

KHET MAR

Two short stories

OUVERTURE

She washed out her brush and regarded her painting critically: definitely a lot of blues. Blue-gray monsoon clouds over the rippling waters of a river; on the far bank, dark green mountain ranges; a blur of red sky just at the top right edge.

That last ray of fading sun fell on the lone boatman rowing against the current, the muscles of his arms standing out in relief in the light.

A gloomy and dark painting overall, but she had wanted exactly that. It might storm, it might rain, and one might have to row against the current, but then, all one needs is the strength to row.

She went to wash her hands at the sink, running her wet fingers through her hairs, re-tying the handkerchief fastened around her hair.

"Aren't you done yet?"

The night watchman called from the door. In the silence of the late evening his voice boomed out. She gave a tired but contented smile.

"Yes, I'm just about done. I'll be out in a minute."

"It's past nine, already. I thought you didn't notice the time; the others have all locked up and gone, you're the only one left," he said.

She took up her things, gave a glance at her painting, and went out of the door, smiling at the old man.

"Good night!"

As soon as she was out of the building, the icy breeze refreshed her in an instant. She breathed deeply. In the darkness she could see the lighted golden stupa of the Shwedagon Pagoda.

She turned left as she came out of the gate of the state School of Fine Arts. She wished she could go and sit by the Royal Lakes not too far away and maybe spend half an hour or so, watch the night fall, feel the breeze, listen to the night birds. But ..how can she; the night and the breeze and the bird calls will surely be disturbed by the drunken leers of men from the nearby night stalls; it is dangerous enough that she was walking home alone, this late. She could not help getting so absorbed in her paintings that she usually stayed on alone after class, finishing up her assignment which she was to do over two or three days. This headstrong streak was what brought her here to Yangon in the the first place.

She had ignored her mother's pleas to finish high school, and had left their small delta village to attend the art school. She had found a place to stay in a nunnery not too far from the school, within the grounds of the Nga Htut Kyee Pagoda of Bahan. She did not mind the daily lunches of beans and rice, or in the evenings, a plate of almost stale leftovers. Each evening she would happily scamper up the steep steps leading to the nunnery, where she had been allowed to stay because the elderly nun happened to be a distant cousin of her mother. The walk to and from school took half an hour either way as the steep climb wound around a hillside, and past a small cemetery where, years and years ago, some minor princes and princess had been buried in a family plot.

She would go over in her mind the lessons learnt at school as she climbed the steps, she thought of those steps as symbolizing the stages of her progress. Where is she now? Not yet near the top, she knew. But just wait. One day, one day...

She was grateful that some donor had paid for some railings to be put up; she clutched at the metal bar as she started the steep climb, first taking off her slippers for one is not allowed to wear shoes on the pagoda precincts. From way up the pagoda, a dim glow of a 40 watts bulb hardly gave enough light for her to see the steps.

Suddenly she heard the shuffle of feet behind her.... she felt so tired she did not bother to look around. Well, someone's coming up the steps, too. She felt less alone. But why should that make a difference? She had been going up these dark steps, alone, for a great many nights.

"Sister! Sister! "

Now whom could he be calling to? She did not turn around, but heard the footsteps quicken, and in the dark sensed someone coming up to stand besides her.

"Sister?"

She looked up; in the faint light she could see a young man. She felt a stab....fear? Perhaps. They were alone on the steps, by the side stood the old tombs; beyond them, a cliff; in front, almost total darkness. And beside her stood a strange man. It was late: almost 10 p.m.

"What d'you want?" Her voice sounded harsh to her own ears. What should i do? She thought rapidly. Who can hear her if she called for help? She noticed that he was dressed decently enough, in a neat white shirt. He held a pair of velvet slippers in one hand. What should she do? What should she do?

"Are you going up there, sister?"

His voice was gentle and he stood still, calmly. She could hear the rustling of the leaves from the trees towering over the tombs.

"Yes."

Her answer sounded even harsher than her previous reply.

"The steps are so dark, and you're alone, aren't you? I've been watching you for some time, going up there. Are you from the art school? Where do you have to go? I'll see you home. It's late."

She could not imagine what her eyes were saying as she stared at him. Is this a sincere offer, or is it a trick? A deep silence fell, broken by a sharp chirp of a cricket. She shivered, but gathered her thoughts to speak in a steady voice.

"Yes, I just came back from art school. I have to go beyond the pagoda to a nunnery on the other side."

"Oh... right up to the top, then beyond?"

She nodded. It seemed to her that his eyes widened. When he spoke it was halting.

"Th..then it means I have to come back alone... its so dark, and those tombs! W..well, you're used to this place, right? Excuse me, I have to go."

He turned suddenly and ran down the steps. She glared at his back, and turned to make her way up again. After a few steps, she stopped and looked down... by then he was already more than ten steps down.

"Hey!"

Her voice was loud in the stillness. Startled, he stopped and looked up. She smiled broadly; she hoped he could see that smile. She waited a few seconds before speaking, for a cricket had started to chirp shrilly. As soon as it paused, she called down:

"Thanks!"

She turned at once and ran up the steps. She heard nothing from him: he must be rooted to

the spot in surprise. After a while she heard him run down the steps; she smiled again, as she has done just now. She turned and looked down until the faint glow of his shirt disappeared past the bottom steps. She smiled again.

She could not understand why she kept smiling all the time, like this.

Translated from the Burmese by Ma Thanegi

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A Good Gift

After testing with a small dark green twig on a piece of yellow paper, I felt satisfied. So by the time I drew a sprout over the red sun, I knew I had done some picture. Whoever knew it or not, liked it or not was of no matter for I had already created a work of art enough to satisfy me. Just as I was immersed in my work with an inspiration got from those objects combined, I had to face a volley of questions by my young little son.

"Mom did you draw this little picture?"

"Yes, my son"

"Is this a real dry little tree?"

"Yes it is"

"How do you know you can draw a picture out of it?"

"You told me so"

"I told you?"

"Yes you did"

"When did I tell you?"

"When you were in my stomach."

"How did I tell?"

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I spread the mat on the floor and placed my pillow beside my son's little one. Then, I started talking.

"Son, come and sleep on this pillow. I'll sleep here will happily tell you how I could draw these little pictures after what you told me."

Suddenly, son lay down on the small pillow and touched my ear. I put my hand over his little stomach. It was as if the cold of winter wet with rain quickly dissipated. The sparrows, feasting on the paddy stalk hung on a small mango tree in front of the house, were tweeting, looking at the roof with cobwebs dangling; my eyes caught sight of the little window at the side on which red Newthargi flowers in full bloom were hanging down. As I sweetly smiled, son's little hand was on my cheek.

"Mom, you said you would tell but didn't. You are just smiling."

And so, still with a smile, I began.

1

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It was the time your elder brother was in mummy's womb.....when becoming pregnant, I felt seriously ill. Because of the physical changes, just as my body suffered so was my mind restless. A son or a daughter? With complete limbs or not? Any defects? Will the child be intelligent? I was overwhelmed by these thoughts. Couldn't eat, couldn't sleep and vomited the whole day. Your grandma who gave birth to five children even remarked that she had never seen a pregnant woman so laboured and vomiting the whole day.

Son, it is said that those who are pregnant have a strong desire to eat something and do something especial. A kind of urge, a yearning. Mine started from an idea. Your father goes to work late morning to evening, your grandma is always out with some matter and your grandpa is occupied the whole time with all his plants that I am the only one left upstairs. Every fifteen minutes, half an hour, I vomit and put my hand on the stomach feeling your brother's every move and kicks. That is how I while away the time. It is very strange to feel and see the stomach shaking because of the little creature in side. A wonder too. In some six or seven month time, this little creature will enter the world as a human being. Because of his coming, I must let him suck the sweet white milk that was not in my body before. Very strange. A wonderful feeling, my son. Because of it, the urge appeared in me.

A picture of feeding milk to this little creature appeared in my eyes. Seeing it for several days, I wanted to draw it. So I sat at your father's drawing desk. Around me were oils and water colours. But I did not know how to mix the colour for my first drawing. What colour must I use for the complexion of the little creature in my bosom? As it was afternoon, I could not ask your father who was not near me. Feeling upset, I pushed aside the paint tubes and got hold of the books on the shelf. I concentrated on an advertisement in a book which I looked for the second time. It was a picture of rose petals, pinkish and yellowish. Looking at them, I come to know that it was the colour I needed for the complexion of my little boy. Immediately; I tore the paper into strips and stuck them on a white paper as the little hands of the baby. For the diaper I used a white paper. The blue paper was for my blouse. I used brown for my complexion. The black was for the black hair falling on my bosom.

2

Son, it was indeed strange. In the end the piece of paper I tore and pasted up turned out to be the picture of me feeding a baby with milk. I was so happy. I was immersed in that little picture making me forget the terrible feeling that I had never before come across in my life. When became aware of the surrounding, the sun light was already pale. The red Nwethargi petals growing from the plant beside your father's drawing table were swinging in the evening breeze.

Then, I came to know how to face the thrilling experiences I have to undergo for the seven or eight months. From that day, before your brother was born, I pasted up little pictures using coloured paper. Every day, I wanted to do those little pictures, and was even interested. That was the urge I felt while waiting for your brother's birth. Whenever I looked

at the little pictures done during that time, I got back the feeling of pleasure. That was why I regarded those pictures with joy. I frequently thought of them as a gift from your elder brother.

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I thought my little one was asleep. But the moment I stoop talking, he looks up at me.

"So...what about the present I gave you?"

Looking at the little birds chirping on the paddy stalk, I replied.

"The present you gave me is concerned with nature, my son"

"What is nature?"

"Nature is little trees, flowers, little birds, the sun, the moon and, of course, the little stars."

"I gave them to you as present, is that so? How did I do that?"

He smiled, his little black front teeth appearing. His eyes sparkled with interest. Brushing away the hair on his forehead, I started again to answer him.

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By the time you have entered my womb, mum had already moved to the farm in Thanlyin together with your grandpa and grandma. A wonderful place it was, with various trees growing. And, many birds came because the place was peaceful and free from bother. The colourful crows making sounds, little doves, golden weaverbirds, many birds with red crests whose name I did not know, and the little mynas, were our friends.

3

As evening drew, the sun perched above the wood on the other side of the road. When looking this side, one could see green field stretching far. Carrying you in my stomach and holding your brother's hand, mum and dad used to walk in the evenings. We just plucked the little wild flowers, small plants unknown to us and seedlings growing by the roadside of the village. When reaching home, we kept them inside the book

As usual, your father goes to work in the afternoon. Grandpa and grandma are in the garden. Your brother is asleep. I read books. I write. When I open the books to read, I take out the little flowers and sprouts that have already dried and put them on a white piece of paper. How beautiful, in some way. I made litter pictures out of it. I put little flower and moons on coloured papers. Before your birth, I created beautiful sceneries with those little things. So my little son, you are the creature who gave me a gift that enabled me to create sceneries.

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My son giggled and asked whether the little drawings were their presents. I replied they were. You gave me valuable gifts.

"What does valuable mean?"

I breathed hard and mustered to answer the question of my little son.

"Now, I have told you how I had drawn the little pictures. Don't you feel happy?"

"Yes, happy."

"When you eat snacks and get toys, don't you feel happy?"

"Sure, happy."

"Don't we pay for those snacks and toys?"

"Yes, we have to pay."

"Is the things we get by paying with money valuable or not?"

"Yes, it is valuable."

"Then, can you bye the happiness you got from what I told you about my painting?"

"No, I can't"

"If a thing valuable when bought with money, the more valuable will be one which can't even be bought with money. Isn't that so my son?"

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While in my stomach, you all have made me do things that gave happiness and joy which couldn't be bought with money. These are the valuable gifts of my sons"

I couldn't tell whether my little son understood or not. But his eyes sparkled and his smile somewhat strange. Seeing him in such happy mood was indeed a value to me. The cause for having the value was the gifts of my sons. I was telling myself the thing which my little son didn't seem to understand.

I was able to cross the perilous path often regarded as setting one foot on the grave. With the gift of my sons, I could create and enjoy art that enabled me to overcome the anxious moments. During that period even if I had not accumulated noble merits, my mind was calm and peaceful being free from sins. Due to the feeling and habits of that time, I have become light-hearted to this very day and can enjoy making little pictures with flowers and twigs whenever I wish. I think I should thank my sons who had given me the urge to create the little pictures during pregnancy.

My little son must have thought I have ended because of the silence which in fact, resulted from my mind drifting. He slipped away from my arms to the place where birds appeared and asked me to follow and see. When I was beside him, he pointed to a place. Dark green vines of ivy crept over the yellow leaves of a lime tree growing near the hedge. On the vines were three little ivy gourd fruits. Two little birds, very beautiful with thick black shiny feathers, violet striped necks and reddish crests took turns pecking the little red fruits.

"Lovely, isn't it?"

When son sweetly said these words while gazing at the scene, I thanked whoever or whatever thing that inspired a love for nature in his heart. Only when one loves nature, one won't destroy it. Is that not so?
