

the story of jan darra

UTSANA PHLEUNGTHAM

TRANSLATED FROM THE THAI BY MARCEL BARANG

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A word from the author

This is the writer's first novel
and he must insist
that his work of fiction
is unsuitable for kids
and most offensive
to sanctimonious pricks.

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Jan Darra – that's my name, so let me introduce myself as the owner of this weird story, as I'm sure we'll be keeping each other company for quite a while, unless, that is, something or other happens to me. When I say 'something or other', I mean that there are two or more possibilities. That's right! At least two things could happen to me: either madness or death. Death, I say! Death is worthy of respect. Why do I idly mention it as a possibility? Are there people who can predict when they'll die, except perhaps the terminally ill? In my experience, everybody forgets about death or dies unawares. And yet, there are; indeed, there are many who can. Theirs is more than a prediction: they are certain; they have worked out the time of their death within a split second, even

though they are neither seers foolhardy enough to swear that they can predict the future accurately, nor critically ill patients who have an appointment with the Reaper and are waiting for it, fully conscious and cold-blooded enough to ask their evening-shift nurse for a last opportunity to admire a young woman's body and soul, and neither are they undertakers greedy enough to earn a living out of their own corpses. There are, there are for sure, and there have been plenty of them. Who else, but those who commit suicide? But I'm getting carried away, when 'at least two things' means there could be more than two. Indeed! Apart from being mad or committing suicide, there are other possibilities, such as dying of... What! Death again? That's right! In this vile world, apart from birth, which perpetuates the life cycle, is there anything more common than death? Well, besides suicide, there's death from natural causes, of which there are many, for example sickness or heart attack, and from all kinds of accidents. For some who die like this, we say that they've run out of luck. (This statement is somewhat ambiguous: when you run out of luck, do you go and pay for your sins in hell, or do you enjoy bliss in heaven? As to the question of who goes where, those who are left behind should know.) For some, we say that they've reached the end of their tether, which is a great consolation for those who are left behind. Besides death, there are many other possibilities that might prevent me from staying with you until the end of

this story. For instance, something might happen that could change my attitude to life in this world so that I'd feel delighted with the life I'm now leading, and the pent-up feelings that I'm eager to pour out to someone would simply disappear. There are still many other eventualities, but I think I've given you enough examples already. All the same, I want you to know that, even though there was a time when I wished to die several times a day, I'll never kill myself. I've come to understand and thoroughly appreciate the truth that there's no way you can escape from all your troubles in life through such a method. Once you've killed yourself, even though you're already dead, you still have to go through similar suffering in the world of *oappartika**, and must endure torments for I don't know how many hundreds or thousands of years before you can be reborn into your next life. Talking about *oappartika*, I'd like everyone to be aware of such a world, because it might be of benefit to our society to keep in mind that none of our actions, whether private or public, can ever escape the attention of the so-called *oappartika*. Knowing that one day soon we'll be among those watching the people left behind may make us feel more ashamed when we do evil. Who are 'those'? Call them deities, ghosts, ghouls or phan-

* Spiritual entities born without progenitors through spontaneous rebirths due to past deeds – according to Hindu-influenced Buddhist lore

toms or whatever you wish: they are all there in the world of spontaneous rebirth. If we chance to meet once again sometime in the future, I may have more to tell you about these invisible entities in hell as well as in heaven – especially in hell, which I’m particularly anxious to find out about since I’m aware that the time is near when I’ll no longer be able to avoid it.

Death, suicide and now spontaneous rebirth – oh my, I’m really rambling, aren’t I. But I trust you’ll understand something of my background from these musings.

All right then, my name is Jan Darra. I was born in the heart of this great City of Angels. My first name was given to me by the man I used to call my father. The last name I thought up myself much later and it’s properly registered in the census. Please don’t pay attention to my surname, because most of my life has been full of surprising twists ever since I was born – and even before I was born, for that matter.

I was born when my mother was already dead. Sounds crazy, doesn’t it? But listen to me first. The midwife who took me out of the womb hadn’t realised that my mother, who had gone through an unusually arduous and protracted labour, was already dead. The person that went by the name of my father was furious at me and has hated me ever since. He never made a mystery of it, even though he wasn’t normally given to showing his feelings, and everybody in the district knew about it, everybody except me because I was still utterly naive. Anyhow,

shouldn't I thank him for going to the trouble of bringing me up even though he absolutely hated my guts? At first, I was grateful, in spite of his constant scolding and cruelty to me, but when I was old enough to know what was what between him and me, I stopped thinking that way.

'That damn boy!' That's how he'd call me, and it became a habit of his as well as something familiar to my ears as far back as I can remember. I believe he referred to me like that from the moment I was born. To tell you the truth, I never felt offended or hurt, probably because I was so used to it. The phrase stuck to his tongue and to my ears and lost its edge. I remember that it did rankle a little bit, though. 'That damn boy!' 'That damn boy!' When I heard that, sometimes I couldn't help but wonder why he didn't call me 'That damn son', because, no matter what, I was his son. If only he had called me 'That damn son' just once, I'd have been more than a little pleased, but never did I hear him call me so. Apart from his anger and hatred for me, he also despised me – more than the dogs he raised, which he called 'his three sons'. As soon as I was old enough to start practicing the only in-house athletic game that he was addicted to, something happened that made him change his mind and call me 'damned'* for short as a form of abuse suitable to my age. He used that word with me for the first time and then threw me out of

* *Janrai*, literally, in Thai

his house in the middle of the night. But that's another weird story, which I'll tell you later.

By now you must have gathered why I was named 'Jan'. You know that when a child is born, the birth must be notified and the child given a name so that he or she can go to school, do his military service or at any rate pay taxes, and finally be registered as dead. As I had to have a name, it had to be thought up for me and that's usually the duty of the child's father who, if he can't come up with one, will hasten to ask a senior monk or some other notable whom he respects to help give the child a name. But in this case, the father named the child himself. The question automatically came to his mind, 'What shall I call him?' The personal pronoun that stuck to his tongue switched immediately to the specific noun, 'that damn...' – 'How's that for a name, Janrai, 'Damned'? Hell no, the district office will never stand for it. Well then, let's call him Jan and be done with it.' So I was named Jan, and given his ancient family name, Witsanan – Jan Witsanan.

But had I been named Janrai Witsanan, I'd be more than a little pleased.