



GREEN, NO MOVEMENT

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Thai Buddhists pray during a funeral. Photos: Tibor Krausz



In the midst of death

After his mother's funeral, Pattipan Boonyee decided to help the grieving by preparing the bodies of the departed for a final viewing – a vocation he says cost him his marriage

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Pattipan Boonyee pulls up a picture on his phone of boy in a green T-shirt with chubby cheeks, a crewcut and a happy smile.

He was 11-year-old Tanawat. Now he is wrapped in a white body bag, lying on a stretcher at the morgue of the Police General Hospital's Institute of Forensic Medicine in Bangkok.

Pattipan, a volunteer rescuer, has driven to the morgue in the Thai capital in his private ambulance with Tanawat's grieving mother by his side. They have come to pick up the boy's corpse to take it back to his hometown of Sri Racha in eastern Thailand for Buddhist funeral rites.

"It's a sad case," Pattipan, 41, says. "I deal with dead people every day, but cases like this are especially tragic."

Tanawat was brutally murdered in early April by a 49-year-old Burmese man who had lived with the boy's widowed grandmother. The migrant worker, local police say, has confessed to killing the fourth-grader with a sickle at a tapioca plantation after a dispute with his mother, Mullika Junduang.



A tableau at a Thai Buddhist temple shows vultures ready to feast on a cadaver.

I aim for elegance. It's kind of like what you would do to make wax sculptures look like real people

PATTIPAN BOONYEE, VOLUNTEER COSMETOLOGIST FOR THE DEAD

"He was abusive and violent," says Mullika, 27, who works as an accountant. "He said he would kill me and my son because I didn't want my mother to be with him."

A few days after her son's death, the young woman appears numb with grief. "Tee was a kind and well-behaved boy," she says, referring to her son by his nickname. "He always helped me with household chores. Everyone loved him. He had many friends and his teachers had only good things to say about him."

During the hour-long journey

much better," she says. "He's a lot more like the way he was alive."

The key, Pattipan says, is not to overdo the make-up, which is what some local funeral assistants do. "They make the dead look like characters from traditional Thai opera," he scoffs. "They add too much lipstick, blush cheeks too red, and draw eyebrows too prominently. I aim for elegance. It's kind of like what you would do to make wax sculptures look like real people."

He learned the skills on the job. He used to work as a motorcycle taxi driver while volunteering as a rescuer at road accidents. He became interested in applying make-up to the dead a decade ago when his mother died of a heart attack.

"At her funeral she looked very pale. They had just covered her face with some powder at a hospital," he recalls. "It was very sad. I thought I should do something for dead people that I hadn't had the chance to do for my mother."

He started practicing on road accident victims and has kept at it ever since. "I've always felt that dead people guide me in what to do. When I'm putting make-up on them I feel like they're watching me," he says.

His services, which include transporting victims to a hospital morgue and from there to a Buddhist crematory, are in high demand. Almost every day he has several cases to deal with – at times as many as eight.

"People tell each other about my work," Pattipan explains. "I get calls for help all the time." He even has dying people contacting him to ensure they will be in good hands at their funeral.

Most of his clients are locals who cannot afford proper send-offs for their loved ones. "He did it all for free," Mullika says. "He didn't even ask for any money to bring Tee home from Bangkok."

Pattipan is a caretaker at rental properties. On busy days he beds down in his ambulance between his rounds.

His skills have made him famous on social media, where he posts images on his cases – with permission from the relatives of the deceased – and he has tens of thousands of avid followers.

"He makes dead people look like they're asleep," says Sunitara Moopayak, a restaurant owner who first met Pattipan five years ago at her sister-in-law's funeral. Like Pattipan's other benefactors, Sunitara regularly pays for his petrol and various other expenses. She also buys coffins for dead people whose relatives cannot afford them. "I'm happy to help him out," she says.

Many of Pattipan's daily Facebook posts aren't for the faint of heart. They feature close-ups of corpses before and after he has worked on them, with disturbing macabre details pixelated. "People are interested in my work," he says. "They're curious about these things."

the dead, however. "My wife couldn't accept what I do," Pattipan says. "So she left me."

He has been raising his eight-year-old son, Piamruk, alone for years. Dressed in a yellow uniform identical to his father's, he regularly accompanies his doting dad on his rounds. "We do everything together," Pattipan says.

The boy is untroubled by human remains. He often even lends his father a helping hand with them. "I'm not afraid of ghosts," Piamruk says.

Pattipan receives a call and sets off in his ambulance with his son. He drives to a rural area with a few low-rises. A middle-aged woman has hanged herself from a tree in a grassy field.

"It's a haunted tree," a local man says. "Two others hanged themselves from it." The woman is taken to a morgue, where Pattipan makes her up ahead of a traditional corpse-bathing ceremony at a Buddhist temple.

Another call comes and he is off again, this time to the site of a car crash where a pickup truck barreled into a 10-wheeler. The pickup's driver is pronounced dead at the scene. He, too, is soon in Pattipan's care.

Every day, for hours on end, wherever death goes, Pattipan follows. "In 10 years I've put make-up on around 10,000 dead people," he says. "I've felt somehow connected to all of them."

He did it all for free. He didn't even ask for any money to bring Tee home from Bangkok

MULLIKA JUNDUANG, MOTHER OF A MURDERED BOY

Clockwise from below: Pattipan Boonyee venerates the corpse of the murdered boy Tanawat; with his own son, Piamruk; and in front of his ambulance.

