

# THE QUARRY

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Attached

‘WHERE IS THE MONEY?’

‘I – I...’

‘WHERE IS IT?’

‘My – my – my friend...’ her voice vanished. Ploy cried, and Ton stood silent, sympathising. Their empathy would not save her. The salty taste of tears wet her mouth. The strike hit her skin, and every muscle in her body contracted.

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The rooster crowed and the sun had not yet risen. Dim was already awake. Her tailbone rubbed through the thin mattress against the wooden floor as she struggled to find a comfortable position. Only a few more minutes, she thought. Her siblings piled up next to her like puppies unconsciously fighting for the warmest spot. Ton was at the other end, still like a mummy, wrapped in the only blanket that was to be shared, while Ploy clung to her own hug, shaking like a leaf caught in a typhoon. Dim stood up and spread the blanket equally over her siblings before covering herself in a floral green and gold sarong. She felt the chill of the morning breeze as she stepped into the dusk. Drizzling, shiver-awakening showers were heard in the distance and Dim dipped the bucket into the river before releasing the bitterness over herself. The drizzle bit her skin like a pile of nails, digging deeper into her bones with every douse. Deprived of physical sensation, Dim shakily changed into torn shorts and a faded purple tee, and the tingling de-goosing skin eventually generated a radiating feeling.

The jetty was slippery and as she walked, Dim continuously imagined a scene in which she would fall silently into the river. She didn't have the faintest idea of how to swim. She had been afraid of depths ever since she remembered herself. Dim recollected that deep within the lifespan of her unconscious soul, was a coda, situated somewhere in the depths of an unknown darkness. Dim's passage of thought was disturbed when she discovered her grandmother in the kitchen, already cooking her dumplings.

'Yai! What are you doing? You don't have to do my work!'

'Mai pen rai, child. The freezing breeze has already awakened me, and since I have nothing to do, I might as well help you. Your mother is already gone, so we have to hurry.'

'Yai ka, have you chopped everything?' Dim asked.

'Oh, yes child. I have chopped the sweet lettuce, the garlic and ground the chicken already. Why don't you fry the ingredients while I grind the peanuts? You fry it just the way I taught you remember?'

Dim was very talented when it came to memorizing recipes and methods of how to prepare Thai delicacies. In fact, she was so gifted that her mother withdrew her from school as she concluded that there was more advantage in having Dim cooking

and selling treats at the street corner of Lad Phrao 68, than being brainwashed by a governmental figure. Dim poured the oil over the wok pan before throwing in the garlic. The fumes dominated her senses.

‘Hom jang, gratiem lan sao,’ her grandmother sang as a compliment.

‘Kob khun ka, Yai,’ Dim thankfully replied and added the ground chicken, stirring it sharply. She dropped the sweet lettuce into the blend and continued stirring before adding the palm sugar along with other flavours. She measured the soy sauce with great attention, never less than three splashes and never more than five. Too much saltiness easily destroyed the entire process, while too little saltiness resulted in dull-looking dumplings. The perfect portion of soy sauce produced a finger-licking tastiness, good-looking dumplings and a successful day of vending. Therefore, perfection was essential.

‘Oh, you’re at that stage already! Hang on; let me add the peanuts,’ her grandmother exclaimed. Dim stirred the dish until it was non-sticky, and a smile snuck through her lips. The aroma watered her mouth while her tummy trembled for a taste.

‘Now take the wok pan off the stove dear and put a smaller pot on for the garlic.’

She took the ground garlic and soaked it in vegetable oil before putting it on the stove to be heated. Meanwhile, she joined her grandmother in kneading the filling into small beads. Then she drained the tapioca pearls, which had been soaking overnight, added four tablespoons of vegetable oil, and gave the dough a light massage. It was astonishingly soft. Those dumplings would melt so nicely in one’s mouth that there would be little need for chewing. Once again, she smiled, frothing over her own creation. Not a single soul would find her dumplings undesirable. The smell of the filling was still haunting, as Dim struggled not to lick her dumpling-infused fingers.

‘That’s perfect dear! Now let us knead the filling into pockets of tapioca shall we? We are running out of time,’ her grandmother said.

Dim took a bead and just the right amount of tapioca and rubbed it around the bead, sealing it perfectly. The mouth-watering, stomach-crumbling process of steaming took an hour, and then the dumplings were ready to hit the road. Dim’s grandmother soaked the cooked dumplings with garlic oil while Dim placed them

neatly on the stall, and strew fried garlic over them as a final touch. The dumplings stood on the show-table, incredibly proud for being dumplings, her dumplings, Dim thought. The slightly visible kneads shone beautifully through the transparent pockets of tapioca pearls, with their light garnish of garlic. They were the rulers of the stall's kingdom, kings and queens dominating over all other dumplings in the Universe.

'Have you washed the cabbage and the chilli dear?' her grandmother asked when the stall was otherwise ready for departure.

'No I haven't!' Dim replied and hurriedly washed what was to be served with every portion of *Saku Sai Gai*. Dim imagined the cabbage and the chilli being servants of her highnesses. Ton and Ploy were already up and about, picking at Dim's majesties when they thought she wasn't looking.

'HEY! You can only take two pieces each!' she said, slightly annoyed.

Dim secretly examined Ton's abraded back as he stood devouring the savoury, feeling sorry for him. She could feel the twinge splitting her skin, thinking about it. It hadn't been his fault. That bastard girl of their father was the one to blame. The coal on her face obviously gave it away, but their father took his second-wife's side, blaming Ton for the trouble that spoiled brat had caused. Their useless father regularly made up his own truths, intoxicated by distilled sugarcane residues, causing trouble, which was not as private as he tended to think, rather it was trouble for everyone but him. His unreliable facts were nothing but rubbish, for which their repressed and co-dependent mother constantly fell victim. Dim's self-claimed responsibility was to endure that misery to protect her younger siblings. Love was nothing but an infinite torment she thought, for which she was determined never to fall. Dim had no chance of protecting her brother this time. Indistinct utterances in the dust, her objections were. Without shedding a single tear, Ton had stood steady as a bull while his back was torn to shreds. He stood for his dignity, like an honest person would, for he had no reason whatsoever to light his own house on fire.

'Thank you Pee Dim! The dumpling was absolutely yummy-yum-yum!' he called out with a smile that melted her heart. Nothing took that boy's joviality away, no matter how often he was unfairly and hard-heartedly treated.

'I'm happy you liked it nong chai.'

Ploy was hiccupping like a stressed baby. It made Dim feel uneasy, since hiccups always meant something bad.

‘You silly-bean! You ought to drink water when you chew on the dumpling. Your throat is too small to chew it like pee Ton.’

Dim gave Ploy a glass of water, which she drank like a thirsty dog. Dim made sure she swallowed the hiccup away before leaving, since that silly toddler could easily forget that it had a hiccup, heaven forbid, whatever it could bring about.

‘I’m off guys. Take care of yourselves and behave so you won’t get into trouble... and don’t leave your hiccups unattended!’ Dim said before taking off with the stall. She was wearing the new apron that her grandmother gave her. It was yellow in colour with a detachable money-pocket. There were still a few coins in it from yesterday’s salary, however her mother had certainly emptied it from the day before, leaving nothing but necessary change. Her grandmother stood looking at her, smiling.

‘Chok dee na, lan sao! Kho hai ram hai ruai na ja!’ she said in a teasing voice. Dim placed her palms together and lowered her head.

‘Kob khun ka yai.’

‘No need to *Wai* for me dear, I know how grateful you are.’

The traffic slowed Dim down, as she hurriedly pushed the stall towards her destination. Kids clad in white shirts and navy bottoms howled continuously as they sat at the back of moped-taxis, passing through much quicker than the standstill cars. Vendors were already sweating heavily. Impatient customers had their eyes fixed on their watches and Dim could hear their bellies crumbling. She sped up, for she knew that time was money.

Dim wondered if Fon would join her in the afternoon. She had never introduced or mentioned her to her mother. Dim’s mother didn’t like people who weren’t family.

‘They can’t be trusted,’ she stressed over and over again.

Fon had been incredibly helpful for the past few weeks, coming over every other day. They used to go to the same school, before Dim was pulled out to work. Fon helped Dim with the customers and kept her company. She was pretty funny, but sometimes she expressed childish behaviour. It got on Dim’s nerves slightly, but most of the time she ignored the fact that she often found Fon annoying. Dim thought it

was better to have some company rather than no company at all. Fon had never invited Dim to her home, or told her where she lived, neither had Dim invited Fon to her house, for that matter. Dim was surprised to see the first customer of the day already waiting at her spot. Perhaps not so surprising anymore, it was the boy who had been her first customer daily for the past three weeks.

‘Two portions, krab,’ he ordered his usual, with a big grin on his face. Dim put ten pieces of dumplings in two separate boxes and placed them in a plastic bag before adding fresh cabbage and chillies. The boy was obviously excited to receive his first meal of the day. Dim couldn’t help but wonder what he found more exciting; eating her dumplings or touching her hand.

‘Kob khun krub, khun suay,’ he said staring at Dim, waiting for her to respond. She felt quite awkward.

‘Mai pen rai’ she said, and he thankfully took off. Flirting was such an awkward act, she thought, especially when she had no interest in getting involved with anything that had to do with love. Dim hoped that he would give up his hopes soon enough, he would have better luck flirting with Fon.

There were always two peak hours during the day in which the dumplings disappeared like a spill in the searing sun; the mornings between seven and nine and the afternoons between three and five. Normally, Dim would be out of dumplings at three thirty. Fon joined her at noon, chewing on two, then three dumplings, and babbling about her day. Dim had saved some money that she kept in a secret pocket in one of her two long-pants which she would use to pay for Fon’s dumplings later that afternoon. Expressing gratitude was something her grandmother had taught her. As Fon bragged about a boy she had a crush on, Dim wondered if Fon appreciated her generosity, but Dim’s attention was caught upon hearing the word *Silom*.

‘SILOM?’ Dim replied flabbergasted; ‘That is like two hours away and only rich people live there!’

‘I know right!’ Fon replied; ‘He said that he would get me a job.’

‘What kind of a job?’ Dim replied suspiciously.

‘Oh who cares when it’s in Silom! Probably at a hotel or something. I will be working around the rich and wealthy and in the end that will get me a rich man and a

very nice life,' Fon said. Dim decided to keep her mouth shut, as she didn't wish to ruin Fon's fantasies. A girl, merely a teenager would never get a job at a nice hotel in Silom. There was something dodgy about that boy of hers, Dim thought, he was most likely a third-rate character, that is to say, *if* he was real.

About fifty dumplings were left and peak hour was approaching when Dim realised she couldn't hold it out without going to the toilet. Fon recognised her agony.

'Are you all right?' she asked.

'I really need to pee... Would you mind watching over the stall and taking care of the customers for 5 or 10 minutes, please?'

'Ohh I thought you were unwell! I don't mind at all! I will guard the stall with my life and sell the dumplings like a pro,' she said with a cunning grin on her face.

'Thank you... I will leave you with the apron in case you will need some change if it gets busy.' Dim said. Without thinking, she took off her apron and sprinted towards the toilet.

Her need was great enough that Dim worried she would indeed wet herself. An attempt of ripping the door open failed for it was locked, leaving her agonized. Dim lowered her clenched legs and secretly pushed against her lady pocket, swearing she would have it cut off. The waiting felt like an entire lifetime. It was Lung Pui that eventually came out, the vendor from across the street. Ashamed, he looked at Dim as he saw her releasing the hold of her nose.

'Oh, hey Dim, I didn't realise it was you... I am so sorry about the stench in there... I got a slight food poisoning,' he looked at her guiltily as he wiped the sweat off his forehead. He did look sick indeed. Dim rushed into the toilet without offering any kind of comfort to Lung Pui. She had already watered herself slightly, and the rest was due to escape if she failed to hit the bowl in time. A euphoric reflex ventured throughout her body like a flux of released feelings of repression, but Lung Pui's horrendous odour managed to make its way to Dim's senses all the same. She began retching uncontrollably, and ran out as if being chased by a noxious ghost. It wasn't until the toilet was out of her sight that the retching finally stopped. And a hiccup throbbed her throat like a Glawng Yao. Dim was *petrified*. She ran towards her stall convinced that something bad was happening. She worried about the various scenarios of Fon's troubles, was she being bribed? Whatever it was, something was

not right. Dim squinted her eyes to make sight of the stall in distance as she ran. Speed increased with every step as the sight of the stall became clearer.

The stall was vacant, abandoned. The fifty or so dumplings vanished, and Fon was nowhere to be seen. Dim circled around the stall in a panic. She wondered if her savings were enough to replace the loss, the chances were slim. Thinking back to her younger brother, knowing she was bound to receive the same fate; the skin-cutting strikes, the blood streaming and the scars to be left on her skin, made her shake like Ploy this morning, the leaf caught in a typhoon. She spotted her apron few metres away from the stall and ran towards it, full of perhaps unrealistic, desperate expectations.

Later, when Dim's back was beginning to heal slightly, Lung Pui claimed to have spotted Fon disappearing onto a bus with a bag full of dumplings in one hand, and Dim's detachable pocket in the other. She seemed to have quit school; for Ton never saw her there after the theft, and neither did the entire neighbourhood. It was a peculiar case; it was as if the earth had swallowed her. Recalling that boy she had mentioned, Dim deliberated whether *Silom* had befallen her.