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Night of the Water Spirits

Written by Barbara Bisco

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NIGHT OF THE WATER SPIRITS

BARBARA BISCO



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BARBARA BISCO caught her first glimpse of Thailand from the deck of a China Siam Line freighter as it steamed up the Chao Phrya River toward Bangkok in 1960. She quickly fell in love with the beautiful country and when, a year later, she had to leave, she went to the Erawan Shrine and asked the god, Phra Bhram, to bring her back to Thailand. He has brought her back to Bangkok many times since, once on a Fulbright Scholarship in 1968 and twice for two-year postings in 1980 and 1985 with her husband and daughter. During those four years, Barbara worked as a volunteer at the National Museum in Bangkok.

Barbara has a degree in anthropology from Harvard University, and a Ph.D. in Economics from the Southeast Asia Program at Cornell University where she met her husband, a nomadic economist.

Barbara is the author of *A TASTE FOR GREEN TANGERINES*, a novel set in Indonesian Borneo, “a sizzling escape to a richly drawn other world...a book about finding yourself in the most unexpected of places”. Her short stories have appeared in various books and magazines.

Barbara and her husband now live in London but Phra Bhram continues to pull back to Bangkok for visits.

FOR MY HUSBAND AND DAUGHTER

CHAPTER 1

BANGKOK, 1958

‘Daddy, Daddy, did you bring it?’

‘The surprise from America?’ laughed William Duncanson, setting down his cases. ‘Of course I did.’

‘Where is it? Let me see.’

‘Right here,’ William said, pushing forward a blond boy with pale green eyes who gazed around the room with reluctant curiosity, ‘an American cousin for you to play with. His name’s Teddy and he’s looking forward to staying with us for a while.’

‘Is that all you brought?’ Panida cried, in disbelief.

‘Isn’t that enough?’

Tears of disappointment welled up in her dark eyes. ‘But you told me on the phone you were bringing me something wonderful.’

‘And that’s exactly what I did,’ he insisted, and turned to greet his wife.

Panida gazed through angry tears at this unwelcome boy. He was a little taller than herself, with blond hair and a face like the jack of diamonds on her mother’s playing cards. How could her father have promised her a fabulous toy and then brought this horrible cousin instead?

Teddy did not take a corresponding interest in the eight-year-old girl with honey coloured skin and black hair who was staring at him with such hostile eyes. Instead, he let his gaze sweep around the strange room, taking in its rattan furniture, its whirling ceiling fans and its funny windows that didn’t have any glass in them and made up his mind that he wasn’t going to stay here a minute longer than he absolutely had to.

His uncle’s wife, who looked like a grown-up version of the little girl but who seemed friendly, spoke to him in funny sounding English and offered him something to eat.

He wasn’t hungry.

‘Panida, say something to your cousin,’ her father ordered. ‘Don’t just gape at him.’

She mumbled something incoherent in Thai.

‘Speak English,’ William snapped. ‘How can you expect Teddy to understand Thai when he’s only barely off the plane? Take him out to the garden and show him around. I bet he’s never seen a gibbon before.’

‘It will probably bite him,’ Panida said.

‘Not as hard as I’m going to bite you if you don’t behave yourself,’ growled her father. ‘Now go.’

‘Do you like gibbons?’ Panida asked him, when they were outside.

‘No,’ he replied. He didn’t know what a gibbon was but he was sure that if this nasty girl liked them, he wouldn’t want to have anything to do with them.

The bright afternoon sun was beginning to fade and the gibbon was getting sleepy. Panida lifted it down from its tree house, undid its chain and held it in her arms like a baby; the little creature twined its long furry arms around her and snuggled up against her.

‘You’d better stay away from him’ she told Teddy rudely. ‘He likes me but he doesn’t like strangers.’

‘That figures,’ he shot back. ‘It probably thinks you’re just another monkey.’

And with that, he trotted off to have a closer look at the fetid green canal that bordered one side of the garden.

‘It isn’t a monkey, it’s an ape, Daddy says so,’ she called after him. ‘You don’t know anything.’

Teddy paid no attention.

After a few moments of feeling rather forlorn, Panida perked up at the thought that her father always brought her sweets as well as a present when he came back from a trip. Telling herself that he surely wouldn’t have forgotten, she put the sleepy gibbon back in its tree house and went inside in search of him.

To her surprise she found that the living room was empty. That was funny, she thought, where had Mummy and Daddy gone?

She went over to their bedroom door, pushed it open and peered in. Her father was standing very close to her mother and handing her a small velvet box. That was a good sign, she thought. If he had remembered to bring a present for her mother he would surely have brought something for her too.

Her parents jumped apart when they heard the door scrape open and neither of them seemed very glad to see her.

‘Did you bring me some sweets, Daddy?’ she asked.

‘I’m sorry, love. I did have some for you but Teddy got hungry in Tokyo Airport so I let him have them. You don’t mind, do you?’ And without waiting for her reply, he added, ‘Run along now, there’s a good girl. Go outside and play with your cousin. He’s come all the way from America to see you.’

‘I don’t want to.’

‘Well, do it anyway. Your mother and I are going to take a nap now.’

Panida stood her ground in obstinate silence.

‘You have no hope of growing up to be as beautiful as your mother if you have a pout on your face and the manners of an orangutan,’ William declared; and, taking her firmly by the shoulders, he steered her out the door and closed it firmly behind her. She heard a loud click as her father turned the key in the lock.

‘Let me in, let me in,’ she cried, pounding on the door with angry fists.

There was no response from inside. She couldn’t even hear them talking so eventually she gave up.

She thought about going round to the outdoor kitchen and talking to the maids while they grated coconut, peeled fruit and chopped vegetables for the evening meal. Usually she enjoyed that but somehow she didn’t feel like it today. She didn’t feel like playing either; so, for lack of anything better to do, she wandered out to the decrepit wooden bench near the canal. It was shielded from view by a low fence covered with luxuriant vines and purple orchids, which made it a good place to go when she wanted to think about things. It was a nearly secret spot, her special place, and one of the best things about it was that nobody else ever went there.

But today she could hardly believe what she saw. That dreadful boy was there, sitting on her bench, just as if her secret place belonged to him. He was staring at the canal.

‘This water’s disgusting,’ he said when he saw her. ‘Look, it’s got green slime all over it.’

‘You can get typhoid from dirty water,’ she warned him. ‘Lots of people do, especially foreigners. Their temperature goes up and up until it gets so high they turn

purple and smoke comes out of their toes. You'd better go back to America before that happens to you.'

'Don't I wish,' he replied, huffily.

'Why don't you then?'

'I can't. Mom and Dad were in a car accident.'

'Are they dead?'

'Dad is. Mom's in the hospital with lots of casts and bandages and things.'

'Is she going to die, too?'

Teddy grimaced. The question gave him a hideous feeling that he was about to cry. Quickly turning his head and looking down so she couldn't see his face, he caught sight of a small lizard near his foot. On impulse, he picked it up and threw it in her face.

The creature scrambled up into her hair; in her frantic effort to shake it off she missed her step, lost her footing and toppled backwards into the greenish, blackish water of the stagnant canal.

Teddy started to laugh but then a terrifying thought struck him. Maybe she'd drown and he'd go to jail, get the electric chair. He hurriedly reached down to pull her out, but she bit him so hard that blood streamed from his fingers. Drops of red could be seen in the water.

The next few days were lonely and desolate ones for Teddy. A sort of armed truce, born of dire threats from his uncle, was in force between the two cousins. William was nice to him when he emerged from his study and his books, but that didn't happen very often. Most of his time seemed to be spent preparing lectures for some university with a funny sounding name.

In any case, seeing Uncle William made Teddy feel happy and sad at the same time, because he looked so much like his father. But where his father had been easygoing and full of fun, his uncle was gruff and stern.

Panida's mother tried to be kind, but the problem was that Panida was always following her around and talking to her in Thai whenever she was at home. She was out a lot though. She would usually wait until Uncle William went out and then she would dress up and go out too.

Although he would rather die than admit it, there were times when Teddy

wanted to cry with homesickness. He kept thinking about his dad, wondering if he was really alive in some kind of heaven and looking down watching him. He kind of hoped he was, even though the idea sort of gave him the shivers.

When it came down to it, he decided, a lot of creepy things went on in Thailand. For one thing, people were always talking about ghosts and spirits. There was even a house for spirits in a corner of the garden, which either Panida or her mother took flowers and incense out to everyday. Sometimes they put rice out too although, for the life of him, he couldn't figure out what good that would do the spirits. And a couple of nights ago things had got even more weird. The family across the street had actually set a table on their balcony and put a bowl and a plate and a glass for some dead grandfather on it, even lighted a candle for him; at least, that was what Panida's mother had said they were doing. Back in the States dead people were dead and live people were alive; it was all very clear who was who and what was what – but here, things got all jumbled up. Dead people came to dinner and spirits lived in gardens and live people? Well, they certainly didn't behave the way people did at home.

Teddy's life took a turn for the better when school started. It was an international school and everyone there spoke English and did things pretty much the way they did back in Connecticut. The only trouble, and it was actually a big trouble, was that it wasn't very easy to make friends. The kids who were in the thick of things, the popular ones, all went to each other's houses after school and had mothers who took them swimming at the Sports Club. The rest of the kids, the ones who were totally out of it like himself, had mothers like Panida's, who expected them just to sit around the house after school. She even seemed to think he could play with Panida, a kid who was only eight, and – even worse – a girl. Never mind the fact that he couldn't stand her. It was hard to believe the ideas that some people got into their heads.

There was another problem, too. Teddy didn't really like to admit to himself, much less to anybody else, how much he missed his own mother. After all, he wasn't a baby anymore. He'd be thirteen in a few months and she would be out of the hospital by then. Everybody said she was going to be perfectly all right. He had no trouble remembering this in the daytime but sometimes at night he had terrible dreams. He'd see her lying on something very hard and very white, all wrapped up in dreadful bandages and covered with blood. Then he would wake up trembling and soaked with

sweat and sometimes even have to run into the bathroom and throw up.

He had a ghastly dream like that in the early hours of the morning when it was just beginning to get light; so, instead of trying to go back to sleep afterwards, he unlocked the front door and went out and sat down on one of the veranda steps to think about things. Everything was quiet except for a persistent sound of *tokay, tokay, tokay* that was coming from somewhere near his right foot. Looking around, he saw an orange and green lizard a bit like the one he had thrown at Panida. He watched with fascination as its throbbing neck moved up and down with each fresh vocalisation.

Who was it calling to, he wondered, and why didn't people like lizards? Why did they always want dogs who would follow them everywhere and make them feel important, or cats who would... but he couldn't think what cats did, except sit around and wait for their dinner? He liked the glorious independence of a lizard.

He became so absorbed in watching the creature that he didn't notice the appearance of his uncle until a heavy scent of whisky assaulted his nostrils.

A very drunk Uncle William, looking as if he had been up all night, sat down on the step beside Teddy.

'I want you to stay away from women,' he told his nephew sternly.

Teddy could not have been more surprised if the orange and green lizard had stood up and started reciting the multiplication tables.

'Women are the devil,' William continued, and seemed about to go on in this vein when he stopped and peered at Teddy. 'I don't suppose you've had much experience with women yet.'

'Well, there's a girl back home,' Teddy lied.

'Avoid her like the plague,' advised his uncle. 'You know what girls will do to you, don't you?'

'Yeah, I've been around a bit,' said Teddy; he was warming to the idea of a man-to-man discussion, and wanted to make an impressive show of things.

'Then you know what women are after.'

Teddy nodded.

'Money,' asserted his uncle. 'Oh, they'll talk about love and they'll put on a damn good show about sex but all the time they've only got one thing on their fetid little minds: money, and how to get more of it out of you.'

Teddy was about to protest. The only woman he really knew was his mother and she wasn't like that. Then he reminded himself that this wasn't a conversation about mothers, it was about women. That was different. He gave a low groan, as if he too had been the victim of sexual assaults by mercenary women. The resulting sound came out more like a gargle, but his uncle didn't appear to notice. His attention had been diverted by a furious little figure storming out onto the veranda, looking like she had been crying.

'It's your fault,' shouted Panida. 'You drove Mummy away. We were happy until you came back from America.'

'God damn it! Your mother runs off with a rich slimy lover and you think it's my fault? Well it's not my fucking fault and if you weren't still a baby you'd know that. Just take care you don't grow up to be like your mother – that's all I can say.'

'I will grow up like her. I'll grow up exactly like her. It will be easy-peasy because everybody says I look like her already.'

Her father glared at her; then, in a voice that almost sounded as if he were sober, he said: 'No, my dear, you're not going to grow up like her. I'm going to see to it that you don't. And if my present state of inebriation leads you to think you can ignore what I'm saying, you are making a serious mistake.'

Then, getting unsteadily to his feet, he announced, 'And now I'm going to shake up the cook and get her to make some coffee.'

When he had gone Teddy, moved enough by the situation to put the usual state of warfare with his cousin aside for the moment, said, 'Maybe your mother will come back. After all, she didn't die or anything.'

'I don't think she ever liked Daddy very much,' Panida reflected, feeling the same unspoken call to a truce and sitting down on the step beside him. 'Mummy and I always had more fun when he wasn't around.'

'Maybe she won't like this new guy very much either,' Teddy suggested, 'and then she'll come back.'

Panida considered this possibility and brightened a little. 'Perhaps,' she agreed, but it wasn't enough to overcome the lonely empty feeling that seemed to be lodged in the pit of her stomach.

In the days that followed, Panida tried to compensate for the void her mother's departure had left by seeing to it that everything went on – as much as was possible – in the way it always had. She spent a lot of time with the maids because they spoke Thai and did everything the Thai way. She refused to speak English to her father and she solved the language problem with Teddy by not talking to him at all. She saw to it that fresh flowers were placed in front of the bronze Buddha image in the living room everyday and insisted on being the one to take the daily offerings out to the spirit house in the garden. She got up very early so she could be the one to offer food to the saffron-robed monks who stopped at the front gate each morning, a privilege her mother had always reserved for herself. Doing these things made her feel that if her mother came back she would be pleased with her; and, if she didn't? Well, she would have to try even harder to be as much like her as possible.

The weeks crawled by until the festival of Loi Kratong, the night Panida thought was the most magical of the year. It was the one when the banks of Bangkok's flowing canals and majestic Chao Phraya River teemed with life and their waters shimmered with lights from a multitude of candles.

As sundown approached Panida put on her best dress and inspected her Kratong for the hundredth time. Its banana leaf base had been shaped into a perfect boat and piled high with flowers, incense, and a candle. She had gone with one of the maids to buy it that morning and the venture had been especially exciting because her father, who had no idea how much a kratong should cost, had given her enough money to buy three of the biggest and most beautiful ones available: one for herself, one for her father and one for Teddy. She had even had enough money left to buy quite decent, though slightly smaller, ones for the maids. And each time her eyes fell on the glorious floral display that decorated her own, an excited tingling sensation ran all the way down from her neck to her toes.

It had been mid-morning by the time she had brought the kratongs home and even later by the time she got to school (not that she cared about that) – so Teddy didn't see his until that afternoon.

'What's that?' he asked, without much curiosity.

'An offering for the water spirits.'

'Why do you want to offer them anything?'

‘To ask their forgiveness for all the nasty dirty things people have been putting in the canals and rivers all year.’

‘Weird.’

‘No, it isn’t. But you don’t have to come, if you don’t want to.’

‘Come where?’

‘Down to the river. Daddy’s taking us. He promised. And we’re going in a boat.’

Teddy’s ears perked up. That sounded like fun. There was nothing weird about boats, and it suddenly occurred to him that some of the kids at school had been talking about where they were going and what they were going to do that evening. Apparently this Loi Kratong thing, or whatever it was, wasn’t just one of Panida’s off-the-wall ideas. It was just one of the crazy things people did in Thailand.

‘I guess I’ll go,’ he said, trying to sound reluctant but actually not wanting to be left out of something that might be fun.

The banks of the river had turned into a humming throng of people, all clutching kratongs, by the time William, Panida and Teddy reached the Oriental Landing. The boat that had been hired for their group – an assorted collection of professors from Chulalongkorn University (mostly Thais but also a few foreigners and their families) – wasn’t as easily accessible as William would have liked. They had to scramble across a number of other rocking vessels, the first one tied to the dock and the subsequent ones tied to each other, to reach their boat. William was less than happy when he saw how many excited children were scampering over the deck but he wasn’t a reliable counter of the younger generation. Ten of the little horrors invariably seemed like a hundred to him. But with several of the prettier secretaries already in the boat, along with a copious stash of Singha Beer and Mekong Whisky, he didn’t let the presence of the little bastards depress him for long.

Teddy’s interest immediately gravitated to the food supplies. There was rice, of course – didn’t these people ever get tired of it, he wondered for the thousandth time – several poisonous-looking curries that had weird things floating around in them, and lots of snacks. These didn’t look too bad but he knew from past experience that most of them would probably have hot chillies in them. He congratulated himself on his foresight in stowing a bunch of chocolate bars away in his pockets.

In the meantime Panida had been busy examining the array of kratongs lined up in the centre of the boat. She wanted hers to be the biggest and the most beautiful, and to her delight it was. At least, she thought so anyway.

When everybody was on board, the boat was detached from its moorings, steered out into the middle of the river and set on its course upstream. Panida and Teddy, along with most of the other children, crowded up to the front of the boat to catch the full force of the fresh breezes.

As darkness fell, this proved to be the best place to watch the river coming to life, with more and more kratongs drifting in the currents, the flames from their candles shimmering like dancing points of light on the murky water.

Panida, for whom this was the most beautiful night of the year, was completely caught up in the enchantment of it all – and even Teddy admitted that it was kind of nice.

It took them nearly two hours to reach their destination: a small, darkened temple surrounded by thick jungle vegetation. The passengers tumbled out onto a rickety wooden landing and, kratongs in hand, began to light the candles and incense and set the little floats adrift in the river.

Panida was afraid of matches so she looked around for her father to light hers. But, as he was at the far end of the dock lighting a candle for an attractive woman he had met on the way upriver, she settled for getting Teddy to do it instead. Then, finding a dry place to leave her shoes, she splashed down the wide temple steps, placed her kratong carefully in the river. Pressing her palms together, she raised her hands to her forehead in a brief prayer to the water spirits.

Teddy, uncertain what to do, watched Panida for a moment and then followed her down the temple stairs and put his kratong in the water.

‘Make a wai,’ she prompted.

‘What’s that?’

She repeated her gesture. ‘It’s a sign of respect. It’s what you do when you ask the water spirits to forgive you for all the bad things you’ve done all year.’

He resisted the idea at first but when he saw that some of the other foreigners were doing it, he decided he might as well go along with it. Feeling rather self-conscious, he pressed his hands together in a hasty and none too graceful version of

Panida's wai.

No sooner had he done this than he was overcome by a sudden panic. Was he going to be struck by lightning for praying to a bunch of spirits, he wondered? He waited; to his horror, he heard a low rumble of thunder in the distance... but no vengeful bolt of electricity shot out of the sky to strike him dead. Relieved, he turned his attention back to what was going on around him.

Panida seemed intent on watching the progress of her kratong. At first it merely drifted with the current; but then, caught by a sudden gust of wind, it gathered momentum and sped swiftly out toward the centre of the river where the stronger breeze soon extinguished the tiny flame from its candle.

Gradually the other passengers from the boat finished putting their kratongs in the water. They lingered on the riverbank, the adults talking and drinking, the children kept happy with sugary drinks and gooey sweets.

Panida and Teddy, for lack of anything better to do, began exploring the temple compound, treading gingerly across its broken and uneven paving stones until they came to the heavily lacquered entrance of the largest building. It was closed and locked. Disappointed, they turned to several of the smaller structures, but they proved equally inaccessible. So, spotting a wooden platform with railings, benches and a high pointed roof that Panida called a sala, they settled for climbing on that.

'What do you suppose this is for anyway,' Teddy wanted to know.

'It's for people to sit around and rest on when they come to the temple,' Panida explained, thinking that this was obvious. She didn't feel at all like resting now, though. She wanted to explore some more – find something exciting – so she jumped down and ran around to the back of the locked building.

Teddy had just caught up with her when the creaking of a door caught his attention.

'Watch out,' he whispered, 'someone's coming.'

They stopped and listened but no one came. The door seemed to be swinging in accordance with some rhythm of its own. Teddy's curiosity was aroused so he pushed it farther open; with Panida pressing up against him for reassurance, he peered into the cave-like darkness of the interior. A large bronze Buddha, reflecting a streak of moonlight, glowed in the darkness and seemed to draw them toward it.

At first everything, apart from the strangely swinging door, seemed quiet. Then a rustling noise from the direction of the image gave the impression that it was coming to life. Panida, now terrified, grabbed Teddy's hand – and, although he wouldn't have admitted it, a shiver ran down his own spine. The next thing he knew, a green and orange lizard scurried out from behind the Buddha; it ran toward Panida and scrambled up her leg before leaping off and disappearing out the door, pursued by another creature of similar size and colouring.

'Beautiful,' Teddy exclaimed as his eyes followed them into the darkness. Then, conveniently forgetting that he had been pretty nervous himself just a moment ago, he turned to Panida and said, 'There's nothing to be scared of.'

Nevertheless he wasn't quite so sure that he wanted to poke around this place anymore; there was something creepy about it. So he added, 'Maybe we'd better get back to the boat. Uncle William might be looking for us.'

Panida didn't protest, so they made their way out through the swinging door. Teddy, giving it an apprehensive look as they went past, saw with relief that its movements were due to a loose hinge rather than to anything supernatural. They made their way back to the river as quickly as the uneven paving stones allowed, but their progress was slowed by the need to keep a careful watch on where they stepped. As a result, it wasn't until they actually reached the landing that they realised the boat was no longer there. It was already well out into the middle of the river. They stared at it in stunned disbelief, scarcely able to take in the fact that they had been left behind.

'But Daddy couldn't have gone off without me,' Panida cried, 'he just wouldn't.'

She didn't know that William (flushed with generous doses of Mekong Whisky and realizing for the first time since his wife had left him that there were other attractive women in the world) had seen a blond boy and a dark haired girl sitting in the bow of the ship, their faces to the wind – and had assumed that his paternal responsibilities had been fully carried out.