

Wipas Srithong

Extracts from the novel *Long, Lop, Leum, Soon* [VANISHING]

Two men meet when they join a secret online group that pursues the idea of becoming lost as a way of attaining higher meaning in their lives. Whether by following strangers in a mall or going off-track in the wilderness, members attempt to get a high by pushing themselves into an uncomfortable place. Wit, an alcoholic, pill-popping student and amateur writer, is barely passing medical school; and Prakorn, brought up with the privileges of an elite military family, is struggling in his career and marriage. Intrigued by Wit's recounts of his lost experiences Prakorn seeks him out, but their friendship leads to murder and the men become entwined in Thailand's repeated history of street protests, massacres and coups.

Whilst examining the men's personal traumas, Vanishing portrays the deep polarization in Thai society today. Set during the 2010 street protests in Bangkok when over 90 people were shot dead with impunity and hundreds injured, trying to become lost plunges the men to the brink of permanent forgetting.

CHAPTER 12

Wit got off the bus and followed a thin haired man with a white goatee who was talking intently into his mobile. The man finished talking, put his mobile in his pocket and turned left at the pedestrian overpass. Just as Wit thought he would step up, he abruptly swung around and met Wit's eyes with suspicion. Wit held his position and stood uncertain and tentative. He knew he wasn't good at this risky game. He turned and walked away with a sigh as he recited the rules and recommendations from the web site.

He meandered along past high rise buildings and stopped at the foot of a wide stairway leading up to a busy mall. Beside a digital billboard pole, a ragged, homeless man holding plastic bags was searching uninhibitedly through the rubbish bin. Wit stood indecisive, looking around and ready to move on.

'Melt yourself into your surroundings until becoming a perfect stranger.' Wit remembered the words of the Soulman: the web master.

'I'm here. What about you?' Wit heard the voice of a boy talking into his mobile.

Wit didn't turn to look, but saw the lower body of a teenager wearing tight jeans, skinny like a stork, passing by him.

'Really—where exactly are you?'

Wit stopped listening and searched for another target on the footpath. A pick-up truck flying the protestor's flag moved along slowly in the traffic. A megaphone on top blared out a recorded political message. He walked away while unintentionally absorbing the words. He stepped onto the shadow of a man getting out of a taxi and followed him up to the entrance of the mall. Wit maintained the distance between them at the length of the shadow, until the man entered the sliding doors and went directly up to a group gathered inside.

'It's not a good idea to leave things like that.' Wit had moved onto a woman in a long skirt, eavesdropping on her as she spoke into her hands-free microphone.

'What if someone managed to deal with him?' the long skirted woman finished her sentence and paused, listening to the other end for a minute before saying, 'You don't need to warn me, I know.' She nodded and went on, 'You mustn't let this continue.'

'What if I really do it?' She lowered her voice. Wit quickened his steps to get closer. 'Listen carefully if you want to have a chance. For the next two days he will be staying...' She shifted to a whisper and he couldn't hear anything. He slowed down and let some distance grow

between them, not wanting to be noticed. The lost people have to be unnoticed. He remembered this rule from the website and subscribed to the idea. He left her and walked in a different direction, strolling towards the escalator that was inundated with people at its base.

'That sounds great,' a long-haired, hip-looking teenager spoke to his group of friends. 'Idiot right wingers like you guys should go to military school.'

'You're so smart aren't you,' another boy mocked, stretching his back and marching in place on a step of the escalator. His arms swung stiffly and his face was stern like a parading soldier.

Wit grinned.

Reaching the second floor Wit saw a tall, blonde foreigner: muscly and wearing a tight, dot patterned t-shirt. He followed him, watching the beads of sweat on the back of his neck. Wit felt calm and was deep in thought. He liked the feeling. Nothing seemed dangerous, it was as though he was sinking into emptiness, and he felt a sense of exhilaration rather than fear. It was as if he was temporarily erasing himself. When he followed the foreigner into the toilet he saw himself multiply, reflected in the many mirrors. Their array in the heavily scented and luxurious room made him feel like he was inside an aquarium.

The foreigner widened his legs in front of one of the empty urinals lined up against the wall. Afraid of being noticed, Wit pushed open the door of a cubicle and sat on a bowl, listening for movement. He heard cheerful whistling harmonised with the flow of water. He heard a door swinging many times, followed by conversations of multiple people.

Wit stared at the graffiti engraved on the cream coloured toilet door. The words were written in strange characters that he couldn't read or recognize. He felt they were there for him and tried in vain to interpret the meaning, and reached his hand to touch the words. He frowned and tightened his eyes and lips, clenched his fists and tried to cry, but nothing came out. He spat into the toilet and left the bathroom.

Wit walked absently, and went and stood by a Greek style column on the third floor of the curving atrium and stared down vaguely at the crowd.

'Isn't it?' a slow voice touched his ear.

'Yes, normal people won't play this game. We are all lost already.' The words came from two women in purple office uniforms walking past him. He felt interested in their conversation and followed them down to the second floor and into a discount baby clothes shop. He touched the merchandise in the shop: pants, jumpsuits and socks, and caressed the soft fabric, looking around and forgetting the two women. A sales woman watched him and was about to approach, but Wit avoided her and turned his face to the front of the shop where he saw an oval faced, middle-aged woman drop something as she walked past.

He rushed out to pick up a crushed ball of paper, intending to return it to its owner. He suddenly realised that she had probably meant to throw it away, but still wanting to follow her, he pushed through a group of teenagers gathered in front of the IT shops.

'Better do something else, believe me,' a voice came from the group.

'No, it's not true.'

'Yes, it's true. Trying to disappear is just as attention seeking.'

Wit halted and turned to look who had said it, but couldn't tell. He moved along, thinking that perhaps he was hallucinating. There was some laughter as he pressed himself through the group. Suddenly he was surrounded by laughter, which was joined in by others as though they were making fun of him. He hurried to follow the middle-aged woman to the escalator down to the basement level, and entered a huge supermarket with oceans of merchandise on the shelves. He felt that he was slipping into another world, with its own atmosphere: separate from the outside. He shadowed her, picking up the same items that she had put in her trolley, reading the

label and caressing them before returning them to the shelf. He inched closer, sometimes almost touching her, but avoided meeting her eyes. He heard her mumbling while reading the labels. Her voice seemed soft and pleasant.

After a while he stopped following her. He walked through the narrow homewares aisle, came out into the bathroom fixtures section and walked along the wider space, watching people queuing with trolleys at the checkout. His gaze stopped at the iris of the CCTV camera above the cashier. He looked hard at the black hole of the lens gazing back at him.

'It's good to open your eyes, but don't try to see anything.' The voice came from a man talking on a mobile as Wit walked past.

'Isn't that right? don't you think?'

'You see what happened next...'

Wit didn't hear the rest of the sentence. He turned and watched the back of the man who was carrying a brief case until he disappeared around the corner, and softly repeated the words he had heard, 'It's good to open your eyes, but don't try to see anything.'

Wit went up to the fifth floor where there was a huge food court. He ordered a meal and chose to sit by a fish tank, and slowly chewed his rice, swallowing without tasting. Two men carrying a tray sat at a table behind him. Wit listened to their conversation.

'Do you know about Danai: Danai, who quit our company last year?'

'Kind of.'

'Danai who drove a Civic and overtook me. That was bad luck. That day if he didn't get it, I would've been the next victim, one hundred percent.'

Wit put down his fork and spoon. He wouldn't touch any more rice. He looked at the fish in the tank, diving and hiding in the fake coral. He tried to examine his thoughts. He didn't know what it was all about. It seemed as if the exercise was intended to strip away his self-consciousness, but as he slipped further into the experiment he became increasingly self-aware. His self-awareness had mounted to a point that he felt he was on a stage. However, he allowed the feelings and started to appreciate the structure of its purpose: its abstract idea.

He gulped water from his bottle, pushed the rice aside and walked up to the coupon refund booth.

'Do you know?' a man in front was talking to a small boy standing beside him.

'I don't know.'

'Please know.'

'Know what?' the boy asked.

'That blind people always use two hands to shake.'

'More, Uncle.'

'That an elephant can't jump.'

'Tell me more.'

'All polar bears are left handed.'

'How do you know that, Uncle?' the boy giggled.

'Do you want to hear more?'

'Of course.'

'A rooster can't walk backwards.'

'I know that.'

'Ok, why do we have Friday?'

Wit refunded his coupons and left without hearing the answer. He walked anti-clockwise around the oval atrium until he reached the other side of the building and entered a department store with a network of aisles displaying a multitude of small designer outlets. He chose to turn left at every junction until completing a full circle and then look for the closest exit. He saw the emergency exit not far away. He made a bee-line, leaving the mall and crossing a sky bridge to the adjacent multi-story car-park. He went down the fire escape to the second floor and then crossed back. The noisy hum returned and the flow of movement tired his eyes. He stared at the crowd with the feeling that nobody noticed him at all, that he was alone, and detached from them.

Wit imagined that it was a labyrinth before him and he was lost. He squinted and looked at the mass of people. He decided to choose grey. He walked up and joined them, looking for someone wearing grey. He found his target and moved towards a man wearing a grey suit and carrying an expensive briefcase; his hair was peppered with grey, carefully combed and shiny. The man in the suit walked energetically as he glanced at his reflection in the shop windows. It was clear that he was content with his looks. Wit zigzagged, keeping a distance between them. The man walked vigorously without stopping. He turned into a narrow corridor. At first Wit thought he was going to the toilet, but he went straight to the lift and pushed the up button, stepping backwards and smoothing his hair as he studied his reflection in the lift doors. Wit stood behind him.

The lift arrived and the doors opened. The man waited until the passengers exited before stepping in. A woman in a department store uniform joined him. The grey suited man looked at Wit questioningly. Wit didn't move and returned his gaze with a blank expression and stood still until the doors closed before leaving.

Wit wanted to leave the mall. He decided to follow someone else and chose blue.

He followed a bleached blonde, stylish young man for a while until he went to the escalator, and then he stopped and changed to follow a blue uniformed guard, who swaggered forward and lead him out of the mall as he wanted.

Outside the sun was sinking and the twilight of a hot night had arrived. The guard went straight to the guardhouse by the entrance to the car park. Wit stood by the traffic lights nearby. 'A chance to build a boon for your life,' chanted the radio coming from the window of the guardhouse. 'If you have no charisma and don't come, you will lose your chance.' The sound faded and then came back clearly, 'Karma is the circle of life. We build this as the vicissitude of life...'

Wit crossed the road and walked along the footpath past the intersection: walking straight and without purpose. He crossed three streets, but nothing inspired him to turn. He walked stooped, hardly noticing his path or surroundings, only knowing that the sky had no light. When he looked up he saw the moon. He remembered that when he left the mall it was on his left, but now it was on his right and about to be covered by thick clouds.

He wandered for a long time, not knowing where he was. He crossed to the other side of the road where there was a dim karaoke bar and a restaurant. The street seemed emptier; over half the shop houses and offices were closed. He moved along, entering small side streets and dark alleys, before turning back and going into another street without plan.

He passed a closed fresh market. In front of it was a small entrance leading in. While he stepped through stacks of discarded boxes he heard a woman's voice coming from inside.

'Wait at the car.'

'What did you say?' The voice came from the other side of the street, which was equally dark. The voice had a low and anxious tone. Wit turned and strained to see, and glimpsed the dark silhouette of a man.

'I said wait at the car.'

'Shout again?'

'Wait at the car.'

'I can't hear you. Shout louder.' The back and forth shouts between the two sides made Wit stop as though hypnotised. He stood with his hands in his pockets in the dim light, looking left and right, following the reverberating sound.

'What did you say?'

'Wait at the car or leave right now.'

'Hey? What did you say?'

Wit caught a taxi home just before the rain poured down. He politely asked the driver to turn down the radio. He felt tired and his throat was dry. He leant back in his seat, stretched his legs and closed his eyes. Having wandered all afternoon and replaying what had happened he felt overwhelmed.

The rain subsided. He looked out through the window, which reflected the light. Raindrops on the window moved and vibrated like amoeba under a microscope, and slid across the pane.

At home he had a shower and went straight to his bedroom. He saw light under his mother's door, but didn't want to disturb her, knowing that she always went to bed early.

That night while lying in bed he suddenly remembered something and reached for his pants hanging across the chair. He pulled the crushed lump from his pocket and flattened it and looked at a completely blank piece of wrinkled paper. He stared at the creases and wrinkled lines in wonder, before squeezing it back up into a ball.

[...]

CHAPTER 26

Wit went straight to the delivery room after the announcement over the PA. Being abused so frequently, he flinched whenever he heard his name called. He had to control his anxiety and at the same time it stirred his animosity at being branded as an incompetent student.

He opened the door, turned left past a pile of clothes and entered the delivery change rooms. He washed and dried his hands with a towel and threw it into a basket on the other side of the room. The sharp shot went straight in. He smiled and shot another and then another towel. Each went straight through the hoop. He threw another and it hit the rim, but still went in. He had thrown six and each had gone straight to the target. He shrugged and smiled with pride and thought that today he had a magic touch. From behind him there was a sound of a throat clearing. He turned and saw a male nursing assistant watching him, smiling to reveal his shiny teeth, 'You're a sharp shot.'

Wit threw the last towel in his hand. He lowered his body like he was shooting a basketball. The towel flew in a parabolic curve straight into the centre of the basket.

'Excellent!'

Wit smiled, nodding thankfully, despite knowing the inappropriateness of his actions. He changed and hurried out of the room to see the case to which he had been summoned. The intern and a nurse were discussing something and glanced over to acknowledge him.

'Is this your case?' asked the female intern.

'No, it's not,' answered Wit, looking at the name tag on her chest, 'Dr Sukhanya.'

'It doesn't matter if it isn't—it's a simple case and should be an easy delivery even though it's her first pregnancy. Dr Wit, you should take this case. How many have you done so far?'

'Two.'

'Only two, well that's good then. You have to do this one.'

Wit showed his hesitation; he would need guidance.

'I don't think you could find an easier case,' insisted Dr Sukhanya, seeing his unease. 'You're strange; show some courage,' she urged and then said firmly, 'There's no choice—you have to do it.'

Dr Sukhanya moved her small, slender body to open the file hanging at the end of the bed. She told him the details, 'We have to wait a bit longer. She hasn't reached second stage yet, but I just did a PV and she's dilated to almost ten centimetres already, so it won't be long.'

Wit reviewed the chart and examined her, checking the foetal heart rate, vital signs and descent. He evaluated the progression of the delivery before talking to the soon-to-be mother. The woman in the labour gown was in her early thirties and her eyes showed her trepidation. She lay on her side and forced a smile as she answered his questions. There were another three cases in the waiting room and they all lay looking expressionless at the young doctor.

'Mother, Dr Wit will be delivering your baby,' the smiling nurse informed the pregnant woman. Wit nodded and asked some more questions. He used a stethoscope to measure the heart rate of the foetus again, recorded it on the chart and went to sit and wait in front of the counter. Dr Sukhanya was busy examining patient's files at a table next to a wall lined with time tables of the ward staff. Outside the window the sky was depressed and overcast and there was a distant rumble of thunder.

Half an hour after doing a PV that told them she was ready, they moved the mother to the delivery room. The staff prepared, following typical procedure. Wit did the urinary catheterisation and another PV to assess the baby and its position for the last time. Dr Sukhanya came to recheck; her prognosis was the same and she told Wit to prepare the anaesthetic for cutting the perineum. When it was ready, Wit injected it while the nurse and assistant moved up to talk to the mother, making conversation and repeating the breathing instructions they had practiced earlier.

The mother began to cry out with pain more often so Wit checked the descent. The head was showing at the opening of her vagina and Dr Sukhanya told him to cut the perineum.

Wit took a pair of scissors from the tray and cut diagonally. The mother didn't react, but raised her voice in agony so loudly from her pushing that the nurse had to quieten her and re-establish the rhythm of her breathing. She told her to breathe out to give more force.

'You don't prefer a median incision?' said Dr Sukhanya, observing his cut and indicating for him to move on to the next procedure.

At first Wit was confused about the positioning and put his hand in the wrong place, even though he knew the theory of the procedures well. Where was the magic touch he had when throwing the towel? For a moment all of his knowledge evaporated, but then it came back clearly. He composed himself, checked the descent and found that the baby's head was in a position of deflection. Slowly and confidently he placed and pressed his hand to help the baby come out smoothly.

Dr Sukhanya stood watching, nodding occasionally and giving advice, raising her voice only enough to be heard over the mother's cries and nurse's urgings. When the baby's head came out of the vagina, Wit used a bulb syringe to clear its mouth and nostrils. He felt moved

seeing the new life in front of him, the shiny pink head so alive. He beamed, overwhelmed with emotion.

He took a deep breath and prepared for the shoulder delivery. Now he was more confident.

'I know you know, doctor...turn the baby in the OT line. Yes, that's right, holding the side of the head. Now gently pull down.'

Wit didn't hear what Dr Sukhanya was saying; he just sensed the touch and acknowledged the soft, fragile, living thing, full of blood and flesh in his hands. He was only faintly aware of the sounds around him as he delivered the shoulders until full expulsion and pulled the glistening, wet baby out. He used the bulb syringe to clear the airways again while the nurse cleaned and dried and stimulated the baby at the same time. Then there was a noise at the main door; a group of people had entered the hallway. Wit turned to look and saw a group of medical students, residents and interns carrying medical records and talking loudly.

'That's strange, rounds so early. It's not even four pm,' said Dr Sukhanya, noting, 'and Professor Anuwat leading the rounds too.' Hearing the name Wit's heart sank and he felt a wave of goose bumps. The tall figure of the Professor stood out in the centre of the group. He swallowed his saliva and started to fidget as though about to be cornered. He took a deep breath and tried to hide his anxiety.

'Dr Wit, continue. Don't waste time,' urged Dr Sukhanya.

Wit looked at the patient. The mother looked exhausted; her eyes were closed and she lay still. The baby lay on its back on her stomach, hands and feet splayed in the air. He tied a thread before cutting the umbilical cord and then examined its blood vessels. He passed the baby to the nurse to be put in the incubator.

Wit prepared for delivery of the placenta. He stood erect to invigorate his confidence. A few minutes later the group entered the room and Wit saw Dr Sukhanya go to meet them. The staff in the delivery ward became exaggeratedly active. Wit tried to calm himself, occasionally glancing at Dr Sukhanya, but she didn't see his call for help.

There was no choice. Wit recited the procedure and its order, step by step, telling himself not to panic, but he couldn't order his thoughts and had to rely on instinct. Although he knew every step, the eyes of the group dissolved his memory. Wit was furious and hated himself, wishing that he could expel himself from his clumsy body.

There are three methods for placental delivery, recited Wit. He composed his thoughts and everything seemed to take shape. He remembered what he had to do next, so simple and easy. His mind had just been playing a game with him, thinking that it was complex and making a mess in his head, he told himself, as he placed his hand on the pubic bone of the mother and applied uterine compression.

'Use your hand to hold the umbilical cord Dr Wit. Don't let it hang loose like that,' a familiar voice flowed to him.

Wit bowed, acknowledging the Professor and hurriedly followed the order. Maybe he was getting used to the authoritarian tone, since he was less startled than he expected.

Everyone crowded at the end of the bed and Wit was relieved when Dr Sukhanya was the one to report the history of the case. They all listened while glancing between him and the mother. Only Professor Anuwat seemed determined and tense, staring at the reporter—undistracted. It was clear that the Professor intended not to look at him. His face was calm. No one could have foreseen the storm of rage that would pour out in a few minutes.

After the briefing was finished there was a short silence. All eyes stared at Wit's movements. He tried to compose himself, but his hands were shaking uncontrollably. Their stare made him aware of his disadvantage and he became clumsy and repeated his actions compulsively.

'Now we will see a placental delivery,' announced Professor Anuwat, raising his eyebrows and asking the group, 'Can you answer this simple question? How many methods are there for performing placental delivery and what are they?'

Everyone raced to answer, but the one who was fastest and loudest responded fluently. Wit was relieved that everyone's attention had been distracted, but still felt uncertain, wondering why Professor Anuwat was avoiding eye contact with him.

While waiting for the placental extraction Wit listened to the lecture from the Professor and felt that his voice was the only thing holding the fragile atmosphere in the room together.

'As you see, Dr Wit is using the second method for this case,' Professor Anuwat cast a quick glance at him, 'So tell me, how do you perform a placental examination and what do we have to look for?'

Wit held the clamp while watching the movement of the umbilical cord. Feeling someone nudging him, he turned. 'Doctor, doctor, it's you—you have to answer the question, but I just see you standing there absent minded.' Professor Anuwat grinned and extended his arm for the answer.

'Sorry, what was the question Professor?'

The Professor's eyes tensed and his lips pursed with impatience. He nodded to Dr Sukhanya who returned an ingratiating smile before repeating the question to Wit. Whatever popped up in Wit's mind he grabbed and shot back as the answer before it disappeared with his nerves. He answered many of the points correctly, but it wasn't the complete answer. His eyes rested on the wide and smooth forehead of his interrogator. He didn't dare look straight at him because he could clearly see the Professor's eyes pushing him away. The pressure was making him more confused and he was perplexed by the shape of the eyes that were becoming more and more slanted and making him realise the intensity of the anger in the powerful face. It stunned him and froze his spine. His thoughts became chaotic. He mumbled, digging for the answer that had swept from his grasp.

'Take your time and calm down.' Professor Anuwat showed his generosity, but his gaze saw through Wit and his eyes sparkled and showed his enjoyment.

Wit looked at all of the faces, but his thoughts were still blank. Despite knowing he was thinking too much, he kept on pitifully searching. He stood stiffly, feeling his body heavy and useless, with one hand holding the umbilical cord and the other placed on the pubic bone of the mother.

Professor Anuwat stepped impatiently closer and slapped Wit's hand away from the patient. Wit cried out, startled, his yelp shaky and loud.

'Why are you crying? Are you really crazy?' Professor Anuwat yelled at him, 'How dare you press your hand that way. What an idiot. You can't press straight on that area—you could cause a uterine inversion. What would you have done if that happened?'

The relaxed atmosphere was gone and the room was tense. Many shifted uneasily, seeing such a harsh scene that had transformed the delivery room into a fighting pit.

Wit lowered his eyes, feeling like a small injured animal, wounds all over his body and everyone around him baring fangs and spitting venom at him with their eyes. He felt like crushing all of the eyes to pieces with his bare hands. He stooped down to hide his embarrassment. He didn't dare meet any of the eyes. He felt a strange, bursting energy flushing through his blood that made him sweat profusely. His forced smile, which covered his shame, made him look sly and twisted his face annoyingly. It made him look insolent and stirred more anger in them. His expression expelled all sympathy.

'Enough. Stop. You don't have to answer. Look at you. Look, you're still smirking. Are you really crazy? Can I ask you frankly, have you ever consulted a psychiatrist?'

Wit stood paralysed, too overwhelmed with embarrassment to continue the pathetic scene witnessed by so many, but at the same time he felt surprised. For a moment he felt that this was all really a stage play that had been well rehearsed and this time, this moment, was only acting. Everyone was playing their role and had been perfectly cast.

'Standing there senselessly, wasting time. Go on with the procedure. Everyone's waiting. Press the uterus like this. You see—now the placenta is coming down,' Professor Anuwat stared at him, trying to read his mind.

Wit hurried to follow the order and willed himself to move naturally. He was still sweating. He felt tired and heavy and had to forcefully move every part of his body. He blocked everything and tried to concentrate, knowing that he had missed some small steps. He bit his lip, intending to do the procedure correctly. The placenta came down. He lightly pulled the umbilical cord and delivered it all, putting it on a tray and observed the blood that came out of the vagina, checking for retained placenta or complications. He weighed the placenta and measured the umbilical cord.

He hadn't yet examined the placenta and its membrane when Professor Anuwat came closer. Wit turned in surprise seeing the ferocious face. He could see bags under the eyes and wrinkled lines running deeply over it. Professor Anuwat's face relaxed and stretched into a mocking smile. He picked up the placenta and the forceps that clamped the end of the umbilical cord. Aiming the end of the cord, he squeezed out the remaining blood so that it shot directly into Wit's face. The blood splashed over his cheek and face-mask in thick red splotches like flicking a soaked brush onto a canvas. Some of the blood stained his neck and gown, and seeped out into blossoming flowers of red.

'Why didn't you check the umbilical cord? No check of the blood vessels just like I guessed. Abnormalities in the blood vessels can infer complications...'

Wit heard Professor Anuwat's voice, but couldn't capture its meaning. He was frozen by the previous scene and too confused to acknowledge what was happening. He stood deaf and dumb. The harsh voice seemed to move closer and then further away like repetitive radio static coming in and out of reception. He couldn't make any connections, couldn't arrange the events, he just knew that something had happened to him. He stood unblinking, in awe mixed with disgust at the changing shapes of the moving lips of his abuser. He could see waves of movement in the face with expressions of strong emotion. The high and low vocalisations continued, but were meaningless to Wit, until he turned and saw all of the faces and eyes surrounding him, affirming and witness, consolidating that this was real.

Wit's agonised face tensed. A wave of self-pity rose and hit his chest. He tried to withhold his compressed emotions, concentrating not to let his chin tremble. His heart beat so hard that it scared him. How long could it last? He started to worry that he really was going to break down. He told himself to move his body: not to stand still and drown in his emotion. He forced his body to move and his hands and legs actually followed the order. His cheek felt itchy. He tilted his neck and protruded his chin to wipe the side of his face on his shoulder and then stooped, absorbing himself in following the next procedure and avoiding all eye contact. He felt dampness welling in his eyes. He blinked frequently to withhold the tears. Professor Anuwat watched him, trying to read him. The Professor's anger had subsided. His face was calm and confident in his judgment.

'Go and wash yourself and then come back to finish this.' He lowered his voice and turned back to Dr Sukhanya, 'Please take care of this case.' He turned around to check the atmosphere of the group before leading them out.

Silence filled the room. Wit kept on with the procedure, tying himself to the continuity of the work. He wasn't aware that the faint smile hadn't left his face and was still pinned to his lips. He smiled at the perineum cut and the vagina and at the emptiness in front of him. His smile made him look vague and as though he didn't know what expression to put on his own face.

Wit used gauze to wipe his face and hair. Dr Sukhanya watched him sympathetically and was about to console him, but Wit avoided her eyes, making a solemn face and showing that he didn't want consolation from anyone. The nurse and nursing assistant came to finish up after he did the stitches. Wit didn't know what to do next. He stood hesitant, pressing his hand against his chest, checking if his heart was beating regularly. He noticed the blood on his gown and imagined himself as a movie villain that had been shot in a blood bath.

He walked wearily from the ward and into the changing rooms.

[...]

CHAPTER 35

Days passed, but the violence and hatred Wit had seen stayed with him. There hadn't been bloodshed, but he had felt the enmity of the hate, and the loathing condensed into something that he could almost touch. The vehemence they had expressed was vivid. Their faces had glowed with rage, their anger ready to explode. Wit was curious. It inspired him to do more research and he closely re-read the history book he'd just finished. He studied the photos carefully. There was a famous and controversial one he'd seen many times, but never felt much for, apart from disgust at the shocking image, but without really understanding its context. Now the incident he'd just experienced sharpened his curiosity. The photo was of a dead, young man, hung from a Tamarind Tree. A raging attacker in a safari suit held a chair above his head, drawn back to strike. A crowd of onlookers, including children, watched in awe. Some smiled and laughed with exhilaration, but others looked shocked and a range of emotions mixed amongst them.

Reapproaching it, Wit felt nauseous with the gratuitous violence that was beyond common sense. The atrocity of its detail deserved contempt. He abhorred the smiles and cheerful animation of the spectators. He had to leave his table and avert his eyes for a while, before coming back to look at it again. This time he tried to discreetly read their expressions, closely study their faces and withhold his prejudice.

He started by observing the general composition. The background revealed the time of day, the location and weather. Then he studied the facial expressions and gestures of each participant and used a magnifying glass to analyse each face, elaborately scrutinising every smile. With the magnifying glass he could see more clearly. He moved the glass closer and the image blew up until he could see each grain of the print, but the blunt and direct method didn't give him an answer. He only saw varying intensities of grey dots that gave no meaning.

Wit realised that the photo was only a momentary snapshot of the situation and rather than clarifying, it built an illusion of understanding. Things had been erased and dissected, vanishing as though oozing from the gaps between the grainy dots. The photo conjured another layer of illusion. Every time he saw the photo, its meaning seemed conclusive, but at the same time it demanded judgement.

There were dozens more photos of victims from the same event in the book. Photos of tortured, dead bodies that made him flinch. Each one was almost unbearable to look at, the death was so raw. Wit turned the pages and looked at them one by one, fully absorbing the detail.

He didn't know how to feel, how to react.

It was impossible for him to read the inner thoughts of the spectators. He raised his eyes, closed the book and left the room to go for a walk and get some air after being alone and engrossed in his reading all day.

Wit walked, trying not to think. The dizziness from straining his eyes and his low spirits subsided. He absorbed the late afternoon air. Cirrus clouds spread overhead in a gentle wave. Golden sunlight reflected from the second floor window panes of old shop houses and shadows of branches and leaves drew patterns on the concrete wall of a primary school. Two boys were racing each other, their hair tousled and messy. One of them, holding a plastic ball, led, giggling in a high pitched voice. The second was smaller and rushed behind, his eyes sparkling and cheeks red. The dull thud of their footsteps brought their chubby bodies towards Wit and they almost hit his side as they passed.

Wit was tempted to follow. He started to run after them and flung his body forward. The boys heard and turned to see. Their eyes widened and they raised their arms and screamed with excitement. Wit stopped and laughed as he watched the boys charge to the end of the street.

Out on the main road, Wit stopped and panted in front of an open air, night market. The stall owners were busy setting up and some were already yelling to draw customers. Loud speakers were loudly competing, broadcasting their wares over one another. A pickup truck customised with stainless steel roll bars drove in, and parked to sell discounted seasonal fruit and vegetables from the back. More and more people strolled about.

Wit turned back and headed home. He smelt the evening air. He felt lonely, but free and a faint trace of melancholy ran inside him.

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That night Wit went back to the book and photo that was stuck in his head. He taped a bookmark on the table and stared hard. His eyes were fixated by the spectators. This time the photo conveyed him a different feeling and in a different direction. He used the magnifying glass to examine the two boys who stood side by side in the front, on the right side. One stood smiling, barefoot with his legs spread, but his hands were clasped tensely in front of his pubic bone. The other boy's lips were parted in a semi-smile and his hands tightly clutched the waistband of his shorts. Each of the spectators held in common: eyes wide with insatiable curiosity, but hands tight and tense, ready to desperately grab hold of something. One man held his shoulder in a strange position and the man next to him had his arms tightly crossed. Others stood with their hands on their hips: not in a manner of challenge, but in one of being ready to encounter a catastrophe. Everyone stood: tense with legs widened, feet nailed to the ground, and expressions of thrill and fascination, as though watching a giant, oncoming wave about to violently crash down. Everything was rushed, with no time left to reflect or reason. Each of them was blindly drawn and inundated by their curiosity.

From their facial expressions, Wit couldn't detect real signs of malice, even from those who were grinning. Their bodies and faces seemed to have metamorphosed into organisms ready to ingest their surroundings. Each face looked up with wide eyes, hungry to swallow what was in front of them.

Wit put aside the magnifying glass, covered the photo with his palms and sighed. He tried not to think about the spectators. He didn't care about them anymore. He closed the book and stretched his legs as he leaned back in the chair, clasped his hands behind his head and closed his eyes.

Innumerable grainy dots started to dance and flicker under his eyelids. The varying intensities of grey drew his eyes as they gathered into a glowing ocean. Each dot gently shook and harmonised to form a clear and fresh image of the dead, young man and the perpetually poised, draw-back of his attacker.



Translated from the Thai by Natalie Schneider and the author