

*Ms. Supa's Age*  
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*Grass*

MS. SUPA'S EXASPERATION over the buffalo filled half of the house, that is, one room of two. It was a quantity. It was a quality. It grew wings and a stinging tail, like a wasp. Her exasperation wasped in pursuit of "The Boy" wherever he might be lolling, wasting his time and her money. A skein of grass tangled in, out, and around the buffalo's nose ring, tangled the head cords, the horns, the ears, and tangled the lead cord by which to lead this pea-brained lonesome enormity here and there in its unprofitable existence. Small distances actually; back yard to front yard, front yard across the macadam road and down into the soggy field long colonized by poisonous frogs and long-bladed grasses. The Boy had simply chucked down this morning's grass ball before his charge and gone off to malingering in company with other malingering boys, leaving the animal to champ unsupervised at its food. One sixty-centimeter strand of heavy grass led to another, so here was Ms. Supa with a buffalo muzzle, buffalo horns, and buffalo ears festooned with and under a grass netting made slick by buffalo slobber. To free this by-now-irritated animal was a filthy, dangerous, and unfeminine task.

This, she thought, is the age at which a lone woman acquires a dog. A dog loving to her, terrible to others such as The Boy. For a start she would like to set just such a loyal big-toothed avenger at The Boy, now, before rain again sluiced down, shielding the guilty from pursuit. You come to a time when a dog appeals more than a man. The idea of a dog charms and pleases; the idea of a man, rolling off you to then fall asleep while offering sweat and intestinal noises, no longer charms and pleases. A man after much beer in fact suggests a buffalo—just look at his slobbery muzzle and closed eyes as he snores in and snores out.

Ms. Supa's day, but minutes old, began to feel like a test of patience; already her feet were muddy and nausea assailed her abdomen. With a far-off stare she wiped the stainless-steel sink, the best purchase wheedled out of Sakhoon & Son since King Rana the Ninth's accession. Ms. Supa's age exceeded that of his majesty by three years, but she was not beloved as was that exemplary man. Her smoldering temper and waspish replies had used up neighborly sympathy toward a woman with both sons in the clink and a husband vanished into legendary lands, maybe Malaysia, maybe Saudi Arabia or the Gulf. Time for a dog, thought Ms. Supa, clambering astride her carmine-colored Kawasaki 150cc. When she peered down, bereft of spectacles, to exactly locate the ignition keyhole, she noticed herself to be wearing a blood-red wraparound. How the two colors regarded each other! She banked the Kawasaki into the first of nine familiar sinuses of the feeder road. Not long ago, she thought, I would have gone back in the house and changed my wrap.

### *Shame*

Damaged in spirit, Ms. Supa two hours later squatted in her doorway; her hands peeled green beans without need of thought. Many times she had "done" those shops along the road to the airport. Never had she taken in that plate-glass window; a mean little shop. Surely the offending dresses had stood there since months—two white, one cream, one light blue. Foreigners, *farang*. Four wedding dresses, ankle-length European wedding dresses, gaping open over the breasts, skirts clumsy, cut so long as to drag in dirt. Messy skirts complicated by pleats.

In imagination she fingered the dresses, felt microscopic grit upon their surfaces, imagined the silence both of mother and daughter, their shame, the meanness of the daughter's father, the meanness of the groom's father, as, alone together, mother and daughter suffered on the brink of this tacky purchase. Those dresses were disgusting. Marriage itself is vile, thought Ms. Supa, but what mother tells that to a daughter whose head is occupied by imaginations of the new

life. "And I used to want a daughter," she mused. She pictured in her mind the brocaded sheath and the tiara of a bride's costume, a proper Thai costume. It all turned out the same way.

### *When She Faced the Sea*

Next day at dawn Ms. Supa picked a way through spears of the pineapple field, passed through the tamarisks, and came at last onto the beach. The Andaman lay becalmed; wee splashes—miniatures of monsoon waves—glittered in the slanting light of sunrise. At the water itself she stopped, keeping her feet dry. A dream lingered from last night. What had the dream shown her? The *Wat* crematorium was it, or was it a newspaper photo of the man killed by his own elephant? Something fatal, something final. She pushed away a gloom begotten somehow by those wedding dresses. An intuition whispered something to her consciousness of here and now; she was, she sensed, not alone. Ms. Supa glanced south, glanced north, then at the trees behind. When she faced the sea once more a light brown dog appeared off to her left, a slender creature, more than a puppy, less than full-grown. It eyed her from some ten meters off, delicate ears cocked, head to one side. Ms. Supa noticed white stockings honoring its front paws. A fluffy and quite delightful dog, its fur unspoiled because still young. She knelt, clicked her fingers, smiled; she allowed out a low maternal call that had not escaped her heart and lips since many years. The dog dropped its head; it retreated with a reproachful noise, more growl than whimper. Still kneeling, Ms. Supa sidled forward. She held out an open palm. Another retreat. She rose and walked toward it; the dog cantered away, looking over its shoulder with aversion. It was a female.

For long minutes Ms. Supa offered friendship to this beautiful light-brown-and-white dog, yet, despite all her arts, all the self-control of her age, their relation grew more tense. She sat and waited, careless of sand clots on her sarong. To her sorrow, once spared her calls and smiles, the dog played. Not with her, all by itself, at a distance. It pounced upon lumps of beach as if they were mice, snuffed, rolled on

its back, ran in a circle looking at its tail, vigorously dug an entrance to a nonexistent cave, ran along the waterside, stopped dead. Self-confident, it now sat upright; it looked out at the horizon, toward India, toward the long-ago places first to hear the Four Truths. This dog was a loner. Like Ms. Supa only more showy about it. Downcast, irritated, she padded home, eyes on the ground. She saw again the feathery tail and white paws, the lovely white bib on its breast. And the light-brown fur, wasn't it touched with gold?

As she checked her excrement—liquid and solid—for traces of blood, an image returned to her of the trotting dog, its carefree gait as if puppyhood's last comment upon its short dog's life under the sun, the rain. "Before we were formed," thought Ms. Supa, "his compassion waited for our lives, and his compassion will wait for our next life and for the next, mine, the brown dog's, even the life of that idiot who made up those idiot wedding dresses that are ruining my peace of mind." Then she felt remorse; her soul had begun a good thought then turned it evil.

Next morning the brown-and-white dog sniffed the chicken bone she threw toward it, picked it up, ran off a ways, gnawed off the gristle. However, at Ms. Supa's approach the fine creature kept a greater distance than before. It, she, no longer cocked her ears to look at Ms. Supa; her lips drew back on her teeth; she retreated, hostility raising the nape of her neck. The dog suspected Ms. Supa. There matters froze, she with her cravings for a dog, and the lovely dog with no cravings for anything to do with Ms. Supa, except chicken bones. A canary-yellow sun topped the eastern hills and set to roasting the beach. Ms. Supa headed home before the sand turned scorching underfoot. Her heart was heavier than when she woke, purposing to befriend the dog and be loved by it.

### *Heavy Boy*

The next morning no sooner did Ms. Supa straighten up—she had just emptied the washing bucket into the road—then there stood Heavy Boy. He had stopped dead in midstride; this was not rare. His

mouth was neatly closed; that was unusual. Thus, due to not revolting her gaze away from the moron's gaping maw, pink, black, and wet, like that of an elephant, something struck Ms. Supa. Since the wedding-dresses business her attention had become excitable, irritated, like a bad electrical connection spitting sparks. Yes, Heavy Boy had received a crew cut. This barbering made him uglier, but that wasn't it. It was his hair. The roots were all white. Twelve years of age, he is dying already, thought Ms. Supa. He's born maimed, grown inhumanly fat, imbecile, frightened, and now dying. She nodded at him—recognition but not encouragement. If encouraged by a smile Heavy Boy had been known to seize a handful of her garment, cling, and weep. Loudly. This yowling, understood Ms. Supa, merely responded to kindness; she knew the impulse in herself. Her memory alighted on her own tears after first sexual relations, tears for which her brand-new husband had whacked her about the head and cheeks, calling her a fat-headed moron, an open-mouthed idiot. She turned her back on Heavy Boy, unwanted alive or dead. His feet slapped the macadam as he waddled past, put into motion by her silent dismissal. Yes, his hair was going white—she peered after the over-size skull as he lumbered west toward the sea, fat dimpling the crevice behind each knee, enormous buttocks jiggling inside electric blue shorts. I wonder, thought Ms. Supa, if he fouls his underwear still. As for a woman's period, what were we supposed to do about it: "grow up"? Die?

### *Tai!*

Wrapped once more by her own house—its walls still a touch damp with dew—wrapped too by a sentiment of failure, Ms. Supa decided to get rid of that buffalo. In seconds it was decided, and no sooner decided than she knew why. She was finished, but finished, "waiting" for this man. He had married somebody in some country, he had AIDS, he was dead, he was in the clink, he was rich, he was a leper—whatever—he would never return to Thailand and if he did she would never know it, and in sum, a net of sharp grasses and slobber covered his nose ears teeth eyes and muzzle, and why bother

seeing him in her imagination as she fell asleep? *Tai!* Dead! as good as. Light an incense stick, or maybe a green mosquito coil would suit better: let his head and stooped shoulders be carried off upon his useless buffalo that she had kept waiting for him for nine years. The one thousand two hundred square meters of farmland would go nowhere, and do nothing, for he was nowhere and doing nothing—not for or with her. A mynah bird honked its four-note call from the windowsill. The image of a bull buffalo braying after a cow invaded her mind, then a recall of vaginal pain in her first days with that man. Now Ms. Supa hammered her thoughts into sturdy blades as she knew how to do; she sliced the village, house by house, into good, better, and best probability of a buyer. Who was able to buy this beast? Whose vanity exceeded his common sense? That afternoon she left the house. Darkness and success mellowed her return. Not only was that brute sold, she carried a box of green mosquito coils free for nothing; priced twenty-five baht at Poon's grocery; twenty baht at the supermarket.

### *Born a White Egret, a Wasp*

The very day that the buyer led away her, or rather his, buffalo, Ms. Supa, on her way to Thalang post office, found herself halted on the road, gazing upon buffalo. Amid sunlight pools and formidable shadows deep within the rubber grove—innumerable trees laid out in alleys running from the main road up to the great sill where agricultural plain irrupted into mountainside, somber and chaotic under rising tiers of jungle—a community of buffalo grazed, patrolled by dead-white egrets. They hinted to her mind a hierarchy of life rising toward or falling away from whatever ideal one was supposed to strive for, to live properly in order to attain a higher form. As she stared, there also appeared and disappeared, as if weapons revealed then hidden, the beaks and heads of haunting jays. She turned off the motor: silence spread from the motorbike out into the grove. The silence touched, one by one, the heavy-horned buffalo, necks bowed, dangerous yet helpless, bodies the color of pewter, death, thunderclouds, ugly as old age and as heartbreaking. If only, thought Ms. Supa, the

brown dog trusted me, it could be coming with me, to Thalang, in the bike basket. She was not a big dog; her eyes were bright, brighter than my eyes now, thought Ms. Supa. Here is the paradox of loyalty, she thought on, had I not been loyal I would not be alone; if only I had a sister; to a sister I could explain the wedding dresses, I would not be thinking still about the wedding dresses. I would not be thinking that I might as well have been born a buffalo as a woman, or better still, a white egret. Yes, a white egret that, with no fear, rides on a buffalo back, then flies at night to be silent and wise among the beloved trees. She hesitated, hoping for something merciful to come out of the afternoon furnace, the glaring sunlight, but nothing happened.

Ms. Supa was in better luck at the post office. First, it was open. Second, the chatty niece of the fish lady from Ban Nai Yang market attended to the counter, not the fat-faced lecher from Ban Phokhla. Back home, nourished by gossip, Ms. Supa felt, as each time, both satisfaction and grief at launching the two letters toward the far-off prison. She changed into her black sarong and sat outside for the sunset. Yes, she would think about the dog and yes about the wedding dresses. It could not be helped—the way her mind turned or refused to turn; she had been born a woman this time, not a wasp, its dwelling in some tall dead tree, first to see the sunrise, first to see the sunset.

### *Pretty as a Whore*

While the sun was still orange, Poon's maternal cousin—the tall thief, face checkered by acne—came abreast of her house; on his arm, or rather half-hiding behind him and clutching his right arm with both hands, the crazy sister in her blue dress. Ms. Supa assumed a mild expression so as not to further terrify the terrified girl. This young woman left her house only with her brother or uncle; they walked her as one does a pet animal. Were her eyes and lips not awry with fear, she'd have been as pretty as a whore—a slim figure, long black hair, and big eyes; a bit Chinese come to think of it. A peculiarity, a second peculiarity, that is, was the blue dress. Had anyone ever spied her in any other garment? Quite a good dress, flattering, seductive

even, but at odds with such a cowering creature. The girl ventured a glance toward Ms. Supa. From that screwball look, mused Ms. Supa, you'd have thought she had seen a cobra coiled round the toilet hole; she'll never get sane. To make his proper *wai* to Ms. Supa the acned brother had to tug free the arm on which his sister hung, not quite managing to join his two hands. This alarmed the girl; she clutched all the harder. Just then Ms. Supa pictured the beautiful brown dog; how delightful it would be right this minute to have this dog sitting by her knees, to rest a hand on its neck and feel it growl at this scoundrel. A wrongful image popped into her mind, a wrongful impulse—tomorrow dawn she would wait on the beach for the dog; she would appeal to it for compassion, the dog's pity for her, for her life and for her suffering and death. She would bow. She gave the smirking thief a nod, did not return his *wai*. Let him be conscious of her superior age.

### *Mirror*

The sun had gone white at the horizon. She stood just outside her house, mind blank. A mynah bird perched on a tile at the corner of the roof inexplicably opened its beak, thus dropping a handsome length of twine of that rough brown quality used for securing heavy parcels. A piece of twine inestimably valuable for a nest. The bird squatted and gaped. It hunched there on the cracked tile, beak open, staring at who knows what out of idiot yellow eyes. Its feathers fluffed outward as in rage or as in death.

“So much for all our talk,” muttered Ms. Supa, firming seamed lips. “So much for talk, even were someone here to listen.”

She looked through the window into her home. There hung the mirror from its wire and nail in the wall, above the green plastic trolley, one wheel broken off, that served to store soap bars, a scraping stone for dead skin, a bottle of shampoo, two scouring brushes, a grey bleach bottle economy size, and the two knife blades that long ago had lost their handles. Because, thought Ms. Supa, there is nothing to steal here, no one will come calling, looking right and left while pretending to seek my advice. A last sunbeam angled across the room,

its rays confused by dirt that fouled the west window. There is the mirror, she thought, glimpsing in it her tufts of white hair. There is the mirror, one layer of blank glass, a nothing, and behind it one layer of silvery stuff. And looking in are all the different people. A blank layer, like me, and in back of that a silvery layer—the people who once mattered. They look for something to steal. She brought a hand toward her face as if to pluck away a strand of hair or a thread once there. In the mirror, of course, a bride costumed in brocaded sheath and gorgeous tiara raised a hand, reaching toward something invisible—the shape of time.