

# **They Beat Your Father**

**Arin Rungjang**

## **Russamee Rungjang**

My father was a victim of hate crime. In 1977 he was beaten by racists in Germany and died several months later. My mother became a single mom raised two children all by herself. I was only two and a half years old when my father passed away. I grew up under poor conditions. Father and mother had planned to buy a house, so my father decided to work with a German company because he could get a better salary, and had to leave us behind. Mother said during the time my father worked in a German company the family was fine and had lived a pretty well-to-do life. I could see that from the things he had left to us. We had an 8 mm projector and films, a slide projector which my mom would play the films and slides my father recorded when he was in Europe, some whiskey bottles, souvenirs from Europe such as a small paperweight depicting Pieta, a plate with Caravaggio painting printed on it...etc. After my father passed away mother had to stay at grandmother's house. Grandmother's house was in the ghetto, and so my childhood life was surrounded by poverty. My mother has Parkinson's disease and can barely move now. I just bought a house which I wish we all can live together; my mother, her caretaker, my nieces, my sister and me. My sister had just passed away on the 15th of May, 2019. She was 47 years old when she died. My mother was totally hearted broken. When she learnt of my sister's passing, she cried and kept saying that she had begged 35 years ago when my father died to the holy spirits to please not let this happen to her again.

This sound installation is made out from the sounds recorded around my house.

Water drops in front of her room

Mother getting her nails clipped

Vibration from the washing machine

Electric fan

Mother listening to the news on Television

Frogs and insects

Rain

Toilet flushed

Mother breathes

Mother is singing along with her favourite song “The River of No Return”

I still remember it clearly. Every morning my mother would sit in front of her makeup table. I would lay on the floor and look at her while she put on makeup on her face little by little. It was such a beautiful moment. The smell of her makeup was so nice. Every time they play this song my mother would sing along. The moments where my mother put on her makeup with this song playing along were magical indeed.

## My mother's memory (This interview was conducted in 2014)

Yes, my name is Russamee, spell with 's'. I was born in Bangkok. I used to live in *Thonburi* district around *Poe Sam Thon* area. Even though I moved to *Sapanmai* later, I always came back to my old neighborhood, riding a taxi boat at *Ta Prajan* pier, crossing the *Chao Praya* River, just for fun. I did it since I missed it so bad that I had to keep coming back. I had to move out to be closer to my office, but honestly, I kept thinking of my old home so much that I dreamt of it. In my dream, it is always that *Poe Sam Thon* house near *Wat Arun* temple. I still have dreamt until today.

Before I moved, I came back home from work by a taxi boat. From *Ta Prajan* pier, I crossed the river to *Siriraj* pier and from there I took a *took took* home. The atmosphere around my old place was actually what I missed most. My house was next to a canal and there were always boats selling toasted sticky rice, coffee or noodles passing by. It was a happy memory. The canal is long gone...its waterway was blocked. When I was young I went to *Apsornsawan* (angel) school. The school was not coeducation like today. Actually, when I was in primary school, I stayed in a place near *Samyan*. It was considered very outskirts of Bangkok then, and in *Sapanmai Donmuang* where I live now a day there was nothing but water chestnut plantations.

One day after I newly moved in to *Sapanmai*, I went to eat noodle at a local shop nearby and overheard a person asking his friend "Where have you been?" His friend said, "To Bangkok" It was fun to know that they thought of *Sapanmai* as a remote area, not even a part of Bangkok. As I told you that I stayed around *Samyan* for a while, I lived in one of its small *soi* (alleys) .... I cannot remember its name now, but it was right there where they just had an eviction for *Samyan's* market renovation. My childhood was simple. I have two siblings, one brother and one sister. Bangkok was much better then, especially when talking about my *Poe Sam Thon* house. We practically lived among trees with rose apple and mango trees at the front garden. We had a small private pier at the back. My siblings and I like to play together there, bathing in the canal

and rowing a small boat out to the *Bang Luang* canal. The funniest thing of all is that I couldn't swim at the time but as we were kids, we had no fear of any danger. By that time, I dreamt of having my own house, a beautiful one.

In the 70s I already had a daughter, Ning, Mai's sister. She should be about two years old then. I liked studying French and English very much, studying humanities you might say. It was not like today that they divided curriculum into two types; arts program and science program. The school system was also different. In the old days after graduating from M. 6, we went to M. 7, M. 8 and so on, not M. 4 - 5 - 6 like today. It was not easy at all to pass through M. 7 and M. 8. Students from all over the country took the same examination run by Ministry of Education. We would go to take the exam at other schools. In my case, I went to take exam at *Wat Nuannoraditr* School, which was close to my school. I remember that the teachers in-charge during the exam were all from that school. One reason that I liked studying French was because I liked the French class teacher. She was so beautiful like a Parisian lady, and a first-class honor graduate from *Chulalongkorn* University. As for English, I liked it since the class was taught by the school director herself. We called her *Ajarn Yai* (headmistress). Her class was very good, she was a nice teacher. I cannot recall much, though, how many people were there in my class. I did not leave any special impressions on my classmates I think, since I was quiet and reserved. I spent most of my free time at home, listening to music, old fashioned kind of music like those 60s songs by Frank Sinatra...for example. Actually Mai has bought me many CDs from that period.

After I finished M. 8, I planned to take an entrance exam to study in University, but life seemed to have another plan for me. One of my senior friends worked right after finishing M.8 and studied at the same time at *Thammasat* University which was an open university... yes, he worked at a hotel and studied at the university. So, I planned to follow his footsteps. My mother did not have much money since my father died when I was very young. She basically raised three of us up by herself. It turned out to be that by the time that I finished M. 8, *Thammasat* was no longer an open university. I had not thought of a backup plan, so I started

looking for a job. I graduated M. 8 in 1963; it was considered very good because the exam was very difficult. Many students had to study one more year because they couldn't pass this exam, even some straight-A students couldn't make it. I worked most of the time of my life, helping my mother...sharing her expenses. At ten o'clock I would go to work at what then called Labor division of Ministry of Labor, as a daily contract officer. My duty was to visit factories and check if their employees' fringe benefits were as agreed in their contracts with the companies. I received 20 baht a day for doing so.... forty years ago twenty baht was quite a lot.

During that I time I stayed in *Thonburi*, in the house that we moved in since I was very little. The area would have been considered a ghetto surrounded by the poor. What else did I do? Oh...after that I worked for a local printing house, run by Ministry of Interior. My friend who worked together with me there is still alive. He is retired with pension. If I had not quit the job, I would have had that pension and life may become much easier. The printing house is still running, working mostly on governmental text books but they also take some private projects as well. My work was to proof read. I did it too much that I became longsighted in my forties. I had to read all day long from morning until 9.00 p.m. Anyway, I got OT after 5.00 pm. Most of the texts were in Thai and English, there were not many in French. The work was kind of harsh, I needed to recheck all spellings to make sure that everything was correct, even the typography. I had to double-check that the fonts were all the same. I do not know how they do it today, maybe they use computers but before that they used proof-readers. The printing house had many departments; the printing part and my proof-reading part were on different floors. When they finished one job, they would send it up to us for proof reading. My job was to find any errors and correct it. Simply reading was very tiring for my eyes, maybe that's why I love reading.

Mai's father was very kind. He was so nice to me that you may say he spoiled me. He made it hard for me to live with anyone else but him. I met him when I started working at *Dusit Thani* hotel, I cannot remember the exact year. At *Dusit Thani* we all started from the bottom as we were the first group of employees hired. We were with the hotel since its

opening, a pilot group you may say. We did everything ourselves from cleaning guest rooms to cocktails mixing. Everybody needed to learn how to be a bartender. However, we did not have to take care of the hotel's account, that was the responsibility of the back office. We were in the service team. Food and beverage were managed by chefs. We were trained by foreigners on everything in terms of service. My husband was in the navy before he resigned and joined the *Dusit Thani* team.

After we got married, we thought that working at the hotel was not enough. Dad, I mean Mai's father, decided to look for a new job. He finally got a job in a maritime company. His first trip was to go to Germany, flying there and coming back on an ocean liner. It was a German company and the contract was signed by the year. At that time, not decent woman would hit on a man first. I am very surprised to see how the world is turning upside down. Women before wouldn't show off their feelings. While he was gone for work aboard, I remember standing near the window of the top of the hotel, in a hall called Tierra something. I am not sure how many floors are there, 25 maybe? Anyway, the Tierra hall was on the highest floor. When you looked down on the streets below at night, it was very beautiful... beautiful indeed, with street lights and lights from cars stuck in the traffic jam, but I think that could not be compared to today's traffic. My mind wandered around while I was standing there. I felt that I missed many things in life. I missed my husband.

My dad died when I was very young. After that, it was so tiring... I felt my life was not like any ordinary kid. I thought too much. I worked almost two years at *Dusit Thani*, and then Sheraton Hotel was opened so we all went to work with the Sheraton. By all I mean the pioneer staffs who had worked with *Dusit Thani* since the beginning. My close friend at the hotel was Terdtoon Chaidee, have you ever heard of him? He was a real trouble maker. He led protests against the slavery of labourers. He was my role model, the one who worked and studied at *Thammasat*. So I moved to work at the Sheraton Hotel. I married my husband while I was at *Dusit Thani*. While working at the Sheraton, I found out that I was having a baby, Mai's sister. When I was second time pregnant, I was not

working in the hotel business anymore. I stayed home as a simple housewife. Mai's dad asked me to quit the job to take care of Mai's sister, my eldest daughter, and my mother. So I decided to leave the hotel.

Mai was breastfed until he was one-year-old but his sister Ning was breastfed for only a month since I had to work. While raising Mai up, I did not work anymore. It was very easy taking care of him as I did not have to prepare milk or clean milk bottles. It was very easy, when he cried I just breastfeed him. My breasts had a lot of milk, I was quite chubby not skinny like today. I could have been able to breastfeed a pair of twins. During the time that Mai was drinking from one of my breasts, there was milk coming out from the other. Even Mai's grandmother said that it was such a shame to see how it was wasted. After Mai, I was pregnant one more time but later miscarried. I was already six-months pregnant. I still have no idea why it happened even until today. I was very healthy and never missed any doctor's appointment. Actually, I just came back from seeing the doctor the day I miscarried...it was a total surprise. I do not know maybe it was the baby's karma...I do not know.

Life went on as usual until the last time that my husband went to Germany. It was a tradition that he would write me a letter every month; it was in this trip that he wrote to me telling me how he was beaten up by some locals. He was unconscious for two days and when he woke up he had to continue working back on the tanker as he always did immediately. No one helped him during the incident. He said that they were those skin head racists, thinking that he was a Filipino guy. They hated the Philippines. Later, he had a stomach ache. He went to a hospital and was diagnosed with Peptic Ulcer. My guess was that German countryside doctors were not so well-trained, somewhat like Thai doctors in countryside in a way. He went to see a small-town doctor. The fact that he worked in an oil tanker meant that it was impossible to be docked in a big city, it would be too dangerous...don't you think? So he wrote in the letter that he had Peptic Ulcer that the pain was so bad that he had to stopover and go to a hospital in France. When he returned home, I took him to see doctors. I think he lost almost thirty kilos. When he had gone for work I think he was around 80 something kilos but his weight was



only 50 kilos by the time he was back. He died several months later. I married him for eight years but I think we spent time together just 4 – 5 years maximum. We were only together for 2 months each year.

In the end I think we were together for less than two years. When he came back, he got promoted by his captain right away. The previous plan was that he would take a test at Marine Department in order to be promoted from third engineer to second engineer and so forth and also to get his salary increased. He received his pay check in Deutsche Mark. After that happy eight years, life was hard on me. I had to raise the children all by myself, Mai was two years old and Ning was six years old. Mai is four years younger than Ning, I think he was two and a half years old. I do not think that he could remember much about his father because he was always absent. Like I said, he was home only for two months a year.

I took Mai's father to *Thonburi* hospital, very expensive one. He knew that we spent a lot of money on the treatment, a couple hundred thousands. I am not an outgoing person; I tend to stay mostly at home while he was away for work. I did not like gambling either, have not bought a lottery ticket in my whole life. But that did not help, we spent all of our savings on the treatment...I mean all.

When he died, I practically had to start from zero; raising up two children and taking care of my mother. Well, not that I had to take care of her full time but I felt that it was my duty. It was not a burden but something that I was willing to do. Since I was young, I remembered that life was very difficult for both me and my mother. She had to take care of her siblings and her children. She was born to a military family in *Korat*, originally from *Intrakampaeng*. Her father was an army officer in *Korat* who was sentenced to jail in *Tarutao* Island during the *Baworndej* Revolt. He broke down mentally and later died in that prison while my mother and her siblings were very young. Her mother decided to start a new life in Bangkok, taking all her kids with her. From then on, my mother had to work while taking care of her younger sister and brother.

How should I explain it? It is like history keeps repeating itself.

I did many things in order to make a living, compared to the time my husband was still alive when I didn't have to do much. When he was home during those two months, we would go see a movie together at Athens movie theatre. One day we went to see a movie and I saw that a company right across the theatre was looking for sales officers. I told him that I wanted to apply for the job. He laughed at me, saying that I did not even know about its product. He asked me if I was sure that I could do it. I just did not care and went in to apply. In the end it was this job that helped me bring money home to my children. It was a real estate business kind of thing, selling houses and lands. I had not done anything like it before and never thought that I could since I was not good at motivational speaking. I applied that day I went for a movie. Mai was able to graduate from *Silpakorn* University thanks to this job.

I just retired about two to three years ago. I have not been out much since then. The economy has not been well as we all know that everything collapsed since 1997. Who would ever imagine that real estate business would become so disastrous? I have worked since my husband died. Like I said my life was happy for only eight years that he was with me. I think it is my own fate that everything in life has to be very difficult. If I had been lucky, if my husband had not been dead, my life would have been much easier. I am not that content now. Life is not that complete by no good reason. Something is always missing from my life since I can remember.

Would it be possible that the beating incident was the reason for his death? It could be from internal bruises right? He went to Germany, but got beaten up. He went travelling and got attacked by some locals. They hit him because they thought that he was from the Philippines. They hated the Philippines. My husband did not look Thai; he was more like a Filipino guy or an Indian man due to his facial bone structure. He was actually "Mon"; an ethnic group native to Myanmar's Mon State that migrated to Thailand long time ago. They hit him badly that he passed out for a long time and couldn't remember what day it was when he woke

up. There was no real reason for that, they just picked him out and beat him...those skin head racists. I considered him very lucky that he was not dead. I think the Germans are cruel. They did not help Mai's father at all. There was a time that Mai really wanted to study in Germany. I kept telling him to change his mind but he did not listen to me at all. He kept saying that he would go. In the end, he went to study in France. Life is funny. I do not know why but I like France since I was in high school. I liked Ms. Nida the French teacher. She was an honor graduate from *Chula*. Her class was really good; I liked her French accent so much. I told Mai to go to France not to Germany. The people there are cold. In the end, he did go to France, I do not think he has been to Germany yet. I finally got what I wished for, even though Mai got everything prepared and even had went for a German course. His father had a chance to be all over the world since he was in the oil company. Later when he worked with that company he got a chance to travel almost around the globe. What I regret most is that I lost my stamp collections. I do not know where they are now. I have like three stamp albums, all foreign country stamps from almost every country in every continent.

My husband was very nice. My wedding was simple. We had a wedding ceremony at my house. Actually, the trip that my husband got sick was supposed to be his final trip. He had planned to open his own business, becoming an agent for foreign marine companies. The plan was to open a recruitment center, sending Thai workers to work abroad. No wonder I come to a conclusion that I was not born under a lucky star. If I had not had such a misfortune, my life would have been different. I met so many nice guys when I was young. By saying that I do not mean I made a wrong decision in marrying Mai's father. He was such a good person, a real family man, loving his wife and his children. He always put us first, planning everything in life for us all. But in the end, there was nothing. That dream was impossible for us. Who else should I blame but myself...my fate? I have realized that my life has to be rough like this. I had not had to work but then suddenly I had to make a living for my kids, for them to finish their university degrees. It was quite a bumpy road but I did make it until the end. My husband died in 1977, September 20, 1977. He was just 35 years old.

