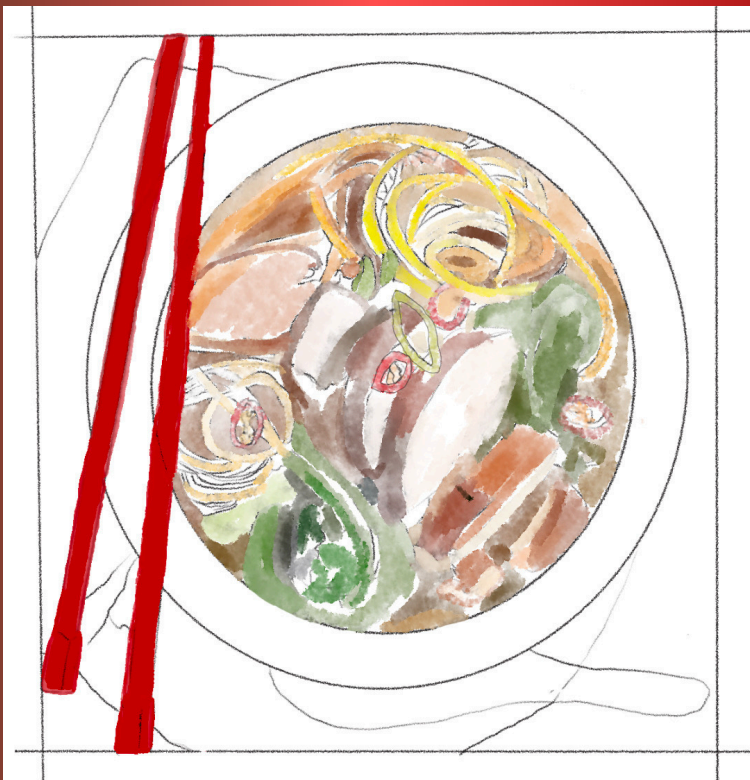


**“NOODLES  
OF  
OPPORTUNITY”**



**PORNNAPAT (PAM) KLIPBUA**





# “Noodles of Opportunity”

Pornnapat (Pam) Klipbua

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Published by Brightly Beaming

Bangkok Patana School

643 La Salle Road (Sukhumvit 105),

Bangna Tai, Bangna, Bangkok 10260 Thailand

# **“Noodles of Opportunity”**

Pornnapat (Pam) Klipbua

We worked from humble beginnings. My mother was a professional seamstress who met my father, a mechanic, during the late 1950s. There was no such thing as industrialization back then in what was the 'rural' part of Bangkok, or what we now call Chinatown. Our community was small but loving. When the factory my father worked in closed, we moved in with my grandparents to run the noodle business. My grandparents have practically been 'running' the soi for the past decades. Everyone knew our store. Jae Lai's red pork noodles. The store was busy, with people bustling in and out.

Me and my parents stayed in the room above the store. It was my responsibility to help out at the store on weekends. Of course, being a young child I couldn't make food for the customers yet, my expertise in the noodle industry was quite shallow. So I was in charge of taking orders and getting them right. We did things the 'old fashioned' way. No pen and paper, just simple memorization of customer orders. I always hated the middle-aged uncles who would come in to order 10 menus, "special red pork noodle", with slight tidbit deviations.

Our store ran from 6 AM to 11 PM. My grandfather used to scoff at those congee places or the joints that made only "breakfast foods". How do they make sufficient income? He'd sigh. My grandfather marveled at how our store was superior because noodles were not just "breakfast foods", we were foods for practically any time of the day. My grandma was a paradox of my grandpa for she was more soft-spoken.

As I got older, I stopped messing around so much. Reality set in more. In middle school, I was a podgy boy with fat cheeks. By high school, I was self-conscious of losing weight and had started to help out more at the noodle store. I was quite handy at tools and so my grandparents enlisted me to help with repairing the creaking fan in the store every now and then. Our store was getting quite old and so it was starting to break down. The clock that used to remind me of 6 PM ecstasy was in a state beyond repair. We sold it off to the Saleng and I promised to run an errand to fetch a new one from the salesman from the consecutive Soi. Before I knew it the Chinese calendars that hung from our store wall were changing faster than I anticipated. I was getting older. When customers once had to peer down to look at me to make orders, they now had to look upwards, for I had grown a lot during the school break. I was now a towering and lanky skyscraper, but that was teenage development.

I was never really good at school. I got good enough grades to scrape a pass. Maybe score slightly above or below the mean of the class. First place, class president, that was all pretty much out of my place. Maybe that was because I was at an elite all-boys Thai school. At home we barely spoke any Thai, it was just Chinese and attempted pronunciations of English when we were feeling jolly. My Thai was not bad because I had spent my entire life here, in fact, no one even knew I was Chinese because my name (Leng), could pass off as being Thai. My parents and grandparents had adopted Thai names as well. Generally, our neighbors christen us, and sometimes it is based on appearance. My Grandfather is hardworking, so much so that the neighbors call him “Mod”, which means ant in Thai and is part of the metaphor, where hardworking people are compared to ants.

As I've gotten older, I stayed to help out more after 6 PM rather than going out. I discovered that more rowdy crowds came in during this time. My grandfather's good friends would come in for small talk and they would always order more red pork so that we could finish our stock for today. I had advanced from a simple waiter to actually being able to cook the noodles! The recipe was simple but quite hard to execute. My grandfather laughed and said it came with time. It was easy to create art but quite hard to make 'good' art. Most of the time I just cooked noodles for my grandparents and parents, and the occasional customer when the store got extremely busy. My noodle cooking skills weren't brilliant but I'd say I still made better broth than my other highschool friends.

My family was never the competitive type. It's not like those asian stereotypes, where the parents pressure the child to get into a good university, to get first place in the class, and if that couldn't be fulfilled then the child would be punished. My situation was different. If I didn't perform, I would simply be limited in choice. My parents didn't feel like applying extra pressure when I would have to accept the reality of limited opportunity anyway. We weren't rich. Putting pressure on me wouldn't make us any richer, sure it might in the future but my parents didn't care about financial riches or future security. They cared about other riches. Was I rich in love? Was I rich in my care of the community?

Those were the things that mattered.

When it came time to apply for university, I had to take a final school exam. My friends had all chosen to major in languages and arts, so I decided why not? I took the exam on an early morning and got home just in time to help out with errands. The exam was



hard. I didn't want to think about it. I wanted to zone out the thoughts in my head. The voice that kept saying, "This is it. I'm not getting into a good university. I've wasted my options on languages and arts, and I'm not even good at that."

I was probably right because my principal had called my parents in for a conference the following day. She sat there in her cushioned chair, looking at me with great assessment as I tried to reduce the sweating in my palms.

"Leng is a rare case," She said finally.

My parents looked at me curiously.

"Your son did not get admitted to any of the universities he has applied to."

I didn't even have time to process anything she said when my mother reached for my hands and squeezed them. She gave me a comforting glance, like the decision hurt her, but she cared more about my feelings. I wasn't going to university? Was that right?

I lowered my gaze. It's fine, I thought to myself. I still have the noodle shop. I still have my mum, my dad, my grandpa, my grandma. So many people still loved me regardless of whatever fate decided to throw into my course. I would learn to cook noodles better, to become the best restaurant heir I could be. And that would be enough. Who cares about the gates beyond this community? When I had warmth and familiarity around me?

So why did the loss of opportunity sting?

“I hear Leng is a very good mechanic. There have been many companies contacting through the school, who request that Leng work for them. In fact, they’ve guaranteed him a working position, no need for a bachelor’s degree.”

She smiled. I gaped dumbfounded. Was I hearing that right? I didn’t even apply for mechanics. I thought I was just getting news on failing my university applications and pitying condolences, but what was this?

“Where is the company?” My father asked excitedly.

“It is in the US.” The principal grinned, handing us the contact she had received.

My parents exchanged a look. I couldn’t help but experience confusion. The US? Was this real?

I suddenly remembered that there was this farang man who lived in the soi across the road. He had a leaky pipe beneath his faucet and my friend Joi had called me to fix it. The cause of the leak was severe, in fact the entire plumbing system was troubled. The farang man watched me with an interested look on his face, he chuckled and asked me in his excellent Thai: “is it the issue with the entire plumbing system?” I nodded. But I didn’t desert my projects. I stayed for 4 hours to find the root of the leak and enlisted Joi to help me find good pipes from the local salesman. It took us another 5 hours to fix the entirety of the system but the results were extremely satisfying for the water flowed into the sink smoothly.

I snapped back to reality. The principal was still grinning ear to ear, “Is it true, Leng, that in our community you have fixed a total of 200 projects?”

I nodded. I never kept track of how many cases I’ve helped but 200 seemed about right. She went on to tell my parents how she heard that I had even more experience than most undergraduates. But I wasn’t listening anymore, the news took me completely by surprise and before I knew it we were leaving the office and heading home.

My parents were still ecstatic but they took a serious moment to ask me if I wanted to do this or not and if I was serious about doing the job in the US. I started reasoning about how we wouldn’t be able to afford it. My father stopped me and asked if I was passionate about mechanics or not. The answer was simple: I was passionate about mechanics.

We walked home and my grandparents along with their friends sat eagerly around the store’s large table waiting for me. My grandfather had prepared a bowl of jade noodles for me, my favorite. In his eyes I could see the glassy reflection of tears. He was mainly an unemotional man, but I could see that he was proud. Regardless of what my future’s decision held, he knew that I would be moving out of the noodle shop, that I would be out there in this wide world. It’s the sorrow and joy of watching a small creature that you raised grow up to leave. My grandmother was hugging me, her tears staining my white school shirt. My parents broke the news. None of us could anticipate how impossible this dream seemed. To leave for the States, when all we had was a noodle shop and enough money to cover monthly expenses.

But everyone had something to pitch in to cover the money. Uncle Tong with his gold necklace that he won way back in his lucky lottery days. Auntie Lek with her widowed wedding ring.

And my grandmother with her vase.

I refused to let them sell their belongings. It was too much. I could just stay here. I would be the next noodle heir. I will stay to help with the business. I wouldn't leave the warmth and comfort I had known all my life.

My grandmother said, "That company better appreciate you the way we do. And if you ever find yourself in need of the comforts of home. Come back. You are not meant to stay home forever. The world deserves to know how brilliant you are, so go out there and live to your fullest!"

I didn't see the vase the next day.

It took everything in me to not break down. The night before I left, I could barely bring myself to pack my bag. I didn't know how long I was going away. Did they have superior "breakfast foods" in the states? What was it going to be like? I pondered on my worries but also on my excitement.

I will always remember home and the people I love. Life didn't wait for me, it didn't wait for me to turn old and sell noodles until my fingers bled from the untrained ambition. It brought me on a new path, one that would make me happy in my riches.





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