Beware of the crocodile wave!

A faraway tale with a moral
By David Sedmera and Penelope Thomas

Once upon the time, in a country far, far away, probably Siam, lived a little girl named Duanphen, which means ‘Full Moon’. She lived with her parents in a small village on the banks of the mighty Mekong river. Every day she helped her mother with her chores: fetching water, pounding grain, preparing food; but her favorite time was always first thing in the morning as the sun rose, when she would play, not with other children, but in the company of wild creatures: birds, bugs, frogs and other small riverside animals. Her mother warned her to always look around carefully when getting near the water. “This is a big river, and dangerous creatures live there! Especially beware of the crocodiles, for to them we are only ‘lunch now’ or ‘too big for lunch now’. They can pull you under the water with their teeth, and we would never see you again!”

One sunny morning, Duanphen was playing close to the riverbank as usual, when she heard a strange call. It might be a frog, she thought, though she had never heard a frog make a sound quite like that! Eagerly she searched among the riverside weeds and reeds, and, eventually she discovered not a frog but a strange-looking lizard. The lizard hissed at her defensively, but could not get away – its front leg was twisted, and its tail awkwardly entangled in knotted reed roots.

Carefully, Duanphen freed it, and saw with surprise that it was not a mere lizard, but a baby crocodile! She also saw its many teeth, and thought of her mother’s warning. But most of all she saw its injuries, not just leg and tail but raptor claw punctures in the softer underbelly skin, and instinctively she wrapped it with care into big leaves and carried it home.

Back in the hut, her parents were not very happy with the new arrival. “Crocodiles are dangerous! You cannot keep it! Put it back right now!” But Duanphen was determined to heal it first, and her mother soon gave in to her daughter’s tears, providing the little creature lived in its own enclosure next to their hut (which her husband quickly built).

Duanphen herself dug a small pond so that on hot days little Crooky – for that’s what she decided to call it, because of its crooked leg and tail - could cool off. Every day she fed it with offal and other leftovers from the kitchen (little Crooky liked fish best) so it grew rapidly and its leg healed remarkably well and the raptor claw holes in its underside were soon just tiny scars that formed the shape of a wave of water.

Only its tail stayed twisted. As Crooky grew into a fine lady crocodile, and as Duanphen enlarged her pond, she saw that her patient would only ever swim awkwardly and never catch enough of her favorite fish if released into the river. With a sigh, she explained to Crooky that, although her baby crocodile teeth had been too small to fight off the raptor and her baby skin soft enough to be penetrated by its claws all that time ago, now her big teeth and tough skin would make her a match for any predator. And that she, Duanphen, would always make sure that Crooky would have enough to eat. And thus Crooky stayed with the family and guarded the hut from her enclosure like a strange long green dog, snapping her jaws as if to
bite the ankles of any intruders who got too close to the hut and hissing loudly, alerting the family.

Duanphen also grew up into a beautiful girl, and, despite her strange pet, there were many boys who tried to impress her so that she would marry them. Finally, she chose Chanchai, the best fisherman in the village; not only because she loved his big smile and strong arms, but also because she knew he would be able to feed both her and Crooky. And they built a boat, loaded up all their belongings, and Crooky (in a cage), and floated downstream towards the sea, as the river around the village was rather stripped of fish, and Chanchai was now a fisherman with responsibilities.

After a long and interesting journey (too long and interesting to tell of here), they built a lovely cottage on a beach, and soon there was a new little girl in the house – Duanphen named her Hathai. Crooky behaved in a maternal way too, as she hissed and snapped her jaws when any stranger got too close to the baby. But soon, Hathai started to walk, and in no time she was running around far from the cottage, where Crooky could not see her. Hathai most loved the sound of the sea, and shape of the waves, and playing near them, where she could be the first to meet her father as he landed his boat full of fish.

However, the sea is not only home to bigger fish than a river, but also bigger crocodiles. They are secretive creatures, but even if they were not, Hathai would not have been afraid of them – after all, she was growing up with one and considered it a family pet, like the geckos, who caught bugs at night on the walls of their white cottage. So one fateful day, she was not worried at all when she saw a serpentine wave coming her way on the beach in front of the cottage. And although her mother was nearby collecting driftwood just along the shore, and started yelling at her to get out of the water, Hathai did not hear her over the sound of waves crashing to the beach.

As she ran towards the scene, Duaphen watched, helplessly, as the deadly-shaped wave got closer and closer to her daughter, who, within seconds, disappeared without a cry into the surf.

Her mother and father were distraught, especially Duanphen who felt deeply that it was all her fault. If only she had taught Hathai the most important lesson: Beware of the waves that hide crocodiles, for to them we are only ‘lunch now’ or ‘too big for lunch now’. How can a child know that while crocodiles on land can look harmless, almost cute when they are fed, those sharp regenerating teeth are not for decoration!? Duanphen sighed and remembered the day she had found Crooky. She remembered how much she had wanted to save Crooky’s life. Crocodiles cannot help being crocodiles. And people who save the lives of injured crocodiles should not stop being caring people because of that. But losing Hathai left her feeling like her
own heart had been torn out. Tears rolled down her cheeks onto the fish as she fed them to Crooky.

Hathai’s parents searched the beach over and over again, and would not give up hope but of course all their friends and neighbours shook their heads and said it was in vain.

Now I assume you want this tale to have a happy ending... and I am happy to oblige, if you just sit quietly and listen. The serpentine wave hid a monster croc, yes, but this was actually Chakrii, the King of the Seas, and he was searching desperately for a wife, since he needed an heir to his throne, and had simply followed the traditional signs that should lead him to the right beach to find her. He had taken Hathai to his underwater palace and tried to train her as a Queen of the Seas in the traditional manner (you can see that reptiles, even the big ones, don’t have very sophisticated brains: how could a human girl, even with all his magic powers, give him the egg he desired?!?) However, Hathai was not very happy, even though the palace was quite beautiful in its own way, and kept crying for her family, her tears mingling with the water that formed the waves she loved so much.

Her parents mourned the loss of their only child. Duanphen hardly ever stopped crying, and Chanchai chewed his fingernails down to the quick trying to figure out what he could do to console her. Nevertheless, he still went fishing since they still had to eat.

And so it happened he caught a beautiful gold fish. He was just thinking perhaps he could sell this fish to the rich local merchant for his pond and thus afford to move somewhere new to help his wife forget their loss when it started to talk to him! It promised that, if he released it, it would answer any one question about the underwater world.

(Now, you may not believe this because you have only ever heard of magical creatures granting three wishes but it was only a wee fish and its magic was not yet strong enough to grant more than one).

But Chanchai did not have to think twice – all he wanted to know were the whereabouts of his beloved daughter, Hathai.

And the gold fish, who loved gossip above all despite its youth, told him everything – about Chakrii, his predicament, and also that his daughter is safe and well fed, despite being quite unhappy. Chanchai gratefully released the fish and returned home to bring the news to his wife Duanphen.

(What would you do if your marriage partner told you that a talking gold fish had told you that your missing daughter had been taken to be wife of the crocodile King of the Sea? Never mind. Here is what actually happened.)
Duanphen dried her tears and started to think hard. After a while, she had a plan – a problem caused by a crocodile could be solved with another crocodile! She explained it to Chanchai and sent him off to set sail and bargain with Chakri for Hathai offering Crooky as a more suitable bride for him. After lengthy searching and even lengthier negotiations (crocodiles can take their time, and Chakrii was a lengthy crocodile!), Chakrii finally agreed to take a look at Crooky by moonlight. When he first saw her on land, he was not convinced, and started to turn to swim away, but Hathai (whom he brought with him to check it was Crooky and not just any crocodile) shouted in joy at seeing Crooky again; and so he turned back just as she slid into the water from her enclosure and saw the wave shape formed by the scars on her belly. This was, of course, the special sign of the perfect partner for the King of the Seas! That, and Crooky’s consuming the fish onto which Hathai’s mother’s salt water tears of sorrow had fallen… And so, after an anxious wait on the beach, her parents’ hearts were refilled with joy as they saw Hathai in the light of the rising sun, asleep in patch of seaweed on some rocks nearby.

And so Chakrii got his mate; Crooky got one of her kin to talk to, a full crocodile life at last, and delightful underwater palaces with plenty of fish; Chanchai showed his gratitude by sailing to where he first met the gold fish once a year to swap gossip; Hathai remembered no unhappy details of her kidnapping, but developed a great gift for painting pictures of the sea from a safe distance, of course; and Duanphen…

(Well, you already know that, don’t you?)

...yes, they all lived happily ever after!

**Moral** is: You can believe what you like about tales from faraway places, but for happiness always try to be the best of what you are, and remember that people are people, and crocodiles are crocodiles.

**Thai names**
Hathai / Heart
Duanphen / Full Moon

Chanchai / Skilled Winner
Chakrii / King