

baker's dozen

13 short stories by **CHART KORBJITTI**

TRANSLATED FROM THE THAI BY MARCEL BARANG

*Thai*fiction

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SHANGRI-LA

At this time of night, few would dare to walk past burial grounds by themselves.

...The solid mass of the mortuary, where the corpses were kept, stood peacefully in the darkness, surrounded by the dark shadows of bhodi trees and bamboo copses. Whenever the night wind went through them, the leaves rustled and swished intermittently and the strength of the wind induced the bamboo to creak and grate and shriek in endless modulations in the dark.

The frantic chirping of crickets stopped short as if by common agreement. A barred owlet flapped by swiftly as if to flee from pressing danger.

The random light of a torch came swinging along the path. The dark shadows of five or six men

followed the light, getting closer to the burial grounds with every step.

‘If we get three thousand five per cartload, this year things will be better.’

‘Unlikely, I think. Last year, they said they’d guaran-tee it. Nothing’s got better, if you ask me. With the cost of fertilizer, it’s hardly enough.’

‘Oh, but this year they promised to help, see. Maybe they will too.’

‘What if this year is no better again?’

‘I don’t know. We’ll have to wait and see. If nothing happens, then we’ll reconsider, whatever we decide.’

‘But I for one can’t take it any longer, uncle. Before we know the score, we might as well be dead.’

The sound of conversation was getting closer and it seemed that they were all raising their voices unwittingly as they walked past the burial grounds.

‘Help ... me ... please ... help me!’ A hoarse voice shouted out of the side of the path.

That voice at such a time had the power to stop them dead in their tracks and, for sure, if one of them had taken to his heels none of the others would have remained stock-still and shivering like this.

‘Please help me.’ The hoarse voice pleaded weakly once again.

‘Man or ghost?’ the man holding the torch took upon himself to shout out as he directed the light in the direction of the voice.

All eyes turned to the same spot.

What they saw in the pool of light was the body of a white-haired old man. He was staring at them. His body was crouched not far from the path.

All of them felt suddenly drained of all strength and their legs threatened to give way when they knew who the owner of the voice was.

‘Go wherever you please, please go, Uncle Khlai, don’t come and spook me now,’ the torch bearer sputtered.

‘Grandpa!’ a young man exclaimed as if he couldn’t believe his eyes.

‘Help me go back home,’ the old man’s face said in the torchlight.

‘Come on, uncle, you’re dead. Don’t you come and spook us now. I’ll pour water for you,’ the man standing at the back said.*

‘I’m not dead yet. Help me go back home.’ The body moved closer. The men stepped back in alarm, but the young man stood his ground. He decided to step forward.

‘Grandpa ... Don’t do anything to me, okay?’ he said as he walked closer.

‘Hold it, Sak!’ a voice rose from the back to restrain him, but Sak instead moved forward because that old man, whether man or ghost, no matter what, was still his grandfather.

Sak observed his grandfather.

* Ceremonial water is poured as a sign of dedication of merit for the departed

'It's me, grandpa, Sak. Don't do anything to me, all right? What is it you want? Tell me.' Sak slowly sat down, raised his hands and bowed.

'So it's you, is it, young one? Take me back home. I'm not dead yet...'

Sak cautiously stretched out his hand and touched his grandfather's arm. The contact told him his grand-pa wasn't dead yet.

'Grandpa, that's right, you aren't dead yet,' he muttered before he turned to shout at the men who stood behind the light: 'Uncle Mee, Uncle Jan, come and help! Grandpa really isn't dead.'

Willy-nilly the men left the path.

What Sak had said was true: his grandfather wasn't dead yet. He really wasn't...

All the households in the village believed that Uncle Khlai or Grandpa Khlai was dead, but his death was a puzzle for the entire village: how did he die? Where did he die? Who did him in that nobody had found his corpse?

What they knew was only that he had left the abbot's quarters in the early evening to go back home and then had disappeared for good that same evening. That night, all night long, all of the pressure lanterns of the village had thrown light everywhere, even over the frightening burial grounds. Of the men in the village none had slept; they had kept searching high and low until dawn and all the next day. It could almost be said that not a single square inch of

the village territory had escaped their eyesight but nobody had found any trace of Grandpa Khlai.

Even after two holy days had gone by, nobody had caught a glimpse of him. His children and grandchildren were off their food and sleep and roamed about asking not just in the whole village but in the whole district, and all to no avail.

Finally everybody was of the opinion that he must be dead because there had been absolutely no reason for him to run away; everyone in the village liked and respected him; his children and grandchildren took good care of him.

His funeral that time had everyone uneasy, not least the abbot himself. It was a first for him chanting the prayers for the dead without a body around. Everyone knew that the coffin set up in front of their eyes was empty.

Grandpa Khlai's death was still a mystery.

Under the bright light of the small barn lantern set in the middle of the veranda husband and wife sat with their backs against the front wall of the house. The husband puffed on his cigarette and gazed vacantly ahead; the wife sat darning a frayed and patched-up shirt and from time to time cast a sidelong glance at her husband. She was well aware that since his father had disappeared, he had turned quiet and grouchy.

'The radio said they'd arrange for cars to send them back to town,' she said out of the blue, her eyes not leaving the work in her hands.

'Mm,' he groaned in acknowledgement and then was silent.

Until they heard a succession of dogs barking in the distance.

'They must be back.' She peered into the darkness.

'They'll soon be here anyway,' he said indifferently.

A moment later, shouting erupted.

'Dad! Dad!'

'What the hell you shouting for?' he shouted back with anger in his voice.

'I've found grandpa!' his son's voice shouted anew.

He sprung up in a jiffy and stood looking in the direction of the voice, just as a group of men entered the lit area. He was at a loss what to do until his father was propped up the stairs.

'Dad!' He rushed to help in the propping while his mouth ordered wife and son, 'Get the mat and roll it out. Sak, go and light the pressure lantern.'

Everything was chaotic for a while but in an atmosphere of rejoicing.

In less than half an hour, all of the households had heard the news about Grandpa Khlai. Everybody wanted to know where he had been. They all made for his house to find out what the story was. At this point, nobody cared any longer about what they had been waiting for all day. All had forgotten that they had sent representatives to demonstrate in front of Government House to demand a guaranteed price for rice.

Within minutes the veranda was crowded with visiting neighbours.

After Grandpa Khlai had rested, freshened up with warm water and eaten hot rice gruel, his body was back to normal and though he was rather exhausted, inside he felt fine and happy as if he had died only to be reborn.

And then the perplexity of the villagers, who had been in the dark all along, was gradually dispelled by his words.

'...When I left the temple, it was still evening. I was walking past the burial grounds when there was a sudden gust of wind as if it was going to rain, so I walked faster. I wasn't past the grounds yet, it suddenly got dark, dark like the middle of the night, you know. I thought I might pass out, so ...

Chart Korbjitti, born 1954, is a highly successful, Thai novelist and short story writer with a wide range of styles. Both *The judgment*, 1981, and *Time*, 1993, received the SEA Write Award and were translated into French, English and other languages. Their English version can be downloaded from thaifiction.com, along with *Mad dogs & co*, 1988, and two of his novellas, *An ordinary story* and *Carrion floating by*.

