PROJECT MUSE®

"The Happiness of Kati" by Jane Vejjajiva (excerpts)

Jane Vejjajiva, Prudence Borthwick

Comparative Critical Studies, Volume 3, Issue 1-2, 2006, pp. 181-184
(Article)

Published by Edinburgh University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ccs.2006.0017>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/199727>

‘The Happiness of Kati’ by Jane Vejajiva¹ (excerpts)

TRANSLATED FROM THE THAI
BY PRUDENCE BORTHWICK

4. THE PADDLE-BOAT

No one ever spoke of mother.

Grandpa had bought a little flat-bottomed boat to paddle in the flooded fields when the rainy season came. Grandpa said it was a nice way to escape Grandma’s bustle. Kati and Grandpa would go off, just the two of them. They would set off in the late morning, Grandpa paddling in a leisurely fashion. They would pass down the waterway, looking at the fruit trees growing along the banks, mangos and rose apples, mingled with casuarinas that liked to grow by the waterside. Grandpa didn’t stop and rest but called greetings to all the people he saw. Uncle Sohn was hauling up his net from the pier in front of his house, looked like he had a good catch of *tapean* fish. Grandpa said on the way home he’d stop and get some for Grandma to marinate in anchovy sauce and fry up for Kati’s dinner.

The little boat drew away from the deep shade of the waterways and moved towards the open field that seemed to stretch as far and wide as the eye could see. The water in their wake was ruffled by a gentle breeze. Away in the distance the paddy fields glinted bright green. Grandpa let the boat drift in the centre of the field and began to pick lily stems, You had to look carefully to make sure that you had the *pun* lilies not the *peuan* lilies with their dry bitter taste. The *pun* lily had round leaves with no veins and bright yellow flowers. The crisp fresh

¹ Jane Vejajiva was born in London, but returned to Thailand at the age of three. After graduating from Thammasat University, she went on to study at the Translators and Interpreters School in Brussels. Today, besides working as a freelance translator, she runs a copyright agency. Her own translations include *Seta* by Alessandro Baricco, *Le moine et le philosophe* by Jean-François Revel and Mathieu Ricard, and *The Trumpet of the Swan* by E. B. White.

stems were delicious, dipped in the pungent chili sauce which Grandma had wrapped in lily leaves along with newly harvested rice for their lunch. Kati had fun breaking the lily stems up into little pipes and fitting them back together as a necklace. Sometimes there would be a raft of *krajup* growing together. Kati liked them better than water chestnuts. Grandpa would gather them in the bottom of the boat to take home to boil and eat. Then there was always the water hyacinth with its fragile pale purple blooms. If you held them in your hands, in no time at all they would wither and lose their looks. The white morning glories were pretty too. Grandpa said if you were an artist like Monet you could reproduce them on canvas most beautifully.

Grandpa would paddle peacefully, not worrying about what time he left home, where he had to be next, and when he had to be home by. Grandpa said they weren't on a tour according to the dictates of the railway timetable. They were on a tour according to the dictates of their own hearts.

The flat-bellied boat with its stubby bow made an excellent conveyance. It did not pollute the environment, but cut through the clear waters to the stroke of the paddler. If you paddled into a flock of pond-skaters, the insects would scatter wildly, making mayhem. Grandpa and Kati didn't need to speak. They let the little boat and the water greet each other instead. The sun seemed far away in the sky even though its rays were stronger now. But around them the water completely covered the field, acting as a coolant to cut out the heat. Time seemed to stop still. Water and sky, wind and sun framed a picture in the centre of which floated the little boat. Nevertheless, a boat can't keep going forward without eventually reaching its destination, no matter how enchanting the journey.

5. THE OLD SHELTER

Kati no longer remembers Mother's face.

The destination Grandpa chose, on the basis of his rumbling stomach, was the little waterside shelter under the big East Indian walnut tree.

To tell the truth, this was generally their rest stop on trips to the field, because it was so well placed. The lone walnut tree stood at the edge of the field. Its broad canopy had been left to grow freely and gracefully, casting a convenient shade over the dilapidated roof of the old shelter. The thick planks of the shelter still held good, though they creaked and squeaked with every step of Grandpa's and Kati's,

sounding like an elderly person greeting a long-awaited visitor. The gentle sunshine filtered through the leaves and branches of the walnut tree. Sunlight penetrated the hole in the roof falling on the raised wooden platform below. Grandpa gave the platform a cursory wipe with his long cotton scarf, before spreading it out for them to sit on like a picnic rug. Kati opened the picnic basket that Grandma had packed for them: rich sweet chili sauce, crispy fried catfish salad, sweet pork, and salted eggs which they mixed with rice and finished off, with Grandpa muttering that it was for this he loved Grandma and no other.

They had not even time for their eyelids to grow heavy after the big meal before they heard someone hailing them from across the water. A number of boats were heading over towards them. Headman Boon was bringing the villagers to meet with Grandpa. He had not made an appointment to see Grandpa but it was as though he had. Everyone in the district was courteous and considerate to Grandpa for he was their counsel in time of trial. Tong was a member of the deputation too. He gestured for Kati to get up and come over to him. The grownups would talk. But Kati liked to hear Headman Boon’s introductory remarks. He always said the same thing. The village by the water was indeed lucky that Grandpa had chosen to return from Bangkok and retire to his ancestral home, which at the time, had been left completely deserted and had fallen into disrepair. That Grandpa who had studied abroad and was a first class lawyer was well known throughout his home and, indeed, the entire kingdom. That Grandpa had made a fortune but had helped so many people. That if it had not been for Grandpa, the villagers would have been exploited, taken advantage of, and the land of their ancestors... Here Grandpa raised his hand to stop the flow of words and asked smoothly if they were planning to conduct the *Kwan Narc* recital, that part of the Buddhist ordination ceremony where the ordinand recalls his debt of gratitude to his mother for conceiving him, bearing him and delivering him. Grandpa asked if they would like to include the nine months he spent inside *his* mother’s womb in their recitation. This raised a shout of laughter that could be heard clear across the water.

It was at this juncture that Kati slipped away. Behind the shelter, steps led down to the water. Kati sat swinging her legs, letting her toes dip into the water. Tong was never able to sit idle. He had a toy that floated on water for Kati. It was a bit of coconut husk with leaves stuck in it as a mast and sails. They raced their boats, thrashing the water

with their hands to make them go faster. If they went so far from the shelter that not even a long stick could reach them, then Tong would swim for them. He was a good swimmer who could stay under water for long periods. But if you were comparing Tong to a fish you would have a hard time finding one that matched, especially as you'd have to find one whose white teeth were the first thing you saw as it came out of the water. When they were tired they sat and rested. Tong liked to ask Kati about stories she was reading or had just read. Tong said he couldn't understand why when he read them himself it was nowhere near as exciting as when Kati retold the stories.

It was a long time before the deputation left. The sun was slowly setting when Kati walked back into the shelter. Grandpa was folding a letter and replacing it in an envelope. His face, when he looked up at Kati, seemed drained and weary, not unlike the old shelter which had seen sun and seen rain, seen so much of the world that every fiber of wood was steeped in the past and no longer had any hope for the future.