Introduction

When Yurí was a child, she always felt excited whenever her grandfather came to stay with her, unlike her parents who would say goodnight and turn off the lights. Her grandfather arrived with bedtime stories—sometimes fairy tales, sometimes life experiences, sometimes funny, sometimes sad—but never boring. Yurí often drifted off to sleep halfway through the story and would create her own endings in her dreams. Like all dreams, these memories slowly faded upon waking, turning into a misty blur.

However, one story stayed with Yurí vividly, even now. She heard it while bedridden with illness, her parents out of town, and her grandfather and elder brother stayed to look after her. She remembers every detail—the gentle tone of her grandfather's voice, the coolness of the cloth he dampened on her forehead, and every word of the strange tale he told.

"Do you see the Japanese shrine at the end of the canal? Back in Ayutthaya times, the Japanese once settled a village at Klong Ruea Yao. One king became suspicious of a Japanese nobleman and secretly killed him, then expelled his compatriots. The Japanese village became deserted, but they didn't leave behind just the shrine pillars and paper walls... they left something else as well.

"It is said that not long after the Japanese left, a procession appeared, passing through the forest toward Klong Ruea Yao. They emerged under the darkness of night, singing and dancing strangely. There were no humans in that procession—only grotesque creatures with swollen heads, disfigured faces hidden beneath woven hats, jet-black cats with glowing red eyes. Even those resembling humans were clearly lifeless, moving like puppets held by the strings of a sinister monk. Anyone unfortunate enough to see this abominable procession would soon be forced to march with them forever."

The latter part of the tale echoed in Yurí's fevered dreams. She awoke suddenly at 2 a.m. to complete darkness—no moon, no stars, not even the cicadas' sound. In the room, only her brother was sleeping soundly; her grandfather was gone. Yurí searched for him and heard music outside her window. Though she couldn't understand the lyrics, she disliked the sound. She stood by the window and looked out.

She saw a blue glow at the end of the street. The music came from that light. Her grandfather was walking toward it.

Yurí opened the window and called out, "Grandpa!"

He paused, turned around, smiled at her, then walked away into the darkness of the street.

Yurí never saw her grandfather again.

PART 1

The Procession of a Hundred Ghosts

Chapter 1

The face of the crouching figure beneath the lamppost was covered in black liquid, its body riddled with wormholes. It sat at the fork in front of the bustling market where cars roared by and people crowded to shop or socialize at bars. Some strolled along the canal, pointing out the festive lights that turned the night into a sparkling spectacle. Yet no one saw that spirit—except a fifteen-year-old boy who had been watching it since sunset.

Akara saw it every day from behind the kitchen window of Lim Peng Restaurant. Every day there was a small krathong (floating lantern) with a ball of rice. The spirit would savor it slowly before vanishing. But today, there was no krathong—Auntie was busy preparing for Loy Krathong and forgot to set out the offering. The whole Klong Ruea Yao community was excited for the full moon of the twelfth lunar month.

Klong Ruea Yao is a small subdistrict hidden in the mountains, quiet all year except during Loy Krathong. Then, lights sparkle everywhere, artificial flowers bloom above concrete walkways, and grotesque decorations line both sides of the canal. Every community invests heavily in decorating floats and selecting the most beautiful girls as Nang Noppamas to parade and compete in a week-long festive celebration of this remote community.

So, it was no surprise that Auntie forgot to prepare the rice krathong for the spirit who had died at this fork eight months ago.

“Hey, new kid, stop slacking off!” A voice shouted from behind, pulling Akara’s gaze from the spirit. He lowered his head to continue washing dishes but stole a glance around. The kitchen was hectic, with the head chef yelling at another staff. With everyone busy, Akara seized the chance to scoop some red pork rice into an empty coffee box and hide it away. When his shift ended, he changed from kitchen clothes into his high school uniform and crossed the street to the fork.

“Here you go... no incense, but this should be edible,” Akara said, placing the coffee box near the spirit’s feet. At first, the spirit seemed confused but then sniffed the box like a food-sniffing dog and began to eat greedily. Akara sighed and crouched down.

“People have been crashing and dying at this curve since I was born. Why is there only one spirit here?” he asked. The spirit shook its head.

Akara had forgotten when he first sensed them, but since he could remember, he often heard whispers in the silent room—screams from the hundred-dead curve or unintelligible murmurs carried by the wind. The sounds started faintly, indistinguishable from the breeze, then gradually grew louder over time. Recently, his senses had sharpened until he could vaguely see them. Still, his hearing remained the strongest.

Akara smirked. If he had a choice, he wouldn't want to see any spirits. Being born in Klong Ruea Yao with this sixth sense was annoying. The procession of a hundred ghosts... the crash here must be just his type—he didn't like living people anyway. The front-line gang burst out laughing.

Akara pressed his lips shut. He hated being the center of attention, especially as the 'shepherd boy.' Back in fourth grade, when he went to Loy Krathong with his sister, the main canal of the subdistrict flows from a forest spring, through the village, ending at the water bay. While waiting to release krathongs, Akara noticed a number of lights in the distant forest. At first, he thought they were just lanterns floating downstream. But the lights moved strangely, drifting toward the spring. Wondering, Akara pointed them out to his sister, but she couldn't see them. That's when Akara realized what he had seen.

The next morning, he hurried to tell his school friends. That was his mistake.

Word spread quickly, and Akara was branded a liar for claiming to see the 'ghosts'—the dreaded Krasue—at the forest edge. Many children cried and refused to go out. Some were so terrified they needed the nurse. The teachers investigated and declared there were no ghosts, claiming Akara had made it up. The children stopped panicking but turned on Akara, accusing him of scaring them for attention. Many thought he deserved punishment, especially Jack, the toughest of them all.

"...Not a biker kid..."

"What did you say? Speak up!" Jack shouted. Akara ducked his head, drawing laughter."

"He said the one who died here wasn't a biker, he had a stroke..."

"I say he was a biker. How do you know? Did you see the ghost?" Jack mocked.

Akara hung his head. If he told the truth—that the unlucky man was glaring at Jack from behind—Jack's gang would only bully him more. Akara had always been intimidated by Jack. Now, in high school, he avoided him and hoped his silence would tire Jack out.

"Who exactly died here?" Akara whispered to the spirit.

"A biker," came a teammate's voice.

Someone asked Akara, "Tell us a ghost story. Have you seen anything lately?"

"No, haven't seen anything," Akara replied softly.

"What?! Didn't you see ghosts? We used to say the canal is full of dead people. How come you can't come up with a story now?"

Jack teased. Akara remained silent, silently praying they'd lose interest.

"Alright, alright, I won't bother you anymore," Jack said. Akara sighed, almost choking on air when Jack added, "Ask Jin, she's always with Akara, so she must have heard ghost stories from him."

Akara looked up and saw a thin girl hiding behind the football players. She looked terrified and eager to leave. His heart sank. Why was Jin with them?

Jin caught Akara's eyes, seemingly asking for help.

"Hey Akara, where are you going? I've got someone to cover for you," Jack said, releasing Akara's shoulder. When Akara didn't move, Jack pushed him, "Go ahead, you're annoying."

Akara slowly stood, heart pounding, stepping out of the circle and keeping his eyes on the ground. His sixth sense seemed to catch Jin's disappointment.

"Look at that coward, letting the girls get bullied," a player sneered.

Akara gritted his teeth. They wanted to provoke him. Akara hated bullies and despised victims who didn't fight back. Though he felt guilty for Jin, he knew if he had a chance to escape, he should. He was too weak to protect her. But anger at himself grew. Jin was Akara's classmate since elementary school and never mocked him about his sixth sense like Jack. Jin was the only one who believed him. But Akara pushed her away, once out of necessity, now because of his own powerlessness.

At that moment, Jack said, "Don't blame him, he's one of us. If he goes back late, who'll watch his sister so that she doesn't overdose in the bathroom?"

The captain smiled as Akara turned back. The skinny player pretended not to hear, but the story about Akara's sister was something he couldn't ignore. Jack knew how to keep Akara on a short leash.

Though Jack prided himself on knowing Akara well, he never expected the weakling who almost faints from a shout to suddenly punch him in the eye. No one stopped the fight. Akara was stunned but managed to return a right hook.

Looking up at the sky, thunder rumbled, a half-moon shone bright. The Loy Krathong festival would arrive in seven days.

Akara didn't lose consciousness but couldn't remember the fight clearly. He recalled the curses and pains across his body and faintly heard Jin shout, "The police are coming!" Then the football team vanished like ghosts.

Akara leaned back against the lamppost at the fork. Above, a simple sign read, "Stop! Demolishing the Ancient Japanese Shrine." In front of him sat a girl and a spirit, staring silently.

For reasons unknown, the first words Akara uttered were, "Jin... I'm sorry..."

"It's okay... that's normal," Jin replied with a twitch of a smile. "Funny, huh? We haven't talked in six months—because of Jack."

Akara turned his face away. Had it really been six months? They used to be inseparable.

The boy was always lonely. Other kids who weren't afraid thought he was crazy, but Jin became his friend because she believed, "He seemed sincere. He wouldn't lie." Jin always saw through lies. That's why six months ago, when Akara told her he was fine and everything was normal, she didn't believe him at all. Akara had to avoid her since then to keep the truth hidden.

“Why did you come with the football team?” Akara asked softly.

“For Loy Krathong preparations. They were decorating the Nang Noppamas parade. Afterward, Jack saw you and dragged me here to invite you,” Jin said.

“You decorated the parade?” Akara asked. He remembered Jin’s drawings weren’t very straight. “Do you like it?” The answer made Akara gulp.

“Are you still hurting? Can you get home?” Jin asked.

Akara nodded. Jin offered, “Want me to take you home?”

“No, thanks,” Akara said sharply and immediately regretted sounding harsh. He appreciated his old friend’s kindness, but thunder rumbled—a rain was coming. He had no choice but to let Jin take shelter at his house. His sister wouldn’t let him refuse.

“Alright, see you later,” Jin said emotionlessly before walking away.

Akara watched until his old friend disappeared, leaving only himself, the spirit, and the rain beginning to fall on the fork in the road.

Chapter 2

Rain showers through dense leaves as Akara steps through the muddy path, leaving behind the bright lights of the main road and heading into the dark forest. Soon, he sees lights ahead—lanterns above a wooden fence. The gate is chained but not locked; Jack must have left it open for him. Akara pushes the gate open, quickly securing the chain, then runs past a pickup truck and a brown motorcycle toward a solitary two-story house. His father, a recluse, had chosen this remote home far from the main road.

Akara enters the living room, dripping wet clothes leaving pungent odors. He raises an eyebrow and remarks about the ghostly procession of a hundred spirits during the full moon.

“Weren’t you quitting smoking?” Akara tries to change the subject.

“I quit only when you’re around... now tell me, what were you doing?”

Under pressure from his sister Anyarin, Akara confesses: “I... I ran into Jack.”

“The stubborn forward, huh?”

Akara nods. “He came after me. I tried to run, but he cursed, so I hit him...”

Anyarin falls silent. “Who won?”

“I lost on points.”

“Better to lose by knockout,” she sighs, opening the medicine cabinet. “I teach you how to fight, but learn to assess the situation. If you know you’ll lose, don’t fight.”

“He said you might overdose in the bathroom. I got mad!” Akara protests as Anyarin dabs his wound with red medicine-soaked cotton.

“Let him call you a coward all he wants. Usually, you’re calm, so why do you act without thinking when angry?”

Akara lowers his head, knowing his weakness and always avoiding trouble bigger than he can handle. But when Jack mocked his sister, he lost control, wanting revenge on the loudmouth. Now, he fears Jack will watch him closely and never let him live in peace.

“He’s been bullying Jin too...” Akara mumbles.

“That makes more sense,” Anyarin replies softly, tossing her cigarette and cotton into the trash. “No...” Akara won’t lie to his sister. “I didn’t hit him because of Jin. At first, they bullied me, then shifted to Jin. I took the chance to run.”

Anyarin looks at her brother with disappointment.

“I’m not as good as you,” Akara murmurs weakly.

Anyarin is five years older than him, but she often played with him. Back in elementary school, when Anyarin was in high school, she would sit and watch over Akara after school at the playground. His older sister noticed that other kids were afraid of Akara, and some even bullied him because of his sixth sense. Anyarin always came to protect Akara. For a small, powerless child like Akara, his sister seemed capable of fending off any rival—from rebellious younger kids to adults telling Akara to stop talking nonsense.

When rumors spread about a ghost epidemic, teachers accused Akara of lying to seek attention. When Anyarin found out, she argued fiercely with the teacher in front of the class:

“Akara says he saw it, so he saw it. Were you there to know he was lying?”

Anyarin stood beside him when Akara saw strange lights. She didn’t see the lights herself but believed him.

Anyarin sighed as she put away first-aid supplies. “Hurry up and take a bath, then come down and cook. I want to eat yellow curry.” Although she knew her mother’s recipes well, Anyarin couldn’t cook herself, so she often guided Akara in the kitchen. However, Akara was completely unskilled at cooking. He once served undercooked grilled pork with burnt fried eggs to his sister. Thankfully, his sister’s stomach wasn’t too upset that time.

Akara’s cooking skills have slowly improved over the past few months, and now Anyarin no longer has to stay up three hours late helping in the kitchen. The sour curry Akara just finished making exceeded his sister’s expectations.

“Tastes just like Mom’s,” Anyarin praised after taking a bite. Akara, sitting across the table, smiled shyly. “I secretly watched the head chef at the restaurant.”

“You picked it up on your own, huh? You should have just asked him to teach you directly. Before this, your sour curry always tasted burnt.”

Anyarin grabbed a can of beer and took a satisfied gulp. “So... what about that Jack situation?” “What do you mean?”

“Get into a fight with people like that once, and they never let go,” the woman said. Akara paled. Anyarin sighed. “Want me to handle it for you?”

“How?”

“Reasoned talk... and if they don’t listen, persuade them with fists.” Akara jumped, knowing what she meant.

“Don’t. They’re big, and there are many of them.”

“That’s true... I don’t even have the strength to hold a pan anymore,” Anyarin said bitterly, looking at her thin wrist.

“Besides... if you’re going to do that, you have to go outside too.”

“Right,” Anyarin muttered, her expression turning somber. Seeing her mood, Akara immediately thought he had to avoid the rowdy football team, or at least keep his troubles hidden from his sister. He couldn’t let anyone see Anyarin in that state.

While Akara was washing dishes in the kitchen, he heard piano music coming from the living room. He didn’t know the song but knew it was his sister’s favorite. The clear, gentle notes blended beautifully, filling the house with warmth, dispelling the cold rain that kept falling.

The boy smiled faintly. Who would have thought that tough Anyarin could play the piano so tenderly? His sister always surprised him, like the time he learned she was studying music education.

Anyarin’s rebellious reputation spread throughout Klong Ruea Yao as a “problem child.” She was smart but skipped school, loved racing motorcycles at night, argued with adults, and wasn’t afraid to shut down gossip. Yet she pursued music education seriously, now in her third year. The title “Teacher Any” still sounded unbelievable because whenever she came home, she’d laze around until noon, wake early to drink beer, and became a regular at the local smoker’s corner.

Because of this, rumors that she was addicted to drugs didn’t surprise many. Six months ago, a friend of Anyarin’s classmate from the neighborhood reported that Anyarin called to drop out, saying her parents had to work abroad, leaving Akara home alone. She took a semester off to care for her younger brother but later failed to re-register as a student.

Anyarin’s excuse didn’t make much sense. Unlike her reclusive husband, their mother was sociable and would have said goodbye to neighbors if she really was moving abroad. Instead, she disappeared as if vanishing into thin air.

In July, on a rainy evening, someone saw Anyarin holding an umbrella to pick up her brother at a minibus stop. Her appearance shocked the onlookers—pale skin, gaunt, sunken eyes, and some noticed scars on her arms that looked like knife cuts. Curious neighbors followed the two siblings to their home, peeking inside to see a messy, rundown house with a foul odor. After a while, Akara nervously asked the neighbors to leave.

Since then, rumors spread that Anyarin had quit because of depression. Many disagreed, suggesting she was addicted to drugs and self-harming. The latter rumor fit her personality better and soon spread all over Klong Ruea Yao. The only remaining mystery was the whereabouts of the two siblings' parents.

In August, Akara applied for a dishwasher job at Lim Peng Phochana restaurant. Everyone knew how reserved he was. If he had to look for work, it was likely due to financial difficulties at home. Moreover, rumors circulated that the siblings' father borrowed a large sum of money to invest, then went abroad, leaving behind a drug-addicted sister and a mentally unstable brother.

Ironically, many locals had never even seen the father's face. The day before, Akara saw a middle-aged woman he didn't know telling an elderly man at Lim Peng restaurant that she had once seen the siblings' house. She claimed it was dirty and dilapidated, filled with empty alcohol bottles and frequented by drug addicts.

Akara looked around the house. While it had been shamefully neglected shortly after the parents left, he was now making a big effort to clean. The house was now neat and smelled of incense that he had brought to decorate it. Despite Anyarin's habit of leaving cigarette butts and beer cans around, Akara kept everything tidy. The house was perfect, and Anyarin's piano music made it even more special.

Most importantly, Akara wouldn't allow anyone in—not even the revered abbot—to enter this precious sanctuary.

Chapter 3

Akara opened the refrigerator and found that his sister's beer was almost finished. He planned to restock the supplies this weekend. With that thought, he opened the cabinet beside the piano in the living room to grab the household expense notebook. He smiled with satisfaction when he saw there was enough money saved for groceries. He wondered what special things they could buy to celebrate the upcoming Loy Krathong festival.

Since their parents had left, Akara had managed the household finances strictly. Without a regular income and unable to withdraw money from their parents' accounts, the only income for the house came from renting out the land used for cattle grazing along the main road. Although sufficient for living, Akara heard rumors that the tenant planned to sell off the herd and move to live with his son in the province. Whether true or not, Akara didn't want to wait passively for the only source of income to disappear. Negotiating for a new tenant was too much for a fifteen-year-old, so he took a part-time job as a dishwasher at Lim Peng Phochana restaurant, arranged through his sister, who was classmates with the shop owner's child.

Anyarin was also trying to find work. Since she could type, she accepted a job translating English documents for an online magazine. Even though Akara didn't want his sister to overwork herself, Anyarin insisted she was the only one who indulged in luxuries like beer and refused to let her brother be the sole breadwinner. She said if that was the case, she would just stop buying beer, but Akara couldn't agree either. He knew that Anyarin's only joys these days were her piano and a can of beer.

After finishing the expense check, Akara put the notebook away and headed upstairs. Passing by Anyarin's room, he overheard a conversation—no, more like an argument—from inside.

"…You're grown, you can take care of yourself, but think about your brother too!"

"I'm always taking care of Akara, Auntie, you don't have to meddle."

"Learn some responsibility, Anyarin. Don't be like your father."

"Auntie, don't say bad things about Dad."

Akara gently knocked on the door. "Sis… can I come in?"

The voices inside fell silent. Akara heard his sister mumbling, "Hang up first." Soon, Anyarin came out.

"Who were you talking to?"

"Auntie On," Anyarin mumbled with a sour expression. "She said she'll visit next week." Akara's eyes widened. "Why?"

"The gossipmongers found out about our parents, called Auntie, scolded her badly, and said she'd come to check if the grandchildren can live here… maybe even move in if necessary."

"Auntie can't come to our house."

"I know. Dad said he'd make sure we're okay here, but Auntie doesn't trust Dad."

Dad had a history of acting on his own—running away with Mom, moving to start work without consulting anyone, and neglecting Anyarin as she grew into a 'lost kid' in the eyes of relatives. It wasn't surprising even Dad's sister was worried that he left the two kids alone for months.

"But you can handle it, right?" Akara asked.

"Like always. You're stubborn enough to make Auntie give up and just leave it be."

Anyarin pursed her lips. "Actually, Auntie mentioned something else… she wants to take you with her." "I already refused. It's settled."

After finishing Grade 10, Akara set his sights on becoming a lawyer like the hero in his favorite movie *The Rainmaker*, living by the family philosophy of giving your all in everything. He aimed to get into a top university. Hearing this, Auntie On worried that a rural school like Klong Ruea Yao couldn't prepare her nephew for the harsh competition ahead, so she planned to take him to a good school in Bangkok. Akara refused, not wanting to leave home or his sister.

“Auntie says since Dad’s not here, she wants to take care of you.”

“No, thanks. My sister takes good care of me.”

“Are you sure? Don’t you think you’re carrying too much for a fifteen-year-old—working hard to feed me and get ready for university? Living like this, is it really okay? I don’t like being accused of not taking care of you, but Auntie would take better care of you.”

“No way!” Akara exclaimed.

No one could care for him better than Anyarin. Who protected him when bullies came? Who listened to his ghost stories without doubt? He’d lived in Klong Ruea Yao his whole life. Akara always felt the world outside his door was dangerous and unpredictable, filled with wandering spirits and people who looked upon him with pity and disdain. And what about Bangkok—the metropolis where ten thousand are born and a thousand die daily? How loud must the voices of the dead be? How cruel would humans be there? Auntie thought Akara’s ghost stories were nonsense and even suspected he might have mental health issues.

Akara would face that city alone, leaving Anyarin isolated in this house.

“Don’t you want me to stay with you?” Akara asked, hurt. Anyarin’s cold gaze flickered.

“No way.”

“Then why do you want to push me away?”

Anyarin said nothing. The two siblings stood silently in the upstairs hallway for a long time until Anyarin sighed and gently ruffled Akara’s hair.

“I’ll call Auntie again tomorrow.”

Akara finally smiled.

A slender figure walked along the dark, silent street. The rain had stopped, leaving only a clear sky full of stars and the fresh scent of earth. For Anyarin, the smell of the earth after rain replaced the scent of cigarettes, calming her heart and freeing her from all worries.

Fortunately, the rain ceased at midnight, allowing her to step outside and enjoy the night breeze. The villagers were all asleep; no one could secretly watch her and spread strange rumors. But Anyarin was determined that her brother Akara would never find out—his stubbornness was fierce when it came to her rules.

She thought back to childhood rainy nights when she promised her little brother to take him out for a walk to breathe in the fresh earth’s scent after the rain. But the rain didn’t stop until around 3 a.m., when Akara woke her, insisting on the promised walk despite the late hour and cold air. As always, Anyarin could not resist her brother’s yearning and secretly took him out. He loved the lush scenery that night. The little girl asked him why he liked it so much.

"...I like walking with you."

The next morning, Akara fell ill. He told no one about their secret late-night walk except Jin, who came to visit. Anyarin hid outside the room, listening to Akara speak with his friend.

"Why did you go for a walk so late and get sick?" Jin asked.

"I promised Sis I'd go out with her. She love the smell after rain so much, and if I didn't go, she'd be sad," Akara replied.

Anyarin smiled faintly, recalling the past. Her brother always thought of himself as an orchid that would die without clinging to a big tree—and because of that belief, he couldn't put down roots or grow on his own.

As she pondered this, a chill ran down her spine.

She decided to turn back, when suddenly a sound came from behind.

The rhythm of long drums and smaller drums beat thrillingly, accompanied by lively wind instruments. A crowd chanted and danced as if in a festive parade—but the voices were hoarse and lifeless. The contrast made Anyarin shiver. No long drum band should be playing on a forest road at midnight like this.

She froze as the eerie song became clearer:

"Krooooo, krooooo, here we come, here we are. Here comes the gang swinging and bouncing, tala-la.

Old man with a big head waddles, red-eyed cat leads the way,

The monk with a woven hat carries a lantern,

The blind man walks beside, swaying, tala-la."

The strange lyrics grew louder and closer.

Mustering her courage, Anyarin slowly turned to look toward the source of the sound at the end of the deserted road.

A blue light shimmered like moonlight, moving toward her.