

Before Reaching the Stars

‘Wat Wanlyāngkūn’



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Mother walked slowly away from the abbot's residence, past the sandy courtyard and the shade of the *pikun* tree, towards the rear of the central shrine. One hand carefully supported a water-bowl, while the other held a rattan basket used for carrying the things needed for merit-making. A horned owl moaned softly from a dark corner of the shrine's eaves. The sweet scent of frangipani blossoms drifted towards her with the breeze and the gentle waving of the flowering grass. Mother sank wearily down in front of the mortuary containing her dead son's body.¹ With its oblong shape it looked like a coffin, except that it was made of cement--and the smell of fresh cement still lingered in the air. There were other, identical mortuaries stretched out in a long row. The empty ones looked like dark caverns. And adjacent to the mortuaries little memorial stupas ringed the central shrine, whose dingy white walls were crumbling away in places from sheer age.

Mother carefully laid down a tray, on which she'd placed white porcelain cups filled with rice, *kāeng som phak krajiāp*,

¹ Hollow cement structures for the storing of bodies prior to cremation. When "occupied," their apertures are sealed with new cement.

fried salted fish, chiffon- and sticky layer-cakes.² The smell of the *kāeng som* wafting into her nostrils reminded her of him so much that the tears welled up in her eyes. Rōy had loved it ever since he was a little boy, especially with fried salted fish, and he'd eat up rice like no one else. The soft, fluffy, pink chiffon-cake looked so tempting to the touch, while the sticky layer-cakes had the red of blood. So Rōy used to tell her. Sobs formed a choking lump in her throat. She had never dreamed that her son's life would come to a bloody end as two bullets pierced his tender flesh. Rōy must have suffered, but her suffering was still worse. A pain not visible to the eye, but experienced in the heart, in the feeling, above all in the feeling of a mother. She didn't understand how some people could be so cruel as to devour the flesh and blood of their fellow men... Softly Mother muttered his name.... "Child, come and eat your food..."³ Then she pushed forward the engraved water-bowl, which still had a few grains of well-cooked rice stuck to it here and there, dipped her forefinger into the water, and murmured prayers.⁴ And, as she slowly closed her eyes, clear drops trickled from the corners down the wrinkles on her cheeks.

Before she'd rowed the boat away from the temple-jetty, the abbot had been kind enough to come and talk to her, and speak to her about her son. The words that still rang in her ears were: "Rōy was a good boy, dear lady, well-behaved, quiet, and serious. Who could have had the heart to do him harm?... These

² *Kāeng som phak krajiāp*--a simple dish made of fish, okra, hot spices and tamarind. The sticky layer-cakes are made of flour, coconut cream, sugar, and coloring, usually constructed in alternate red and pink layers, and steamed before serving.

³ It is a Thai custom to bring offerings to "feed" the deceased before cremation. Mother here is speaking to her dead son.

⁴ She follows the traditional ritual for making offerings to the dead.

days people have become so cruel..."

Mother had heard praise of this kind ever since Rōy was a little boy. And when she heard it repeated now, she couldn't help feeling proud and happy. When Rōy had grown up to be a young man and had gone off to study in Bangkok, he remained her own adorable son, unchanged. When she said that students didn't have to wear their hair long, he cut his short. It got to the point that she felt hesitant to scold him. If she wanted to give him some advice, she had to think it over very carefully before she brought it up: so much so that Rō, her youngest boy, used to tease her by saying that she had a saint for a son.

There was only one thing she couldn't stop him doing--when he broke the news to her that he probably wouldn't be able to finish college in four years because he had to devote part of his time to "activities." Mother later came to understand that these "activities" meant politics.

"Politics aren't what I'm really after. I'm using my time to study and learn about the problems of the poor, who are so much poorer than we, who don't eat three meals a day, and who have to do heavy work as manual laborers, hiring themselves out for low wages. When they demand fair pay, and appeal for help, how could you have me stand idly by, Mother? Or when the peasants demand justice, sometimes to the point of having to make demonstrations, I can't possibly rest comfortably through it all. I'm concerned about our poor, not about politics. But politics concerns itself with me. So we can't escape it..."

But no matter what reasons he gave, Mother loved him too devotedly to accept them. The very word "demonstration" pierced her to the quick. She couldn't bear to look at the photos of the young men and women gunned down on the streets during

October 1973.⁵ Worse than that, her thoughts would fly ahead in so many directions: if there was a mass demonstration, and someone threw even a single bomb, rows of people would be killed or wounded. She urged him to hurry up and finish his studies, hurry and get a job and settle down like his older brothers and sisters, so she could stop worrying about him....Rōy couldn't explain and get his mother to accept his reasons; so he'd just keep silent, listening quietly to her advice. But as the days passed, she had to recognize with a sigh that he was not following that advice. After that, Rōy gradually drew away from his mother. Only once in a long while would he come back to visit his riverside home, even though it was really not that far from Bangkok. The one thing that deeply pleased his mother, though, was that Rōy finally graduated, even though he took longer than usual to complete his studies.

She'd written to congratulate him. Yet in the letter she'd used the words "obstinate child." For, no matter what, she remained just as concerned as ever, and urged him to hurry up and find a job.

"It won't be many years now before Rō finishes high-school, and we'd like him to continue his schooling in Bangkok. If you can get a job with a salary befitting your education, it'll mean you'll have got settled, and won't have to go on being a burden to your uncle. Your little brother can depend on you from then on, and I won't have to worry any more. Now that you've graduated, you won't get involved with those demonstrations any more, will you? It was all well and good while you were still a student. I'm sure someone like you, Rōy, won't take more than a few years to get settled. It'll be much better if you set your mind to establishing

⁵ A reference to the violent repression attempted against the mass demonstrations in Bangkok in early October 1973, which ultimately led to the fall of the Thanōm-Praphāt dictatorship on October 14.

yourself first. I've never been disappointed in your elder brothers and sisters. They've all done well, every one of them. Just two weeks ago, in fact, your elder brother Rōng bought me a radio-tape recorder set, boasting that he got it in Japan. I think his company must have sent him there--his boss must like him a lot. I feel very happy for him. And it looks like your little brother's crazy about this present. Rō listens to it day and night, and pays no attention to his books, so I've had to put my foot down."

Mother tied the boat to the bridge and scooped up some water to rub her face clean of the dirt and dust of her grief. The *sanun*-tree by the water's edge was beginning to change its leaves to welcome the cool season. Little Rō, wearing nothing but a pair of khaki shorts, was lying prone on the floorboards reading a newspaper. By his side lay the brand new radio-tape recorder set, playing a song.

"Any news today?" Mother asked, picking up the betel-tray from inside the rattan offering-basket.

"They sat Elder Brother Rōy's case is still a mystery. They have to interview the people close to the case, but so far they haven't been able to track them down. And the bullets taken from his body aren't any use in solving the riddle. Another paper makes it out to be an affair with some woman. It also says he was an extremist and a troublemaker. So I didn't buy that one. I was afraid you'd be upset."

She was struck dumb. She sighed and shook her head without a word.

A moment later she told her youngest son to get the cassette, murmuring very softly "I'd like to hear it one more time. I miss him so much."

She still remembered very well that after she'd sent the letter congratulating Rōy on his graduation and urging him to hurry up and settle down, she'd heard nothing more from him. He seemed

to have vanished as silently as a needle dropped into the sea, until one day he sent her two cassette tapes through the mail. The one with a dove on the outside was simply filled with songs; the other contained a recorded message for her from Rōy.

"Dear respected Mother, I received your letter a long time ago. The reason I've been so long in answering isn't because I don't care about the family, but because I've been very busy with my work. Then, when I heard that Elder Brother Rōng had bought you a radio-tape recorder, I waited till I had enough money to spare to buy a cassette. The other tape has songs on it that I want Rō to hear....

"I understand your love and concern, and I've been turning over in my mind for a long time how I could best express myself to you, so that we can really understand each other. Right now, I'm a reporter for a little newspaper. The salary isn't very high, but I'm satisfied, because the paper takes its stand on the truth. It speaks for the poor and attacks those who take advantage of the great majority and sell out the country and the people. The truth is, I've been at this job since before I graduated. I didn't dare tell you then. I was afraid you'd be upset. I hope you aren't angry with me, Mother! If I'd waited till graduation to join the movement for justice, I'd have proved to be the kind who thinks first of himself--and it would have been too late. So I joined in before I finished school. It was a golden opportunity for someone who believes that one is born into this world to do some good. Yes, there's danger for sure, especially for investigative reporters. I've seen poor, pitiful peasants murdered, one after the other, like fallen leaves. I've seen women workers bravely resisting the clique of savages. Sometimes they've been cruelly mowed down. If you'd met them, if you'd seen them, if you'd understood them, you wouldn't be able to stand it either, Mother....

"Your love for your child may be so great that it prevents

you from seeing things as they truly are. You're afraid that your child will get hurt, get wounded by a fragment of an incendiary bomb, or be gunned down. I feel a deep warmth in my heart whenever I think of your loving concern. Yet I'd like to pass on to you something a friend of mine who works here with me once said. He said that death is a common thing and comes to everyone without fail. But before we die, we have three choices as to how to spend our lives. The first is just to drift along worthlessly, seeking only our own safety, and in the end dying in oblivion. The second way is to seek meaning in life, struggling against the oppression of the many by the few, working with a heart brimful of good intentions for our fellow-men, not as a sacrifice but as a duty. The last way is to live by seizing everything in sight for ourselves, to live without conscience, wallowing in selfish pleasures over the blood and tears of others, before dying to the sound of curses. Mother, which road would you want your son to take?....

“So it's no wonder that sometimes we have to risk danger. Right now I'm investigating a case of some Thais who are conniving with the Americans to swindle our people out of a huge quantity of the nation's priceless resources, destroying what ought to be for the people's benefit. The accomplices of the *farang* are all bigshots with a lot of political and bureaucratic influence. The profits they're making in this case are so enormous that we guess that any attempt to expose them will certainly be blocked. A modest step would be to shut down the markets to prevent the public reading the newspapers. The decisive step, though, could be shedding blood. Right now, we're getting death threats on the telephone. But I won't choose money or bullets, because I have my own right choice already. If such persecution develops, Mother, don't be frightened; be proud that your son hasn't lived in vain....

“Please tell Rō that the songs I've sent are songs with real substance and value, because they tell about the vast numbers of

people who live in darkness and utter despair. I'm sure Rō will like the first song. The words are a kind of vow by someone who is ready to sacrifice even his life to help win peace and happiness for the mass of his fellowmen....

*We ask to be corpses turn by turn,
piled on top of one another like a staircase,
high enough to reach the sky,
bringing the stars down to the earth.
If we make this world beautiful, and
make the people in it happy and equal,
this world will be a star...*

“Mother, in your life you've found some happiness. You've had enough over to give food to the monks every morning, while so many others have nothing, not even something to eat. They drown in the swelling flood of their debts. If you were ever really to experience all these things, I know that someone with your sense of justice wouldn't be able to stand for it, and you'd see the need to join the struggle.

“I tried to communicate my thinking to the girl I used to love. I tried to get her to understand my work. But she left me. I'm sorry about it, of course, but it was unavoidable. We always went separate ways. She had no love to give to anyone else, not even to the pitiful and the starving. She saw only herself and me. She was trying to enter a framework from which I was escaping. I've already lost one person that I loved. Don't let me lose you too, Mother....”

The days passed smoothly by like the flow of water in a stream. Every evening, when her youngest son sprang up out of the outboard riverboat, she would poke out her head and ask right away whether there was any word of Rōy. From this daily routine, she came to experience the sale of lies on the pages of news-

papers. The more she insisted that Rō̄ buy every newspaper that had any news of Rō̄y, the more she was able to make comparisons, beginning with the investigating of Rō̄y's background. There were two papers which tried to show that Rō̄y was a despicable character, with a deep inferiority complex. They also included an interview with a police officer to the effect that her son's activities showed he was involved with the "ideology of the other side." On the other hand, there was almost no interest in his unsolved murder--to the point that the paper which had so often smeared Rō̄y finally went so far as to say that his exposure of the giant mining swindle had sabotaged the national economy, made foreign countries afraid to invest their capital, increased unemployment, and led to chaos, following the blueprint of the "ideology of the other side."

Mother put the ricebowl and the metal cooking-pot away in the rattan basket. She knelt respectfully before the abbot and then took her leave. She cast a glance at yesterday's newspaper lying against the veranda of the abbot's residence. The moment she could distinguish the color of the ink, she shuddered with disgust.⁶ The abbot spoke up:

"Are you in a hurry to go and feed your boy?" She answered softly in the affirmative, and so he continued:

"When he was a boy your son seemed such a good lad. It's only now I realize how mistaken I was. Who'd have thought that as he got older he'd turn into one of those extremists who are destroying the country. Too bad! Must have gone around with some fine friends, I suppose...." the abbot went on sarcastically. "That's why these extremists don't live long. Keep a close eye on

⁶Thai dailies typically print their front pages with a particular brightly-colored ink, allowing easy identification from a distance.

little Rō; watch out or he'll follow in his elder brother's footsteps. Ah, the young people these days, they're no good at all...." and he shook his head.

Mother's face went burning red, her heart beat violently, and huge beads of sweat suddenly bathed her forehead. She quickly took her leave, unwilling to take any time to dip up water for the memorial libations. However, she didn't want to blame the abbot either.

Late that morning, if anyone had passed behind the central shrine, they'd have seen Mother sitting with her head slumped over her arms and knees. Blood dripped from one wrist. The other hand tightly gripped her betel-paring knife. Traces of blood still stained the blade. In the engraved water-bowl there was not a drop of water for dabbing--just some blood in a pool at the bottom.

The crumpled body breathed faintly. It paid no attention at all to the emaciated dog which had followed her out from under the abbot's residence and was busy eating up the rice in the little tray in front of her.