

Thai fiction

immortal

TRANSLATED FROM THE THAI BY MARCEL BARANG

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03:00 read the digital clock. Phrommin still couldn't keep his eyes closed. He wanted to sleep, but the more he wanted to the more his thoughts kept him awake. He tossed left and right and sighed deeply. He had been sweating profusely since he went to bed at eleven last night. At times he felt so incensed he almost got up to bang on the walls just to settle his nerves. The venom of sleeplessness was like a burning fire.

His wife turned and presented her back to him. She was luckier than he was as she could sleep by fits and starts. Even though she wasn't sound asleep, she still could get some rest; she wasn't tormented and agitated like him.

'What's bothering you?' she asked.

Phrommin stepped out of bed and went to sit on the easy chair by the window, taking deep breaths to try to calm himself.

His wife rose too, stretched her arm to switch the lamp on, and then moved to sit up against the bedstead. Soft yellow light illuminated her thickset body draped in a nightgown. She was half-Thai, half-

Chinese, but her soft features were decidedly Thai. Her hair was wavy and cut straight at the nape. Her skin was deeply wrinkled, especially on her forehead, at the corners of her eyes and on her neck, which was only natural for a woman of fifty. She had striking eyes, pensive and worried at all times – the eyes of someone who never knows peace of mind. She looked at her husband, rather indistinct in the lamplight. She guessed he must have a big problem, something momentous, because he had never behaved like this throughout all the years they had been married.

‘If there’s something you want to tell me, go ahead.’

She freed herself of the blanket, stepped out of bed, went to sit in the easy chair opposite him and waited for him to speak while trying to guess what it would be about. As for him, he pondered how to begin so that he wouldn’t scare her too much.

Then he spoke.

‘I think the time has come.’ He rested his elbows on the arms of the seat, rubbed his temples and stared at the carpet as if finding his words there. ‘For several days now my joints have been killing me. The professor did a check-up and he says I am suffering from arthritis.’

She stared at him while holding her breath, wishing that what she thought wouldn’t happen.

‘My body is beginning to deteriorate with age. So I think it’s time to fix it. I’ve been procrastinating for far too long.’

She didn’t hear a single word of the last sentence,

because there was a buzzing in her ears and she had grown numb.

He understood how she felt. 'I don't want to do it, but it's necessary.'

'Isn't there any other way?' Her voice was hoarse.

He shook his head. 'I want to solve the problem at source, not merely treat the symptoms of the illness, because no matter what it won't go away. This ailment is torture, you know.'

'And won't it be torture for him?'

'No.' His tone was firm. 'We won't let him suffer.'

'I really can't take it.' Her voice was shaky.

'I understand,' he said in a conciliatory tone. 'Me neither. That's why I can't sleep. But no matter how much it hurts, I will have to accept it, because it's necessary. How can I go on working if I keep hurting like this? Our children aren't experienced enough yet to do all the work for me. We've more than a thousand companies. Besides, and more importantly, I want to have a long life without suffering, so we can be together forever.'

She had told him many times she'd never do the Immortality programme like him after he had taken it over from his father. She was happy to let her life run its natural course, rather than being hacked to bits and take someone else's life to extend her own.

'Can't you give him one more year?' she pleaded, even though she hadn't the slightest hope.

'I'm fifty-five already. The more we wait, the more difficult it'll be. Sooner or later it's got to be done. If it's

done soon, it's good for me. As for him, he'll have done his duty. You won't have to suffer any longer either. And when my life is fine again, everybody – the three million people plus – will also be fine.' He meant his employees, both at home and abroad.

'We've raised him like our own son.' Then her tears came. It was hopeless to plead with him any further.

He tried to comfort her by saying, 'No matter how we've raised him, we must accept the truth. He isn't our son – he isn't even one of us. He's only a part of me, and he's been made for the purpose of being of use to me.'

No point in arguing. No point in pleading. No-one could get in his way. She stood up to leave, but didn't know where to go to escape the sorrow that overwhelmed her heart. Then she opened the door and went out of the bedroom, leaving him sitting alone in the dim light.

In the morning, when Phrommin went downstairs to eat breakfast before going to work, he found his wife sitting with a strained face on the sofa in the living room. He greeted her normally. 'Have you eaten yet?'

She shook her head and without looking at him asked, 'What will you have?'

He told the middle-aged maid who had come in and stood waiting for his order, 'Orange juice and coffee will be enough,' then went to sit down on the chair in front of his wife.

She turned her face away and looked at the small

garden in front of their residence, her eyes glazed as if her soul was already frozen stiff.

Phrommin let out a sigh. He wasn't feeling unhappy because of the other fellow but because of his wife's feelings. 'I know you're disappointed and angry with me, but please try to understand me a little and, if possible, stop thinking about it. I don't want to see you like this. It can only depress us. I'd like to leave the house with a light heart, not dejected and sad like this because I'm worried about how you feel.'

'Don't worry about my feelings. No matter what, I can't accept it, for all that I've tried to. Actually, you're not so much worried about my feelings but about yours. You've said it clearly enough: you want to have a light heart.'

His face tensed up at her retort. 'All right, I accept I'm selfish. Everybody in the world is selfish. So am I wrong? If I'm wrong, so is everybody in the entire world, and even you, who sit here with a long face because you can't get what you want. It's the same thing. It's just a matter of who's got the better reasons.'

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Wimon Sainimnuan, born 1958, is a foremost, if controversial, Buddhism-inspired Thai novelist and short story writer. Through his punchy writings, he pursues a double reflection on the nature of the individual and the social forces that mould and maim it. Among his best-known works is the Khoak Phranang quartet (*Snakes*, *The Medium*, *Khoak Phranang*, *Lord of the Land*), to be found exclusively on thaifiction.com. *Immortal* won him the SEA Write Award in the year 2000.