

Rat in the Rafters
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What do you think everyone wants to do once the COVID-19 is over?

Go on vacation? Visit friends? Throw a party?

Wrong! The real answer is: Everyone wants to divorce!

Maybe it's because partners in quarantine have to share the same tiny space for so long. Whereas before they may have seen each other in the morning and after work, they are now stuck together day and night. They work from home sharing the same space, staring at each other's face every minute, unable to escape for a quick stroll around the block. It's even worse for couples with young children; normally they would be dropped off at school instead of romping around the house all day. People work (*The customer asked you to revise the last part again—nothing much, just change the entire typesetting.*), they attend meetings (*Oh, Mr. Project Manager, my connection at home is bad!*), all the while policing their children (*Cooper, no cartoons now, Daddy's making a call!*) or cracking the door open to accept deliveries (*Oh, the assemble-them-yourself shoes I ordered are here! Taew, fetch the noodles left by the front gate, would ya? And another delivery service on the phone—what did I order this time?*). All of life squeezed inside the four walls of a single-family house or a tiny condominium. This type of life might be tolerable on normal days, but during these pandemic times, the stress of work, daily routines, bills and expenses—the madness reaches a new pitch, running up against the fragility of interpersonal relationships. Every couple has old wounds that return for the picking; ancient matters long since buried, exhumed to be argued anew; and embers that stir until they blaze once again. You end up fighting so much that you can't wait to exit your partner's life once and for all.

It was actually my wife and partner who wanted to split up once the pandemic was over. In fact, we wanted to put distance between us as soon as possible, but given certain economic necessities, we continue to hold each other's hands. Our daily pay decreased while our electric and air conditioning bills shot up, and we have a seven-year-old child clinging to our sides. Staying together should help us survive this crisis as two sets of hands are better than one.

And despite the discomfort of staying together, we at least gain the warm comfort of sharing difficult times with someone. Looking ahead, neither of us can envision the future—when the pandemic will end for sure, or will it will drag on like this forever?

They say that when serious problems emerge in married life, other smaller problems start leaping from the water like carp. For us, the virus is the biggest problem, but it has also made all the smaller ones crawl up from beneath the carpet to make me and my wife want to part ways. Now something similar is happening to our country, with long cracks running down the nation no less than through our household.

Within our country, diverse and sundry problems have accumulated, whether stuffed inside the water regulation pipes or buried in the potholes of these never quite smooth streets or buried out at sea. These problems have joined the host of topics you can only whisper about, with no one daring to voice them any louder. The people's dissatisfaction with the military government; the succession of senseless mandates; the schisms in thought that existed prior to all of this—these are the problems that Thai society has tried to overlook and sidestep time and time again.

But the arrival of the virus was like one enormous wave that shook them all to the surface. And it wasn't only the pandemic: questions about the national budget, questions about the integrity of the courts and the nation's laws, questions about the direction in which the country is headed (which seems contrary to the rest of the global community). They all came gushing out from our heads at once, enraging the people and sending them furiously into the streets—rushing out with the same zeal with which my wife and I wanted to file for divorce at the local courthouse. The pandemic may have riled them up, but the unfair and inequitable parsing of the national budget infuriated them, and the way the protestors were cruelly suppressed had them almost stark raving mad.

Because of COVID, the various issues simmering in Thai society have bubbled up into enormous political rallies, with the people wanting to divorce themselves from the injustice they witness daily. But then, and again because of COVID, these massive gatherings have had to disperse and go their separate ways. Everybody was forced to return home, wipe their hands with alcohol before entering their rooms, remove their masks, and say, *I can't join the crowds anymore. I'll catch it.*

I've wanted to divorce my wife since the first lockdown, but in the end I had to sit by myself at home and say, "Can't yet. Too many bills to pay."

Sit at home, or lie on the sofa, the back of my hand against my forehead, listening to the soft scratching noise whose source I could guess...

There in the rafters was a rat. Each day I could hear it scurrying to one corner above the ceiling, where it had started to gnaw away at some sort of trash. That little rat was collecting things—dust balls, maybe, or scraps of paper, and was using them to pad its den in the rafters above the bedroom.

Many times the sound would bother my wife and keep her awake. Annoyed, she would mutter, "This is no time to be housekeeping, you little rat..."

But it would continue to tidy up its little home, day in and day out. The rat never understood what we were telling it, only trying to live out its life the best it could.

Then came the first storm of the rainy season. We forgot to tell the little rat about the leaky roof over its corner in the attic.

The rainwater came seeping in. My wife brought a bucket to catch the water dripping from above. It looked like the rat's den had already been washed away.

I heard it scamper to the corner and pause, take in the situation, and then finally let out a noise: a single squeal.

It was a sound that shook me to my core.

That little rat was exactly like my wife and I as we struggled to make a den together out of paper scraps and dust balls. We built a house, bought a car, decorated our rooms; we created a life and future for us and our child. But in the bigger houses in which we live—our municipality, our province, our nation—there was a leak the size of which we had never realized.

Or we might have realized but never had the power to do anything about it.

And then at last the monsoon came. An incredible surge of water poured down, destroying everything we had built: razing the home we had paid for in monthly installments, washing away our livelihoods, cutting off other sources of income, and ripping apart the lives we had tried so hard to keep together.

We couldn't do anything except watch our lives fall to ruin and cry out the way worthless creatures do—in half-voices. There was no squealing: for us, only a soft whimper as we stood by and watched our lives fall apart

Waiting for news about the vaccine and other developments, the government's handling of the pandemic became so frustrating that at times my wife and I were uncertain of what cloth our protectors and leaders were cut from: whether they were simply so stupid running the country into the ground, or whether they meant for it to end that way. Did they intend it as punishment for not being children obedient to their rule?

You aren't satisfied with our leadership, then here, take this: a wooden switch for children who won't fall in line. You won't receive the vaccine; you won't have a hospital bed; you won't receive any care at all. No matter how much we cried out for change, there was only worse things to come. Each and every last thing that could be done to us, they did it. All they could take, they took. Even the smallest of hopes their long arms reached down and snatched away.

They simply meant to let us die: this is what the government is doing to us.

After the downpour ended, a change came over that rat in the rafters. Where before it scampered with light feet, always coming back to tend its den in the corner of the attic, its steps were now heavier and its route, erratic. I never did catch sight of it, but I could hear it thudding about and crashing into the walls as if it had gone mad.

My wife couldn't handle it anymore, complaining that it kept her up all night. As for me, I kept seeing it as an image of ourselves and everyone else in society; our lives were being destroyed by a stupid hole in a high place, but, incapable of doing anything else, here we were running in circles inside our homes, bumping into things to deaden the pain that we felt. But the homeowners cared not at all to help—not at all. I myself had no intention of fixing the leak; I couldn't afford to and in any case, it didn't really bother me. All I had to do was put a bucket out when it rained and everything was fine—my home wasn't destroyed like the rat's.

Whoever dwells above and controls our destinies probably feels the same way. Because of our leaky roof, the nation's people are forced to shutter themselves inside their own narrow, individual hells; but for those residing above, the hole is tiny enough that they don't pay much attention. The opulent lives of the upper class are not sufficiently rattled for them to bother repairing the hole. At most, they are simply annoyed that we've become such noisy little rats, bumping into walls and squealing in hopelessness.

How irritating, they're probably thinking, just as we thought about the rat. And one day they will probably do to us what I did to it.

You can be quiet now, you! So they will say as they peel back a small panel in the ceiling and sprinkle poison inside.

And one day, the government will do exactly the same to each of us.