



Living with an outlook

The stranger had seen the old lady on his previous visit. It was difficult to tell her age, but then age is relative in the slums where most people are old at forty. He had stopped to buy some of her fish snacks which she cooked on a charcoal griddle in her doorway and sold to passers by. It was really a matter of sharing today's meal to provide the means to buy tomorrow's.

He had stopped long enough to eat his snack and pressed close to the tin wall of her one room home he had learned her name was Loi. A stream of neighbours called it out in greeting as they passed along the narrow two-plank walkway between the close-packed, doubled-stacked homes suspended across the waterfront. There was a uniqueness about the dwellings. Unlike the uniform rows of houses on western estates, these were all different depending on the wood tin and plastic and other materials available when repairs were needed. He could see nothing through the doorway of Loi's home except swirling smoke from the extinguished charcoal against an empty blackness. The single shutter opposite was closed to keep the room cool. He imagined a mattress on the floor, a table and maybe a chair.

He thought of the chair when he saw her now with a stool in her hand. The same tattered dress and blue rubber slippers. It was later in the day this time, and having closed her door she was making her way along the boards where the high water splashed less than a metre below. She carried a folded canvas stool in one hand while with the other she touched the wall, holding on to any protruding object as the boards below her rocked with the passing of a horde of screaming children in pursuit of a rat.

Like children everywhere engaged in games, they were blind to other people, as they were to their surroundings where the smells of sea and sewage mingled those of cooking and kerosene, and gulls shrieked to an accompaniment of loud canned music. Loi stopped at a place where two passages crossed. She unfolded her stool and setting it down in a recess between two shacks, she sat down staring ahead of her.

The stranger approached and greeted her. He was not sure that she remembered him. A breeze snatched at strands of her greasy hair and wafted on to play with a loose blue plastic sheet in the doorway beside her. She turned her face to the stranger. He took in her strangely attractive features. There was a light about her which seemed to squeeze from her eyes, run along the tired lines of her face and lift her mouth into a smile.

Time for a rest, she said wearily.

Why here? asked the stranger. *To catch the breeze?*

Loi lifted one arm and pointed. *You can see the sea.*

The stranger looked in the direction of her pointing finger. At the end of the long passage, intermittently broken by moving bodies, there was a small blot of blue sky between the last two buildings. You could indeed just see the sea meeting the sky. A tiny glimpse of another world. He dare not ask what dreams she had of other places.

The stranger went on his way, but pushed aside by another rush of playful children, he looked back. He saw Loi rise and fold her chair, still looking towards the sea. She carried the stool as she had done before with one hand gripping the wall. A neighbour called to her and taking her arm led her along the walkway. In that moment the stranger recalled her face. The eyes. The way she looked. The careful walk. He had not realised. Loi was blind! The sight of the sea was in her heart.