

# The Dream

When secretary KURUVIN BOON-LONG chose a hamburger as the focus of her first short story, she bit into success in a big way. Her poignant story 'The Dream' earned her the first prize in this year's UNESCO/PEN Short Story Competition. Here is the story, which tells of a boy's dream come true.



He had always wondered what it would taste like. It looked such a joyous thing to eat. All those lovely shades of brown, the sprinkling of seeds on top, and that juicy-looking chunk of meat.

The little boy turned his gaze from the poster glued on the inside of the shop window. He looked over to his mother standing behind her makeshift food stall. He was glad that she was busy. There were three customers hunched over their bowls of noodles, perched on the rickety stools set by the road. A man had ordered a take-away and his mother was ladling the broth into a plastic bag. She then gathered the bag holding the noodles and meatballs and deftly tied the two together, reached out for smaller bags filled the night before with sugar, chilli powder and vinegar, and put them all into a big plastic bag.

He thought the pale green plastic bag did not look as appetising as the big brown paper bags that people carried out of the shop. Those paper bags held so much promise.

He was seven years old. Only the other day he heard his mother discussing his age with the woman selling garlands. He wished he had a younger brother because then being seven would mean something.

His mother called. He ran to her. "Aren't you hungry yet, son?"

He shook his head. He was hungry, but not for noodles. His mother pulled him towards her, ruffled his hair and looked at him thoughtfully. He loved her and wished that they could walk into that shop together to feel what it was like. He had asked her about it and she said that they would, one day.

He knew that the wait had to do with money. He knew that his mother did not have very much because they were not dressed like the people he saw in that shop. Their clothes were always colourful and the children had happy eyes. A lot of them wore very fancy shoes, and when he watched them swinging their legs, waiting for the trays to arrive, he wondered whether he would like wearing shoes. He liked his rubber slippers, but preferred to go barefoot. He liked to feel where he was going.

The shop was getting busy. People were queuing before the counter, looking up at the list. The illuminated pictures of the food looked even better than the paper poster.

Laden trays were carried back to the tables. Children waited. Paper cups



were lifted off, followed by little bags trying to hold in the pale yellow sticks. He noticed that children's hands always reached out for these. Then came the little bundles, wrapped in paper.

The boy salivated although he did not know what it tasted like. His imagination made his stomach rumble in hope.

He watched as a little girl quickly unwrapped hers. She spread the paper out and picked up the food with both hands.

He swallowed:

The two hands were raised to her mouth, which was wide open. He watched her as she bit into the food. A bit of the red sauce oozed out and dropped onto her lap. She put the food down on the paper and, with her index finger, flicked the sauce up and licked it.

He turned to his mother and saw that she was looking at him intently. He smiled and walked to the makeshift kitchen. He pretended to be a customer and ordered a *sen mee nam mai sai phak*. His mother lifted the wire net strainer and made to pick up a fingerful of the thin white noodles. Her gaze went to the shop, and then down at her son. His eyes so bright and brave.

"I'm sorry, but we've sold out of *sen mee*."

The boy laughed out loud. He continued with the game and asked for *kao lao luk chin*.

His mother put the huge tin lid over the steaming broth holder. She walked to the garland lady who was mechanically folding rose petals and threading them on the long needle. His mother squatted down beside her and said something. The boy saw the woman nod, her face pulling up into a crinkly smile.

His mother straightened up, undid her *pha sin* around the waist, pulling out one end to a tension and bringing that end back to the waist and tugging it in. She smoothed down her blouse and pulled back her shoulders, at the same time smoothing her hair. She walked back to her stall and picked up the money tin. It used to hold powdered milk. His mother said it was the first tin of baby milk that she bought for him.

She unscrewed the lid, straining against it till the veins showed on her hand. Rust had taken over but his mother refused to part with it. Inside there were four 20-baht notes and three 100-baht notes, and some coins.

Out came a 100-baht note. She then took the tin to the flower lady for safe-keeping.

His mother called to him.

"Let's go in and find out, shall we?"

The boy looked at his mother to make

certain that she meant what she said, although she had never given him any cause to think otherwise.

She walked over to him, took his hand and together they went up the steps, passed the grinning figure dressed in yellow and red, pushed open the door and walked in.

It was very cool inside. His hands were already cold from anticipation. His mother tightened her grip as if to reassure him.

They stood behind a college student with long dark brown hair tied in a ponytail and both were impressed by the confidence with which she ordered her food. With the exception of iced coffee, her order meant nothing to them.

The girl paid and stepped to one side of the counter to wait while her order was arranged onto a tray.

His mother felt his hand tremble as they moved to stand before the till. The girl behind the counter smiled and said "*Sawatdee Kha*."

His mother looked down at him, questioning with her eyes what he wanted to order. He could not read, he did not know what it was called. He looked at the girl behind the till and pointed to the picture. She said the word that millions of people all around the world took for granted to confirm his order, but to him that word had a magical ring to it. It was not a Thai word and he repeated the sound in his head to memorise it.

The girl asked whether he wanted anything else. He shook his head but asked his mother with his eyes whether she would want something. She, in turn, shook her head almost imperceptibly.

It arrived on a brown plastic tray. A dream wrapped in not-quite-white paper.

The boy reached up for the tray and proceeded to find a table, as he had seen so many people do, his mother following behind.

He clambered onto the swivel seat, thanked his mother, again with his eyes, and reverently unwrapped the little package.

The smell was wonderfully different. Admittedly it did not look as plump as it did in the picture but he did not mind. He picked it up with both hands and, very slowly, bit into it.

He grinned at his mother and loved her even more in his young heart.

Outside, people were looking into the shop. Looking at him. He felt that he was like the other children, all sharing the same liking for this handful of warm, delicious lump of meat and bread. Except for his bare feet.

He curled his toes and uncurled them. No, not having shoes did not bother him. He was living a dream and in dreams shoes did not matter.