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The Golden Fish in Flood Time

(Pla boo thong nam norng tem ta ling)

Pla Boo Thong (The Golden Fish), a Thai tale, was adapted to address the 2011 flood in central Thailand. The original story tells of Damrus, a man with two wives, each of whom has a daughter. He goes fishing with his major wife, who drowns when she tries to protect a golden fish that they have caught. He takes the fish home and his minor wife and her daughter eat it. The daughter of the first wife, Uyai, discovers that her mother has become a golden fish since it was the last thing on her mind when she died. The evil second wife and daughter catch and eat it, too, leaving only a single scale that a duck presents to Uyai. She buries the scale and it becomes a golden *pho* tree. A prince states that whoever can move the unusual tree to the capital will live with him in the palace. Damrus, Kinnithi, and Ai all try, but only Uyai succeeds, and marries the prince.

Characters:

Narrator

Damrus, *a fisherman*

Kinnitha, *his major Wife/Golden Fish/Golden Pho Tree*

Kinnithi, *his minor Wife*

Uyai, *Kinnatha's daughter*

Ai, *Kinnithi's daughter*

Surveyor

Official

Plastic Bottle *puppet*

Styrofoam *puppet*

Scene One

Narrator:

During the 2011 flood that covered many towns, including Rangsit, the fisherman Damrus and his major wife, Kanittha, went out every day looking for fish to feed the family.

Damrus:

(fishing in a boat) I can't see anything through this muck. Can you? There aren't even floating dead fish anymore. Wait! I've got something. *(he pulls up a high heel shoe.)* That's the fourth shoe we've pulled up and none of them match.

Kanittha:

It's pretty. I wonder if it came from Icon Siam. Well, add it to the pile.

Damrus:

You're collecting so much rubbish you'll sink the boat.

Kanittha:

Look over there, something's moving.

Damrus:

It's just a snake. No, wait, put your net there. Wow, it's fighting. It must be a big one. (*he hooks underwear*)

Kanittha:

It's big alright. It must be Ai's underwear. She's been looking for it all week, accusing Uyai of stealing it.

Damrus:

Well, you can see if she wants it back. I'm ready to give up. There's nothing alive in this filthy water.

Kanittha:

We have to continue; we can't go home with the nothing. Try again. Remember (name of a locally known person) caught a box with 10,000 baht in it. Maybe we'll be lucky too.

Damrus:

We only pull up 'lucky bags' full of shit.

Kanittha:

Don't be vulgar. Try again.

Damrus:

Damn, just another plastic bottle.

Bottle:

(*wriggling and screaming*) Let me go! Let me go! I'm underage. I'm undersized. I'm a rare species.

Damrus

I must have drunk too much last night. Did that plastic bottle just scold me?

Kanittha

No, it was pleading with you to let it go.

Damrus

No problem, I don't want a damn bottle.

Kanittha:

No, bring it up. At least we can recycle it.

Bottle:

No, no, that's not fair. You can't take me. I can't miss this flood. It's created the greatest wave ever to come through here, and I've been racing on the crest. I come from a great family of surfers. We've surfed all over the world, even to Antarctica. But now my folks have retired to the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. I'm going to join them.

Damrus:

Great Pacific Garbage Patch? Where's that?

Bottle:

In the Pacific Ocean, stupid. Because of the currents, all the plastic rubbish can gather together. Now there is more plastic there than biological organisms. We're a plastic community even bigger than Thailand.

Damrus:

Wow! So far away, so many!

Bottle:

Yeah, millions, and growing everyday. And this flood helps us gather together quickly. Whoopee! Who says empty bottles can't have fun! (*sees another bottle puppet go by*) Oh no! There's Fizzy Water getting ahead of me. Enough talk. Let me go. I've get to catch up. Bye bye.

Kanittha:

(*she prevents him*) Oh, no, you don't! I'm not letting you go. The likes of you make this flood worse.

Bottle:

Me? You're blaming me for this mess. Typical. Environmentalists blame the loggers for cutting all the trees and causing erosion. Farmers blame officials for paving over the rice fields so the land can't absorb the rain. Officials blame the dam managers for not opening the flood gates early enough. Ordinary people blame the heavy rain, but scientists blame climate change and they tell everyone who is complaining to stop driving their cars! No one takes responsibility.

Kanittha:

Including you.

Bottle:

What do you mean me? I'm innocent. I'm clean, light, convenient, and cheap. It's the *people that make and use me* that are to blame, not me!

Kanitha:

I won't have you on the street or in my house. I always refill my bottles at the reverse osmosis water machines. My daughter carries her own bottle and doesn't waste money buying water in disposable bottles.

Damrus:

So I guess you're blaming me?

Bottle:

Sure, you and your minor wife use me and all kinds of plastic every day. Why should you be surprised at all the garbage brought up by the flood?

Damrus:

I will not be scolded by a damn plastic bottle. I'm going to recycle you right now. *(he crushes the bottle)* Smart ass bottle! What next? We can't fish anymore. We'll have to find another way to make money.

Kannitha:

Looks like you've caught something else. *(he pulls up a Styrofoam container)*

Styrofoam:

Oh thank you for rescuing me. I've been in that filthy water for days. I could have caught some terrible disease among all that rotting food.

Damrus:

I'm not collecting any more rubbish, especially other people's. Back in you go.

Styrofoam:

No, please spare my life. You see, I'm still so nice and clean. I've only been used once, I swear! Take care of me and I'll stay pretty and white like a fluffy rabbit. It's such a pity to be built to last one hundred years and then be used only once. Before this flood, I could sit on top of some rubbish heap, enjoying the sun, listening to the birds, getting a tan, but oh dear! With the flood I've had to mingle with some unspeakable things—stinking rotting fish, and those terrible 'lucky bags.' I can't stand having to mix with such dirty company. *(cries)* It's terrible for my self-esteem. Please take me home with you.

Kannitha:

I don't want such rubbish in my home. I always use my own bags and containers. If you Styrofoam and plastic containers weren't tossed in, the organic waste could be collected and converted into compost. Because of you, you'll just be hauled away to some other site—dirtying up somebody else's neighborhood.

Styrofoam:

(cries) It's terrible for my self-esteem.

Kannitha:

Your self-esteem! What about the poor sanitation workers who have to work overtime for weeks to clean you up from the water?

Styrofoam:

Oh you mean like Mr. Subong Suprang. He likes his job. He likes making the city clean. I make him happy.

Kannitha:

Maybe on a normal day, when Bangkok only makes 8,000 tons of rubbish, but now the collection trucks can't get through the flooded alleys.

Styrofoam:

True, there's so much more garbage after the flood, since people throw away their damaged belongings, too. Besides the landfill sites themselves are still under water.

Damrus:

Why don't they get more collectors?

Styrofoam:

They even tried to use prisoners, but they wouldn't do it, didn't want to risk their health. (*cries*) Oh, not even prisoners will go in this water! This is terrible for my self-esteem.

Kannitha:

Your self-esteem! What about poor Mr. Suprang. Since the sewage systems don't work, the trash collectors also have to collect those 'lucky bags'. I'll tell you what should be bad for your self-esteem—that you're banned in many countries. You shouldn't be allowed here either.

Styrofoam:

Me! I'm so clean and white, light and cheap. I keep food so nice and hot. I do my job very well. It's the *people* who *make* and *use* me that are to blame.

Damrus:

What nonsense! How can ordinary people be to blame?

Styrofoam:

(*cries*) Oh my self-esteeem!

Damrus:

Shut up you! (*he crushes it and throws it in the pile*) A scolding bottle, a complaining container, the world has gone crazy. This flood is a real disaster. I'm going home.

Kannitha:

Wait, I know Uyai hasn't eaten in three days.

Damrus:

What? I brought food yesterday.

Kannitha:

Yes, but Kannithi and Ai ate her portion. The day before, she gave me her portion.

Damrus:

Well, then; it was her choice.

Kannitha:

Wait! I see ripples. Row the boat over there.

Damrus:

You're right. It looks big. Give me the net.

Kannitha:

No, I'll do it. (*she scoops out a golden fish*) My goodness! What a beautiful fish.

Damrus:

What a huge fish! It can feed us for two or three days.

Kannitha:

It's amazing that something so big and beautiful could still be living in such terrible water. It must have magic powers.

Damrus

Magic powers, nonsense. Now hand it over to me and I'll knock it on the head.

Kannitha:

Oh no! We can't kill it.

Damrus

What do you mean? It's the first decent fish we've had all week. Stop your foolishness and hand it over.

Kannitha:

No. No matter how hungry we are, we can't kill this fish.

Damrus

Then let me eat it alive.

Fish:

Please spare my life.

Damrus

What! A talking fish?

Kannitha

Why not? You've been talking to rubbish all day.

Damrus

So have you, and collecting it as well. Now I want to collect the fish and you say, 'no.' Just like a woman to be inconsistent. Well, you go home and eat your precious rubbish. I'm your husband and I say I'm going to eat this fish.

Kannitha:

No, you can't touch it. It's holy.

Damrus

(they struggle; he grabs for the fish and knocks her overboard) Oh no! She can't swim. I can't either. She can't survive in that filthy water. Kannitha, raise your hand so I can see you. I can't see anything. I don't see any bubbles. She must be drowned. It's all your fault. *(he hits the fish and kills it)*

Black out.

Scene Two

Kinnithi, Ai and Uyai are up on the roof of their house; Uyai is cleaning and sewing; the other two are eating snacks and throwing the wrappers in the water, painting their nails, and watching a TV melodrama on their mobile phone.

Narrator:

Damrus returns home where the rest of the family are sitting on top of the roof waiting for food.

Uyai:

Father, what a big fish. How lucky you are today. Where's mother?

Damrus:

She's um...

Uyai:

Did she get something too?

Damrus:

Umm..yes...now you, clean this fish and cook it for us. *(she cooks it but does not eat. Damrus, Kinnithi, and Ai eat, but Uyai keeps looking for her mother.)*

Damrus:

Stop looking for her! She had an accident and fell into the water trying to get the big fish. She drowned. It's a pity, but nothing can be done about it.

Ai:

If she doesn't want to eat, there's more for the rest of us. And don't think finding my underwear gets you off the hook—I know you threw it in the water just to spite me.

Uyai:

I never touched it. Why would I?

Kinnithi:

I suspect your mother did the same with one of my dresses. Both of you are so spiteful and jealous. Well, now you are on your own with no one to protect you.

Narrator:

The next day, the water has receded and they can begin to clean out the mud in the house.

Damrus:

The water's much lower. There can't be any living fish in it—just snakes and crocodiles.

Kinnithi:

It's still too dangerous to go out. But now that the water has gone down, Uyai can clean the second floor. Uyai, you lazy brat, come wash the floor and the furniture. See what can be saved and what has to be thrown out. If you throw out anything good, I'll beat you.

Black out.

Scene Three

(Uyai works; as parents play cards and Ai dances in front of the mirror, Uyai steals out, goes into the boat and rows, calling for her mother)

Uyai:

Mother, mother, I know you must be out there. I must find you before your body stays too long in the filthy water, or before you float somewhere far away. Oh Mother, speak to me and tell me what happened. How can I pray for you if I don't know?

Fish:

Dear daughter, don't be afraid.

Uyai:

A talking fish! I must have rowed into a different era. In modern times fish don't talk, or at least, people can't understand them.

Fish:

But I am talking, and you understand. I'm your mother, turned into a gold fish like the one I tried to save. I understood your father was hungry, but it was a sin to kill such a fish, and now I have paid with my life.

Uyai:

Without your protection and good sense, I'm bullied by Kinnithi and Ai. They send me to the 7-11 to buy junk food in plastic wrappers they just toss into the water. Our neighbors do the same—we get their rubbish and they get ours.

Fish:

Never mind, just do your best and save a few crumbs for me every noon. I'll always come, and try to comfort you.

Uyai:

I'm afraid for you, not myself. How can you live in such filthy water? You're such a beautiful fish I'm afraid someone will catch and eat you—maybe even your husband.

Fish:

Don't worry about me. Just meet me here.

Uyai:

(rows back) Oh dear, Ai saw me talking to the fish. I'd better keep rowing a little further. *(she rows and stops to talk to the water)* Oh, look, all of you. Not just my mother, but you poor fish, turtles, snakes, and frogs. How pitiful you are, unable to escape this flood. Though water is your element, we've poisoned it and many of you will die.

Ai:

(watching from the rooftop) Silly girl! Why are you talking to the water? You think the fish will come up to hear your lovely voice, begging to be caught. Now, come back and finish cleaning. Mother has been shouting for you to fix dinner. You'll get a beating if you don't hurry. *(Uyai begins to work)*

Ai:

Mother, I don't know if she's just stupid, or up to some trick, but I saw Ai talking to the water. Perhaps she knows some fish are there.

Kinnithi:

Do you know the place?

Ai:

I can remember it because our neighbor's roof poked out nearby.

Kinnithi:

We'll go tomorrow and try to discover her secret.

Narrator:

The next morning at breakfast, Kinnithi thinks of a plan to get Uyai away.

Kinnithi:

Uyai, I want you to check on the cows we left up higher on the hill. One of them might have fallen and broken a leg. Go now. (*Uyai goes out the back without the boat*) Now Damrus, you have a rest. Ai and I will go out and fish for a while. (*they go in the boat*) Now, where is the place you saw her?

Ai:

Over here. Yes, about here.

Kinnithi:

What did Uyai say?

Ai:

Oh, I couldn't hear her.

Kinnithi:

(*beats her*) Stupid girl. How can we find out the secret without the proper words?

Ai:

I remember she had some crumbs and so I brought some too. Here fishy, fishy, fishy. (*sprinkles them on the water*) Oh Mother, there's nothing. (*the golden fish comes at the sound of "Mother."*) Oh, another golden fish. Oh, we're so lucky. Get your net.

Kinnithi:

(*catches the fish*) Why this one is even bigger and more beautiful than the first!

Ai:

Do you think we should throw it back?

Kinnithi:

Nonsense! Didn't it come when we called? Didn't it swim right into our net? It wants to be eaten. Now hurry home, Uyai will cook it up for us.

Ai:

But she's in the upper field.

Kinnithi:

Well, then I'll have to do it myself. Why are you such a useless daughter and don't know how to cook.

Ai:

You never taught me.

Kinnithi:

Come, I'm hungry after all this work. (*they go inside house*)

Uyai:

(while the others eat, Uyai rows in the boat) Mother, Mother, sorry I'm late but I came as soon as I could. Mother, where are you? Have you suffocated, unable to breathe under water that lacks oxygen? *(paddles wildly)* Mother, you can't leave me...again! Please come back!

Duck:

Your mother is gone. I saw that Kinnithi catch her. All that is left of her is this golden scale. Take it. They'll try to catch and cook me next, so I'm leaving. Goodbye Uyai, and good luck.

Uyai:

(cries) Oh Mother, how could you die again so quickly? What an evil family I've got, but what can I do? I'll bury this scale in the ground up in the field where the cows are. You'll be safe from the polluted water and I can pray to you everyday.

Kinnithi:

(shouts) Uyai, you lazy girl, hurry up. You have to wash the clothes.

Uyai:

(shouts) Coming. *(to the scale)* Don't worry, Mother, this time I'll be able to protect you. **Black out.**

Scene Four

Narrator:

Slowly the water recedes and the townspeople are busy cleaning their houses. They bring all their destroyed belongings into the center of town and eventually the government trucks haul away the garbage, but no one knows where it goes. Though Uyai does all of the work in her family, she still finds time to go to the hillside everyday where the fish scale has grown into a golden pho tree that sparkles in the sunlight.

Uyai:

Dear Mother, how beautiful you've grown. But now I'm afraid others will see you and want to take you away. How will I be able to protect you? Don't be so ostentatious. Being ordinary is safer.

Tree:

Don't worry, Daughter, nothing can happen to me and I will provide you with a happy destiny. Look behind you, it's already coming.

Uyai:

Oh, no, it's a surveyor. They're planning to make a road right through here. They'll chop you down.

Surveyor:

Miss, please get out of the way. We have to make our measurements.

Uyai:

But you can't make a road here. If you cut down the trees, you'll cause erosion and the next flood will be even worse.

Surveyor:

The officials in offices make the decisions. I only carry them out.

Uyai:

But you can report back to them the damage it would do.

Surveyor:

That's not my job. If I don't obey, they'll just fire me and hire someone else.

Uyai:

Surely you can't give up so easily.

Surveyor:

What's that tree behind you? I've never seen any plant sparkle like that. Did you paint it?

Uyai:

Certainly not! It's a very special tree and that's why you can't build the road here.

Surveyor:

All right, I'll go back and report this unusual species. Maybe it's endangered, but I can't promise I can save it.

Black out.

Scene Five

Narrator:

All the townspeople heard about the magnificent tree and Uyai's family claimed it. They tried to pick its golden leaves, but none would come off. Someone came in the night and tried to cut it down, so now Uyai sleeps beneath it every night. Finally, an official's curiosity was aroused and she came to see the glittering tree.

Official:

Yes, it's certainly special. It looks like real gold, and we must preserve it. (*she tugs at a leaf*) Perhaps I can take back a souvenir? (*it doesn't come off*) Cut it!

Uyai:

Oh, no, you mustn't hurt it.

Official:

Who are you?

Uyai:

This is my tree. I grew it.

Kanitthi:

She's lying. It's our family's She's just an adopted daughter.

Official:

I see. Well, no matter. It stands in the way of our road, but it's too precious to cut, and it's certainly too precious to leave in this backwater. I want to take it to the capital. So, whoever can pull it out, can come and be its caretaker.

Kanitthi:

We're already its official guardians. (*pushes Damrus forward*) Why don't you say something? Go on and pull up that little tree. (*he tries and fails*) Ah you no good. You look strong, but sitting around all day during the flood has made you flabby. Now, let Ai try. She's a sturdy girl.

Damrus:

Only her lips and tongue get exercise. (*Ai fails*)

Kanitthi:

Oh, you're all so useless. Why's it's just a little twig of a tree. (*she tries and fails*) It's rooted too deeply.

Official:

Well, if no one can move it, we'll have to cut it.

Uyai:

No. You'll have to cut me first. (*she wraps her arms around it and moves it*)

Official:

Good. No bloodshed. You'll come to the capital?

Uyai:

I'll go, but the tree was happy here.

Surveyor:

Don't worry. I'll make sure its new home is a good one.

Narrator:

And so Uyai went with the tree to the capital, and the surveyor, who had fallen in love with her, planted it in a park near their house. They were very happy together, and everyday Uyai went to the tree to water it. The surveyor was pleased with his wife, but he couldn't understand why she never used plastic bags or bottles, and always refilled her own bottle and used her own bag.

Surveyor:

Uyai, you're not poor any more; you don't have to be so frugal. It's embarrassing to me that you save and re-use everything.

Uyai:

I don't mean to shame you, my love. Rich or poor, none of us can afford to waste. We'll all pay for it in the next flood. My mother loved the beautiful trees and flowers, she loved the clear streams and rivers. To honor the golden fish, I must do my best to preserve them. If you find my behavior embarrassing, perhaps you should re-examine your own values. How can we live with so much rubbish around us when it is all of our own making? We made it, we can stop it. *(suddenly the gold tree begins to shake filling the air with gold light.)*

The End