Yaa Dong

by JGS

“That boy Anorn is just the smarty type to pick a disgusting project like this,” fumed Kaow, a twelve year old school girl, as she leaned on the railing playing out a length of string on which was attached a plastic bottle, lowering it into the city canal’s murky water. A noise like a semi-truck rumbled through the air and her pace picked up. As the passenger ferry neared the water rollicked against the canal walls kicking up a stench so noxious it veritably slapped her in the face. With a tortured expression she pulled up the bottle and then put a hand over her mouth and nose, vainly trying to block out the malodorous attack. How could it possibly get this bad? People must’ve been casually tossing garbage into it for a really, really long time. She figured there was absolutely nothing like it in in the world: It had to be the horriblest, stinkiest, nastiest, slimiest water of all the water anywhere. She’d seen funny stuff in it too, from a ratty foam mattress floating alone and sad-like to the whole contents of large rubbish bins dumped in and forming grotesque makeshift islands of trash. It smelled like a reeking mix of dog crap, maybe people crap too. And unknown general rotting stuff.

Carrying the full bottle of dark-greenish liquid as if it were nuclear waste, she crossed the parking lot that belonged to the apartment building, went round to the front, climbed the entrance stairs and then entered the mini-mart shop next to the elevator. Aunt Atita was in her room, which consisted of a single bed by the window at the back separated from the shop by a curtain of dangling plastic ruby beads, fussing with her makeup before a small mirror attached to the wall, dressed as usual in a pink silk bathrobe and bunny rabbit slippers. She was a very kind aunty growing evermore dotty in her dotage.

Kaow went to the potted plants underneath the rack of pandan-green tea custard buns, wanting to get the onerous task over with. She wondered if the plants could feel anything and truly hoped they couldn’t, because if they could it must be unimaginablypainful to them. She hated to do it! What was the point of the stupid experiment? Of course the plants that were watered with the slimy canal water were going to die and the ones watered with regular old tap water were going to live. It was obvious. It didn’t matter how long it took and it was an act of cruelty to simply watch, noting the changes in the poor things as their leaves shriveled. But she had to do her part of the group work or she wouldn’t pass Mr. Pod’s class. The playful sound of girls’ voices chatting and laughing danced in to her. It was her friends Pim and Neem! Kaow was dying to know where they were going and what they were up to on that Saturday morning so she set the full bottle down as quickly as she possibly could, without spilling even a single drop on herself, then skipped out after them.

Aunt Atita peered over the top of her glasses, furtively scanning the room. A sigh like pressure being released from a valve escaped her: alone at last. With surprisingly nimble movements for a lady of her esteemed age she picked up from her cosmetics shelf, the one underneath the mirror, an eyeglasses case and withdrew from it a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. On weekends Kaow didn’t attend school so she had to sacrifice her beloved morning cigarette. One a day, it was but a minor transgression. She’d never had much and this one little thing was hers, only hers. She lit up a smoke and exhaled contentedly out the window, treasuring the peaceful moment with its slight air of naughtiness.

“Good morning, Atita,” said a voice from inside the shop.

Stubbing out the smoke, she thought, “Oh darnit, didn’t even get to finish my cigarette. What kind of a day is this going to be?” Then in a pleasant tone belying her dissatisfaction, she said, “Hi Sombat, what do you need this morning?”

“Well, I’ve been feeling a bit sick lately. Sort of got a headache and I feel a little hot,” said the elderly woman.

“Sombat, maybe you’re thinking too much. You’ve always got something wrong,” said Aunt Atita. Sombat was indeed perpetually ailing, seemingly afflicted with an unending curse of minor headaches, achy joints that flared up with the rain, and coughs that struck at inopportune times.

“Well, maybe. You could be right. But I was thinking some of your yaa dong mix would do the trick. Your yaa dong is the best. It’s magical -- fixes me up every time.”

Aunt Atita felt mollified. Her yaa dong wasn’t famous like some healing remedies. No one traveled from the other provinces to queue up to buy the healing concoction, but there were a few people over the years who’d come to swear by it and she had developed a certain hidden pride in her well-kept secret recipe. She would tell anyone who asked that it was her own special recipe developed over many years of careful tinkering and thoughtful examination of her craft. Really it was the same recipe her mother had handed down to her, bestowed upon her like a precious family heirloom.

“Okay, give me a moment while I get it for you. I’m just finishing up soaking a small new batch.” She went to the plants underneath the rack of pandan-green tea custard buns where the plastic bottle of yaa dong sat fermenting. Koreans buried their kimchee in the ground, which was the right way. If you wanted something to gain power you had to have the patience to give it time to strengthen up. In the past she had considered burying her yaa dong underground to supercharge its two week sitting period and had gone snooping around the neighborhood in search of a clean and safe burial site, but it was difficult to find the right place in Bangkok and she had reluctantly given up after a week.

A confounded expression crossed her face. There were two bottles down by the plants. She was sure - well, pretty sure - she’d made only one bottle’s worth. It was getting increasingly hard for her to be certain about anything lately though. One morning she had opened up her glasses case and tried to put on a cigarette, setting it on the bridge of her nose, an event which she would die before telling Kaow about. Still, it was weird that there were now two bottles. “Maybe my yaa dong has gotten so powerful it’s cloning itself!” she thought, laughing inwardly. Ultimately deciding that she had simply forgotten that she’d made two batches, Aunt Atita retrieved a large jug to pour them both into.

First one bottle gurgled in then the other. Both bottles were dark colored but one was more brackish-green. Aunt Atita and Sombat’s faces crinkled up. “I don’t remember it smelling like that,” said Sombat.

Aunt Atita stirred the contents with an elongated, thin wooden spoon then carefully measured a single shot. This was heavy stuff: more than two shots would stun a water buffalo. You didn’t mess around with yaa dong. Sombat paused, looking into her cup.

“I’ve been experimenting with the herbs again and found some new ingredients at a Chinese herbal shop over by the Bang Kapi fresh market,” Aunt Atita felt the need to explain.

Sombat closed her eyes, scrunched up her face and gulped the vile looking stuff. Immediately she swayed, as if a strong wind had suddenly gusted into the shop. Trying to regain her balance she grabbed hold of a rack and accidentally knocked several bags of corn chips onto the floor. Then she bent over, put her hands on her knees and shook her head vigorously and snorted loudly several times.

“My word! Sombat! Are you okay?!” exclaimed Aunt Atita.

Sombat staggered drunkenly out of the shop. “Geeze, she could at least help me pick the stuff up,” Aunt Atita thought. “This new batch seems strong, maybe too strong. I’ll have to keep an eye on it. That ought to solve Sombat’s problems, then. She forgot to pay me the thirty baht, but that’s okay, I’ll get it from her next time.”

Sombat made her way to the other side of the elevator where she slumped into a chair in the chicken and rice shop. She scrunched her eyes open and closed several times and then blew her nose on the back of her shirt sleeve which made the cook frown. “Let me have a nice bowl of chicken noodle soup, will you, sonny? I’m feeling a little achy today and I’m hoping that’ll clear it up,” she said. The words came out distantly, like she was speaking from deep within a cavern.

She rubbed her stiff neck. She thought it hadn’t been that stiff earlier. Her noodle soup arrived. She tried a spoonful but something was off; it lacked the usual pleasant odor of chicken noodle soup and it didn’t taste like anything. “There’s something wrong with the soup, sonny,” she called out, but her voice was feeble, and the cook had gone back into the kitchen anyways. Her head began to throb, throb, throb, like a nail was hammering into each temple. Heat racked her every limb and then in the next instant she felt as if she had been packed into a meat freezer. Chills cursed her bones. From top to toe her muscles stiffened, hardened. And then her face contorted and her mouth opened and a soft stream belched out of her: pieces of semi-digested bread and soft boiled egg from that morning’s breakfast sploshed into the chicken noodle soup. It turned a nasty murky black. Boonchai stood before her, surrounded in a beautiful soft glow. Boonchai, her Boonchai, the one who was her destiny but who had mistakenly left her for another woman long ago. “Have you come back, Boonchai? Have you? Have you realized the error of your ways? She was never as good to you as I was, was she, Boonchai?” Her eyes glazed over. Her head was splitting open and her neck was stiff as a metal rod, stiff and swelling and becoming harder and harder; it wouldn’t stop hardening. Some powerful, unknown force was crushing her head, but the pressure came from inside her skull. Her right arm twitched wildly as if a jolt of electricity had shot through it. Then just as suddenly, it stopped. Her eyelids drooped. The world was dank. She was at the bottom of a swimming pool uncleaned for many years, now filled up with debris and crawly insects. All at once her arms, legs and head spasmed violently, anarchically. Boonchai had gone.

Being free for the moment the cook came out of the kitchen. The grandmother was sitting with her head down on her chest, unmoving, arms dangling at her sides. “You okay, grandmother?” he asked tentatively. There was no reply. He grew worried. He didn’t want any grandmothers dying in his shop right after eating his chicken noodle soup. Perhaps she had gotten a bone stuck in her throat and needed some help getting it out. He walked over, going slowly so as not to create unnecessary ado. “Hey, grandmother, are you okay?” he asked again, cautiously. There was still no reply. She seemed unnaturally still. He grew very scared. Perhaps she really had died. Ever so slowly he reached a hand out to her wrist to feel her pulse. Her skin was warm and covered in a thin slick of perspiration, like all the pores of her body had spat out the moisture. The cook leaned over her, checking for shallow breathing. And then, suddenly, grandmother’s head jerked onto his neck and she bit him. Her jaws were those of a dog sickened with rabies, enraged and ferocious, and she tore off a massive piece of flesh that left a raw gaping open wound. His mouth formed a scream of ultimate terror but no sound emerged. His voice box had been ripped out. Automatically his hands went to his neck to cover the wound and staunch the blood spurting out, but they merely got soaked in the crimson liquid. His eyes widened in shock and horror and confusion. Grandmother moved toward him in a herky-jerky fashion, like a hideous marionette. Then she was upon him, feeding off him, striving futilely to fill the fathomless hollow inside her, to satisfy the unquenchable hunger that drove her.

Aunt Atita leaned against the window in a relaxed pose smoking a fresh cigarette. If the first one went unfinished she was allowed to have another one, and so on, until one whole cigarette had been smoked. In this way she occasionally had four cigarettes - or more - in the course of the one. The morning was yet dark, blanketed as it was in the haze of particulate matter that had hung doggedly in the sky for the past month. From the television turned on in the background a news anchor’s words blurred together monotonously; “Customs authorities have vowed to clamp down on cargo inspections at Thailand’s seaports in a fight against the illegal importation of extremely hazardous e-waste. However, environmentalists are skeptical, doubting the measures will be reliably enforced. …”

There was a thud at the door. “Oh, mercy, now what is it? I’m never going to get to finish my cigarette,” thought Aunt Atita. She pulled the rope tighter on her pink silk robe, then said in surprise, “Sombat! What’s wrong? Did you fall down? … You’re all covered in blood.” She walked toward Sombat to see how she could help her friend, but her mouth was strangely hanging open and her eyes were half shut. Aunt Atita stopped dead in her tracks. “Sombat?” she asked. Sombat's jaws started chomping empty air and she jerked forward a step. There was something dangerously wrong. Aunt peered over her glasses, scanning the room. She spotted just the thing: a neat stack of durian for sale at the counter. These were smaller ones fresh from Chantaburi province and not so heavy, but whose shells were still rock hard, and, more importantly, covered in spikes. Aunt moved toward the durian and Sombat jerked towards her. Aunt pushed off her back foot like a skateboarder, spry in spite of her old age and daily smoking habit. She slid smoothly across the floor in her bunny slippers to the durian. It was a beautiful maneuver that would have made any ice skater proud. Sombat jerked toward her, two steps away now. Aunt grabbed a durian by its stem and the thought “aim for the head” flashed through her. She lifted the durian up and slammed it right into Sombat with all her strength. Wham! A direct hit. But in her hurry she hadn’t gotten it high enough and had only hit her shoulder. Sombat staggered backwards while the momentum of the swing pulled Aunt around and she hit the counter, ramming her hip into it. She gasped in pain.

Atita leaned on the counter, breathing heavily. The clack-clack-clack of Sombat’s jaws chomping resounded in the otherwise quiet room, chilling her to the bones. Sombat was too close! She had to try again. Now! She grasped another durian with both hands like she was swinging a mace, lifted it up higher and this time smashed it smack onto the side of Sombat’s old head. Crack! Sombat’s head caved in easily. She tumbled backwards and lay contorted on the floor. Atita spun around and smacked her hip again in, most unfortunately, the exact same spot, which caused her to experience a flash of white accompanied with excruciating pain that wracked her body. She fell to the floor. She was winded, terrified and bewildered. She was alone.

Sombat’s eyes remained fixed on Atita. Those eyes never blinked, never once strayed from Atita. In some kind of a mystifying act of the miraculous or of black magic that opposed the most fundamental laws of natural organic life, Sombat’s jaws were yet working, opening and closing, opening and closing. Unchewed bits of raw flesh marked her teeth. Aunt Atita reached deep down into her reserve of will power, for which there had not been much call in many years, and summoned all that remained of her strength. Not much was left. She dragged herself up off the floor, then paused to rest against the counter. And then she picked up another durian and brought it down hard onto poor old Sombat’s face, which exploded like a watermelon dropped from a height. “Double tap,” Aunt Atita thought. She’d seen one or two of those zombie television shows. She knew what to do.

Aunt Atita’s hands shook; her breathing was hard. Her nerves were killing her. That she hadn’t had a heart attack and died of fright already was a miracle in itself. She stepped towards her cosmetics shelf where her cigarettes were, hoping to calm herself with one. She didn’t care in the least who saw her smoking or if her secret got out. She winced; her hip was agonizing. She needed help and badly. It wouldn’t be possible to withstand any more stressors, or pain. Maybe, hopefully, Kaow would come home soon. But then Kaow might get hurt. On second thought it was better if she didn’t return, better for her if she stayed as far away as humanly possible.

Suddenly the cook plunged through the door. Chunks of his face were missing. His head leant awkwardly to one side atop a well chewed up neck. Run! She had to run! She grabbed an umbrella. Using it as a cane, she limped painfully toward the back window. The cook heaved after her emitting an evil groan of undead flesh lust. Then she was there and all she had to do was pull herself through and she’d be outside, in safety. The window was a half meter higher than her waist. She grabbed each side of the window frame and tried to pull herself up and in. Her bathrobe opened. This made her face flush as she felt the hot shame of exposing herself to the world wearing only her night slip, especially as it was an old one frayed at the edges. But so be it: she had to get out of that room of terrors! Somehow she was up in the window on her stomach, her body teetering half in-half out upon the sill as she fought to get her balance. The ground was a paltry six feet below but at her admirable age even that short of a fall could easily break a bone. She held herself there precariously with her upper body jutting out and her legs inside kicking wildly. She pulled a knee up and got one leg into the window -- almost there! If she didn’t kill herself in the landing she would tumble to safety. The bunny slipper on one leg fell off. Oh no! She felt herself awkwardly beginning to fall. At the last second the cook reached out and grabbed ahold of her ankle. Her forward momentum was halted. She tried to scream for help. The cook bit into her flesh. Aunt Atita’s body trembled and writhed. Instinct pushed her to scream, scream, scream but there was not enough air in her lungs. And then the weight of her body was too much for the grotesque that was the cook, and she was pulled through the window. Aunt Atita hit the ground beneath her window with a gut churning smack.

She lay there in a heap under the dusty sky, the world sludging to black. A blind musician wearing black sunglasses and a cowboy hat sat by the canal. He played a grizzled electric guitar through a mini amp, singing a country folk song. There was a tips cup before him. Awakening to the music, Aunt Atita moved in his direction, dragging a leg. Her eyes were glazed, probably with pain, and she desperately needed help. Perhaps the musician could be of assistance. The blind musician heard Aunt Atita and injected some extra vigor into his singing, hoping to catch an early riser. She limped along, drawing nearer to the wizened busker. In between a verse he ripped off a fiery lick. She got up to him and he was ripping it now, blazing through the chord changes. She stepped toward him and her mouth opened, as if to speak. And at that moment she hit the railing, which caused her to lose what little was left of her already unstable balance and she tipped over into the canal. For a second she was in the air, her pink bathrobe opened out, a sweet elderly aunty falling wildly, outrageously through the air.

The blind street musician was engrossed in bringing his song to a grand finish. His fingers were a blur on the fret board. His warbley voice was almost hitting the sweet high notes like he had as a young lad; he was busting out the pyrotechnics. And, then, the song was finished. He stopped. He waited for the happy swish of baht notes landing in his tips cup, or at least the felicitous jangle of coins. None came. He shook his head. The world was getting harder every day, when you put your heart and soul into a song like that and nobody appreciated it.

Local Bang Kapi police were alerted to an attempted robbery in which at least two people had died at an apartment building’s mini mart shop. When they arrived at the crime scene they had discovered a severely wounded man lurking inside the shop who repeatedly refused to obey directions. He kept moving aggressively toward them. It was additionally noted that the man emitted a horrible, nerves-rattling groan. The only alternative had been to shoot him multiple times in the head.

The apparent perpetrator of the crime baffled them. Why would a grandmother try to rob a mini mart as well as a chicken and rice shop? Neither place would have had much cash on hand, especially early in the morning before the day’s business had begun. The manner of the grandmother’s death was unspeakable. As far as anyone knew the grandmother was the first to be murdered by durian. From all vantage points it was the most bizarre robbery they had ever encountered. Perhaps the strangest aspect of it was the shop owner’s mysterious disappearance. Had she gotten injured and managed to get herself to a hospital? If so, how come no hospitals had reported any injured aunts? If she had gotten a taxi, surely the taxi driver would have remarked upon such a fare? It was suggested that she had been so frightened by the ordeal that she had simply taken off, never wanting to come back for fear of being contaminated by evil spirits.

The crime’s details were too bizarre for the local police to pass up the chain of command. There was no sense in trying to explain something to their superiors that could not be explained, even if they had seen it in person. The two corpses were accordingly quickly removed to the nearest temple for immediate cremation and the public was informed that a very sick grandmother with Alzheimer’s disease had lost her senses and attacked the innocent victims. The outlandish story made the news then was soon forgotten.

In the shadows of one late night, sometime after the above events had transpired, a dead dog was tossed ignominiously into the canal. Down it sank through the putrid toxic water to lie on the grimy bottom. A hand becoming soap-like in texture picked up the canine corpse, moving it towards its mouth.