

MOONSHINE IN
THE MORNING

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ALMA BOOKS

For my father, with love

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MOONSHINE IN
THE MORNING

List of Characters

<i>Mother Pensri</i> – the lottery ticket seller	<i>Mali Foi Thong</i> – the butcher’s daughter
<i>Uncle Nun</i> – her husband	
<i>Kwan</i> – their daughter	<i>The Shan Fortune Teller</i>
<i>Mother Noi</i> – the deep-fried pumpkin vendor	<i>Sia Heng</i> – the Chinese entrepreneur
<i>Uncle Daeng</i> – her farmer husband	<i>Sergeant Pan</i> – a policeman
<i>Tuptim</i> – their daughter	<i>Bee, Lek and Jai Kham</i> – migrant workers
<i>Sergeant Yud</i> – a policeman	<i>Jamu</i> – a tribesman
<i>Mother Nong</i> – his wife	<i>Lai</i> – the moonshine stall owner
<i>The novice</i> – their son	<i>The Abbot</i>
<i>Maew</i> – their daughter	<i>The Schoolmaster</i>
<i>Aunty Wassana</i> – the noodle soup stall owner	<i>The Headman</i>
<i>Uncle Ong</i> – her husband	
<i>Mother Suree</i> – the green papaya salad stall owner	<i>The District Officer</i>
<i>Gimsia</i> – the Chinese grocer	<i>The Forestry Officer</i>
<i>Mother Pon</i> – his wife	
<i>Dee</i> – their son	
<i>The Chief</i> – the Chief of Police	
<i>Madam</i> – his wife	
<i>Panit</i> – their maid	
<i>Uncle Moon</i> – the dustcart driver	
<i>Gop-Guu</i> – the madman	

Prologue: Lottery Day

At six o’clock in the morning dawn was sneaking through the chill of night. A mountain mist lay over the village like a damp cloth; dogs lay curled nose to tail on steps and under houses, too cold to bark. Along the main street shops and businesses were stirring, creaking and clattering their shutters and opening their doors. A thousand small birds prattled in the ancient banyan tree in the temple grounds, while cockerels stretched their scrawny necks and crowed in the backyards of sleepy householders who shivered, washed their faces and spat out the staleness of the night’s sleep.

It was the first day of December. Mother Pensri yawned noisily and stretched. While dressing, she pondered the unfolding day and how different her life could be by late afternoon. She washed her face and swept her black hair back with both hands, expertly making a neat bun. Peering into the mirror, she powdered her nose and cheeks, pursing her lips and applying a dash of lipstick for respectability. She moved through the house towards the door, frowning at the few particles of dust that had dared creep inside overnight. Once outside, she plucked a jasmine blossom from the bush in the yard, inhaled its scent and tucked it into the folds of her bun before mounting her bicycle. The front wheel wobbled as she found her balance in the dawning day and pedalled past the district office, oblivious to the pink and purple bougainvillea that flourished luxuriantly in the gardens. She turned left on to the main road.

“Where are you going?” called her neighbour, Mother Nong.

“To market! Are you coming?”

“What are you cooking today?”

“*Nam prik ong!*”

“Isn’t it cold!”

“Oh, colder than last year... but then, we had so much rain in September!”

Bellows of laughter rang out from the market entrance. Standing amidst the mopeds, bicycles, barrows and baskets was Uncle Moon, the dustcart driver. Clutching the neck of an almost empty bottle of rice whisky, he staggered from stall to stall, berating the market vendors good-naturedly on the price of their goods.

“*Aow,*” he shouted, “three baht for one lime! You are all thieves! No one will buy your tomatoes at the prices you ask!” He took another swig of whisky. “*Oh-ho,* Mother Pensri! Good morning!” He bowed elaborately as she went past him into the market. “How do you stay looking so beautiful?”

Mother Pensri clicked her tongue against her teeth. Uncle Moon had never married. Some of the villagers dismissed him as a drunkard and a ne’er-do-well, but with the older women he was a favourite: they understood he drank to forget the death of a young girl with a strawberry birthmark on her cheek many years before.

The market was set out in three long rows of wooden tables, covered by a makeshift roof of corrugated iron to keep out the cool winter mists, the hot summer sun and the rainy season downpours. It began in darkness at four o’clock when the first vendors arrived to set up their stalls, donkey baskets full of

goods slung across the backs of their mopeds, balaclavas over their heads to keep out the cold. A couple of the vendors sold their products wholesale. They drove out before midnight to the nocturnal city markets to buy fresh squid, meatballs, egg noodles, dried shrimps and yellow slabs of tofu, which they piled into trucks and brought back over the mountains, a three-hour drive along a narrow switchback road with hairpin twists and turns. In the old days the road was a rough dirt track, cut through the north-western highlands by the Japanese during the occupation to improve their trade route from Thailand into Burma. In those times the villagers had to walk to the city in the rainy season, camping in the forest, lighting fires to scare away tigers and bears. But as the village expanded much of the forest was felled to make way for concrete roads, and the tigers and bears were hunted down or chased away.

Sometimes vendors would come from outside the province with goods that the villagers couldn’t find easily in the northwest of Thailand: pungent, prickly durian fruit from the south, bales of shimmering homespun silk from the north-east, cigars and face powder from across the nearby Burmese border, garish Chinese blankets. But most days the vendors were local women, Shan or northern Thais with noisy, teasing voices and pale, smooth skin. They brought fruit and vegetables, bunches of neatly bound holy basil, sweet basil, mint and coriander, homemade sweets and sour pickles. Some came only with the meagre produce from their backyards, a handful of tomatoes, a bunch of lemon grass, beans or morning glory. Others collected wild plants and roots from the dwindling forest, spending hot afternoons climbing steep mountainsides, their arms and legs scratched by thorns and bitten by fierce red ants. They would

wade patiently through the river with nets, catching whitespots and shark minnows, or they would lay traps for field frogs, which they sold speared on to sticks, three in a row, ready to barbecue. Sometimes they even daubed glue on to bamboo poles near the river to catch the cicadas flying in over the water in the evening, selling them by the kilo for villagers to fry.

The vendors sat cross-legged on top of their wooden tables, gossiping, complaining, and rearranging bundles and packets in front of them with innate tidiness. A few of the older ones were smoking cheroots. The women who had come to buy walked around with baskets on their arms, rubbing their eyes, planning meals. A straggle of men sat around Lai's moonshine stall and his selection of herbal whisky contemplating the red-and-orange firebrand liquors, such as "Eleven Tigers" and "Chinese Man Who Can Carry a Water Buffalo over His Head". Eyes bleary and bloodshot from a night spent arguing and gambling, the men knocked back shot after shot, hoping the moonshine would give them the courage needed to go home and face their wives. Mother Pensri sniffed and walked past them: her husband was safe in bed, for once. She stopped to buy some coconut cakes, leaning over the wooden table.

"What numbers do you want, Grandmother Gaysuda?" she asked the tiny woman who was scooping the hot cakes from a griddle into little boats made from banana leaves.

"Three and four, for sure!" answered the old woman, pausing to relight a hand-rolled cheroot. "My grandson bought a new moped yesterday and the last two numbers of the licence plate are three and four."

Mother Pensri nodded and put the cakes into her basket. She moved among the stalls, prodding and picking at the

vegetables, complaining wildly at the prices. Gold bracelets and rings set with Burmese rubies and sapphires twinkled on wrists and fingers as deft hands packed wares in banana leaves and in packets folded out of old newspaper. A small group had gathered around the fried pumpkin stall.

"What's going on?" asked Mother Pensri, elbowing her way in.

"Mother Noi had a dream!"

"Yes!" confirmed Mother Noi, pulling her sarong more tightly around her waist. "I was sitting under a tree, eating mangosteens. It was a big banyan tree, like the one in the temple grounds. I was very full and sleepy. I was about to close my eyes and take a nap when a tiger appeared in front of me! I didn't know what to do!" She paused for dramatic effect. "But it only looked me straight in the eye and then turned and walked away. And then I woke up! What do you think, Mother Pensri?"

Mother Pensri wrinkled her nose. "A banyan tree in full bloom is a... nine. A tiger is a two or a seven. But mangosteens... I'm not so sure."

The chatter resumed as the women began clamouring for Mother Pensri to take their bets, noting down numbers on small slips of paper, tucking them inside pockets, bras and shoulder straps for safe-keeping. Mother Pensri continued through the market, making a mental note to look up the significance of mangosteens in her book of dreams when she got home. She bought ingredients for the morning meal: some fermented soy bean cakes, a slice of pork, cherry tomatoes, a bunch of red shallots and some coriander tied into a spray with spring onions.

Outside the market a row of seven monks had stopped to receive their daily alms. Barefoot on the cold cement they clasped their bowls, chanting a blessing as some of the women knelt to offer food. Mother Nong was first in line, as usual. Since her son had become a novice monk, she never missed the morning alms round and was always first up at the temple on Buddha days. Mother Pensri peered at her. *Oh-ho!* she exclaimed to herself, *surely that isn't another new silk sarong she's wearing?*

Mother Pensri, bags and parcels dangling from the handlebars, pushed her bicycle past the monks and along the road. The Chinese merchant, Gimsia, called out to her from his grocer's shop, just across from the market.

"Hey, Mother Pensri, buy some bananas! Only six baht a bunch!"

"Your bananas are too expensive! Everyone else sells a bunch for only four baht!"

"But my bananas are more delicious! Good enough to eat with sticky rice; a meal in itself!"

Mother Pensri laughed. Gimsia smiled and his eyes disappeared. He smoothed down the front of the faded pyjamas he always wore, regardless of weather or occasion. His only concessions to the cold were the socks he wore under his rubber sandals and the old scarf around his short neck. His eyes darted for profitable opportunities everywhere. The hairs sprouting from a large mole on his chin were proof of his shrewdness in business. He had migrated to Thailand during the fifties on the advice of an uncle, nothing in his bag but a change of clothes and a small roll of banknotes, his heart full of the steadfast Chinese will to prosper and succeed. He and his wife, Mother Pon, had run the grocer's shop for almost thirty years. Despite

the fact that Gimsia sat on a comfortable fortune, he still kept his old newspapers and cardboard boxes to sell, and he ate rice porridge with salted cabbage twice a day. His money, he liked to boast, had all gone on sending his only son, Dee, to the very best university in the nearby city.

"What numbers will you buy today, Gimsia?" asked Mother Pensri.

"*Aiya*, no dreams, no deaths, no new cars or special signs. Why should I throw good money away when I am certain not to win?"

He shook his head and bent down to pick up the yellow cat lying across his feet.

Mother Pensri swung on to her bicycle, heading home, past Aunty Wassana's noodle soup stall, Mother Suree's green papaya salad stall, the newsagent's and the police station. Mother Pensri had only caught sight of the handsome new Police Chief a few times but from what she'd heard around the marketplace he was planning to come down hard on illegal gambling. Busy worrying whether his crackdown would affect her underground lottery sales, she had to swerve suddenly to miss Gop, the madman who wandered around barefoot, collecting rubbish.

Once home, Mother Pensri unpacked the coconut cakes, placing three of them on to a small silver plate, and filled a small china cup with water. She took three incense sticks and a thin candle out of a silver bowl and holding everything carefully she padded across the living room to the small red and gold shrine affixed to the south-facing wall. She placed the cakes and water in front of the bronze statue of Buddha at the centre of the shrine. Buddha was seated, head erect, eyes closed, legs crossed, one long, elegant hand resting palm upwards on his

lap and the other resting across his knee, fingers pointing down towards the earth. As Mother Pensri knelt down, the candle and incense unlit between the palms of her hands, she meditated on the significance of the Buddha's pose. The Buddha had reached a state of enlightenment in the forest, when Mara, the devil, jealous of the Buddha's wisdom and serenity, sent a great army of demons to destroy him. Buddha, unperturbed, pointed down at the earth, calling her to witness his goodness. Up rose the earth goddess, Mother Thoranee, wringing the water out of her long hair, creating a great flood that washed away the army of demons. Mother Pensri thought about the story as she bowed to the floor three times, her feet tucked as neatly behind her as her short, fat legs would allow. Then she prayed the special prayer she reserved for the first and the sixteenth of every month: lottery days. She prayed to win. She prayed to win so that her daughter, Kwan, could give up work canning fruit in the city factory, come back and live at home, find a good husband, and settle down. She prayed to win just enough to make life a little easier and she promised to spend some of her winnings on religious offerings and merit-making ceremonies. If she won a lot she would order a new Buddha statue for the big temple, or new robes for all the monks.

"*Saddhu, saddhu, saddhu!*" she concluded, lighting the incense and candle in front of the Buddha.

She was feeling lucky as she went about her daily chores, sweeping and polishing the wooden floors of her house, pestling garlic and chilli, toasting the soy bean cakes, chopping the vegetables she had bought from the market that morning, steaming and frying until a delicious aroma filled the house. Her mind was busy considering the numbers she had heard at

the market. Mother Noi's dreams were often worth following, and Mother Pensri reminded herself about the mangosteens. She consulted her book of dreams and jotted down numbers furiously. Lighting a cigarette, her eyes were caught by two small house lizards chasing one another fitfully across the wall next to the shrine.

Seven for the lizards, she thought automatically, *two because they are a pair.*

"*Tch, tch, tch, tch, tch,*" said the lizards, rolling their tiny eyes and flicking their tiny tails.

Tickets had to be bought before two o'clock in the afternoon. Some people bought the official government lottery tickets with six numbers, hoping for a jackpot. However, most of the villagers bought tickets from the underground lottery organized by Sia Heng, a rich Chinese entrepreneur. Mother Pensri had been an agent for Sia Heng for nearly ten years. The underground lottery used the same numbers as the government, but the chances of winning were greater because the gambler could choose to gamble on only one or two numbers.

Mother Pensri spent the rest of the morning going around the homes and businesses of her regular customers, advising on numbers and collecting bets. From her book of dreams she had found that mangosteens signified numbers one and three, so she had chosen these numbers for herself. Nevertheless, she advised her regular customers to buy nines, threes and fours, sensing that if too many people knew about the mangosteens then the portent wouldn't come true. Twice a month she made a small amount of commission on the tickets she sold and, despite fervent resolutions to the contrary, reinvested most of it in her own lottery numbers.

By two o'clock the sun was high. Balaclavas and scarves had been discarded and the women who had risen early to go to the morning market were lying down inside cool houses, on wooden floors, catching an hour or two of sleep before children came back from school and husbands returned from the fields. Mother Pensri returned home and lay down on her side, her hands clasped under her head as a pillow, her mind a confusion of money and mangosteens and what to make for the evening meal.

Around four o'clock all ears turned to the radio as the winning numbers were announced from Bangkok. Word of the numbers spread through the village and across the whole country like a trail of firecrackers, an explosion of whoops and groans as the villagers pulled scraps of paper from pockets. One farmer had won a small amount on the last two numbers and was already on his way to order the celebratory bottle of herbal whisky, a mob of men clustering round him, eager to share the good luck. "I knew it!" he cried. "I dreamt I saw the numbers painted across my rice field by the hand of Mother Thoranee herself! Sure enough, seven and two! Didn't I tell you?"

Mother Pensri was not alone in feeling envious. *Why*, she thought, *that farmer is drunk every evening and never goes to the temple to make merit and yet he wins quite often!* Mother Pensri couldn't understand where all the luck she had enjoyed last year had gone. "Maybe," she said to Mother Nong, over her backyard fence, "we should start drinking to see if we have auspicious dreams!"

The afternoon ended in another upsurge of noise as children came home from school, riding too fast on bicycles, walking in small gangs and talking in loud voices. Along the main street Aunty Wassana's noodle soup stall was closing up, stools

stacked on tables, the big pot all but empty. Aunty Wassana's latest Burmese worker was crouched over the huge basin of dirty bowls and chopsticks. Mother Suree, face grimly set, was still pounding green papaya salad in her huge wooden mortar. Every so often she would pause to wipe a hand across her eyes: rumour had it her husband was seeing another woman. Gimsia was out on the street, turning a water hose first on his plants and then on the road, washing away the dry season dust. People stopped to chat to one another on their way home, about the weather, their day, and the lottery results. Those who had won were laughing, explaining how they had known which numbers to buy, describing their dreams from the night before. Those who had lost were shaking their heads because it seemed they had come so close to winning, just one or two numbers away from a jackpot. "Never mind," they said to one another, "what we have lost this time we will win back in the next lottery!" As the sun slipped behind the mountains, basking the valley in a brief golden glow, the villagers hurried home to bathe and change before the chill of dusk set in. The steady *pok-pok* of marble pestle on mortar could be heard; the smell of deep fried garlic, chilli, fresh herbs, barbecued fish and mouth-watering omelettes. After the fading smells of dinner came the sharp aroma of the mist mingled with the perfume of wood smoke. Men gathered around small fires at the edge of the road, toothpicks between their teeth and cigarettes hanging off their lips, grumbling about their rice fields and their wives, dredging their pockets for the price of a glass of moonshine, the possibility of a game of cards. Televisions echoed channel seven, the only channel the village could pick up, as families settled down under quilts to watch serial dramas.

All was quiet in the old temple: the monks were already sleeping. Gop, the madman, had fallen asleep under the old banyan tree, near the *chedi*. In front of the *chedi* a statue of Mother Thoranee gazed patiently over the temple grounds, hands elegantly grasping her long black twist of hair, as if wondering when the villagers would start paying attention to her again.

Mother Pensri loved the cold evenings. She sat on her porch smoking a cigarette, checking over her notebook of lottery bets to see who had won. Her commission was all spent as usual, lost on mistaken interpretations of the signs and portents. Mother Pensri knew she could have won, if only she had been paying attention to all the signs. *Tho-oei! Two and seven: how foolish of me!* thought Mother Pensri, one eye on the notebook and one on the persistent house lizards.

“*Tch, tch, tch, tch, tch,*” laughed the lizards, chasing insects on the wall in front of the shrine, rolling their eyes in derision. Somewhere in the nearby jungle the ghost of a tiger roared.

Pumpkin

The stranger sat at Aunty Wassana’s noodle soup stall in the morning market, his truck parked across the street where he could keep an eye on it. He was a long way from home, and mountains made him wary. Too much open space and sky. He had driven all the previous day and through the night, reluctant to stop on the twisting road, feeling trapped by the cold, silent mountains that loomed under a huge, watchful moon. He was dressed in the leather jacket, tight corduroy jeans and brown suede boots he had recently purchased in a Bangkok department store. Foreign brands. He believed in spending a little extra money in order to buy good quality, stuff that would last. On the little finger of his left hand he wore a large blue sapphire set into a thick gold ring. His nails were clean, and trimmed to the quick. As he tucked into a bowl of steaming yellow noodles, he listened to the group of local farmers gathered around the herbal whisky stall. Heads and bellies suffused with the whisky’s mellowing magic, the men were oblivious both to the stranger and the early morning chill; by now they seemed to care little whether they had won or lost at the hands of poker they had spent all night in playing. Their easy, familiar bluster told the stranger they were all neighbours, brothers: the greatest of friends.

“My wife won’t tell me off! She’s got money of her own now!” One of the farmers chuckled and sucked on his cheroot, spitting out the stray tobacco stuck between his teeth.