

THE MEMORY LANTERNS OF LOI KRATHONG

Something to share.

BY PRESTON GRASSMANN

Today is a holiday for purging bad memories. Until now, the sky lanterns and floating candles have largely been symbolic, but new techniques in selective memory-erasure have changed all that.

Chakkri carries his new lanterns from Sukhumvit's Atlanta Hotel, all the way to this smoky blur of neon at the edge of Chao Phraya River.

A crowd gathers around him, eager to buy the festive paraphernalia of Loi Krathong.

With his lanterns displayed, Chakkri holds one of them out for the gathered buyers to see. He channels through a sequence of tailor-made images and the crowd steps back — countless faces flashing in reflection. Stock images of news clips and footage of war scenes explode across the pixelated surface of the paper. He lights a lantern and lets it go — a gust of wind pushing it out over the stalls of Canvas Town and over Chao Phraya, where it joins other lanterns ablaze with memory. Young and old stand along the shores of the river, watching their own selected moments of time drift away.

As his hands pass swiftly over the counter, exchanging lanterns for old baht, Chakkri notices a boy in the crowd, pushing his way forward.

He has seldom seen such eagerness in a child's eyes, and for a moment it reminds him of his own childhood memories of Loi Krathong, the amazement he had felt when his mother had taken him to the festival so many years ago.

As the boy reaches the stall, he looks up at the images and videos that flash across the lantern screens. "Are those your own memories?"

Chakkri shakes his head and leans over with a conspiratorial smile. "I'm afraid not. They're modified from the public domain." "Don't you have any memories of your own that you want to ...?"

"Erase?" Chakkri says, shaking his head. "I forget enough as it is."

The boy looks up. Even through the flickering wash of lantern light, Chakkri can see the



disappointment. For a moment, it catches him off-guard.

A man steps forward to stand behind the boy, placing a hand on his shoulder. The boy doesn't turn back.

"Even the painful memories?" the boy asks.

"Especially the painful ones," Chakkri says. "I'm not sure who I would be without them."

"I'm sorry," the man says, shaking his head sadly. "My son ... lost his mother a few days ago ..."

Chakkri holds his hands together and closes his eyes, memories of his own mother returning as he offers his condolences.

The boy traces a finger over the surface of a lantern, as if the words are too much for him to hear, as if he's trying to find his way out of a maze of pain.

Chakkri lifts a hand to the crowd, signalling that he's closing the booth. The boy's lantern remains lit, while the others fade to blank screens and he leans towards the boy again.

"We can share the past, instead of forgetting it," he says. Appearing on the lantern's screen is a sky full of lights — a bright mosaic of his own memories floating in the dark. It might've been that very night along the Chao Phraya, but this was 30 years ago in another city. He lets it play for a moment before revealing a woman and a child.

"Is that ...?" the boy asks.

"My mother," Chakkri says. "And me."

He stands on the shores of the Chiang Mai River, holding his mother's hand as they watch the lanterns of Loi Krathong — a memory he has never shared.

"Now it's your turn."

He places the lantern in the boy's outstretched hand. He is too young to have a neural implant of his own, so his father takes a moment and selects a memory.

A video sequence begins to play on the lantern's screen — a child at a beach, crying as the waves surge and fall against white sand. The mother lifts the child in her arms, pointing out across the sun-burnished sea, where tiny islands and ships dot the horizon. The child's fear begins to fade as he takes notice of faraway places he has never seen before. He leaps from his mother's

arms and runs along the shore on his own, unafraid. "I remember that," the boy says, looking back at his father. "I remember that."

When the sequence ends, Chakkri leans down to face the boy at eye level.

"That's a beautiful memory," he says, pointing at the lantern. "Why don't you keep that?"

An echo of that childhood memory rises back into the boy's face now, and other emotions take the place of pain. The boy's eyes shine through his tears, and the father places his hands together, thanking Chakkri for his kindness.

For a moment, Chakkri is a child again, holding his mother's hand, the blazing lanterns above like distant islands, like ships setting sail to some place faraway. And then he remembers the words she had said that day, all those years ago: "The hardest part of holding on to memories is the loneliness of never sharing them."

As he watches father and son walk away, holding a memory in their hands, he realizes how right she had been. ■

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