

Miss Ang Has a Very Comfortable Life

by Caleb Powell

"Is all life suffering?" Miss Ang asked as she parked in front of the brothel. The concrete monstrosity stood humble and lost in appearance, but the locals knew what transpired there, as did the truckers and businessmen that frequented the Phetkasem Highway heading to or from Kanchanaburi. Two young women sat at a plastic white table underneath an awning. Behind them, steps led to rooms on the second and third floors. One side a vacant storefront, debris, crates, plastic bags with flies buzzing, on the other side a garage, used tires, boxes of auto parts, and a few mechanics sitting around waiting for their next client. Ambitious plans for the outpost had transformed into piles of rebar and corrugated aluminum stacked at the foundation of the half-finished structure standing in front of an expanse of farmland. She agreed with the Buddhist precept. Yes. All life is suffering.

A young girl came down stairs carrying an infant swaddled in white cloth. The girl, Jongchit, seemed particularly tiny now that she had given birth. Despite the heat, Jongchit did not wipe sweat off her brow or the sleeping infant's face as she handed Miss Ang the baby. Though Miss Ang had been doing this for years, when she first saw the newborn she had to suppress overwhelming sadness. She would never feel completely at ease with her role, knowing these mothers gave their babies up, forever. She attempted to be firm yet caring. Miss Ang kissed the baby, a girl, on the forehead. The child, not yet a day, sneezed and nestled her head into the cloth.

Miss Ang asked, "How many times has she fed?"

"Four times. Like you told me, I did not breastfeed," Jongchit said, and she pointed to a canvas bag given by Miss Ang, with purified water and formula along with the plastic bottles.

Miss Ang strapped the baby in the car seat, the safety device a luxury, as children often rode in laps in rural Thailand. Miss Ang buckled and tucked the sleeping child. Jongchit did not pay attention as she made herself comfortable in the front seat. Miss Ang had advised Jongchit to give birth at a hospital, but Jongchit insisted on remaining in the brothel, and had worked almost until labor. Another practice that Miss Ang disapproved, but what could she do?

Sometimes bonds formed between mother and child, but most mothers could be convinced. The argument did not ask for much persuasion. Miss Ang would say, "What can you give? Who will take care of it when you are working? Will you even find time to work? You will have even less money. This way is better, this way the child will have a home, two parents, and financial security. Here your child will be a bastard. And what about you? You must take care of yourself. It is for the best."

When Jongchit suspected she was pregnant she had sent a message to Miss Ang. Miss Ang came to the brothel and took Jongchit to a doctor for an examination. She tested HIV positive. But hope remained for the conception. Inside the air-conditioned Toyota, Miss Ang asked Jongchit if she took all her Nevirapine. Miss Ang brought doses and the formula, and often reminded the women how important antiretroviral drugs were in preventing HIV-1 infected mothers from passing the virus to their fetuses. Though Nevirapine had risks, they did not outweigh the fact that without the drug the baby would have a greater than ninety percent chance of carrying HIV. With Nevirapine, and provided the mother did not breastfeed, the baby had less than a five percent chance of carrying the virus. If the baby tested positive there would be no money.

They drove toward Bangkok. For Miss Ang, calculations became second nature. Prices fluctuated, but a healthy baby could give Miss Ang about 150,000 Baht or more in revenue. In one year she took to Bangkok about fifteen to twenty babies from brothels in Nakhon Pathom Province. Miss Ang profited from the babies, but she gave generously. She went to the nearby Kuun Si monastery and paid

alms. She helped mothers who contracted AIDS. Miss Ang earned enough to own a car and house. She lived comfortably.

Couples paid the Thai Adoption Board twenty thousand US dollars or more to adopt. Of the money Miss Ang received, she would give 40,000 Baht to Jongchit. Miss Ang had seen the Baht rise above seventy and drop below forty to the US dollar, but no matter the exchange rate, the sum of 40,000 a modest fortune, especially considering twenty Baht could buy a bowl of soup with noodles, and a Thai trucker paid the brothel 200 Baht for sex. A month's rent in a concrete room with a fan, bed, and one electrical outlet cost less than 1,200 Baht. After medicinal costs, doctor visits, and what she gave to charity, Miss Ang might take home less than Jongchit.

Some girls wanted to become pregnant, and survived as quasi-surrogates. One prostitute had three babies before she turned sixteen, but she contracted HIV during her fourth pregnancy. Another, even though she had AIDS, would not give up her child. She ran away and three months later her gaunt body was found in an abandoned hut behind a farm, lesions from Kaposi's sarcoma spread over her yellow skin, clutching her dead baby. Then there were the mothers that committed suicide. In twelve years only four that she knew about, one before birth, and the other three after the baby had been sold. Jongchit would be better off living at a monastery or Christian house, where at least she would be taken care of while she died, but often girls like her stayed in the brothel. Miss Ang distributed condoms. The girls said they used protection, yet Miss Ang did not know to what extent.

Miss Ang did not consider herself a mercenary, but rather someone who mitigated suffering. She improved lives, had been able to pay for two brothers' and one niece's education, and had bought her parents a house in Chiang Mai. She had told her family she worked in the medical field, and then she moved away to the countryside.

Fifteen years ago Miss Ang left her parents' home to work in a factory in Bangkok. She lived in a dorm and labored as almost a slave making garments. But Bangkok had opportunities. Her friends

dated foreigners, and from them she met a German, Hans. Hans could speak enough Thai to communicate, and they dated. But Hans had a family in Stuttgart.

She lived as his *mia noi*, or "minor wife," for over a year, a practice frowned upon but tolerated in Thai society. The upper class Thai men often took a *mia noi*. Thus she quit the factory, lived in a modern apartment in downtown Bangkok, and met other Thai paramours. These women prepared her for the inevitable, the fact the men always left. Hans treated her with kindness, or at least he gave money freely, and she even hoped that they might love one another. But this naïve thought disappeared when it became apparent that he would leave. Miss Ang, though not surprised, had felt devastated.

When they arrived at the British clinic, just outside Bangkok, Miss Ang buzzed and used her English, "Miss Ang here."

Inside, a nurse led Jongchit down a hall. Jongchit would look at her baby one last time, perhaps kiss her, hold her, cry, or perhaps not. If the baby turned out to be HIV positive or have other serious problems they would send her to a Catholic orphanage in a heartbreaking corner of Bangkok.

Jongchit emerged, accompanied by a nurse. Jongchit sat next to Miss Ang and said nothing; she just cultured a blank stare. Miss Ang leaned over and asked if everything was okay. Jongchit nodded. Then the nurse called Miss Ang over and explained that so far the infant appeared healthy. Miss Ang filled out paperwork, and departed with Jongchit to await the test results.

Relief and satisfaction swirled in Miss Ang's head as they drove back to Nakhon Pathom. Miss Ang consoled Jongchit, or maybe only herself. She described the love adopted parents could give, of mountains and beaches, clean air, giant houses where everyone had two cars, a refrigerator full of food, and regular doctor visits. But Jongchit's spirit seemed to have disappeared. Miss Ang could not discern the girl's heart, for she stayed silent the entire drive back to the brothel. Before Jongchit left Miss Ang told her, "When you start

to become sick, you can contact me." But Jongchit only nodded, and then said, "Please put the money in my bank account. I thank you and now I return." Miss Ang watched her walk back up the stairs. She might never see Jongchit again. What could Miss Ang do? She had seven other pregnant women to attend to, two had tested HIV positive, and she had much work that week. But that would be later, her day finished.

She returned to her home, by Thai standards upper class, serviced by a maid, with electricity, plumbing, even air conditioning, kitchen appliances, and a television. Miss Ang did not drink very often, but after a trip to Bangkok she had her ritual, beginning with a glass of wine. She asked herself, does suffering end? After a few sips she went to her bedroom closet and pulled out a teak box. She sat on her couch in the coolness, removed the dark brown wood lid, and pulled out a faded grey cloth. The cotton fabric had never been washed, and a smear of blood remained. She unfolded, and then embraced the cloth, stroking the worn material. Her hand ran back and forth over the crimson, almost black stain. Stroking. Stroking. Stroking. And she felt the presence of her daughter. Her daughter recently would have celebrated her thirteenth birthday. And she certainly had a comfortable life. Yes. How happy she must be!

