

In the Mirror

‘Kōn Krailāt’



Chiwin¹ sits quietly in a dark corner, waiting for his moment to come. . . .

Tonight the place is packed, since it's the beginning of the month and people still have enough cash to go out and enjoy themselves. Chiwin lights up a cigarette and inhales listlessly. It's very strange, but this evening he feels lonely, moody, not himself. He's got a lot of complicated problems on his mind, among them a letter from his mother: "*Win, my dear son, your father isn't very well. The riceplanting season's already here, but there's no one at home. How are things going for you in Bangkok? Have you found a job yet or not? We haven't heard from you at all. . . .*" Parts of the letters Mother wrote usually went like this. In fact, of course, she hadn't written them at all. She was illiterate, so she must have asked someone in the neighborhood to write them for her.

Actually, it's only now that Chiwin takes cognizance of how long it's been since he left home. Days turned into years before he was aware of it. In this city, where he now lives, night and day are unlike night and day anywhere else. . . They rush by so rapidly that he doesn't have time to think about things as they happen. . . .

¹The name Chiwin, hardly chosen at random, also means "life."

If he does think about them, it's only cursorily, for a moment or so. . . . like a brief gust of wind which merely rustles the leaves and then vanishes without a trace. . . .

His mother's letter brings to his mind images of various people, but heaped up on one another in such confusion that he feels dizzy and disoriented. And Chiwin inhales cigarette smoke, puff after puff, one after the other. . .

It's so dark in that corner that people can't see each other's faces. The customers sitting at the tables loom up only as obscure silhouettes. The waitresses move back and forth, some holding flashlights to guide new arrivals in search of empty tables. On the tiny stage a naked girl is dancing to the pounding rhythm of a song. Her name is Latdā. She has two children, plus a do-nothing husband drunk day in day out. So she's had to come and work as a go-go girl, stripping her body for people to have a look. She'd told him all about it one day, not long after they'd got to know each another... The Tale of Latdā...cracked in pieces like the lives of all the women in this place, full of knots and problems. If one had a good and happy life, who would ever want to bare every inch of one's body for any Tom, Dick, or Harry to stare at? Chiwin reflects, like someone who thinks he understands pretty well how the people working here tick.

The last strains of the song die away. Latdā steps down from the stage. There's some halfhearted clapping from a few of the customers, none of whom know why they clap. Utter silence for a second, as though the spectators sense that the moment they've been waiting for has finally arrived. The lights on the stage turn pale pink. A slow, soft melody lāa-laa-lāa-laa-laa-lāa strikes up . . . Another girl, dressed in black underwear, takes her turn on the stage. She makes her appearance slowly and silently.

And now they're playing Chiwin's musical cue. He stubs

out his cigarette and pushes himself to his feet. He steps out of the dark corner into the pink glow, with the lithe movements of a young man of twenty-four. Some of the male spectators who remember him stare at him now, half in scorn, half wanting to do it themselves.

"You know, it's not easy at all," Chiwin had once told one of those who spoke to him in this tone. "It's only when you're on stage that you realize it's really no piece of cake."

No one has much of an idea about the music that's now being played, and it seems as if no one has the slightest interest in finding out. Most of the spectators simply know that when it's played it's time for the house's "special program" to begin. The words, accompanied by rhythmic sighs, most likely describe the mood of a young woman on a lonely night. The girl on the stage stretches out on her back and begins to writhe and quiver as though her flesh were burning with desire. Then slowly she removes the two little bits of clothing from her body.

Her name is Wanphen. . . .

Chiwin has now stepped up onto the stage. The play of spotlights moves back and forth between purple, blue, and red. Wanphen's act is so well done that it makes some of the young men close by the stage almost forget to breathe. Chiwin slowly unbuttons his shirt, then shakes his head two or three times. His eyes are getting used to the lights, which keep changing color like a magic-show.

A moment later and Chiwin has nothing left to himself but his bared body. It's a handsome, well-proportioned body, full of young flesh and blood. He throws his clothes in a heap in one corner. Everything takes place with the utmost slowness, as if in this piece of life time has ceased to exist. At this moment no one can think of anything else--even if country should meanwhile collapse in ruins.

Chiwin stretches his body out alongside Wanphen and embraces her, while caressing her naked flesh with his hands. He kisses her once, and she kisses him in turn, then turns her face away and snuggles it into the hollow of his neck.

"How many times have I told you, Elder Brother Win!" he hears her whisper, "Please don't smoke before doing the show with me. It smells horrible. I can't stand the stink, and I lose the mood . . ."

"I'm sorry," he whispers back, as he rolls his body back and forth over hers. "Something's been bothering me. I've been in a bad mood, so I forgot . . ."

How many times now had he partnered this woman! . . . Chiwin thinks about the man with the unremarkable face who comes to wait for her every night when the bar closes. He can't imagine what the man's real feelings are. He comes to wait here in silence, and he goes home in silence. He must feel something. How could one man not understand another? But the two of us don't even know each other. And we both suffer. At least the man had once stared at Chiwin with a strange, cold gleam in his eye.

"He's my husband," Wanphen had once explained, "a real husband, you know; we're properly registered and all."

"How can he stand having you come here and do this kind of show with me?" He couldn't put the gleam in the man's eye out of his mind.

"What can you do?" she'd answered seriously. "It's a job. It's a way to make a living. If you live with a woman like me, you have to be able to take it."

She's right. That's what it is, a job. O.K. At least it's a job for me too right now. Chiwin has the feeling that he won't be able to perform well tonight. He doesn't feel prepared at all. The young man rolls over and down. Wanphen knows the signs very well, so she presses her body tightly to him. Deploying all her skills,

using everything she has, she begins, with intense concentration, to arouse his desire. The play of the lights halts for a moment at pink, bathing the bodies of the couple and bringing out their beauty.

Chiwin stretches out full length and closes his eyes. The whole world darkens before his vision. The airconditioning makes the air cold and moist, but he feels the sweat beginning to ooze from some of his pores. His ears catch the soft music . . . when the song comes to an end, it starts up again, in an endless, indolent cycle, making his thoughts drift far away, to the past, to broad ricefields and to days and nights long gone.

. . . . By now the rains must have started back home Sometimes one could see the grey-white rain pouring down, moving in over the ricefields from the horizon, blurring everything in sight. The nights would be chilly and damp, and filled with the loud croaking of big and little frogs. And mornings, if the sun shone at all, its beams would be soft and tender, soon to vanish as the thick rainclouds piled up once more. In the rainy season, the earth would be turned over once again with the plough. And it wouldn't be long before the rice-plants came up green, ripening later to a brilliant yellow throughout the paddies. But this isn't his work any more. He abandoned it a long time ago. It's hard work, backbreakingly hard. Worse still, the harder you work, the poorer you get. He'd been so utterly, indescribably tired of that way of life that he'd struggled to get a better education, and with every ounce of will turned his face and headed towards Bangkok to find a new life. . . .

. . . . And my little brother Wang. . . . I wonder if he's out of the monkhood yet? Mother doesn't mention him in her letter. He's been in since last Lent.² Does he really want to study in the

²The Buddhist "Lent," which runs from mid-July to mid-October, is a time designated for religious retreat and for the ordination of new monks.

temple to become a Mahā?³ Doesn't he know these days there's no road to Nirvana any more? And what about my little sister Wān? She must be buckling down to looking after the kids she produces year in year out, giving her almost no breathing-space for anything else. She got married to a boy from another subdistrict before she was even eighteen. Everyone's left the family home. Only Father and Mother still remain, and how much can they do on their own? And now Father's sick too. . .

Last night he'd had a terrible dream. It seemed that Father was in it somehow, but he couldn't arrange the images of the dream properly in place. All he knew was that it was so horrible that when he woke up his heart was pounding with fear. And then he remembered that it was a long time since he'd dreamed at all. Every night he fell into a deep sleep, as though his body'd been picked up and laid casually down on the bed, feeling nothing, till a new day dawned and the time came for him to get up once again. And when the next night fell, he'd be picked up and laid down once again in the same old place. Dreams are the travels of one's soul. It's no good if one lives without dreams. It shows that there's no soul left inside. So it's a good thing he dreamed last night, even if the dream was a nightmare . . .

Chiwin feels Wanphen's body arching up and pressing tightly to him almost all over. As she rains kisses over his chest and in the hollow of his neck, she whispers . . .

"What's the matter with you tonight huh?"

"I told you, I'm really feeling down . . ." Chiwin embraces her in turn, mechanically, "I keep thinking about my father. . . ."

"You crazy? This is no time to think about your father. . . ."

³ Mahā is a title awarded to any monk who has passed at least the lowest of the seven grades of the ecclesiastical examination-system for the study of Pali texts.

If you go on like this, how can we do the show? In no time at all, the crowd'll be booing us!"

Chiwin shakes his head once. Some sort of realization makes him push his body up from hers on outstretched arms. If only this night were over! The spectators are dead quiet, each pair of eyes glued to the stage. He puts everything out of his mind, draws Wanphen's body onto his, and begins to go through all the acts he usually performs on this stage.

Many of the people up front move closer and closer. Some of them even poke their faces in, right close up--as though this were the single most extraordinary thing in life, something they'd never seen from the day they were born. Some of the customers who have girls sitting with them begin to grope them obscenely. His gaze meets their eyes and in a flash he senses in that some things men may not understand other men at all. In their eyes glitter a thousand and one things--pleasure and desire. Some of the men pretend to be unaffected by the scene, though in fact their souls are seething through every vein.

"What have I become?" Chiwin asks himself. He feels like a male animal in the rutting season, brutishly copulating with a female animal, right before the eyes of a group of studmasters. The more powerfully he performs, and the more varied the couplings, the more they're satisfied.

He glances down at Wanphen for a moment. He is now fully astride her body. She is sighing and groaning, twisting and writhing her body as if she's being aroused to the limit, even though actually she experiences nothing from what she's doing. This is the first time that Chiwin understands her life clearly, and he feels a heart-rending pity for her. He wants to ask her just one question: how much does she suffer from living this way? Having intercourse with a man she doesn't love in front of a crowd. Pretending to experience so much pleasure to arouse all these people . . . in

exchange for no more than a hundred baht a night. Do her children back home know what's going on? Isn't there a night when she goes back home, lies down and cries? After all, she still has feelings, doesn't she?

Chiwin lifts his head and stares once again at the audience, as if searching for even one person with some understanding of the things that go on in the stories of the people working here. But he sees nothing but faces burning more hotly than ever with satisfaction and excitement. In fact, it looks like some of them have even reached a climax.

Chiwin begins to see the truth . . .

All of us here are simply victims . . . Latda . . . Wanphen . . . me . . . Even those people sitting there watching with such satisfied expressions. All of them feel the pressure of the society outside. So they come here for emotional compensation, to build up a superiority complex. They come to eat and drink. They come to sit and watch others expose their genitals and perform every variety of sexual intercourse. This allows them to feel contempt for people they can then regard as lower than themselves. Man has a deep abiding instinct to shove his way up over his fellow men. The truth is that we're all animals of the city, who live lives of pain and suffering in the midst of a demented society. The only difference between us is that those who have greater advantages stand on top of those who have less, and so on down the line.

"Give it to her! All the way, kid...!" comes a roaring cheer from a table to the left, mixed with delighted laughter from a group of friends. Wanphen clutches him still more tightly to her body. I wonder what she's thinking about now. Chiwin stares at her, but can't see her clear. In her eyes there's an expression of entreaty. He grits his teeth, swallows his saliva down his dry throat, and gasps for breath. The sweat oozes from his forehead, back, and shoulders. A stinging drop trickles down into one eye, blurring

his vision. Feeling a numb rage, Chiwin is almost at the point of jumping up and kicking out in the direction of those voices. But in fact he doesn't dare do anything, not even respond with words.

Wanphen's hands, still clasped around his back, give him a stealthy pinch. "Take it easy, Elder Brother Win," her voice is barely audible, "Don't listen to those crazy people. I'm not a cow or a water-buffalo, you know. . . ."

So that's it! He's turned Wanphen herself into a victim of his own oppression. He comes to himself at the nip of her nails and the sound of her voice. Suddenly the tears well up in his eyes, mixed with drops of sweat. He pushes his body up, leaning on his outstretched arms, and stares Wanphen full in the eyes. When he bends over and gives her a kiss, she's surprised by a touch she's never felt from him before. Just then the song ends and the stage-lights dim to darkness.

Chiwin goes into the bathroom, his shirt still unbuttoned. He turns on the tap, washes his hands, and scoops up some water to rub in the hollow of his neck. As he lifts his head, he encounters his own face reflected in the little mirror above the basin.

Indeed man encounters his real self when he stands before a mirror . . .

In the bare, empty bathroom the faint sound of music filters in. He leans on his hands, gripping the basin's edge, and stares at that face for a long time, in silent questioning.

He thinks back to his mother's letter. "*How are things going for you in Bangkok? Have you found a job yet?*" How can he possibly tell his mother about the kind of work that he has found? She would faint dead away. And he himself can't really say why he's struggled so hard to make a living this way. The easy answer is probably because he was hungry and had reached a dead end. When he'd set off for Bangkok, carrying his teacher's

certificate with him, who could have known that for months he'd be clutching at straws, trying to compete with tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, of others, taking test after test? And then go home, waiting to learn the results of his applications, place after place, day after day. At first his hopes had still been bright and clear. But, as time passed, they'd faded, like a candle that melts itself completely away, dimming down to his last baht. Then a friend of his, who worked as a bartender in a go-go club, had invited him along to try this line of work.

"Don't worry . . . at first you feel a bit shy . . . But you get used to it after a while... A good-looking guy with a nice build like yours is just what these people are looking for. You get a hundred a night, two or three thousand a month. It's far better than being a teacher. You talk yourself blue in the face for nothing but a few pennies a month." His friend had patted him on the shoulder and said, "Okay? Give it a go, to tide you over while you wait to hear about your job applications. You want to starve? You don't have to worry about getting picked up. The police don't make any trouble, the people there have got connections high up."

Is this the true image of a man who's studied to become a teacher? Chiwin stares at his reflection with a feeling of nausea. His hair's a mess, his eyes dry and lifeless, with a timid, evasive look. The skin on his face and lips is parched and wan with strain. Not a shred of dignity left, though he's still young and strong. How did a man with clear, firm hopes and goals end up as someone who doesn't have the courage to confront even his own face?

Suddenly he feels a terrible churning deep in his abdomen. It surges up through his insides to his throat. Chiwin clings tightly to the wash-basin, hiccoughs once, and then, before being conscious of it, doubles over, arches his neck, and vomits in a torrent. All the different foods he ate earlier in the evening, accumulated in

his belly, spout out in streams, splattering the wash-basin. Once, twice, three times. Sounds of retching follow quickly, one after the other. Each time, he spits out what he'd swallowed earlier, till he's gasping with exhaustion. Snot and tears join together in a dirty stream. Chiwin lifts one forearm to wipe his mouth, and smells the sour stink pervading everything.

The reflection in the mirror is now a murky blur, because of the tears which well up and fill the sockets of his eyes. He feels so dizzy that he almost can not stay on his feet. Chiwin swallows his viscous saliva and hiccoughs once again. This time what he vomits up is a thick, clear liquid. It spouts out so violently that it seems to carry with it his liver, kidneys, and intestines.