Oye's choice

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A country girl chooses to work in a massage parlour as her possible ticket to a new life.

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Sugarcane.

From the machine that squeezes the canes flows cool light-green juice filling the waiting glass to brim, so sweet to the taste. Oye lately has thought of her name and how appropriate it seems for her. She feels like that juice. Whoever drinks her will find her pleasing. Of that she is sure.

The sun is almost behind the trees around her village. After another blazing hot day, the birds are singing in a loud cacophony praising the evening coolness and its fading light. Oye is at her usual place by the village’s large lake, where a thick growth of reeds shelters her from the houses of the village on the opposite side of the pond.

Oye stands next to a tree and let her sarong slip to the dusty ground, then picking it up quickly to drape on a convenient branch. She still feels the warm sun on her bare body and see patches of it being painted on her shiny and smooth skin, the colour of rich mud under her feet..

Glancing quickly around, she senses that the trees are looking. She knows that some village youngsters, friends of Noy, her brother, and maybe her brother himself, are probably at their usual hidden viewing spot in the shrubs over to the right. Some of the older village men may be there as well for all she knows.

Oye used to be very shy. But the thought of stripping for this hidden audience each evening makes her flesh tingle. It is the highlight of her day. She takes her time now, stepping slowly to the water’s edge, then feels her body accepted by the water’s coolness.

A good swimmer who taught herself, Oye strokes the surface easily to the middle, avoiding a big raft of big lotus leaves and beautiful magenta bulbs of flowers standing proud in the water. She dives deeper into the dark water, knowing that her bottom and thighs are exposed fully the surface as she

does so.

This is her place on earth. She was born here in the house on legs that she can sees now. Will she have the heart to leave it?

At dinner, Oye looks at her father. His good looks that she is so proud of is pleasing every time she sees him. His hair is thinning now and more grey. His eyes grow more peaceful and wise with the slow passing of the years. He moves some plates of food to her mother.

Oye’s own beauty comes from her mother and she is so thankful about that. What a pair her parents are. When she marries, she wants her marriage to be like theirs.

Everyone is quieter than usual. Insects are chirping away in the trees all around the balcony where the family sits on the mat to eat. Oye thinks of getting on the bus tomorrow and the farewell before that.

It was warm night but light breezes spring up later. Oye is wakeful while her brother breathes evenly in his corner of the room. Oye passes her hand over her body underneath the sarong. On many long, warm nights, she enjoys the pleasure of her body, taking care that noises or movements do not wake her brother. But she has no doubt that he is awake sometimes.

She has grown up in this bed. It’s a young woman’s body that is in it now. She has been feeling of late that this body of hers is a bus ticket to another place.

Her school days in the local wat (temple) school are over. There was a tearful graduation and farewell ceremony when most of the teachers and students were crying.

She does miss the long days there which started with the students standing at attention to salute the Thai flag, being slowly hoisted by two proud students, one boy and one girl, chosen especially for the job each morning. Many of those mornings were freezing with the school ground covered by thick mist, even with her hats and gloves knitted by Grandma. But she loves such weather.

Most of what she had learned was taught by repeating what the teachers recited. She felt that most of her teachers learned this way too. So she and her friends thought the same way on most things about the King, religion and their duties to their parents and their country.

But for Oye that was never all. In her brain, she saw plenty more she thought than most of her friends. There was more to this life.

Oye sits now on the little bus. She looks for the final time at her nest, the dusty ground of the village. Her brother was there standing next to his bicycle. She is sure that somehow he knows what she is doing. She has said goodbye to her parents.

She is to be away to nearby Chiangmai to see Suay, a village school friend, coming up from Bangkok to meet her.

The bus starts. On its way out, Oye sees the village pond through the big green leaves of the teak trees. She clutches the bag with her belongings in it. She will be strong. The familiar bamboos and the banana trees now form an escort on either side of the road winding though her mountains and valleys.

When Oye sees Suay at the central bus station, she drops her bag and has to hug her school friend. Suay seems to understand and they embrace for long moments, ignoring the stares all around.

That night in the cheap hotel room, they share the double bed, as they sometimes did in their teens when staying over at each other's houses, quashed together giggling on narrow and creaking bamboo beds.

In the privacy of this noisy room, they stand by the bed and take turn to remove each other's clothes, slowly, their eyes locked. Oye kisses Suay on the mouth for the first time on the spur of the moment, feeling light in the head as she does so.

Suay laughs and then kisses her back with more purpose.

Such a thing must not be right and they did all they could to muffle their sounds, difficult to hide in the village still night and through thin bamboo walls.

Here they have nothing to hide from anyone. They can scream as loud as they want and still not be heard above the street noise.

Suay's hands have found new skills obviously learned in the big city and Oye has never thought two women can create such pleasure for each other. The whirling ceiling struggles vainly to dry their sweating bodies.

She doubts whether she can be as free and at ease with any man.

There must be 50 girls in this funny large room set out like stage with steps that Oye, Suay and the other girls are seated in three rows, each higher than the other so that they can all be seen. Each girl

wears a large number.

In front of them is large mirror covering the length of the room, into which the girls are forever gazing and adjusting their hair or clothes. They forget that it is actually a one-way mirror behind which male customers are sitting and selecting which girls they will take to the private massage room.

The girls are wearing their best clothes with blouses so close-fitting that the buttons struggle to hold their bosoms in. The skirts too are so short that it’s a real struggle for the girls to keep their legs and thighs closed together. Wherever she looks, Oye can see what underpants the girls are wearing and what colour.

The faces of most of the girls came as a shock to Oye at first. The pretty faces are spoiled by make-up much too overdone, so that some of the girls look like the heroines in a Chinese opera. And the way they screech when they speak, they would be at home in those plays.

Many of the masseuses come from the north also but the majority came directly from the arid villages in the northeast and use different words and sounds to her and Suay.

Oye looks at Suay sitting next to her. She is really beautiful, true to her name. She has been working here for a year now and has made good money. On top of her small monthly retainer, Suay gets paid when she is chosen by a client, which she is at least once or twice a day, more often than Oye.

Yet the work has not changed her. She is still her loving childhood friend and now lover. They share a room in a old wooden house run by a smiling old grandmother in one of the maze of lanes nearby.

To the folks at home, they tell them that they are both working in a factory making soap. Both send money back to their parents.

Oye is happy to spend the day without being chosen. With her heart pounding, Oye sat in the fish bowl for the first time. And within half an hour, her number was called on the intercom. She was shown her way for the first time to one of the dozens of private rooms in the maze of the big building.

A balding, podgy man with a black mustache was sitting in the armchair, drinking whiskey and smoking. He had paid the top rate for three hours with her for a hot bath, massage and just about anything else he wished to do with her.

As she had been trained by the wife of the owner, Oye undressed the man. She thought that she was brave but it was still with trembling hands that she pulled the man’s soiled underpants down to the floor, her eyes averted.

Then as the man sat watching on the massage bench, Oye had to undress completely herself, which she did too quickly that time. Then using oils and lotions she massages the client on his back, and on his front, in his groins, using the technique of no more than just deep feeling and pressing everywhere that she dared to.

Then she ran the big sunken bath, which filled alarmingly with a mountain of soap bubbles because she put in too much bubble liquid.

She has come to like this part of the “executive’s special” of getting in to the bath with the client and using her body to soap and massage his. The soap bubbles hid most that was ugly, leaving just lovely sensations when your eyes are closed.

This first client was nice but clumsy and rough, being quickly aroused and then in a big stumbling hurry. Her first experience was as Oye had imagined and dreaded but much more pleasant for the attention that her own body was getting. The clients usually do more of the massaging than her.

She finds out later from some of the girls that there is a hidden video camera in each of the rooms. Who is watching or what the tapes are used for, the girls don't know.

As they sit each day displaying their numbers, both Suay and Oye wait.

One day a nice rich man, maybe a foreign tourist, will be waiting in their private rooms, with their tickets to a new life.

They hold each other’s hand behind their backs as they wait.