Maengmoom first noticed it when she was seven years old. None of the other children seemed to have it; she knew because she'd checked surreptitiously as they'd been bathed. She was housed in what was mainly a boys' section of the orphanage, so perhaps it was just a girl thing, this budding, this tender blooming from her navel. But when she did at last get to be bathed next to Sopa, one of the few other girls, she saw that Sopa's navel went sweetly in, and showed no signs of anything emerging from it. Maengmoom's own navel protruded ever so slightly, and was opalescent in colour. Sometimes it would throb gently and she could feel it pulsating under her fingertips as she placed her hand there. She would stand, flooded with excitement, her hand inside the band of her shorts, sure that if she concentrated hard enough, something magical would burst forth.

Last night she had dreamt that she had been floating above the large buildings where she lived, as if she were a balloon tethered to a cord coming directly out of her navel. Up there she had seen the world that was beyond the gates, and it was big. The place she was tethered to was tiny by comparison, and she saw that it would be possible to simply float away, for the world was large, and she could fly. She'd been woken by a stinging tug on her cowlick, followed by two slaps on her face.

Lazy creature! Always the lazy creature is the last.

Pakpao. Today's house mother. Pakpao's voice was like nails on tin. Maengmoom's hand crept back to her navel, checking to see if the cord was still attached, but she found nothing, just the small warm grape that was the middle of herself. She was in her bed, thirteen beds down on the right side wall, and the other kids were already wriggling out of theirs and shoving toward the bathing room. It was important not to be last. No one wanted to be the one Pakpao chose for Unfortunate Crane Trapped Under Water. It was Pakpao's favourite game. In the bathing room she would be the tree and would hold the legs of the child picked as Crane in her branches so that the child's head was under water. This was so Crane could fish. But the branches were strong and Crane would always get stuck. Hence the misfortune.

Find the fish! Find the little fishies, Pakpao would shriek with glee.

Although Maengmoom was often chosen, she never did find any. Pakpao had told her that if she'd tried really hard, she would have found a fish, and the branches would have released her sooner. But as she never did, the water would seep into all her open places. Although she held her breath for as long as possible it was never long enough and water would flood her chest. Since she didn't find any fish, there would be none in her breakfast bowl either.

She scrambled past Sopa in line for the bathing room and so, today, Sopa would be Crane. Maengmoom laughed louder than the rest as they watched Sopa's stiffened legs and stupid struggles. As she laughed she felt strength coming from her belly, and a hot sharp pain that made her sweat and left her breathless. Something was released from her. It felt like a worm emerging through her navel, which then crawled its way across her body, and sat like a cord around her waist. All day she patted it to make sure it was still there. Its presence was thrilling, and she drew power from it. She was therefore not surprised when she was able to find a quiet corner and for an entire ten minutes was alone to examine the cord and luxuriate in its wonder. It was the most beautiful thing that she had ever seen. And this silky, pliant, shimmering thing had

"Maengmoom." Rosemary Jackson.
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come from her. It was delicate, but seemed to have the strength of soft steel. She wove it round her fingers and waggled them in the sunlight. It sparkled diamonds. She held it to her mouth and licked it. It tasted like the sweets that they had been given once, by that farang couple who had taken one of the boys away to live with them over the water. Once in her mouth, it was a quick step to gobbling the cord all up. Maengmoom was replete.

Next day, she was gratified to find her navel pulsing, and the cord waiting to emerge once again. Her ability to produce this cord was not something she could imagine sharing with anyone else. The idea that it might be confiscated and banished to some dreary cupboard, forever out of reach, and that she might be examined and contained was not to be borne. But then Maengmoom discovered a curious thing: in spite of its scintillating brilliance, she was the only person who could see the cord. This meant that she was free to experiment with it. At first, she would just throw it up in the air, to observe the way it looked as it flashed through the sky, finally coming to rest on the buildings and trees, like a glorious giant web. She would wind it back in, then devour it, as its production seemed to tax her energy.

Another day during game time, Maengmoom threw it at Pakpao while her back was turned. Pakpao seemed not to notice so, with as much caution as possible, Maengmoom circled her twice, tightening the cord as she moved. Pakpao looked over at her and smiled. This was such an unusual occurrence that Maengmoom left the cord where it was, to see whether this behaviour would continue. For the rest of the games session, with the shimmering cord draped around her body, Pakpao's treatment of Maengmoom was almost kindly, although this did not appear to extend to other children around her.

For the next few days Maengmoom experimented with throwing the cord in the direction of children or other house mothers whom she wished to influence. It was rather haphazard: sometimes the cord got tangled [around things or people that were in the way]; sometimes she was unable to tie it firmly before the recipient shook it off; and other times it completely missed its mark and wafted on the breeze. But the overall effect was positive; those whom the cord encircled would give Maengmoom their attention, and favour her above others.

She'd had a particularly satisfying time weaving the cord in and around her four closest playmates one day; they'd made her boss of the game and the cord had formed a sparkling web around them, binding them to her and to each other. They'd been playing Going To Farang Family. It was her game of choice. One girl would be the child going, one would be the director bowing and preening, another would be Pakpao shedding crocodile tears at the child's departure, and the other two would be the farang parents grabbing the child and exclaiming loudly, whilst throwing toys around. This had actually happened to a few special children. So strong was the web, and so intricate the pattern, that it almost seemed a shame to reel it in and eat it when the game was over. But the trembling in her limbs and the slight fuzziness in her head made her realise that she needed its nourishment. She didn't want the game to end, and now knew that it wouldn't. With every mouthful of this web came the certainty that the magic of a farang family would be hers.

The very next day, before sleep time, Maengmoom was squeezed into a dress instead of t-shirt and shorts. It was the kind of dress that the girls who were chosen to play at the gentlemen's houses wore. She had never been chosen and it had seemed quite a shame for, although those girls came back looking a bit hurt and strained, they also came back with sugary mouths and clutching stuffed kittens or dolls. The dress had puff sleeves and was made of soft white material, over a pink satin petticoat. She had never felt more special. Whatever was to come, she was ready. Her secret ability would safeguard her.
Not a pretty one. They choose a pity one. Pakpao enjoyed the humour of this. She repeated it, tittering. *Stupid farang! When they get you, they get trouble.*

Maengmoom looked up at Pakpao, at her brown teeth and at the way her mouth worked as she spat the words into Maengmoom's face.

When I wake up, I shall walk out of this place. I shall forget you utterly.

But the words were inside herself and she raised a shut face to the mother.

Sleep was a long time coming. When she did sleep, there were no dreams. It was as if a large white sheet had been wrapped around her, cocooning her from the garish pictures that were a usual feature of her afternoon rest. Plucked from her bed two hours later, in a drowsy fugue, she was taken to the bath house where her face was splashed, her hair tugged into a bow, and her dress pulled into order.

You're going to meet your farang mother, farang father. Farangs such ugly people. You will do well.

Pushed ahead of Pakpao, Maengmoom emerged from the bathing room and saw, at the end of the rows of beds, a *farang* man and woman staring at her. Her navel pulsed and the cord issued through the fabric of her dress. It was warm and comforting. She clasped it, raised her hands high in front of her face, and made a deep bow.

*Oh, what a darling. No need to bow to us. We're your parents.*

They smiled. A tear formed a small creek down the father's long face. The *farang* mother looked like she was holding her breath in case something came out too fast.

Maengmoom knew what to do. This is what the cord was for. She cocked her head, gave a slight smile, and lifted her arms out to the side, holding the cord in her fingers. Moving towards the parents, she bobbed up and down, creating a dance as she went. She circled them, placing the web around their waists. She drew back, then forward, weaving her way between the two whose smell was delicious to her nostrils. Round and round she went, her feet drumming rhythms on the floor, her extended arms rolling and flicking her fingers in alluring gestures. She wrapped the cord around herself too, entwining the three of them. The *farang* father lifted her up and the *farang* mother embraced them both.

Although exhausted by the dance, and by the volume of cord she had produced, she knew she would not eat this one. The web needed to be firmly in place at all times. The *farang* parents would always be connected to her. If this web broke, she would make another, and another, as many as necessary – each one thicker and stronger and more elaborate than the last. The parents would never be aware of its presence. They would be bound to her by her own making. The world was large and she was now flying away.

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**Rosemary Jackson** is a graduate of the Masters of Creative Writing programme at the University of Adelaide. She has worked as a teacher, an actor for a performing troupe in schools and now as a role-player for both corporate and medical education. Her story *‘Athina and the Sixty-nine Calorie Burn’* was published in *Breaking Beauty*, ed Lynette Washington, *Midnight Sun*, 2014.