

A Guttersnipe

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Pira Sudham
It is the People
of Thailand and other countries

A Guttersnipe

Sighting the bill-collector, Mother herded us into a corner of the hovel.

“Be quiet, all of you!”

I wondered how long we could stand still in absolute silence.

A little one might be wailing at any moment.

“She should be in,” our neighbour told the man. “I talked with her a moment ago.”

Mother gasped, raising her hands to cover her face.

“Go and tell him that I’m not at home,” she whispered. “But, don’t accept anything from him.”

Being the oldest, I had to face the authority.

“Nobody is home.”

The man from the Electricity Board continued scribbling words onto a piece of paper and then shoved the note into my hand.

Mother screamed when she saw what I handed to her.

“I told you not to accept anything from him. Stupid boy! Now I have to go to the Post Office to pay within seven days. If you hadn’t accepted it, he’d have to come back next month. Now I’ll have to raise money to pay the bill or else they’ll come, cut the wire and take the meter away.”

“Will they really, Mum?”

“Of course, they will.”

“How could they be so heartless?”

“What good have you done all day?”

Then she slapped my face.

For several days now I had to stop selling flowers or newspapers at congested intersections or at lucrative night spots since the police had arrested hawkers, including us little guttersnipes, earning a living from selling whatever.

But, it could be just a blitz, possibly because someone wrote a letter of complaint to the editor of an English newspaper.

If we had been able to pay protection fees, we would have been protected, and so allowed to continue our operation just as drug traffickers,

casino operators, brothel owners, prostitutes and sex show performers had carried on their illustrious careers.

Mother was playing a waiting game with the bill-collector while waiting for money from Father. He left for Singapore to work. Mother took me with her to see him off at the airport.

Off to slave at a construction site in a foreign land, Father looked more like a buffalo being taken to a slaughterhouse. Even for that kind of hard labour, which the Singaporeans did not want to do, the people at the employment agency mercilessly fleeced him. Then they rounded up the *successful applicants* like they did with cattle.

At the airport check-in counter, the leader loudly told them that in Singapore they must not chew gum, urinate in the lifts and in public places. The smokers should give up smoking or they would be fined.

“It’s a fine place, Singapore! All of your nasty habits are likely to be fined there.”

Before going inside the Departure Hall, Father ruffled my hair and said: “You little rascal, you behave from now on. Don’t stick out your tongue at policemen or they’ll cut it off.”

He did not look at Mother, knowing that she had detested him, a former Isan peasant. Furthermore she forbade him to speak to us in Lao, his Isan tongue, and refused to allow his relatives and friends from Isan to make our shack theirs, not even for a short stay. That was the price Father had to pay for marrying a Bangkok woman.

Meanwhile, mother sells *kanomkok* on the pavement. She concocts little cup cakes from rice flour, sugar and coconut cream. Her customers may make a meal out of her *kanomkok* for 10 baht while the rich coming in their luxurious cars should be able to satisfy their nostalgia for something down-to-earth.

Sometimes I stayed at her side, counting the change. It was far better to be in touch with life, with noises and fumes from the traffic. I could be so easily tempted by the smell of street food being either grilled or stir-fried. The sight of people eating never failed to make me salivate. Being part of life in the street was much better than being confined in the hovel.

I did not detest our home just because it was a shack made of old boards, discarded cartons, rusty corrugated iron and softwood from crates shipped as containers from abroad. It was my love of the street life that kept me out most times, running about selling flowers or newspapers.

I wanted to be near to big rich men and their beautiful women whose photos and reports on their lives appeared in the newspapers. Though the glass windows were between us, I wanted to be as close as possible to angelic film stars, dapper executives, pretty whores, eminent thieves, high-ranking crooks, untouchable drug traders, renowned crime kingpins, invincible drug barons, awesome godfathers, revered casino operators, magnanimous vote-buyers, well-kept women, respectable paedophiles, astute financial advisors who obviously have not yet fled the country, big loan-approving bank presidents and their vice presidents, shrewd financiers some of whom might be on their way to the International Airport to live abroad, wheeler-dealers of the stock exchange, good-all-round manipulators, formidable property developers, the silent tax payers and sex-struck foreign visitors with their cute partners, etc.

Trapped in the vehicles in the traffic congestion, they could hardly avoid me.

Such was a perk of the job. O yes! The mammoth traffic jams in Bangkok were a boon to me.

When some of the great and the good, the rich and the famous, the beautiful and the wicked, the rogues and the gays lowered their windows to buy jasmine garlands, the blessed the cool air from the cars licked my sweaty face. What a joy!

At the closing hour, I would see another kind of crowd -- pimps and their pretty cash earners on motorcycles, staggering drunkards, jolly gays coming out of gay bars and saunas, sexy a-go-go dancers and scantily dressed pole dancers, adulterers on their way to short-time motels, bartenders going home and taxi drivers waiting for customers.

In front of Nana Complex, there were some men, waiting for the girls who failed to hook customers for the night. The men bargained; the women had to halve the going rate if they did not want to go hungry.

They played out the drama right in front of me, taking no notice of me, a mere street urchin.

My father had taken advantage of the closing hour too when he was a taxi driver, parking his Toyota closest to a certain popular haunt which made Bangkok known as the best whorehouse of the world.

I could not help being attracted to the night crowd, wanting to be part of their fabulous lives. Some of them did have sympathy for me too.

Once, an elderly man showed that he cared.

“A little boy like you should be in bed now. Go home,” said he.

But, advice like that was wasted on me.

No matter how late it was, I wanted to make more money so that I could bring home twenty baht. Therefore, such a paternal tone of voice urging me to go home at two in the morning did not work. I stayed alert in the streets though most people seemed to have given up their roles for the night.

Pimps stopped pimping. Bar girls took off their false eye-lashes and jumped on the backs of motorcycles. Bar tenders changed their uniforms for street clothes. Sex workers gave back their number badges to the bar managers. Nightclub operators allowed customers to walk out with the girls without having to pay the so-called 'bar fine'.

Only I maintained my role of a guttersnipe to the end.

You might not believe this. When I was totally engrossed in selling whatever I had to sell, dashing here and there, I was blind to the speeding cars and roaring motorcycles and drug-driven trucks.

Once, amidst the chaos, Father drove his taxi straight at me. It nearly hit me. For the benefit of the passenger, he said: "Look at this little devil! He's lucky it isn't a truck or he'd have been run over, dead like a dog in the middle of the road. Let's put him out of his misery, shall we?"

When he was resting with us at home, he aired his concern.

"It's a shame. You little guttersnipes create a bad image for the country. What will the tourists think of us? Now, Tui, what would you say to that?"

"Why, Father, you should bring them to see us in this slum."

Definitely they would have seen something closer to the truth.

I wanted to hang on to my job. To be allowed by the master of the territory to hawk flowers or newspapers at the allocated spot was a boon. On the other hand, to guard my turf was not easy. Besides, the master must be satisfied with what you could give him daily. Otherwise, you would not be able to show your face there.

Father understood me well since he had to rent a taxi on a daily basis.

Perhaps, earning income from one's body might have some degree of stress. Likewise, selling flowers or newspapers at jammed intersections and at certain night spots could be rough and tough too. Many street boys had to resort to inhaling thinner to keep them going, but not me. I was alert and awake at the wee hours so I did not miss an opportunity, not so much in selling, but in seeing some of the dignitaries and celebrities and film stars.

It was so unfair that us little hawkers were harassed and arrested and condemned. Murderers, drug traffickers, drug pushers, the bribers and the

bribed, venal bureaucrats and corrupt officials, world-class swindlers, awesome gunmen and prostitutes went by as free as could be.

Why the police did not pick on someone their own size? There we were, little children, struggling to survive. Without money to pay for protection, we had to suffer harsh treatment.

Meanwhile I patiently wait and stay safe by Mother's side, helping her count the change.

One day, Mother was in the throes of getting ready to leave the shack.

"Don't sneak off anywhere now. You look after the little ones. I'm off to try my luck at a gambling den."

Like prostitution, which is illegal, gambling dens thrive in the Kingdom. How do I know? Oi! Everyone knows that! It's a common knowledge.

Mother went with high hopes to one of the numerous illegal but well-protected dens belonged to a senator.

As soon as she left, I dashed off. Breathlessly I reached the street and felt a great relief to be out of the slum. I loitered at the spot where mother sold *kanomkok*, observing trucks, cars, taxis, motorcycles and passers-by. I eagerly took delight in being part of life in the street. Suddenly a car halted in front of me, and two lovely ladies came out. Daintily they looked about.

"Where is the *kanomkok* seller today?"

"She's gone to gamble at the senator's casino."

Mother's customers looked disappointed.

One said to the other:

"Ah, she exercises her freedom! Don't you say anymore that the poor will embrace communism."

I did not understand what she meant, but then they went back to the waiting Mercedes. When hunger gnawed, I went home to take my share of whatever there was in an aluminium pot. The little ones had been weeping because one of them had fallen into the slime.

I washed the muck off his face just in time.

Mother came back sooner than expected. From her expression, I could guess that she had lost at the table, enriching the senator a little more. Poor mum, she did not say a word while fondling a small gold ring.

"Put it on, Mum."

She did, but then the ring slipped off her finger.

"I've worked myself to the bone."

Whether she was going to pawn it afterward, I could not tell. But, after having seen her tearful eyes, I went out immediately to challenge the police.

It was well-known among us guttersnipes that at certain places, paedophiles picked up the children and take them away in their cars.

For 100 baht, you'd get two or three addresses.

Thanks!

One meeting point was where Silom Road meets Rama 4 by McDonald's opposite The Dusit Thani Hotel. Another was Lumpini Park Corner at the intersection opposite Thai-Belgian Bridge. You'd see cars curb-crawling there. The other location was Suzie Wong Hotel, so-called because it is in Suriwong.

To offer my body to be abused for cash, I chose the Lumpini Park Corner but, after a long wait, I gave up loitering there, realising that the arrangements to pick up the children were usually made in advance and the minders dropped their young at the pre-arranged places. I, as a freelancer, having neither pimp nor minder nor 'uncle' to make the appointment, was left in the lurch.

Wanting to earn more cash than just enough to pay our electricity bill, I had already aimed for a sum. When the offer of my body to be abused failed, I had Plan B in reserve.

In times of dire need and desperation, I often wanted to be hit by a car. It should be a luxurious car, preferably a Mercedes. If the accident was not fatal, I would claim compensation. The more expensive the automobile, the more money I might make.

Just as I was ready to throw myself at a cruising Benz, a police car came along, ambling behind it. Thank goodness! I saw it in time. So off I ran.

The seven days of grace the bill collector gave us had passed, but we were relying on the usual inefficiency of the bureaucrats, hoping that the wire would not be cut and the meter taken away so promptly.

Each day meant a lot to Mother.

"Why hasn't your father sent money?"

"Maybe he has already sent some. But then it could be delayed or perhaps lost."

We hoped in vain.

The men arrived, cut the wire and took the meter away.

It was staggering to know that the authority could be efficient, concerning its own benefits.

"Go and see whether you can buy one or two candles on credit," mother hoped. "Don't go to the shop in front of the lane where the shopkeeper knows you."

Though we had been living in poverty all along, she did not want to lose face. For having to resort to candlelight would tell tales.