

Bang La

NEVER SAY GOODBYE



By decree of the military junta, the beach lay denuded, its vibrant expanse of umbrellas and beach chairs swept away. Overnight, the shore appeared stark and empty, stretching uninterrupted to the distant rocks at the bay's edge. Deprived of their usual recline, tourists resorted to towels for sunbathing. As the afternoon unfolded, disbelief lingered in the air; people stood, hesitant and wide-eyed, before tossing down their towels and lowering themselves onto the sand, as if unearthing a newly discovered and untouched beach.

Amidst the swirling confusion, Hin Pa stood as the monsoon loomed ever closer, its echoes borne on strong winds weaving the misty sea air into the city's heart. Aware of nature's portents, aware of the waves swelling in anticipation, their mounting ferocity heralding the season's return. With wind tossed white spray arcing over mountain peaks, he pondered the mystery, how had those beach umbrellas and chairs vanished with such stealth. Only that morning, they had stood at attention.

An awestruck voice broke through, eyes tracing the distant horizon beyond the churning waves. His own gaze, though outward reaching, turned deeply inward, caught in a web of captivity. The island, with its magical allure, held an undeniable sway yet upon each return, everything had change again.

As his bare feet sank into the sand, Hin Pa fondly recalled his friend Bak Berd. Both hail from a modest rural village, their future seemingly unclear. Bak Berd earned his nickname due to his misaligned eyes that gave the impression of looking past people, a quirk that amused many. Hin Pa and Bak Berd shared a passion for cycling. They often pedalled to the rain filled fields at the forest's edge to capture fighting fish, which they would keep in bottles for friendly wagers with children from neighbouring villages. In the classroom, Bak Berd was affectionately teased as "Bak Kee Puek." "Puek" signifies foolishness, and "Kee Puek" suggested a recurring folly, as he frequently forgot his studies and faced the teachers' punishment. However, Bak Berd's prowess in pursuits like fishing and bird hunting remained unrivalled. Despite his academic struggles, he confided in Hin Pa his aspiration of one day gracing newspaper pages and achieving fame and how grand that would be! Just wait and see. Together, they wove dreams and shared youthful adventures until life's paths led them in different directions during adolescence. Hin Pa embarked on a

journey of toil, working tirelessly in various factories within an industrial estate. He bore the stigma of moving from one factory to the next. Meanwhile, Bak Berd disappeared for several years, sending only sporadic messages, hinting at his wanderings in the south.

Driven by perseverance, Hin Pa diligently saved his earnings, eventually acquiring a tricycle cart and grilling equipment. With newfound determination, he left his labour intensive job to sell grilled meatballs, striving to make a living. In less than a year, as he pedalled past a luxurious mall, a familiar voice called out to him. To his astonishment, he saw Bak Berd running toward him, radiating joy. Hin Pa could hardly recognize his old friend, transformed beyond belief. Bak Berd's skin was as dark as soot beneath a steamer pot, and he donned vibrant shirts over a now muscular physique.

Bak Berd introduced the woman accompanying him to Hin Pa, a stunning Japanese woman with skin as pink-white as cherry blossoms, and a model like stature, towering a full head above Bak Berd. As Bak Berd narrated his adventures, his life seemed to have defied the destiny predicted for him. Hin Pa was in awe; he never envisioned that Bak Berd, once a wayward child from a remote village with no clear future much like himself that could ascend to such heights. Captivated by his friend's tales, Hin Pa felt a restless wonder. Bak Berd's world

appeared nothing short of miraculous. Hin Pa learned that the enchanting woman with Bak Berd was merely a travel companion. Their arrangement was such that it concluded wherever her travels led, marking an imminent end.

Bak Berd, previously awkward, had metamorphosed into a courageous and adept individual, at ease among the well-to-do while Hin Pa now felt like the awkward one in comparison. When Hin Pa inquired about Bak Berd's occupation, Bak Berd responded with a super duper pride:

"I work as a beach boy, managing parasailing activities on the shoreline." At that time, Hin Pa was puzzled by what seemed like a simple task of handling sun umbrellas. He initially interpreted Bak Berd's job as merely setting up umbrellas each morning and taking them down in the evening. However, Bak Berd clarified that these "umbrellas" were in fact large parachutes tethered to motorboats, offering thrilling rides that soared high above the beach for panoramic vistas. Despite the detailed explanation, Hin Pa struggled to visualize it until Bak Berd playfully mocked him for being naive. Determined to introduce Hin Pa to this adventurous world, Bak Berd shared his address and insisted that Hin Pa visit, with unwavering persistence. After some consideration, Hin Pa decided to sell his tricycle cart, pack his belongings, and hop on a tour bus. By the next morning, as the bus traversed a bridge leading to the

island, Hin Pa sensed that his life was on the brink of a remarkable transformation.

The sea waves crashed with vigor as Hin Pa shifted his legs, settling into a new position. He observed red flags flanking the beach, signalling caution to tourists about the perilous winds and turbulent waves. Swimming was a risky endeavour. Today, the sky was shrouded in a grey blanket of clouds, yet the temperature remained pleasantly mild. Few Chinese tourists, all striking young women, queued in anticipation for parasailing. Several dark-skinned Burmese operators, many with bare chests, shouted commands energetically. Their apparent leader donned a snug red tank top, his shoulder adorned with an incomplete skull tattoo. The next in line was a fair skinned woman, her eyes shielded by large, round sunglasses with blue frames. The leader approached her with a determined look, seemingly intent on persuasion. As the previous boat returned to the shore, tethering the parasail line as the allotted time concluded, another Chinese friend gently landed on the sand. She stepped forward, surrounded by operators attending to her, securing her life jacket, and ensuring the metal fittings of the parasail lines were firmly in place. Once all was set, a signal was given to the boat to depart. She gradually ascended, while the man in the red tank top agilely perched himself on the parasail line above her. The boat guided the parasail onward, the duo ascending ever higher into the sky.

The scene stirred Hin Pa's long-buried memories. The beach attendant, devoid of any safety gear, glided with the parasail, tasked with ensuring seamless ascents and landings. He would leap first to add weight to the line, allowing tourists a gentle touchdown. The image of the sun-bronzed, muscular man repeatedly vaulting onto the parasail line evoked memories of times when Hin Pa and Bak Berd were present too, intertwined with an era from another chapter of his life.

Bak Berd was known for dating foreign women, never the same one twice, possessing remarkable qualities that eclipsed his uneven eyes. Hin Pa shadowed Bak Berd everywhere, seeing him as an unquestionable elder brother. The duo lived like hedonistic spirits for years, indulging in nocturnal revelry and soaring through the skies by day. At times, Bak Berd would abscond abroad for months in pursuit of romance. His amorous escapades took him far, but what he perceived as love invariably drew him back, crestfallen like a bird with clipped wings. The inseparable duo always found the grace to start anew and forgive themselves, usually embarking on fresh beginnings again in the same cycle they could never understand.

Then came the most melancholic day of Hin Pa's existence, coinciding with the monsoon season. A tempest, also known as a ghost wind, swept in with vehement force and

without forewarning. In an instant, it whisked the parasail and dashed it upon the road effortlessly. A foreign female traveller sustained grievous injuries with fractured bones, yet Bak Berd was not as fortunate. Hin Pa ran after the parasail, not thinking of his own safety. Bak Berd had been hurled further than anyone could have fathomed Hin Pa bore his friend's contorted, misshapen form from the blood red road. Bak Berd opened his blood filled eyes, attempted to speak, choked twice, and then succumbed to silence. Hin Pa stood amid the swirling chaos, cradling his friend as the entire world seemed to waver and then recede. By morning, the tragedy of Bak Berd and the female tourist graced the front pages of local newspapers. His name, however, soon dissolved into obscurity. In the swift currents of seaside society, nothing remained remembered, celebrated, or scorned for long.

The sun gracefully descended, casting its soft illumination upon the crests of the waves, delicately tinting the mountain's treetops, and gradually yielding to the encroaching twilight. On the beach, tourists transformed into dark silhouettes, moving languidly as jet skis were secured and the final parasail boat vanished into the dusky horizon. Rising to his feet, Hin Pa brushed the sand from his trousers and ascended the modest steps of concrete, making his way along the short path leading to the place where he and Bak Berd once immersed themselves. In his characteristic, audacious manner, Bak Berd had once

declared that even demons must possess a graveyard, and Bang La was his. Hin Pa, countering, claimed that Bang La was, in fact, their paradise. Bak Berd had merely responded with a hearty laugh. It was during that time Hin Pa first heard the name Sawanya, the man whom even the ghostly winds could not take his life.

Hin Pa and Bak Berd frequently gathered for card games at the Oasis, a secret chamber owned by Auntie Swat. She was a woman who once sold herself to the foreigners in the old western style era, Bak Berd had whisper to Hin Pa that all the ugliness in the world had been encapsulated in Auntie Swat. Petite and emaciated, she bore the visage of one from the wild, with a flat nose and naturally dusky complexion, her hair dyed a jarring copper-red akin to a crow adorned with chili peppers. Her voice was an irritating, high-pitched melody, often peppered with a fusion of Thai and English. Yet, she embodied everything the Oasis stood for. It seemed everyone dismissed her array of flaws, because sometimes, when she found companionship with a foreigner, everyone at the Oasis benefitted, too. She wasn't bound by conventional morals. Often, someone had to lift her sarong to preserve her dignity when she passed out drunk on the street. Still, everyone respected and loved her, seeing her as their emotional anchor. Auntie Swat dubbed her secret hideaway the "Oasis." Hidden inside a narrow alley in the bustling heart of Bang La, reaching this Oasis involved

navigating a tricky route. One had to weave through an alley past a Nakhon rice and curry restaurant, a Chiang Rai à la carte restaurant, and a pay-per-use toilet. A more confined path beckoned, requiring a sidelong slip to enter, then unveiling an unexpected expanse. Legend murmurs that Auntie Swat stumbled upon this secluded spot during a secret meeting with an inebriated foreigner, yearning for private intimacy amid the towering trifecta of entertainment giants that formed a triangular retreat. Despite the narrow entrance, it opened to host many, offering a refuge from the nightlife chaos synonymous with Bang La. Auntie Swat often joked about having her own realm in the city of sin, an unclaimed triangular plot hidden from prying eyes. With humour, she proclaimed her dominion over this hidden refuge, her oasis amid the sin city.

The Oasis was accessed discreetly through a hidden entrance at the rear of the bathroom, concealed by weathered tarpaulins. Known only to its regular patrons, they enjoyed playing cards there without the worry of police interference. Uncle Maew acted as both the guardian of the public bathroom and a fellow member, while Auntie Swat beautifully adorned the space with her dedicated effort. It featured electricity, running water, protection from rain, and ventilation afforded by small gaps between adjacent buildings, allowing a gentle breeze to flow almost continually. The Oasis served as a sanctuary where members could bring their solitude to be mitigated

through connection, conversation, sharing stories from their hometowns, discussing livelihoods, and exchanging humour, often of the risqué variety. It was a communal space for dining, where everyone contributed their own provisions to share, and prominently, for playing cards throughout the day. People of all genders came and went freely, without prejudice. Members were signalled that the Oasis was already occupied when they saw an old, faded red G-string hanging at its entrance symbolized that the Oasis had reached its full capacity. Most individuals frequenting the Oasis were employed somewhere within Bang La Alley ,as go-go bar dancers, customer service girls, workers in boxing stadiums, restaurant staff, but predominantly as dancers who performed using stainless steel poles. Hin Pa was acquainted with few among them. One had spent many years as a go-go dancer; when he encountered her again, she was poised to move to Europe with her foreign husband. She stopped by to bid farewell to the Oasis and its members before embarking on her new journey. Hin Pa once inquired about her feelings toward the stainless-steel pole. To this, she replied that it had been a blessing, adding that her foreign husband was oblivious to her past as a go-go dancer their love had blossomed in a downtown department store. Life seemed like a dream, she mused. After her departure, she was never seen again.

Bak Berd mentioned that the only enjoyable aspect of the Oasis was engaging in conversations with others who were

also striving to achieve their dreams. Many hoped foreigners would provide them with money and the chance to live in affluent countries, dreaming of a more comfortable life. The Oasis gave its members a sense of security, shielding them from the realities of the outside street. By night, it transformed into a non-stop paradise, welcoming people from around the globe. Over time, the older generation dwindled, and bars changed hands, undergoing renovations repeatedly. Hin Pa later discovered that behind the vibrant lights lay hidden territories, areas covertly divided for profit in the shadows. Yet, the Oasis stood apart from such schemes.

News arrived that Sawanya had returned. Auntie Swat organized a welcome party at the Oasis, with a lucky draw allowing only ten attendees. Hin Pa was among those chosen and eagerly anticipated meeting Sawanya. However, on the day of the party, he overindulged in drinking for more than a day and night, causing him to miss the event. He apologized profusely to Auntie Swat, who sadly told him she didn't know when Sawanya might return to the Oasis.

Years after Bak Berd vanished with the ghost wind, Hin Pa continued working as a parasail operator and occasionally accompanied adventurous, lonely women from abroad. He earned just enough to get by but lived without security, always fearing the violent gusts that could crash his parasail on the

road, breaking his bones like those of his friend. While he never went hungry, his life remained a repetitive cycle. Unlike Bak, Hin Pa wasn't as lucky with women.

During that period, he remained oblivious to the fact that he was inexorably drawn into a whirl of lights and colours until an unforeseen event happened. While queuing for the parasail, Hin Pa engaged in a casual dialogue with an unfamiliar traveller vacationing with his spouse and child. Suspended above the azure sea, the stranger earnestly handed him a tome, urging him to keep it. The gesture was as amusing as it was peculiar receiving a book instead of a gratuity amidst such dizzying heights but Hin Pa dutifully secured it within his waistband. That evening at the Oasis, rumours pervaded the atmosphere that Sawanya had reappeared. Immersed in a lively discourse with a cohort of foreign women along the shore, his attention captivated by one young woman in particular, Hin Pa inadvertently missed another encounter with Sawanya. Eager to meet Sawanya, he yearned to inquire about how he withstood the ghost wind and discover the means by which he transcended life's relentless cycle.

It's almost unbelievable that it was that book which offered him an escape from the monotonous cycles of his existence. The stranger referred to it as literature. Despite being unfamiliar with the term, he eagerly read

the book quickly simply because its protagonist shared his occupation of pulling parasails along the beach. After immersing himself in its pages two or three times, Hin Pa wanted to explore more. He visited a bookstore, inquiring whether they carried literature. While the sales assistants were unaware of the term, the store manager treated him with great courtesy, guiding him to shelves brimming with diverse books and making thoughtful recommendations, undeterred by the dark, rugged-looking man before him.

During that period, Hin Pa pondered deeply what made literature so enchanting, yet he continued to delve into books with fervent obsession for years. Concurrently, Hin Pa ventured into portrait painting alongside acquaintances from Bang La Alley. He also became a tattoo assistant, diligently tracing designs, adorning customers with patterns, preparing ink for needles, and seeing to the tattoo artist's needs. Literature, with its myriad characters, led Hin Pa far from his former life. He accepted portrait commissions during quiet times at the shop and undertook small tattoo projects skilfully needling, shading, and filling large sections of tattoos, while assisting during bustling periods packed with customers. Several years later, having amassed sufficient savings, he aspired to fulfil a dream he had promised to pursue with Bak Berd.

On the day Hin Pa visited the Oasis to bid farewell to

Auntie Swat, informing her of his plan to embark on a distant journey by bicycle, she chuckled heartily and lifted her foot in blessing, her hands preoccupied with the shuffle of cards. Auntie Swat frequently reminisced about Sawanya, mentioning that he was among the pioneering parasail boys on the beach who had funded his own education, Auntie Swat mentioned Sawanya's return, urging him to return to the Oasis. He'd never seen Sawanya, only heard of his legendary status in the Oasis. Auntie Swat was sure that, like Sawanya, Hin Pa would return one day. He gave no promises, just a gentle smile, and left. By then, many familiar faces were gone, replaced by newcomers eager to join lively card games. But he knew Auntie Swat would always make room for everyone.

Hin Pa left the Oasis, heading into town to buy the mountain bike he had always wanted. He added a rear rack, packed light, and rode off without a clear destination. Each day ended wherever the path led him. When money was low, he sketched quick portraits at markets to earn cash. With extra funds, he bought books and passed them on after reading. The journey unfolded slowly, a new world emerging, then fading away like a trail of dotted lines.

Hin Pa ventured on his bicycle to unknown destinations, penning daily journals that amassed in piles, many of which were eventually lost. Eventually, Hin Pa never met

Sawanya. Each time he returned to Bang La, where everything changes superficially were apparent, he revisited the Oasis. At the Oasis, Hin Pa began leaving undated notes on scraps of paper. For him, Bang La was timeless, and he sought no rationale for his actions. He simply believed that Sawanya would one day return to the Oasis. His first note left there read:

“To Sawanya, there was a time I walked into Bang La Alley. The world was preparing for its nightly bustle. I made my way to the Oasis, anticipating Auntie Swat playing a few last rounds of cards before her group disbanded faces unwashed, bathed in potent cheap perfume, lips stained bright red, luring customers. At the alley’s entrance, I passed a homeless figure, shrouded in tangled hair, body cloaked in dirt, encased in plastic bags strung together like a cocoon. I slipped into the Oasis, only to find myself isolated, alone because the Oasis was in disarray, littered with debris. Unsure of what transpired or what to do next, I recalled some beer bars where familiar faces might be found. I was intensely curious about Auntie Swat’s whereabouts. As I reached the alley’s entrance, lost in thought, a homeless person reached out and grabbed my ankle. I flinched. The figure smiled, revealing teeth stained with dark, rough tartar. I looked at her in shock. “Auntie Swat!” I exclaimed. I sat down, calling her name repeatedly. She didn’t respond, only offering a brief smile before turning away, ignoring me. I stood there for a long time, enveloped in sadness and

feeling more adrift than ever. I wandered past several beer bars. Vibrant lights shimmered like jewels enveloping each particle of Bang La. Signs proclaiming “BUY 1 GET 1 FREE” beer fluttered energetically on the streets. The night came alive with a chaotic blend of loud music, creating an auditory illusion where only the persistent, urgent drumbeats were truly discernible. Nobody recognized me, and strangely, I didn’t recognize them either. The people I once knew were gone.

I pondered how long I had been away from Bang La. It was unclear, yet it didn’t feel very long. Or maybe this place moved too swiftly, spinning hundreds or thousands of times faster than anywhere I had visited. There seemed no way to uncover what had transpired at the Oasis or the fate that befell Auntie Swat. Suddenly, I gained a new understanding: the unrecorded flow of life is its own truth, unalterable and natural. I returned to remember a dear friend whom the ghost wind had carried away.

One year during the rainy season, he stumbled upon a note penned by Sawanya, carefully preserved so the ink would withstand the passage of time:

“At least I had the privilege of staying here for about three weeks, immersing myself to crystallize my memories for a short story about the beach, Bang La Alley, and Auntie Swat

for the culmination of my latest short story collection. The title of this tale eludes me. Each day, I traverse the entrance alley of the former Oasis down to the beach, delivering food to Auntie Swat. She seems to have forgotten me. Though the Oasis has crumbled, Bang La remains.”

After pondering this, Hin Pa gently sat down and crafted a succinct note:

“To Sawanya, I can’t recall the countless times I have visited Bang La. The echoes of my past here have swiftly faded away. My lifelong bicycle has carried me far, far away solitary, yet unable to feel loneliness.

I found myself among the bustling tourists, lost in their solitude. Auntie Swat was absent from her usual spot, so I gently placed a package of food there and continued, my drawing board in hand, heading toward the sea.

Years later, Sawanya penned a note at the Oasis, sparking Hin Pa’s reminiscence of the day that transformed his life:

”To Hin Pa, whenever I visit, I find myself drawn to the beach. On one such occasion, I carried a collection of short stories I had composed and made my way toward the shore, where my wife and son had already gone ahead. On that day, I

had a yearning to try parasailing so my son could witness it. My wife never knew that I once worked as a parasail attendant; I never told her.

The boat surged over the wave crests, the parasail caught the breeze, and I was lifted swiftly skyward. In that fleeting moment, I noticed someone climbing up a fellow parasail boy, gracefully astride the parasail line, beaming a smile of dazzling white. We exchanged a few pleasantries from my vantage point below, as relentless gusts of wind rolled over us.

Reaching into my belongings, I retrieved the book I had brought and handed it to him. He appeared slightly bemused but accepted it, securing it in his waistband. Then, turning his gaze to the horizon, he seemed lost in thought. The vessel arced, aligning itself with the sandy beach. From this lofty perch, I peered towards Bang La Alley, the old path where I once faced life's challenges.

I had resolved to visit Auntie Swat, who had promised a celebration at the Oasis. She exuberantly announced to everyone that I was the sole returnee, proudly proclaiming that the demon wind had failed to claim my life. I glanced up, sharing a smile with the parasail boy, who responded in kind. As we soared, my thoughts drifted to the night of lights that awaited.

Hin Pa arrived to say Goodbye to Auntie Swat's spirit and the Oasis. This time, his absence might extend for many years, or perhaps he would never return. Inspired by the revelation that roads could carry him to the world's remotest destinations, Hin Pa aspired to embark on a journey cycling around the globe. At the Oasis, he left a note for Sawanya, expressing his gratitude and farewell. He wrote that Bang La had been irrevocably changed for him, yet Bang La would endure long after the Oasis had crumbled into memory. He ended his note with:

“As they said, We can never truly bid farewell in Bang La”