

## *The Sweetest Contest*

It was a late evening.

The three children had finished their dinner, though there still were chores to be done in the kitchen. Their father Ko Nyunt Maung had not come back yet, and Khin Lay was waiting for him.

Chicken curry was cooking on the stove. The hen had belonged to her eldest son Ko Ko. It had not been looking too well, so now it was in the cooking pot. Its meat being rather hard, it had to be cooked slowly on a coal stove.

The eldest Ko Ko did not want to kill his own fowl. The youngest son Cho Lay was too small. The daughter Latt Latt turned pale whenever she saw blood. So Khin Lay, who could not afford to discard this bird with the price of chickens skyrocketing, took on the task of inexpertly cutting its throat. Having added some water to the curry and some coal to the stove, Khin Lay climbed the three steps from the kitchen to the main house. She switched off the light. She always took care never to leave the light on unnecessarily. As two feet of neon tube shone in the living room, Ko Ko bent over his lessons, while the two young ones sprawled on the floor, arguing over a game of checkers.

Exhausted, Khin Lay seated herself in a chair. Then she began writing out the daily expenses in a little book.

Rice	k 105/-
Gunnysack	k 6/-
Trishaw fare	k 30/-
Total	k141/-

The previous gunnysack was old and battered, full of patches, so she could not avoid buying a new one. Kitchen expenses were kyat thirty-two, the next day inclusive. And oil costs kyat forty a viss. Though one viss usually lasted ten days she had better scrimp to make it last two weeks. Pocket money for the children, bus fare for Ko Ko, kyat thirty for the washerwoman. Her monthly pay had been all spent since the middle of the month, and now she was dipping into advance money.

With the school reopening, she felt for her washerwoman, a mother of five school children.

Then there were the usual charities and donations, and odds and ends needed in the kitchen. All in all, it added to two hundred and sixty five kyat and fifty-five pyas.

Khin Lay went into the bedroom and looked in the box where she kept her money. She checked and found kyat twenty-five in difference. Flustered, she searched between her clothes, came out and checked her list again and again. How could this be? She had so little to begin with... She squinted at the list. The light was dim and she could not see clearly.

"Latt Latt, you're so noisy. Mother, why don't you tell them to quiet down? I can't get anything into my head," Ko Ko muttered loudly.

Only then did Khin Lay raise her head and scold half-heartedly.

"Did any of you children find a kyat twenty-five note?"

No one answered her question.

Then suddenly the light went out.

"Oh no!" all of them burst out. As they looked up, the light came back on. They let out a sigh in unison.

"Cho Lay, give up! You've lost."

"No, no, it's a draw."

A frown on her brow, Khin Lay was still deep in thoughts, not noticing Ko Ko standing beside her.

“Here mother, the meter receipt.”

She took the slip of paper but did not see what it was all about. Ko Ko went back to his reading“

I don’t think I had written down this one.”

There was no reply from Ko Ko. Having gone to the city Power Coop and paid the bill, his duties were done, he thought.

Well, that’s what it was. She should have remembered giving money to Ko Ko, asking him to pay the bill on his way to his class and keeping what was left for his weekly pocket money and bus fare. Khin Lay sighed with relief as she wrote on in her notebook.

In her youth, she had been a bright girl. It was much different now. It had been quite some time that she had been forgetting like this. She felt deeply disturbed and inferior. It was just yesterday that she and Ko Nyunt Maung had gone together to visit a relative. They seldom went out together but yesterday they took off to see Ko Nyunt Maung’s aunt whose husband had died just recently.

Ko Nyunt Maung was an odd one.

A fat fair woman was smiling at Khin Lay.

He said,” Khin Lay, look who’s there!” Why couldn’t he have said, “ Here’s Ma Ma San,” right way? This was no time for puzzles or quizzes.

Khin Lay thought she had seen those eyes and that smile before, but could not place her. The lady’s smile vanished. She could see instantly that Khin Lay did not recognize her. Only then did her husband give her a clue.

All right now: “Oh Ma Ma San, you’ve become prettier and fairer. I didn’t even recognize you at first!”

But Khin Lay’s attempts at appealing her did not bring back Ma Ma San’s smile.

On the way back, they had quarreled.

“Didn’t I tell you that they had gotten a raise and been transferred there?”

“We haven’t seen them for ten years. How could I know that I’d see her here?”

“Yes, yes, I should have snooped and then reported to you.”

Khin Lay was upset that she hadn’t recognized their immediate superior officer’s wife.

What was happening to her? Why was she so dim?

“It’s only eight o’clock. Let’s have another game sister”

“Enough. I’m sleepy. Must get up early.”

Khin Lay gazed unseeingly at Latt Latt who walked past her, stifling a yawn.

“I can smell burning.”

Ko Ko’s voice did not move Khin Lay.

“Mother, I think it’s the chicken curry.”

Oh! Khin Lay jumped, ran into the kitchen. Sure enough, the bottom of the pot was jet black.

She saved what she could, and transferred the chicken into another pot. Somehow she will have to try to make it edible tomorrow morning, adding some spices.

She poured water into the blackened pot and left it in the sink.

Khin Lay felt sad. Was it fatigue or was it the chicken curry? These days she was sensitive about almost everything.

She came back into the living room. Ko Ko had already gone to his room. Only Cho Lay was still on the floor, laughing heartily while reading a cartoon strip. She sat down beside the child.

Thunder clapped, lightning flashed. She hoped that rain would cool her anguished thoughts. But right away she remembered that the gutter\_needed repairing and the several leaks in the roof. That meant money, money and money. Cho Lay laughed

again. What was there to laugh about? For a child life is so free of care. Khin Lay wished she were a child again.

“Aren’t you sleepy yet, son?”

“No, I’m staying up to keep your company, mother.”

“Your father’ll be late, son.”

Cho Lay might have wanted to go on reading comics or he may have really meant to keep his mother company; Khin Lay could not be sure. Whatever his reason for staying up, the child’s words soothed Khin Lay’s sadness.

The other day she had played three games with Latt Latt and lost. Though she had been good at these games when she was a young girl, she now lost every time she played.

It was the same when she tried it with Ko Ko.

Ko Nyunt Maung had mocked her. Has she become infantile? So she challenged her husband who never played checkers. After much preparation and practicing five games, she was sure she would win. Even then she had lost.

What was happening to her sharp mind?

Gazing at Cho Lay, she had an idea.

“Son, let’s have a game, since you’re keeping me company.”

For an instant Cho Lay seemed to want to refuse. Then he laid his book aside and sat up.

“When I was young, I was good at checkers. I always won. Now I’m always losing. I think I’m getting slow. Well, let’s see. But son, please do me a favor. Let me have the white pieces. The black ones bring me bad luck.”

Wishing nothing as much as winning against her ten-year old, she took advantage of the privilege of the first move too. And still the child won. She watched in dismay while he rearranged the pieces.

“Shall we play another game, mother?”

“Okay, let’s keep going.” Her voice was sharp. Cho Lay smiled forgivingly. His cheeks dimpled. Khin Lay felt a little ashamed.

“Are you going to move that piece, mom?”

“Oh, no, sorry son, not that one.”

If she did she would definitely give Cho Lay the chance to kill her two games in a row.

“I actually meant to move this one.”

“Then my chance to get the king is open, mom. Good.”

“Ah, no. Let me think. Just a minute please.”

She withdrew her hand. She wavered for a couple of minutes.

At last she could make the right moves. She even managed to gain two kings.

Cho Lay only had one and even that was cornered. Khin Lay first blocked and then killed it. So she won.

After many frantic false moves, altering them again and again, she did win nonetheless.

She won again in the third game, even if just barely.

She laid spread on the floor like Cho Lay did before, laughing happily.

“I’m not so dim yet. that I couldn’t beat a fourth grader. Ha! Ha!”

Cho Lay was laughing too. He looked as happy as his mother.

“Shall I make you a coffee, mother?”

“No, darling thanks. Oh, yes, please do, darling.”

Khin Lay was pleased and laid there, smiling.

Hearing footsteps, she looked up and saw Ko Ko putting his books into his bag.

“Son, I just beat Cho Lay in two games, you know.” She laughed.

“Then you’re sharp, mother.”

“Don’t make fun of me. I have been so down lately because I feel myself to be so slow.”

“Actually, mother, none of us ever manage to beat Cho Lay.”

Khin Lay frowned as she thought about what Ko Ko just said. It did not take long. Her heart leapt with joy.

No one could beat Cho Lay.

Well, she was not quite brain-dead yet.

As she watched her plump little son walking towards her, carefully balancing the little coffee mug in his hands, she smiled affectionately.

She could not find words to express the sense of peace and pleasure as she kissed the dimpled cheeks of her son Cho Lay.

Dr. Khin Lay Nyo (Mya Hnaung Nyo)  
Kant Kaw Myaing Magazine  
May 1988

***The Sunflower Made Me Do It.***

Sitting on an easy chair, Khin Khin could only have dozed off for a few minutes. Neither the coarse fabric of the chair, nor the worn flannel of her jacket and her longyi could prevent the attack of the mosquitoes that always woke her up.

How could she sleep well?

As the cool air seeped through the cracks in the wooden walls, she shivered, her blood almost freezing. Curled and coiled as she was in this uncomfortable position, the cause of her suffering was her resentment against Maung's unfairness.

A sting on the right cheek made her slap it and then she was wide-awake. The quiet of the night was disturbed by a rattle of a snorer. She bit her lip as she eyed the bedroom. She tried to stretch her legs that felt heavy and numb. They were ice cold. Bending forward, she massaged her limbs.

The sound of the snores won over the buzz of the mosquitoes, making her angrier still. As the numbness subsided, the itching became unbearable.

They had quarreled earlier in the night. What made them fight was not so important.

Both had felt aggrieved.

The rhythmic sound of the snores was piercing in her ears. Khin Khin wrapped herself more closely and folded her arms, all the while rubbing and wiggling her legs to warm them.

Maung knew for sure that, had she known he would be home ahead of schedule, she would have come back from work early to wait for him. In fact, he wasn't supposed to be back for quite a while.. Whenever he traveled to Shan county, the trip lasted at least ten days. Sometimes, when communications were difficult or business matters lagged, it was even longer.

This time it had only been five days since he had left. So it was not her fault that she was not at home that evening. Maung was making a fuss over nothing. She really resented this.

Khin Khin had returned home late this evening. The cold sharp wind had made her shiver in her little sweater, which could not give her much warmth. She wanted to be inside, and walked briskly. She knew every inch of the way.

Even the kids who used to play on the street were indoors. A sad tune floated in the air. Rather sentimental, she thought. From another house came the sound of children saying their prayers and Khin Khin thought of their two boys, living with her parents-in-laws in the highlands.

Though the houses were crowded, their block was neat and tidy. The reddish clay of the lane and the dim light came together beautifully in the winter night. As she walked toward her house she could see the faint light through the cracks in the walls of the downstairs flat, occupied by the owners. The upstairs was in total darkness.

As she pushed open the bamboo-matted door, the dog barked.

"She's back."

It was the old woman's voice.

"Wonder why she's late," worried the old man.

"I was seeing a friend," she answered.

The old woman opened the door of her apartment.

Behind the frail woman, someone was standing.

Khin was shocked at the unexpected sight of her husband, especially seeing at his angry and confused face, the deep frown making him look old.

“Maung, why have you come back? Didn’t you go to Lashio? Did the car break down?”

Worried, Khin asked a flurry of questions,  
But he just faced her with an irate look.

“He’s been here since four o’clock. He’s brought some fried noodles, too. You better warm them up and get him fed,” the old woman was saying.

Maung strode past and climbed the stairs. Khin had wondered when Maung had forgotten his bags. But she really did not expect him in so little time. Defending herself to herself, she hurried after him.

Until then she had been feeling sorry that Maung had been kept waiting.  
“Just because I haven’t returned, must you go about parading this late?”

His harsh insulting words hurt Khin Khin.

While waiting for the bus she had met a friend, Ah Win, who pulled her aside, talking first about herself, then asking after Maung and the children. They had chatted about the old days. She had had to cut short their conversation saying it was getting dark. As she explained, surely that was the least social duty and obligation required. At the top of the stairs, they both stopped. The door had to be unlocked. Once they were inside, surely the warmth of the room would soothe their bitter feelings.

“Maung, you’re so forgetful. You should not have forgotten your keys,” she cajoled.

She fumbled in her bag and heard Maung’s impatient tick. Well, if she herself longed to rest at home after a hard day’s work, he who was travel-weary would feel all the more so. She tried to reason patiently.

“There’s hot water in the flask, dear. Wash your face. I’ll warm the noodles.”

Maung seemed not to hear her, and walked right in.

There were sounds of his travel bag opening and closing. After a moment he came out with a towel on his shoulder and stomped off down the stairs.

Khin had no time to change. She was busy warming the noodles and laying the table. She wondered how he could be taking a bath in this bone-chilling cold as she heard the sounds of water splashing against the wall downstairs.

The draught of icy wind made her shiver and Khin ran to shut the door. The warmth inside the room, as they first came in was all gone.

Maung who came in to the table looked hungry. He turned away and sneezed several times.

“You’ll catch a cold, Maung. Here, take this Procold tablet.” Khin Khin laid a tablet beside the plate. Then she hurriedly washed her face and changed her clothes. She had had tea and *mohinga* together with her friend, and now she was full. But she would have to smooth away the little doubts and misgivings while eating together.

No sooner did Khin sit down, that Maung finished the last mouthful and got up from the table at once. The Procold tablet remained beside the plate.

“Maung, you haven’t taken the tablet yet.”

Maung did not pay any attention to her words and went into the bedroom.

The creaking of the bed made Khin even more upset. She put away the noodles which she did not want to eat anyway. They were sure to have heated words if they faced each other.

But everybody would hear everything that was being said, so Khin khin withdrew into the easy chair, sad and angry.

Both of them had to work for their living. Maung’s parents looked after their two children. Khin Khin’s parents lived in the Yangon district but there was no way to see the old couple even once a month since a trip took a whole day each way. Most important was being able to get to work while living in a safe neighborhood. Parents, relatives, friends- all were farther and farther away.

The old couple with whom they were renting had nothing in common with them. Khin Khin often felt lonely when Maung was not at home. No wonder there was a lot to talk about when she met Ah Win, an old friend,

Maung did not think like this. Khin Khin could not forgive him. That narrow minded stubborn man!

She pulled up her legs and crossed them. Then she put them down Either way, she felt cold. She stood up. Though she had been tired and sleepy after a day at work, she was now wide awake, feeling the chill more and more with each passing. Second.

She should go to bed.

He was asleep now, and there certainly was no need to talk. She walked wearily towards the bedroom.

Then she thought of the Sunflower.

It was now three winters that Khin Khin had meant to buy a new blanket before the cold season set in. The one they had now was worn thin. Earlier they each had one. But once when the children and the grandparents came for a visit, she had given them one for the return trip.

However much she tried to buy another blanket, she could either not save enough money, or else she forgot, or sometimes the weather did not seem cold enough.

“Don't you worry darling, we'll keep each other warm.”

With Maung consoling her like that, she allowed herself to accept the idea without much thinking. That was the main reason that she gave up on buying a blanket, she now realized irritated.

How come it never occurred her that they could quarrel

They fought only rarely. Maung joked, “We don't love to fight, and especially not at night!”

And darn, now it had happened!

Maung was waging a war of silence and she, Khin Khin, was ready to break both the peace and the truce

But the problem was that her teeth were chattering with cold. In the light from the living room she could see him curled up under the blanket.

Sometimes we have to do what we must, rather than what we would like.

One last time that night, Khin Khin longed for the Sunflower--the Sunflower brand blanket so popular for its warmth. She regretted she did not try harder to buy one before this power struggle occurred

Khin Khin switched off the light in the living room.

Careful not to make any noise, she came closer to the bed, reluctant to lift up the mosquito-net and to crawl in. She wondered whether there was a little movement on his side. She held her breath, embarrassed.

The cold air seeped through the cracks of the wall and made her shiver.

She bit her lip.

“Anyway, it's obvious that it's only because of the Sunflower,” she silently reassured herself.

And then, and then,

Well, all because of the Sunflower.

## A Little Firefly, That's Me

Dear Doctor,

While I was a patient at the Infectious Diseases Hospital, being treated for my skin infection, you looked after me. A nurse told me that you're a writer. I hope you won't mind if I admit I've never read your writings. I've only passed third standard. But I've become very interested in a writer like you who I believe can tell my story to others who may suffer like me.

I am writing about myself in the hope of easing the burden that I carry in my heart.

My parents separated when I was about 12 years old. All four children were left with my mother, my elder sister, two younger sisters, and me. We were very poor. I had to leave school. Mother did all kinds of odd jobs to feed us. My sister and I packed plum jam at home.

Before long my sister married. My brother-in-law seduced me and at 16 I had an abortion. I couldn't say I was forced though, because we were so close anyway.

After that, mother made me go and work in a shop where there were other working girls. There I met a friend, Yi Yi, who liked reading love stories. I didn't try reading. I like picture stories. While we worked, Yi Yi told me the stories she had read and I listened, never tiring, never bored. I wanted to hear about these pretty girls, rich or poor, who always got married to rich, handsome officers or the like. As for us poor folks we only meet with laborers, car drivers or ice peddlers. At least, Yi Yi did. She's fair and good-looking. I am dark, and thin, too. So who'd be interested in me?

One day Yi Yi said, "remember Daw Mai? She's rich now." We used to work for Daw Mai before. Yi Yi told me Daw Mai had connections with a restaurant in Kaw Thaug. She earned a lot of money by finding girls who wanted work there. They would be given a free place to stay and food, plus daily wages that were 5 or 6 times more than we now made working here the whole day. Our earnings barely covered daily expenses. We couldn't even buy old rags sold in a heap at the roadside. Yi Yi said we'd go with Daw Mai, work for two easy years, and by then we'd have saved enough money to come back and open a little store of our own. I agreed.

There were altogether five of us. The other three were from the provinces. Daw Mai looked well after us and we had fun the whole way. One night we slept at Kaw Thaug. We were to work the other side. I had thought "the other side" meant Kaw Thaug. Yi Yi laughed at me. She knew much more. Anyway, only then did both of us realize that we were being sold.

We crossed to the other side by boat and proceeded by bus along the highway. We were taken to a large building where there were armed guards. I didn't know when or where Daw Mai disappeared.

I was there for six months. Those who had good looks or spoke Thai were favored. Yi Yi was pretty and had many customers, so of course she was a favorite. But she was all the more guarded to stop her from running away. We were never given any money and never allowed to go out, except under guard. They saw to it that we had pretty clothes and make up to look good for the customers. Though I



didn't get any payment from the boss the customers sometimes gave me little presents and money. I've saved that money and bought two half baht gold chains when I had the chance to go out shopping. I have been planning to escape.

If I had known that easy money destroys one's life I wouldn't have taken such risks. Now I loathe this life all the more. I did not want to stay there any longer and kept thinking of running away. I thought I'd go back home and nobody would be the wiser.

I was forever thinking of means to escape. The guards were changed often, to keep us from getting too familiar with them. I noticed that they changed every seven days and the old guard would return to the brothel again for another two months. Not knowing their language was a big problem. Whenever I tried to get acquainted with them their faces looked threatening. Of course I understood that they were afraid to lose their jobs or maybe even their lives.

After a time I became friendly with one of them called Kin. He seemed to be quite hard up. I noticed him borrowing and asking for money many times from the next guard on duty. Most of the time he was refused right away, and left disappointed. He never smiled when I smiled at him. Nevertheless I had to take the risk. As I passed near him I slipped a roll of bank notes into his waist belt. If he had reported me I'd have the beating of my life. He didn't report me and he didn't return the money. I was encouraged. I showed him the gold chain, shed tears and begged him to take me out. He refused. On the last day of his duty he discreetly pointed out a man, a regular customer. I understood that I must ask for his help. This man accepted my gold chain.

He gave me a piece of paper with instructions where to meet him. No one must suspect, or my throat would be cut, he gestured. I was afraid to die but I was more afraid to continue living this life of hell.

The next day was shopping day. At the market I slipped off and got into the shop shown on the paper. I was terrified, expecting the shopkeeper to cry out in alarm. I was pulled into the back and there was my savior. We got out into the back street, hurried through lanes, and at last came to a group of huts. I was left alone in a hut where I hid the whole day, hungry and tired, terrified as ever. I dozed off. I dared not think about what would happen to me if the man did not come back.

About midnight I was woken by a woman who made me change into old clothes and took me out. We crossed through jungle, hitched a ride on a bullock west, walked again and eventually came to the boat that brought me back. Unbelievable! Don't you think? Even if I wasn't killed they could have taken away my gold chain and my money. Why did they help me? Was it sympathy for a fellow human being? I have often wondered.

At Kaw Thaug the Immigration Officers arrested me. I thought I would be jailed but I was sent to the Women's Development Center. There I was cared for. I thought I would learn sewing for my livelihood or go back to packing plum jam. But that was just a dream.

My blood tested HIV positive. I now know it is incurable. I've been in the hospital twice and am very thin. Now I have AIDS.

This is what happened to me. I wish to implore you to help, not me, but others who may suffer like me, innocent girls who are being driven into this loathsome life, whether through ignorance or ill fortune. Please protect them and please help those who wish to come back to freedom. Oh, doctor, I believe that you won't laugh at me. I'd like to think that having written about myself – I have helped just a little bit to protect other victims. Am I like a little firefly that wants to show the way in a stormy dark night? Let me be one!

**Note-** I pray that someone from the Women's Development Center may incidentally notice this article, take it to the little firefly and tell her- "You've made a difference!"

Sept 1996

Dr. Khin Lay Nyo (Pen name= Mya Hnaung Nyo), Kalyar Magazine,

Translated by Daw KHP, June 4, 2001

### **Fallen Petals**

Heard second-hand, 'tis a story,  
Self-experienced, 'tis a diary.  
From conjectures  
This work's not born  
May you recognise  
The bonds of a soul forlorn.....

Bougainvillea...  
Fresh blossoms in colourful clusters,  
Defying the darkness of night,  
Bathed by the moon's silv'ry lustre,  
Teased by the zephyr's light,  
Tossed by windswept rain  
Or by the unruly storm  
Forests posing as barriers, and plains  
so arid, barren in form,  
scorched by the sun's blaze,  
It leans to where it will,  
With guilt and sadness, my heart's fill'd..

Cause and effect dissociated, weak,  
before 'twas time; unkissed. Alas!  
Whilst the stem's strong, the future's bleak  
They've yellowed and aged en masse  
These blossoms... prematurely withered.... and fallen...

Translated by Zeyarthu

## Thorn Heart

A garden is my cardia  
A foolish flower blooms  
Hoping you'll pluck and wear it forever  
O ! Why do those black & bold thorns  
prick your fingers ?  
Cruel indeed! My heart gasps  
Blood splashes  
This flower blooms only once in a life  
Fate is the cause now  
No explanation and no appeal  
Tears well in my eyes concealed from sight  
Days pass by  
No way to forget  
It really is the first and the last flower  
and it is meant for you  
But because the thorns are always guarding  
My heart remains broken

Poem from the novel "Ah The' Pan Hmar Hsu Dway Ne' Yei" (Thorn Heart)  
By Mya Naung Nyo  
1<sup>st</sup> Edition 1985, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition 1990

*Untamable prisoner*

Please be imprisoned and be locked  
Behind seven steel curtains  
My dear heart please do not wake up  
I beseech in vain

Though it mocks me and makes me crazy  
I grasp it with force and without mercy  
I lull it with patience and persuasion  
I even handcuff it and hide the key

Oh! How impish and how reckless  
Powerful as a wizard, tricky as a magician  
Fading in the western deserts  
Escaping across the smoky mountains

Now tired and haggard, searching for my runaway soul  
wet and soaked by the thundering rain  
Could I but find that reckless plea  
I swore until ten worlds'd cease, forever chained

From the novel "A The' Pan Hmar Hsu Dway Ne' Yei" (Thorn Heart)  
By Mya Hnaung Nyo  
1<sup>st</sup> edition 1985, 2nd edition 1990