9 THAI short stories

TRANSLATED BY MARCEL BARANG

1 – a traffic-wise couple – SILA KOMCHAI
2 – blood buds – SILA KOMCHAI
3 – the lookers-on – KORN SIRIWATTHANO
4 – a bamboo bridge over rapids – SEKSAN PRASERTKUL
5 – friends – SEKSAN PRASERTKUL
6 – the muzzle – SUCHART SAWASDISRI
7 – the night of the falling stars – MANOP THANOMSRI
8 – instructions – SAKCHAI LAKKHANAWICHIAN
9 – ties that bind – REUNGSAK KAMTHORN
My wife is very thoughtful. As soon as I tell her I have an important appointment at three in the afternoon – to take my boss to meet a major customer of ours at a riverside hotel in the Khlong San area – she says we must leave the house at nine in the morning. She, too, has a business engagement at Saphan Khwai before noon, and she thinks that by leaving then, we’ll both be right on time.

Her thoughtfulness doesn’t stop there. On the back seat of our car, she keeps a basket full of fast-food items, an icebox to chill drinks, some snacks and sweets, including tamarind seeds and star gooseberries, a salt-shaker together with a plastic trash bag, a spittoon, and even some spare clothes hung on the pegs above the windows. It looks like we’re going on a picnic.

As the theory goes, we belong to the middle class: our residence is in Sai Mai, the subdistrict connecting Lam Lookka and Bang Khen districts. To reach the heart of the city, the best way is to drive past countless housing projects up to Km 25 on Phaholyothin Road, turn in the direction of
Rangsit, then take Vibhavadi Road up to the Seven Generations Bridge and from there head for Bangkok.

If we were part of the destitute lower classes, we’d be staying in some slum right in the heart of town, like those upper-class people who build condominiums to enjoy the sunset lighting up the ripples on the river.

But what’s that compared to the constant dazzle of dreams?

The goal of the cohorts of the upwardly mobile is plain to see, but the problem is how to achieve it. We work ourselves silly and are always making plans for our own projects, hoping to become entrepreneurs so much we keep changing plans almost on a daily basis. All we can do for the time being is have our own house and our own car, even though this rather cripples our budget.

I won’t deny that one reason for having a car is to uphold our social status, but more to the point, our bodies have begun to protest they can’t stand being left dangling three to four hours at the time in a crowded bus inching forward in the sweltering heat. Though a car stuck in the same traffic will take about as long to cover the same distance, it’s infinitely better to be sitting in air-conditioned splendour, listening to our favourite songs.

How odd indeed: just as I am turning 38, I reach home at eleven at night and stagger to bed totally exhausted, as if all the ligaments in my body have got slack and reached retirement age. When I was in secondary school, I used to be on the school’s soccer team. The teacher had
me play halfback, or midfield as it’s called these days, and could I run then, tireless as a dynamo!

Maybe I have been working too much, but I once heard a feature broadcast on the radio during a break in a variety programme which said that atmospheric pollution due to three or four kinds of toxic gases deteriorated all of our bodily functions and that stress in our daily life impaired our efficiency.

A car is a necessity these days because we have to spend just about as long on the road as we do at home or in the office. And since my wife has enhanced ours with lots of amenities, it has become a kind of combined mobile house and office.

Keeping this in mind, I have stopped worrying about driving conditions. There’s nothing strange about Bangkok having millions of cars, and to see them stalled in the streets as if they are about to spend the night there has become normal too; and maybe because I’m beginning to enjoy our car life, as a couple we have become even closer than before. Sometimes, we have lunch together on the expressway like any other happy couple, with plenty of opportunities to laugh and get more intimate. For instance, when we are stuck in solid traffic for hours, we play a game together.

‘Close your eyes,’ she orders.

‘What for?’ I wonder.

‘Oh, come on, darling, do as I say,’ she insists as she
takes the spittoon from the back of the car, places it between her feet on the floor, pulls up her skirt and lowers herself to squat under the steering wheel. I do as she orders, putting my hand over my eyes but keeping fingers apart to admire the fair skin I am not unfamiliar with. In moments like these, a strange emotion grabs me and I get all excited.

‘Hey! That’s unfair, stop cheating!’ Her business over, she looks askance at me and slaps me on the shoulder a couple of times to cover her embarrassment.

We got married rather late in life, as advised by the Ministry of Public Health, strictly complying as well with the ad exhorting people to wait until they are ready before they have children. By the time country bumpkins like us striving to make a decent living in town are just about ready, I have turned 38 and she 35. By now, however, my body is no longer willing, what with coming back home at eleven every night and scrambling into bed some time after midnight. Even if I am in the mood, the gonads are probably flat out, and as the fancy takes me only once in a blue moon anyway, there isn’t much hope.

One day, I woke up feeling unusually jolly, perhaps because I had slept soundly, which hadn’t happened to me in a long time. I went out to enjoy the golden rays of dawn, breathe some fresh air and do stretch-out exercises to a samba beat, then took a shower, washed my hair, drank milk and ate two soft-boiled eggs. It seemed
I was back in midfield shape. Even though the traffic had come to a standstill on Vibhavadi–Rangsit Road just past Kasetsart Intersection, and Miss Peun, my favourite DJ, was reporting on the radio with her usual cheerful voice that a power pole rammed down by a ten-wheel truck had blocked the road in front of the Thai Building and was being removed, I still felt great.

In the car struck across the left lane behind us, a student couple were going at each other like boisterous puppies. The guy playfully ruffled the girl’s long flowing hair; she turned to pinch his forearm; he put his arm around her shoulders and held her tight; she poked his ribs gently with her elbow, and then...

I felt excited like a standby player called into the field. I turned around and surveyed my wife’s face. She looked prettier than usual. My eyes lingered on her full bosom and her round, smooth thighs. She wore a miniskirt and, to ease the movements of her feet while she drove, she had to pull it up a little closer to the danger zone.

‘You’ve got beautiful legs,’ I quavered, my heart beating unusually fast.

‘What’s wrong with you?’ she said, but her tone was hardly as earnest as her words. She looked up from inspecting her nails. Her neck was slender, smooth and milky white.

I swallowed uneasily and looked away, trying to bring the painful turmoil inside me under control, but familiar
images kept firing my imagination. My animal instincts were strongly aroused and since superior animals like to search and experiment with new and weird sensations, I was quickly going crazy with frustration.

My hands felt clammy. When I looked around, I noticed that many cars had tinted windows just like ours, which also has plastic shades to further shield us from the outside glare. The air conditioner was on full blast and the radio was playing a piano concerto evoking a running brook, at once peaceful and wild. I stretched out a shaky hand to roll down the shade of the windscreen.

We were now adrift in the pleasant privacy of our own world.

I’m aware we have been destroying our natural environment for so long it is now harming our inner self in turn, even as we choke on the gagging fetters of urban life, work pressure, pollution and the sardine-can traffic. Family activities which used to be happily in tune with their own momentum and rhythm are turning increasingly incoherent due to our rush through the obstacle course of life.

Perhaps because it had been a long time since our bodies last met, as well as out of her longing for a child to treasure as all mothers do, or for some other reason, her ‘Don’t do that…you’ll crumple my clothes’ objection and initial resistance soon gave way to the inauguration of our connubial nest on the road.

Our life is full of bliss now that the two of us engage in