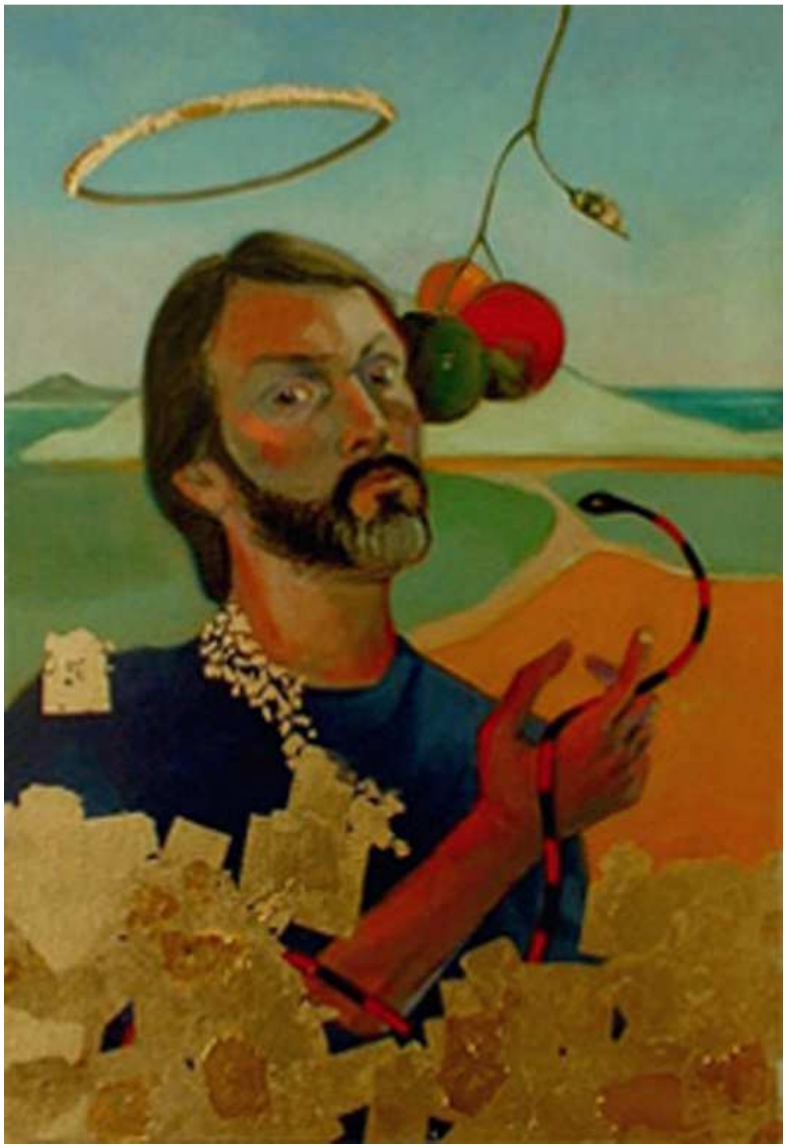

SHROVE TUESDAY

GARDNER RICH

Because I know that time is always time
And place is always and only place
And what is actual is actual only for one time
And only for one place...

And I pray that I might forget
These matters that with myself I too much discuss
Too much explain

T.S. Eliot
"Ash Wednesday"

I knew him in his decline, you might say. Not that he was old, though old age is the taper of one's middle years. And not that he gave the impression of being a ruin, some remnant of stacked stones long abandoned. On the contrary, he possessed something rare: an instinct for living that belied years, even denied them -- but which reduced all the world to one narrow, distorted end.

Our acquaintance was for a few months only. In many ways it was much briefer, and much like a long journey by plane or train in which two unknowns tell all in the tacit assumption, the refuge, that they will never again meet.

Ah, no. A picturesque thought, that... but, perhaps, far too facile.

It was more like sharing a black confessional, one of those lacquered coffins in which one is confessing and damned, the other is absolving and damned. It was face to face, but anonymous. We could have been anybody.

When we finally went our separate ways, I said he should write down what had happened to him and how he had lived. I had said this to him many times before, and at one point he began to fill a slender notebook. The effort was all preamble and came to fifteen pages, first in black ink, then red, which he discarded upon leaving and I later reclaimed. I warned him that if he did not set down how he had lived, someone else might. The implication was not lost on him. In that little notebook, in my possession still, are the words "It is in the hope of helping others to make swifter progress than I, that I have written this book." So this, then, was his intention: an intention, ostensibly, no different from the preamble to the Satyricon of Petronius Arbiter.

But, of course, he did not write the book. I now know he will never set anything down at all. At first I suspected it was no longer in him to write. But now I know his books are behind him.

Then what is this? It is, if you will, a recollection by one who, too, will likely never finish the tale; but one who is different from his subject. I do not know if one of us lives life, while the other lives life vicariously. Idle speculation and possibly foolishness to suppose there may be a rational means to say. I do know, though, that one of us is silent while the other writes as memory serves.

This is just another of life's little injustices.

PART ONE

It was only nine o'clock on the first day, but I was already all in, sitting there, expectantly, at one of several new gray desks. I had just removed the plastic wrap from a new black swivel chair, one of two dozen so wrapped, by pulling it carefully from around the screws in the arms.

Such a small effort, and so much sweat. My ridiculous necktie, even that, was wet. For most of my adult life I had not worn a tie, except by fiat. Now one was required, although it was the hot season turning to rainy. I did not resist. I wanted to wear the tie and to get things right for once. It was a new tie and a new start, with new desks and new chairs and freshly painted walls. It was northern Thailand, where I thought I wanted to be. It was halfway around the world and the end of the line. So, with the plastic removed, I settled down in the new chair and applied myself to the pressing tasks at hand.

I was sorting pens and pencils into nice, neat rows in my top desk drawer when he came in late, gave the room a cursory glance, and plopped his bag down on one of the new gray desks, as though the desk had long been his for the plopping. He opened the bag perfunctorily and removed an odd assortment of papers and books, together with a name plate which he positioned carefully at the desk corner pointing to the door. It read: Ajahn D.B. Noel. It was printed in blue upon yellowish cardboard and mounted in plastic, to announce for all to see that he was an "ajahn", a respected teacher.

He wore the traditional ajahn suit, grayish brown with Nehru collar, short sleeves, epaulets, buttoned pockets and everything neatly pressed. A pair of bifocals depended from a cord around his neck. He was slightly under average height for a Westerner, but square, compact, and wiry, like a steel coil with snap in reserve. In fact, he exuded reserve-- that palpable British correctness of manner which so easily chastens colonials like me, for whom there are few things as daunting as a British accent, provided it is not pinched to the point of caricature. His was on the marge so, yes, it had an edge.

"Will it be all right if I should alight here?" were the first words out of his mouth. The question was addressed to no one in particular, so I felt obliged to respond although I was sitting in the row behind, two desks removed, with my back to him and facing the other direction. If I did not respond, no one else would.

I trimmed and tacked my swivel chair: "Do you need permission?"

He smiled at that. "One can't always be sure." This he said while removing-- rather more carefully than the books, papers and "ajahn" name plate-- one final item from his bag. His very deliberateness denoted this was the final item and, indeed, most prized: a framed photograph. He placed it against a bookend in such a way as to face the door, though behind his name plate. It was of a Thai woman in her middle twenties, seated and smiling, face turned up to the

photographer. I guessed the photo to be five or ten years old. But even so, she was still considerably younger than he. In fact, she was considerably younger than I.

It was the smile that hooked, that snagged me, that so often appealed for a passing glance during the troubles which were to follow. I could not look without being reminded of a pinscher on a leash, straining to please.

"Done. All moved in," he stated, and sat down without removing the plastic from his chair.

I was to notice that it would be almost a month before the plastic was removed. Even then, his chair was easily identifiable from the ragged remnants flapping from the screws in the arms.

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"From the outset, I want to make one thing clear. I am Buddhist."

Noel was at the head of the conference table and leaning over a folder of typed, dog-eared remarks. Because of his credentials and long residency, he had been asked to say a few words to the other new teachers. It was "Orientation (such an odd word, here) Day" for foreign faculty.

Noel was not the only "orientation speaker." He was preceded by a man who had lived and worked throughout the country nearly forty years as a Baptist missionary. The missionary was a close friend and associate of the college president, who had been educated and baptized in the United States. Though the faculty and students were overwhelmingly Buddhist, or indifferent, the English department was clearly a conduit for proselytizers. They were, mostly, recent graduates from the president's alma mater, part of an exchange program, assured of salvation, and all with Bibles atop their Grammars. All, that is, save Dr. Ezekial Abrams, a retired academic arrived from teaching in mainland China; and save Noel, who had made his declaration. And I? I sometimes brood about being spat out, for being neither hot nor cold.

The missionary was a nice man and straightforward, yet oddly retiring-- perchance from many years of professing to people who would politely listen, nod assent, smile and promise to attend church come Sunday, then not come. He emphasized the students short attention spans, playfulness, and displeasure with anything "serious." The Thais, he underscored, viewed foreigners as being far too "serious", which was, above all, the thing to be avoided. He was very serious about all this.

He distributed a booklet entitled "Survival Thai." A cartoon on the cover depicted a hapless, pith-helmeted foreigner ass-deep among Thai-speaking alligators. It was intended to be disarming. It did provoke a chuckle from a sincere young woman who had survived four years of college in Tanner, Texas. I was to learn later that her parents had been missionaries in South America, where she was born. She had been reared in foreign lands, because of her parents peculiar calling. Going to college was her only experience of living in America. She wore a long cotton dress, had curled, barretted hair, and spoke with a faint drawl. Her name was

Johanna. She seemed from another time, another place, possibly even another medium, like a LIFE Magazine spread on Eisenhower's America. Gauging from her friendly but anxious glance, she was pondering me, too-- that fretful, displaced creature sitting apart who, unlike herself, was not anchored by an exchange program, an alma mater, or the beliefs she shared with the young man sitting at the end of the table opposite Noel.

The young man was Paul, a minor legend for breezing through the undergraduate curriculum at Tanner College in only two years. In his third year teaching, he was now the old hand. He had come with the first exchange to the original campus. Many had since come and gone, but unlike the others, he had decided to stay. Lanky and stooped from trying to lessen his height, self-effacing and quietly amused, he was enjoying the nervous speculations of yet another green exchange teacher. He was also gingerly testing administrative waters, for the college had named Dr. Abrams for the department chair without, apparently, consulting Dr. Abrams. When Abrams flatly stated he wanted no administrative duties whatsoever, the administration was surprised. Abrams was pulled from the meeting to speak privately with the president. Upon his return, he remained the titular department head for purpose of dealing with the Ministry of University Affairs in Bangkok. The unassuming Paul was quietly appointed as Department Co-ordinator, a new title at the college. All this happened in about two minutes. Then, the Baptist missionary spoke on short attention spans and handed out his survival booklets. And, just now, Noel stole everyone's ears by his pronouncement of being Buddhist. Thus, my first ever departmental meeting was under way. I knew little about these matters, but it seemed a safe bet this was not business as usual except, perhaps, at this particular college.

Noel's observations disturbed me. He stated that teaching in Thailand was based upon the Buddhist tradition of recitation, which made for rote learning. It was no use, he insisted, to try to break the mold. One would only meet difficulty and disappointment. He further outlined that we were "ajahn", that is, respected persons considered to have a higher calling. This explained why we, as a group, would be ill-paid for our efforts. People of higher calling are not in need of cash. I learned later this was a reference to the disparity between Bangkok and provincial salaries, as much as two hundred percent. In closing, Noel spoke of the students' fear of the "ajahn". He suggested we press it to advantage, closed his folder, removed his glasses and sat down, all as if to say "That is that."

Well, you bastard. I felt the very idea of rote learning was repugnant. I viewed these remarks as a kind of prophecy to be proved wrong.

Paul shyly cleared his throat. He thanked the missionary and Noel for their insights, then handed out some papers printed by roneograph and stapled together. These comprised a grammar, the book which we were to use in the classroom.

Book? I scanned the material, but had difficulty deciphering even the format. It was antiquated and fragmentary. There was nothing prefatory. Everything appeared to begin in the middle of lessons culled from disparate sources.

"It is generally recognized," said Paul, "that the teaching of English as a second, or rather foreign, language has been a disaster here." His tone indicated he wanted to remedy the situation, but he said nothing more. He offered no analysis and no solution, only a statement.

There were placement examinations to be given three hundred students. The examination included an oral interview. We would commence at 8 o'clock the following morning. Classes would begin the day after.

"Oh, yes," he continued. "About two-thirds of the students who are to take the placement exam are not here yet. They should be coming in the next two or three days. Maybe the first of next week."

"Do ya-all know how we can give them the test when they aren't here yet to take it?" asked Johanna politely.

"No," Paul smiled, "but it'll work out." He opened another folder, full of forms. "Also, you'll need to fill these out sometime today. They're application forms for your work permits. Too, we need to arrange to go into town this afternoon, so you can get some passport-sized photos taken. You'll need two or three of them every time you fill out an application, and there are many forms to fill out, so you'll go through them fast. The Ministry of Education in Bangkok wants them, and so does University Affairs. Immigration, too. When you have to start travelling back and forth for your visa, you'll need photos almost every time. And photocopies of your passport. I always order about two-dozen passport photos at a time. It's about fifty baht."

I looked at the forms, which were in Thai. My stomach sank. I had been teaching myself the language for eighteen months, but could not make out a single word. These were not the words in my book.

"Don't worry about the forms, just sign your name wherever you see an X, so we can get them to Personnel as soon as possible. Someone else will fill them in for you." Paul looked about the room quickly. "I think that's everything for now. Any questions?"

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I purchased a journal, and began to make regular entries, though the reason why eludes me now. On one earlier occasion, upon the advice of my grandfather, I tried to fill a diary he had sent me. After two weeks of pointless entries, I knew I was not a writer. But that was then, in my old life. I was on the street in my new life when I saw a svelte, raven-haired vendor whose neat display of slim, bound volumes separated me from thirty baht. The one I purchased seemed manageable. It was the size of a legal pad, and had light, blue-ruled paper with a dark blue cover. I took it back to the fifth floor of an airy hotel where the college housed me for a month during completion of a dormitory. I was in a squalid city, in a strange land on the dark side of the planet. The weather was hot and sultry, the ceiling fan did nothing but cool sweat, and the women at the reservation desk were all smiling and wearing tight silk skirts. They deferred to

guests, and to the foreign teacher, especially. Their manner was always engaging, which was troubling, but I was never sure if anything was being insinuated. This was even more troubling. When the many cold showers I took no longer helped, I picked up the journal.

I read somewhere that Thomas Wolfe would walk the streets of Brooklyn, in the middle of the night, exultantly chanting "I wrote ten-thousand words today, I wrote ten-thousand words today." When, after an evening's effort, I had filled one or two pages of the journal, I would turn out the light, lie upon the tile floor beneath the ceiling fan, and listen to the rains washing the roofs below. Sometimes I slept, sometimes I sweat.

The wet days settled into a routine of rising before the sun, stretching, showering, dressing, then eating breakfast in the lounge downstairs before the shuttle arrived from the college. My classes were in the morning. In the afternoon, I would read Thai history, study the Thai language, write letters or feverishly prepare lessons for the following day. By five o'clock, the van returned me to the hotel, where I would change clothes and again eat in the air-conditioned lounge. A bottle of Kloster beer would be followed by the nightly peregrination down the city's narrow, jumbled streets-- a labyrinth of stock-piled sidewalks, honking horns, milling manswarm, horse carriages for hire, and abstruse alleyways under flickering lamps. After an hour or two on the prowl, I would find a way back to the hotel, shower again, write for a time, then lie down upon the tile floor beneath the fan. Sometimes, padded footfalls from the corridor would wake me, but never a discreet rap at the door, never a visitor from the reservation desk. Then I would remember a hotel scene in "Apocalypse Now", with Martin Sheen saying "Everybody gets everything they want." The people passing in the hall must have wondered at my disembodied laughter in the dark.

When it came time to remove to the dormitory, the hotel was home. I had no wish to leave. I had settled in, finally, and also settled down. I did not cotton the idea of living on campus in a dormitory -- something I had avoided as an undergraduate. It proved to be everything I dislike: a concrete drum in which the least sound resounded. The blare from radios, cassette players, and the yelps of students, never ceased. Soon, my nerve ends were frayed from lack of sleep.

The only respite came from hiking. Spreading at the foot of an imposing hill, the new campus was surrounded by tiered rice paddies long-abandoned to a forlorn, spiky thicket. The rise of each new building required bulldozers and brush fires. I could sense the wild in retreat. I wanted to see it before it was gone. I would always set out alone, sometimes in the morning, sometimes late in the afternoon, to thread my way through brush and briar to find a trace of pathway to a rickety fence gathered about a sad, thatched hut; or, march up a winding road to overlook an adjacent river valley from the top of the hill. The bulldozers seemed not so near then, but still the world was a patchwork of rectangles cut from the wholecloth forest. Always and again, I dropped back down the hillside into the trees.

There came a day when I mentioned to Noel that I was going batty, and needed to get away from the students, the dormitory, the commissary, the dress code, and the routine of an eighty-hour week. I was speaking to him through the door of the department lounge, where he sat scanning a newspaper and smoking cigarettes between classes. Up to that time, we had

exchanged civilities only. This was because we were the odd men out. The exchange teacher and the Department Coordinator were already annexed to the missionary's circle. The taciturn Dr. Abrams had come with his wife. They appeared content with each other's company. This left Noel and me to share white-out and a stapler for two months without ever conversing. We had even fixed coffee for each other, a friendly gesture but, as he was later to say, one of us was always "on the fly."

I said: "I've never heard so much fifties rock'n'roll...ever...in my entire life. It's mind-boggling. I've read every book I could lay my hands on before coming here. Admittedly, the books were fifteen, maybe twenty years out of date, but Jesus Jones... Bangkok is Los Angeles and then some. So I thought, "It'll be all right when you get up north", right? But what's the first thing I see when I get off the train? Coca-Cola."

He smiled. "I take it Thailand has proved to be everything you hoped it would be?"

"I'm sorry?" I had not heard his question for thinking about Coke.

"I take it you had expectations."

"Expectations?" I repeated. His simplistic analysis was exasperating.

"Yes, expectations. Thailand has failed to live up to your expectations."

"Well, I'm not sure I had any... expectations."

I know now he might have asked why I was so annoyed by a Coca-Cola sign at a train station, but he did not. In fact, he said nothing more. This was our first conversation, in its entirety.

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Some days later, a photocopied manuscript was slapped down on my desk. It was entitled "An Overview Of Buddhist Traditions". Noel himself was the author.

"What's this?" I asked. The plural "s" in the title had caught my eye.

"Read it, and tell me what you think."

I wanted to plead not having enough time. "Why do you give this to me?"

His manner was all patience: "Because you seem the sort." He made a move to collect the manuscript. "But then, if you're not interested, there's no point."

I picked it up before he could collect it. "I'll read it, I'll read it. It just happens I'm interested. I had a grandmother who was Buddhist... before it was fashionable."

I do not know why I added that last bit. Authenticity, maybe; vanity, more likely. Religious questions had long interested me and I had, at different times, put considerable effort into

studying tenets and history. I became conversant with orthodoxy, yet displayed a marked tendency to side with revision and dissent.

"Your grandmother?"

"Yes. Zen. My father's mother. I had only one conversation with her in my entire life. I was twenty-something. She was living in a houseboat off Point Richmond, near San Francisco. I had come to visit. We sat down and talked four straight hours, just like we knew each other well. But we didn't."

Noel watched, appraisingly, as I made a pretense of scanning the manuscript. When I tucked it away in the desk, he asked:

"What is it that brought you to Thailand?"

The question was no different from what so many others have asked, but it caught me unguarded. It was disjointed, and it was not being asked from polite interest. I tried to put him off by answering:

"I know a Vietnamese woman, in America. She thinks I was Thai in a previous life, but must have done something wrong to be reborn as a white guy."

He did not laugh. "Do you believe that?" he asked.

"Depends on what day it is," I said. "So this is your book?"

"It's part of a book. The first two or three chapters. The others are packed away in a box somewhere, but I have not had time to look. Anyway, read it. We can talk about it, if you like."

That evening, after everyone else had gone, I read the manuscript. It corresponded to other articles I had read. Buddhism, it claimed, was of different schools, but really of two types only: an original teaching, and a popular Buddhism of borrowed beliefs, superstitions and rituals. In short, outside influences had obscured the original teaching. The book was an attempt to do what many reform-minded Buddhists have tried to do: rid the teaching of animistic and Brahmanic influences, and set the record straight.

I saw nothing extraordinary in this. One could read this on the front page of THE NATION or THE BANGKOK POST. It was common knowledge, and roughly equivalent to someone at home writing about the pagan origins of Christmas or Easter, or the development of certain widely held doctrines. I had once read an analysis of Buddhist influences on the attitudes of Thai military, published by the U.S. Army, which said as much. Still, there was something of interest. What was interesting was the blurb about the author, written by Noel himself. It read:

D.B. Noel was born in Lancashire, England in 1928. At the age of thirty-three, he became highly interested in Buddhism and, subsequently, took a B.A. in religious studies at Wessex University and an M.A. in religious studies at St. Regis Trismagistus. Later still, he studied Zen in Japan for two years. He has travelled extensively throughout Asia, studied in India, and has been ordained a Buddhist monk in both Japan and Thailand. He is now living in Bangkok with

his wife and daughter and is lecturing in university. He hopes to retire in the peace of the Thai countryside.

D.B. Noel has authored two earlier books: "Yoga Meditation" and "East Is West, West Is East."

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When Noel and I met for lunch the next day, he again asked why I had come to Thailand. I told him I had become interested through friends who had come from Southeast Asia to America.

This is partially true. It is also true there is no single reason, though one reason may be overriding: there was a woman from Chiangmai who changed me. Coming to know her was a slow entwining of single strands which, over a period of time, made the rope that hauled me here.

I had been restless a long time. Much that had so long claimed me became unimportant. I wanted a change. I wanted to speak another tongue. I wanted to get away from America for a time. I was tired of being myself and wanted to disappear into a rain forest before the rain forests disappeared. These were the strands.

Noel did not press his inquiry, but talked about himself, instead. He fleshed out the book's blurb. He was uncomfortably candid about personal problems. In the space of thirty minutes, I knew a great deal which could be paraphrased, or reinvented, here. But this is unnecessary, as the small journal, in his own hand, remains. In red ink, he wrote:

"I have now lived in Thailand for more than eight years. When I first arrived, I went to a meditation center at the small seaside town of Chonburi. There I was ordained as a Buddhist monk, and practiced vispassana meditation for a period of one year...

I was no longer able to control physical lusts, nor to meditate effectively. Further, Thai Buddhism appalled me by departing very greatly from what I believed Buddhism was intended to be. By remaining a monk, I felt that I would be doing nothing of value and simply wasting time. So, after one year, I disrobed. The experience had gone sour on me.

Next, I took a job teaching in Bangkok and, after three years, another, where I remained for five years. That period of my life was the most unhappy that I have ever known.

On leaving the monkhood, I had married a girl from northern Thailand. I was very much in love with her, but now I realize, she was not really in love with me. She is still my wife and I have adopted her daughter by a previous marriage, but our problems have been many. Differences of age, cultural background, education and socio-economic level, plus an addiction to gambling at cards on her part, have thrown up problem after problem and still do. The problem of gambling is not only that one loses money, but also and worse, that one wastes so

much time. A gambling wife is never at home to take care of her house and family, and her husband is robbed of her companionship."

This was the motif that would sound again. All else was counterpoint, variation, and episode.

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After listening patiently to my complaints about daily routine, the need to get away, and some off-hand remark about my being here two months without having seen a water buffalo, Noel said:

"That very Thailand is not so far away as you might think."

"Just how far away is it?"

"About thirty kilometers."

"Where's that?"

""Ban-Mae-Fah, where I live."

"Is there a Coca-Cola sign anywhere?"

"Why don't you see for yourself? We can take my motorcycle."

"When?"

"Right now, I should think."

Earlier, I had come north from Don Muang International by third-class train. It was eleven at night. I was dead, after a thirty-six hour flight, but did not sleep. I was anxious about being among so many Asians outside Chinatown or Little Saigon. This, after all, was not a street in Denver or a district in San Francisco. This was IT. There was no one familiar to whom I might turn. Anxiety aside, I knew there could be only one first-time-third-class train ride from Bangkok. Sleep would wait. I wanted to see, hear and smell everything-- to breathe the rain, keep a hand on my purse, and watch a young woman nurse her boy. I later wrote that travelling through the Central Plain on that wet, pulsing night was a passage through a womb.

The ride on Noel's motorcycle was as memorable. There was no sense of safe envelopment, as his machine careened between trucks, pushcarts, straying cattle, bicycles, pedestrians and potholes. It was invigorating.

We soon hit open road. The lowing morning sky lifted. The sun was beginning to burn. It was intense. The light in Thailand can be fierce. It can turn glass-encrusted temples to

ephemera. That, and the wind in my face, had me squinting like a rice farmer. The world became kaleidoscopic.

The paddy fields, the buffalo wallows, the banana groves, the roadside stands-- all passed and passed, timeless and transitory, on and on. It is all, someone said, an illusion. It is all, someone else said, vanity and striving after wind. It was all my first ride through the Thai countryside. It was all Noel's daily commute.

We came to a wall surrounding a little plot abutting a field. He unlocked the iron gate. His house at Ban-Mae-Fah was of cinder block coated a sickly green. Inside were a small refrigerator, a gas stove, a divan with chairs, a kitchen table covered by oilcloth, some yellowed paperbacks in a stand, and a Japanese television. The screenless windows and doors were open wide, but other than flies and two dogs, no one was home.

He immediately stripped to short pants and poured ice water into two small glasses. He apologized that his wife was absent, and that there was no food in the house. For three days, he said, she had been staying with her sister. His adopted daughter was two doors down, at her grandmother's house. No one, he said, was doing the washing or ironing, and the house had not been swept in two weeks. As he sat speaking, he picked away scab and dried skin from around a lesion on his shin. He had another, smaller lesion on the hand that was doing the picking.

"How long have you had that?" I asked. "It looks nasty."

"Oh, about six months or so," he said. "It simply refuses to heal. I have been to several doctors. They have prescribed various ointments, but nothing seems to work."

"I think you might need antibiotics."

"Oh, no. I have been getting this every now and then for years. It is aggravated by stress. For some reason, I am a slow healer."

"Why do you pick at it? Leave it alone."

"If I leave it alone, it makes for very unsightly scar tissue. But, if I remove the dead skin, it will eventually look like this." He showed me a pinkish, but otherwise smooth, patch on the calf of his other leg. "That took two weeks to heal, but as you can see, all is now well."

I had visions of holes in the roofs of mouths. As a boy, I had studied photographs in a World War II medical tract on the dangers of gonorrhea. My parent's sea chest was a store of facts and information. I still remember the title of a book found therein: "Sane Sex Living." It seemed to imply that sex could make one insane. It said that syphilis, untreated, certainly would. But Noel's plight was really not my affair. I changed subjects.

I asked about his being ordained a monk. He said ordination was one of a long train of events that had begun at Easter, in 1963.

"I had a sunburst experience in the middle of the night. I was thirty-five, and it changed everything. But, to understand what it was that changed -- well..."

He said that at an early age, he had entered the British Navy. He soon learned to shift for himself, whether avoiding barroom brawls, washing and ironing his own clothes, or pinning the amorous hand of a seaman to the latrine door with a pocket knife. He saw some of the world, then returned home to Lancaster where he "took a wife and settled into the cloth trade." Every day, he worked with his father and uncle, selling cloth. Soon enough, he had a daughter. Sooner still, it was fifteen years later. By then, he knew all there was to know about the warp and woof of the family business.

He awoke one night to excruciating pain in the center of his brow. When he opened his eyes, there was nothing but white light, blindingly cool. The pain came in three waves which bathed him in sweat. When the pain finally ebbed, he was no longer what he had been. He said with conviction: "My former self had washed away."

He provided other puzzle pieces, which I am trying to fit together now, as I write: that as a boy he had "a sort of mystical absorption in nature"; that he had out-of-body experiences; that he had recently converted to his family's Anglican persuasion, with no discernable spiritual effect; that he had picked up a handful of booklets in a second-hand shop, one of which was an introduction to Theosophy; that he had become acquainted with esotericism and the Masters of Wisdom.

"However," he said, "I was still in the European cultural milieu, with its unquestioning assumption that spiritual beings exist, whether they be Masters, gods, or God. My entire upbringing and early education had so firmly implanted these assumptions in my consciousness that it took me many years to rid myself of their influence."

He dated his life as beginning in the sunburst experience. He was reborn at Easter, 1963. Shortly after, the family business folded, and he was no longer in the cloth trade.

"I was to make a fateful mistake with long-term consequences. Reasoning that, with a wife and young daughter, I could not chuck everything to become a contemplative, I concluded that the next best thing was to become a teacher of religion. I completely overlooked the vast difference between experience, which is direct, and the purely intellectual exercise of being a teacher. I was ripe for meditation. I should have become a monk at once."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because the period in ones life when one can profitably undertake spiritual disciplines does not last forever."

He became certified to teach, which fed his family and financed a return to school for seven years and two degrees.

"This period awarded me with intellectual insights only. However, I did meet my first Buddhist meditation teacher. I practiced during vacations. Progress was slow, because this was never a sustained training. My practice was diminished by the long periods of intense intellectual activity at college and university-- because rational thought, itself, is one of the main barriers to meditation. It is the habit of naming, and of explaining everything that is the opposite

of Enlightenment. What? -- the utter cessation of named things -- and thus the direct experience of the world, rather than participation mediated by reason and classification. The Aristotelian bit."

I recall listening intently to everything Noel said. Finally, I could absorb no more. I asked him if I might walk through the fields. He said yes, but that I must go alone. He wanted a nap.

I set out with one of his dogs running circles around me. Soon I was nose to nose with a water buffalo lolling in the mud. I fancied we were kin, but its nose had a rope through it.

"Khun-chawp-kooey-gap-kwai-reu"

A thin man dressed in dark blue was speaking to me. He was a rice farmer and apparently the animal's owner. We had a largely unintelligible conversation, but he smiled patiently until I said goodbye. I continued on to the next village, where Noel's dog was hit by a truck. The hit was direct, and the truck was moving fast, but the dog shot toward home immediately. By the time I returned, Noel had it bathed and bandaged.

"Would you like to stay here tonight?" he asked. "We can buy a bottle and a little food at the shop coming in. If you like, one of the village girls can be sent for."

I remember being attracted and repulsed by the suggestion. He must have sensed this, for he added:

"I am only saying what is available should you want it."

I considered the possibilities, but decided to go. Next time, I said, who knows.

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Culture shock happens to others. I had prepared before coming here, and fairly laughed when Paul distributed an essay on culture shock to each person in the English Department. Now, searching my journal for entries about Noel, I can see that I was, at that time, struggling.

All the old issues with which I wrested had been raised again since coming here. I did not expect this. I thought that, in coming here, I could put everything behind me-- the encrustations of misjudgment, pretentiousness and infidelity-- the folly that formed me. But the old questions reasserted themselves with a vengeance. I was forced to reconsider old conundrums.

There was so much with which to cope, much of it aspects of my own culture which were present here. It is disconcerting to say farewell to what one has known, only to meet again with what one has known. In my case it was the mindless rock'n'roll and Coca-Cola signs, symbols certainly, of secular popular culture. It was also being around its reverse image, the endless bric-a-brac and easily digestible Jesus of Christian popular culture. Johanna, the exchange teacher,

Paul, the Coordinator, and the missionary were often speaking with students who might convert. They often planned programs and activities, especially when groups from Tanner passed through for field trips, seminars and banquets amid considerable hoopla. It took time to become accustomed, because Thailand is where I have most often heard accents from Texas, Georgia, Arkansas and the Carolinas, and the only place I ever heard people say "ya'all" without jesting. Being around these people, day after day, jarred me.

So did Noel.

He once said the sole reason for expatriate males in Asia is Asian women. He said he was aware from an early age that his two strongest drives were for spiritual experience and sex. He had come to Asia to meditate. I joked that he stayed to fornicate.

I suppose this is the point at which I began to consider Noel as a type: a creature or child of the Raj. It was easy for me to do this. He was British. I considered it almost a tradition, if not a cliche, to want to be Kipling in India, Burton in Egypt, or Lawrence in Arabia. There were always men who would be king. It was all, I thought, reducible to exploitation: the reduction of others to objects. I tried to sort it out, to search for words to articulate a single, coherent statement which would explain why individuals, societies and entire civilizations behave so badly so often. I saw connections, similar attitudes, between such diverse phenomena as colonialism in Southeast Asia, partying on the Patpong Strip, and my own murkier motivations. I was grasping, because I realized that here, in Thailand, are people toiling for a few coins and daily doing without so that I can buy cheaply. There are people used up before their time, bending in the shriveling sun, so that I can eat rice in comfort and sit writing the words in this sentence.

I was looking for an explanation, a distillation, or a rationalization; some coherent expression of what was happening on all sides. The conflict, the balancing act, is in my journal. The struggle is there to see. At one point I scrawled, so rushed to set down the "truth", the following words:

"Not only the British-- the West has been grabbing at Asia for centuries and taking what it wants through either colonization or corporation. Various means have been found to justify our actions-- all of which betray a basic contempt born of ignorance. Occasionally however one of the raj will find something of value among the lesser beings -- tin teak rubber and women-- it could be handmade trinkets or clothing from a night bazaar a curio for a shelf That's for tourists or a system of belief if one travels alone more often than not it is a young woman (a trophy? Gr. Wh. hunter?) brought home West. society will absorb the (illegible word) of its wayward son with the explanation that "He wants a woman that will wait on him hand and foot." This happens, certainly, and when it does it is marriage as raj. But sometimes the lines we have drawn are crossed by those who either see no line, or see no use for the line."

This ungrammatical melange of "history" and "politics" and suppression is embarrassing to read now. In part, this is because I failed to say what is most insidious about exploitation: it can happen through inadvertence. There is something else missing, as well. I could not admit, little as I have, that I do not want to give it up to help my fellows. I like my little privileges.

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"Here's the passage. It's Proverbs 5:3," said Johanna. She was reading to one of the male students who had shown interest in the church's activities.

"'For the lips of a foreign woman drip honey,

and her palate is smoother than oil;

but in the end, she is as bitter as

wormwood..."

"Of course," she continued, "a foreign woman isn't foreign to you, because you're a Thai. Do you see what I mean?"

By no means was Johanna as simple-minded as what she had just said. It is difficult to avoid saying things like this when it is you who is the foreigner. It is easy to forget, so far as Proverbs is concerned, that all gentiles are foreigners.

I remember feeling raw that Friday the thirteenth, and intolerant of my own mistakes made by others. It had been one thing after another, all day. I said to Noel:

"That's it. Enough Sunday school. Let's go get a drink."

"My sentiments, exactly," he smiled.

We were soon sitting riverside, with a bottle between us. Noel began talking about marital problems, but I changed the subject. I asked how he had come to the East, and why he had become a monk.

"My first meditation teacher," he said, "the one I told you about. I was studying meditation during vacations from university. I told him about my white light experience, and he said it indicated I was already a master. He is the one who said, "Follow me". Something like that. So I went. He had a dojo in the countryside south of Tokyo. I stayed two years. He is the one who unhooked me from asceticism. Purity is pride, you see. It is the ego which likes denying the self, but this makes the self grow stronger. It is the self which interferes with ones practice. The self is the barrier. It is attachment, when the goal is detachment. It is a common misunderstanding, in the West, that meditation implies a morality and prohibitions. Not so, eh?

"The spiritual path must constantly twist and turn, because whatever the self likes to do strengthens it, if you indulge it. It takes discipline, eh? The vegetarian needs the discipline of eating meat just like the teetotaler needs alcohol. If the ego likes these things, then it is time to abstain.

"Nieh! I was full of ideas before I went to Japan. But that old master showed me a few things. He sipped scotch and water all day, beginning at sunrise, eh? And if he liked a pretty girl, that was that. He was famous for his cocksmanship. How does that match people's preconceptions? Nieh!"

During his two years in Japan, Noel wrote or co-authored several books and articles on yoga and meditation. He lectured in Australia and South Africa, and was eventually sent by the master to open a dojo in London. He returned to Lancashire to find his wife, Penny, living with another man. A divorce followed, and the London dojo was not a success. He again headed for the East.

He went to the Philippines, later to Indonesia and then to India, where he had a tempestuous "marriage" with a young and wealthy girl. They lived here and there and quarreled often. After two years of bitterness, he returned her to her family in Simla. Without a teaching contract, he returned briefly to Malaysia. Shortly after, he left for Thailand, where he shaved his head and entered a monastery.

He wanted to meditate, but soon grew tired of droning in Pali, which was the Thai way. He disrobed after one year. He returned to teaching English in the capital, made a respectable living, and married a Thai woman working in a restaurant. Her name was Boon-chat. She was a country girl from the north. He had taken pity on her after listening to her many difficulties.

Life in Bangkok was comfortable and secure. Once each month, they would entrain northward to visit her family in the village of her birth. For some eight years, this was the routine. The trips to the north country were welcome holidays from the traffic jams, pollution and bustle of Bangkok.

Eventually, they purchased land in the village, built a house, and came to stay. Noel secured a new position at a new college. He was out of the city, Boon-chat was back with her family, and all would be well.

"But listen," he said suddenly. "Enough of all this. I need your advice."

"Why?"

"Yesterday, I had to pay a gambling debt. My wife plays cards. She is positively addicted. This time it was five-thousand bloody baht. That's half a month's salary."

"It's a month's, if you're me."

"Right. Well, she telephoned me at the college. She was in a fix, and could not leave the house where the game was held until she paid up. I had to leave my classes, go to the bank, and get her out. What a bloody nuisance, I can tell you."

I did not see how he needed any advice from me, and said so.

"Well, I need your opinion, actually. You see, my wife's gambling is getting worse and worse. She's never home. It's been like this for about two years. What's more, she is having some sort of internal problem which might require surgery."

"Has she seen a doctor?"

"I think so, yes. She is very unclear about what the problem is, except to say that she cannot sleep with me. It's been months."

"Does she have a boyfriend?"

"I think not. It's just gambling. She's addicted."

It was still unclear how I might advise in any way. I remained silent. Noel ordered another bottle of Kloster and lit a cigarette. He was weighing things. After a little, having nearly finished the cigarette, he continued:

"I've met someone."

That someone was named Aht. He said he had met her at a small roadside restaurant. It had been her first day on the job. She was nervous. She had a daughter, and had just left a man who was beating her.

"Who's the man? Her husband?"

"I think so," said Noel, "but these things are never very clear. A woman with a child may or may not have standing as a wife. She could be a minor wife, or a "fan" -- a sort of girlfriend who may not be a lover -- but then a "fan" may also be a wife. She may even be a rented wife, but that is usually for foreigners with money."

"You're a foreigner with money."

"Yes." He said this matter-of-factly. "As it is, she has no family, no money, no place to turn, and the owner of the restaurant has been pressuring her to work the backrooms. I was fortunate to meet her on her first day. It gave me time to think. I went back the next day, when she started at four o'clock. She said the owner had greatly pressured her to entertain clients in the back rooms, but she had resisted. She said the boss knew she had nowhere to go, and had almost forced himself upon her. That was the first day on the job. She was scared what he might do on the second day."

"Uehhh," I groaned. "I know, I know. That is the sort of shit that really pisses me off... someone with a little power over somebody in a bad situation. And they use it."

"Well, not to worry," Noel said lightly. "I've taken care of it. I found her a house for three hundred baht. I take care of all her expenses, and she takes care of me."

Noel went on to explain how this was good all around. Aht had a place to live, money for food, a chance to get out of the restaurant, and new-found status as minor wife to an ajahn. He had a chance to help someone and, into the bargain, get laid regularly by a woman thirty-five years younger.

"A young woman keeps a man young." He said this for the first time. He would say it many times in the weeks to follow.

Several days later, Noel remarked that Aht was quite industrious, even entrepreneurial. She had worked at a construction site two or three days to make money to buy fruit which she sold in town for a profit. This took some financial pressure off him, which was all for the better. He said that Boon-chat was now gambling heavily, and would disappear for days on end. Noel said he had threatened her with bringing home a minor wife, that if she kept gambling and depriving him of his rights, he would be forced to look elsewhere. Boon-chat's brother, Senn, sided with Noel in this. He told Noel that loss of face would be enough to bring his sister back. By the terms of everything decent, Noel was right and had the upper hand.

After telling me this, we went into town for a beer. On the way to the riverside bar, he stopped at a bank. He was in and out quickly. Without saying a word, he beveled the motorcycle down narrow side streets until we came to a woman waiting at the curb. It was Boon-chat. Noel made introductions, but I knew it was she before he said a word. She was smiling, but reserved-- much less eager than in the photograph on the desk. He handed her an envelope, stuffed with baht notes.

"Good husband?" he asked.

There was no reply.

"Good husband?" he asked again.

She nodded assent.

He shook his head, and we sped away.

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We did not go to the restaurant on the river. We sped south along the still unreconstructed route I remembered ending at Ban-Mae-Fah.

"Your house?" I asked.

"No, but near there. I want you to meet Aht."

"At her house?"

"No."

At a small roadside oasis, we turned into a dirt drive. A wood-lined stone walkway skirted a constellation of tables, tree-shaded and canopied. It lead to a barroom door, ajar, then around to a streamside patio.

We sat down. A young girl fetched Singha beer, Maekhong whiskey, bucket ice and two Disneyland glasses. She attended the uncapping, the plunking and the pouring. She lit Noel's cigarettes, which I thought a bit much.

We had no need of hands. I remember saying that I had two of them, and thanking the girl for her ministrations. It went for nothing. Noel said I should let her do her job, which was to serve.

"I dislike being fussed over," I said. "Then there's my egalitarian nature."

"You'll get over that," replied Noel. "In fact, you should put it away altogether. It's of no use here. You will only confuse her with your notions of what is proper."

"You mean to say you have no such notions?"

"Laddie, I left that behind a long time ago."

"I don't believe that."

"Believe what?"

"That you have no Western notions."

"Western, is it?"

"Isn't egalitarianism Jewish or Greek in origin?"

"Oh, that. Well, I do not. I haven't any."

"Not even residual?"

"None."

There was a finality in his words, but I remained unconvinced. In our many discussions, he often put forth that he had ceased to be of a Western mindset entirely. He maintained that his thought, through meditation and yoga, was completely changed and no longer chained to illusory concepts., to rational constructs with no true correlation to the world. His experience was no longer held at bay by rationality. He had ceased to be a Western man.

In the space of an hour, perhaps a half-dozen people came to our table. First it was local men who Noel said were working at a nearby construction site. They spoke a local dialect and seemed acquainted with him. They talked for the duration of a cigarette, then moved on.

Another man arrived. His cheeks, chin and temple had once been slashed. His manner was businesslike, with none of the usual deference paid by villagers to ajahn. He helped himself to the Maekhong and one of Noel's cigarettes. As he reached for Noel's lighter, a new pair of hands appeared from nowhere, took it up, flicked it, and held its yellow flame to the end of his cigarette. The man took a long draw, nodded, then rose slowly from the table and went his way.

"Aht!" exclaimed Noel, as she sat down next to him and filled his glass. Noel introduced me. She filled my glass as well.

"I made arrangements for Aht to meet us here," Noel explained. "I have told her about you, and she said she wanted to meet you. So, this is Aht."

I said hello. I do not remember what we talked about, but we did talk. I do remember that Aht was very attentive to anything that Noel might want. Most of their exchanges seemed to be whether he wanted this or that. If he wanted this or that, she saw to it. She struck me as street-smart, but honest. On the whole, I liked her, though I thought I caught a fleeting glance, a cool appraisal of Noel as he rummaged for cigarettes. I was to see that glance again.

As we sat drinking and chatting, two women joined our table. One was fresh looking, and quiet.

The other was flashy and animated, with a silk scarf about her throat. They knew Aht, but also questioned me politely. Did I like Thailand? How long would I stay? Was I married? The usual small talk. They shortly departed.

Then another sat down. It was now apparent, even to me, that the women were on parade. When I raised my eyebrows at the new arrival, Noel said:

"That one likes you. You can have her for not very much money."

"How much?" I asked.

"Fifty baht, I should think."

"Do you get a percentage of the gate?"

"No, no, no." He did not like my ribbing, but let it slide. "I am just letting you know what is available."

I looked around. "Where would I take her?"

"There's a bungalow across the footbridge, there... and through the trees."

Abruptly, Aht said she had to leave. Noel was still helping with translations. I did not trust him entirely, but Aht and I seemed to agree that we must do this again soon. When she left, Noel excused himself to go to a pissing stall, a recess in the outside wall of the bar, draped with an odd rectangle of burlap hanging to about knee-height above the ground.

An older woman came out from the restaurant, with three other women who appeared to be in their late twenties. They paid no heed to me at all, but drifted aimlessly here and there about the patio, the stream, the footbridge. They began to pull weeds some distance from where I sat. Soon, I paid them no attention. I was lost in thought, until I became aware they had worked their way to pulling weeds right around my table. And where was Noel? I could see no legs below the curtain. I glanced at my watch. The older woman said, in very clear Thai:

"Do you think she is pretty or not?" She motioned to the footbridge, where a country girl, perhaps seventeen, stood awaiting my response.

Aht, Noel's minor wife, reappeared. I counted seven women around my table. They were no longer making any pretense of weeding. They were looking directly at me.

"Well, what do you think?" asked the woman.

"She's very pretty," I said.

"Do you like her?"

"Yes, but I am old and tired."

With one voice, all seven women emitted a rising "Oohhh!"

"Not so," said the older woman. "Isn't she a pretty thing?"

"Yes."

Noel returned, and everything quieted down to little parting smiles. When I looked again, the girl on the footbridge was gone. I told Noel that I had drunk too much and it was time for coffee. He agreed. We would return to town.

Evening was upon us. Bats were swooping after gnats. I went to the stall and carefully arranged the curtain. I wanted privacy, that most Western notion, because I could not urinate for having an erection. Before heading to the stall, Noel had told me the girl was twelve baht. For that, about fifty cents, she would stay with me for two or three hours. Also, there was opium, if I wanted it.

Standing in the stall, I calmly thought about it. I also contemplated the pale yellow arc spiraling down the drain. I laughed. For some reason, my mind jumped to an old series of Arco ads:

Great Thoughts of Western Man

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It was two weeks until I was free to join Noel at the table by the river. In the interim since meeting Aht, I had been reading and thinking a great deal about Noel's insistence that he had rid himself of Western modes of thought. I also had been reading Matthew and Mark in Thai, because a Gideon Bible supplied by Johanna was the only parallel text I could find. Though my interest was practicing Thai, I was once again considering the gospels. I was also reading history, essays and short stories. So much was turning in my mind that my journal could have passed for the jottings of a schizoid, or a sophomore in university. I was weary of thinking. A beer by the river was long overdue.

"Nieh!" Noel pointed at the word 'rational'. "You see the difficulty, don't you?" There was a paperback in my backpack, the title of which was "A Rational Look At Eastern Religions".

I sat down and said: "Paul lent it to me. But say, when you meditate, you cease to have rational thoughts, right?"

"You cease naming and thinking. You experience things directly."

"You are more like a dog?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

How do you know you are experiencing anything, unless you are aware of the process of experiencing? I think if you are aware of the process, you can not have direct experience. By your definition. How could you know you had been meditating? As soon as you realize you are meditating, you are no longer meditating, right? And you say that Nibbana is achievable only when selfish desires cease. But isn't the desire for Nibbana selfish? Then, if one strives for Nibbana, it remains unattainable. You can't get there from here. I mean, how do you even know it exists? A bodhisattiva hasn't achieved it, because there's no coming back from nothingness. Speaking of which, what is the self? An illusion? Then how does karma attach, if nothing's there."

"Is something the matter? Here, boy. Have a beer."

"Make it Cointreau."

"You think too much."

He turned to his troubles with Boon-chat. This was not unusual. Our discussions usually began with talk about women and ended with less corporeal concerns, such as attaining enlightenment. In my skepticism, I had departed custom and precedent.

"If my wife cannot, or will not, give me the attention to which I have a right," he began, "what use is it to berate her or force her? Even if I could, what good is an unwilling companion?" He lit a cigarette, and inhaled deeply. Then came an afterthought: "I cannot divorce her."

"Why not?"

"I cannot get my residency otherwise. One must have been here five years, have one hundred-thousand baht in the bank..."

"Where'd you get one hundred-thousand baht?"

"Borrowed it for ten days from a Chinese merchant. After the paperwork was concluded, I returned it and paid a small fee... interest, you could say. Ah! It cost me five hundred baht to look like I have one hundred-thousand for ten days. Nieh! But the point is, I must be married to a Thai as well. Boon-chat has me over a barrel, and well knows it. She continually threatens to

tell authorities we will divorce, which would dash everything. I've been in bondage for nearly three years, waiting for the residency permit."

He said this often. Boon-chat, he maintained, had taken advantage of his good acts. He had "white-knighted", had saved her in Bangkok, and this was how she was repaying him, with ungratefulness. In the Thai world view, this was an approach to the Western notion of "sin". Noel maintained that she had been corrupted by the money he gave her, that it had gone to her head. She had also become influenced by Western ideas through magazines and television. She had come into contact with Women's Lib.

"Nieh! I want none of that lot, I can tell you. It's unnatural. Someone has to be the boss, or their will be nothing but strife."

Besides simple exoticism, from which neither Noel nor myself was exempt, many Western men are attracted by a misconception that Asian women are pliant and gentle. They often find Western women, by contrast, to be brassy and abrasive. What they miss is the significance of a proverb: "To survive is the highest good." Personal relationships, especially between men and women, are pragmatic and often grounded upon financial considerations solely. But this is of no moment where the attraction is strong, the attraction which Noel reduced to "It's a different body type, though the labia are vertical contrary to some expectations."

"Finish your drink. We are expected at minor wife's house for dinner. Aht is there now, making ready for your visit," said Noel, with satisfaction. "There is a guest room, if you care to stay the night. There may be one small inconvenience, though. Brother has started coming around..."

"Senn? Boon-chat's brother?"

"No, Aht's brother. He's becoming a bloody nuisance. First, he shows up at the worst possible times, then drinks up all my Maekhong. Worse, he has insinuated himself into our business discussions.

He has put the idea into Aht's head that she can sell very much more fruit if only she has a motorcycle and trailer to travel from market to market."

"Well, what about it? Do you trust her?"

"Yes. This one is a good one."

"You said she is industrious..."

"It's expensive. I simply haven't the money."

We bought food and bag ice at a roadside market along the way. Aht's new house was an old wooden structure up off the ground in the traditional manner. It was in what appeared to be a family compound. Noel parked his motorcycle underneath the house, and called out loudly for Aht. There was no response. He climbed the stairs to find the door locked. I thought I heard a rustling within, through the wooden sideboards, but could not be sure. After a few more futile attempts at yelling and pounding, Noel slipped in through a side window which he remembered being unlocked. He unlatched the door and swung it wide.

The interior was cluttered. On the walls were mildewed and shoddily framed pictures of the King and Queen gleaned from old calendars, a kodachromed monk in saffron robe, and a musty group shot of people in uniform. The floor was covered by warped roll linoleum of a faded floral print. There were heavy teak pews and a nainsook-draped, magazine-filled bookcase against the walls. Overhead hung a single electric light, naked and harsh.

It began to rain heavily. The tin roof sounded as if a hundred rats were playing "keep away" with a wedge of cheese. I sat upon the floor of smooth wooden planks, crossing my legs.

From outside, Aht called up the stair, then climbed to where Noel and I sat drinking Maekhong. She said she had been talking with the landlady, and smiled in apology. She set out the market food in bowls upon the floor. She also served up something she had made herself, a kind of crayfish pate eaten with sticky rice. It was pungent and good. I ate hungrily.

Noel drank glass after glass of Maekhong, without, I think, realizing it. Aht sat next to him attentively. She kept his glass constantly filled. After every second sip, she would pour. I managed to avoid drinking too much by the simple fact I dislike being waited upon. Aht tried to fill my glass, but I pleaded being a strange farang with two hands of my own. Noel reminded me that I was not doing as the Romans do. He also said village girls were available, should I want company. I did but, among other considerations, I was thinking about AIDS.

"Not here," said Noel. "These girls haven't been to Bangkok. They're clean as whistles."

"Maybe next time."

"It's always 'next time' with you, isn't it? I've never met anybody with so many Puritanical prohibitions. There's nothing wrong with having a girl. It's expected that you, being a man, should want one."

There was no exasperation in Noel's voice, only instruction, as though he were taking me to a cathouse for my sixteenth birthday. I also recognized the truth of what he was saying. I had recently attended a traditional dinner with beautiful dancing girls. Everything was proper. The guests were upper crust and respectable. One guest, an older man, took a fancy to one of the dancers. Seeing this, the host said he might kiss her. The older man replied candidly, "No, no, not now. That will come later." His forbearing wife was seated quietly at his side, and I wondered whether she was capable of mutilating a sleeping husband. I saw such stories from time to time in the tabloids, front page, with photos.

On another occasion, I had opportunity to speak with a well-educated woman I came to know through language lessons. We were in a bookstore browsing when I came across a profusely illustrated and explicit guide to the Patpong Strip, replete with foldout maps and "menus". It was Bangkok nightlife in a nutshell. I asked her what she thought. Being Chinese, she first said that Thais are barbarians. She smiled in saying this. Then she allowed that Thais consider Chinese to be barbarians, as well. Our exchange went this way:

-- Thai males smoke and drink and whore every day. Women do not like that at all. The men go out in groups and leave the women at home.

-- Why do women allow it?

-- It is the tradition. Men are like that.

-- Isn't it a double-standard that women are to be virgins until they marry, and then stay home while the husband goes out?

-- Women have the same freedom as men.

-- Do they use it?

-- No.

-- Why not? Don't you think it should be the same for both sexes?

-- Yes, and it is the same for both. They have the same freedom.

-- Then why don't proper Thai women go out on the town, the same as proper Thai men?

-- Because it is the tradition.

The tradition. There were so many aspects that mystified me. Sitting on Aht's floor, eating rice with my fingers, it occurred to me, might be improper. I thought it a good time to unravel part of the mystery, and so asked Aht if she would teach me northern Thai traditions. She whispered into Noel's ear. When she had finished, he said:

"Aht asked me to say that she would like to teach you the northern Thai tradition, but that she cannot, for to do so would violate the northern Thai tradition."

I let it go. It was dark. Through the door, even with the naked bulb burning, I could see a spangle of stars. After perhaps an hour of talk, food and drink, a voice called from down below.

"Nieh!" Noel motioned with his hands that it was Aht's brother, then told Aht that he did not want Brother here eating and drinking on this particular night. Before Aht could respond, Brother was standing in the midst. He held out a cigarette, which I declined. Noel's face was a solemn mask as I offered Brother food. Brother was cautious, and bided his time. He ate only after he was certain Noel and I had our fill.

I guessed him to be in his late twenties. Brother was about five-eight, of a slight build, but wiry. He did not seem to be a bad sort. I could not understand Noel's attitude. I handed Brother a glass, which he filled with ice and a little Maekhong. We discussed electric light. Brother was patient as I garbled his language. He made asides to Aht, who started to smile. The atmosphere lightened.

Noel began to speak to Brother. I did not understand what was said, but they seemed to be getting along. Then, Noel slapped Brother squarely on the back. Brother accepted it with a smile, so I thought it was rough play only. When Noel did it again, harder still, I asked why.

"Because I am ajahn, and I must keep Brother in line. It is expected."

"Maybe, I said, "but I do not like it."

"Oh, that Western mindset again, is it? You really must put that away. Thais expect such from those of us who have superior status." He slapped Brother once again. Brother's response was to shake his head, smile and light a cigarette.

"Well, I am farang, and they know that. They always seem to accept me for what I am." I am not sure what I was thinking in saying this but, lame as it was, it is what I said.

As the night passed, Noel continued slapping Brother's back, in the same place. It had to hurt. Sometimes there were blows in succession, but Brother sat steadfast. Noel made out it was all in fun, but there was for me an undercurrent as dark as the White Man's Burden.

"He's got to know who is boss," said Noel, turning toward Brother, and smiling from ear to ear. "I am ajahn."

"As ajahn, don't you represent virtue?"

"I do. You do. We do. Yes." The emphasis was upon "do". He was now quite drunk. "But, we represent firm benevolence."

He stopped slapping Brother. Was this, I wondered, a practical demonstration? I said:

"And if we are not virtuous, what will they say?"

"They'd probably want to say 'Bad ajahn! Bad!' Something like that."

I deserved that and, in retrospect, it was funny: the bad ajahn as a dog that has just peed on the carpet. But I was in no humor. I often guess why I did not intervene that night. There is a complex of reasons. I did not understand the situation and was not sure but what Noel might be right. I was new to Thailand, and Brother, after all, bore up with a smile. Also, though he looks years younger, Noel is about my father's age. It is not done to punch out an elder. Ideally, one does not strike anyone. Lastly, there is always the consideration that one might get pummeled in return.

Noel leaned over, embraced Brother in a headlock, and kissed his temple. He offered Brother a cigarette. Meanwhile, for the second time, I caught Aht give Noel an appraising glance. It was a flicker, a calculating will-o'-the-wisp, here and gone in an instant.

Noel leaned the other way, placing his head upon Aht's lap. She began to massage his shoulders.

"Do you want a girl for the night or not?" Noel asked languidly. "The guest room is ready. It is no bother to find you one." He spoke to Aht, who indicated there was no mosquito net and that I would be eaten alive.

"No problem," I said. "I can sleep here on the floor, alone."

The events which followed were quite confused. Noel, who now could barely walk, tried to escort Aht to their room. She, however, indicated he would have to sleep elsewhere, though I, as the guest, could stay. It was late, and Noel protested loudly. I did not want to stay and said:

"No problem. We can head back. Can you drive your motorcycle?"

Noel went downstairs to start his machine while I waited on the stair. Aht stepped down and leaned over to kiss me on the cheek. Her blouse was boat-cut, and through the neck I saw her breasts were bare. She said I could come back anytime. I even remember saying a ludicrous "Thank you."

The motorcycle roared to life after half a dozen kick starts. I sat behind Noel, and we lurched directly into a fence. He had missed the gate, which was only ten feet wide and wide-open. He also narrowly missed a chicken coop. The chickens were flapping, scurrying and otherwise running for cover. A rooster began to crow. Lights came on in neighboring houses.

"Can... not," said Noel decidedly. "Cannot do it."

We walked the motorcycle back under the house and climbed the stairs. The debate about who would sleep where resumed. I again stated my preference for sleeping alone on the floor. The first part was now accepted, but that an ajahn should be on the floor was not. I stretched out to make my point, and everyone deferred. Aht guided Noel to the bedroom, where he passed out. She then spoke with Brother, who disappeared silently. Noel revived and called from the bedroom. Aht went in and gave him a back massage, which put him out for good.

She reentered the front room to say she was going out and that I should tell ajahn, whenever he awakened. She slipped out the backway. I could hear Brother's hushed voice on the balcony. He was interrupted by a third voice, lower in pitch and barely audible, yet assertive. It was all secretive and strangely disembodied. There were no footsteps, no rattlings, only conspiring voices which faded away and were gone.

I sat alone in the house for perhaps three hours, while Noel snored from the next room. About two o'clock, I awakened him. We collected ourselves and this time navigated the motorcycle successfully through the gate.

Two or three days later I saw Noel again. His eyes were red and raw, his movements were slow, his head was hung down.

"So what's the matter with you?" I asked.

"I went to Aht's yesterday, to clear the air. It did not go quite as planned. In fact, Senn helped me move everything from Aht's house... a fan, an old refrigerator, and of course the bed..."

"Why did Senn help? He's Boon-chat's brother."

"Senn is in my corner."

"How can you be sure of that? It's his family, and you're an outsider."

"Senn despises Boon-chat, but he must be careful. She is older. He has told me many things that she has done through the years, and he would like to even scores."

"I assume Boon-chat knows about Aht."

"Oh, yes. That. I had nowhere to store anything, so I brought it home and put it on the porch. Boon-chat is not happy. In fact, I now find I am negotiating from a somewhat weakened position."

Noel looked as if he had not slept since the day before we went to Aht's. I made him coffee and asked what had happened with her. He was reticent to say, because he had believed her and now felt betrayed. He said he wanted to talk with her one more time at the roadside bar. I asked what the point would be. For when the fog had lifted, it could be plainly seen that Brother was really husband and pimp. He said Noel might avail himself of Aht, but he could not live with her as minor wife. So long as Noel paid the rent, bought the whiskey, and was willing to discuss the purchase of a motorcycle and trailer, things might continue-- including the back-slapping.

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Jieyp was back in town. He came out of nowhere.

One leaden morning, Noel received a curiously perfumed envelope, posted locally. An enclosed photograph showed Jieyp with Boon-chat in a local hotel lobby. There was also a letter, unsigned, which said Boon-chat had been married six or seven times and was deporting herself "like a whore" with many different men.

I remember Noel's shaking hands when he held out the sad stationery. It was this that caused the freefall that followed.

He began to lecture while hungover or drunk, or to miss classes altogether. He got a black eye, a purple slab of raw meat around a smashed orb that could no longer focus, as the result of siccing his hound on a villager during a drunken blowout. He went with Senn to Bangkok to speed the residency permit and paid under the table. He said that, with all he endured to become a resident, it was fitting that he was stamped and photographed with a Guinness Book shiner. He opened and closed accounts. He tried to hide assets. As a foreigner with no property rights, he fought to get his name in the district records alongside that of Boon-chat. He learned then he had paid an exorbitant amount to build their house in the village. The builder had been Boon-chat's friend, and together they marked up materials and labor nearly one hundred percent.

With his residency permit in hand, he was free to divorce. He talked to a lawyer, a former kick-boxer who would kill Boon-chat for five hundred baht. The price was steep, he thought, so he would shop around. He handed me an envelope to be opened should he suffer any injury whatsoever, and purchased a machete which he honed to an edge. Senn said he was in danger, so he stuffed his bed with blankets to look like someone sleeping. He slept elsewhere. He also sent his adopted daughter to stay with her grandmother. The daughter was having problems. She was caught between an absent mother and an absent-minded farang for a father. Sending her to stay with grandmother seemed the best. She had lately let in one of the village boys, at night while Noel was out at Aht's. She freely confessed this and, when questioned, simply collected her knitting materials and sat down to work. The family lost face in this misadventure, and responsibility fell squarely upon Boon-chat who, everyone said, should have been home in Noel's absence.

But fiery Jieyp was back, fresh from a stretch in prison. Noel said Jieyp had been with Boon-chat in Bangkok, and was furiously infatuated. On one occasion he had slashed screens and smashed a door. He had carved up a table. Noel said he could prove it, and he showed me color photographs filed with a damage report. These same photographs were part of an updated dossier he was preparing for district police in building his divorce case. These gave me an inkling as to the contents of the envelope I was holding.

From my journal, I see that I began to distance myself from Noel. I knew more than I wanted to know, and everything sounded like a mad round. There were too many things I did not understand, and he was not, I thought, holding up his end at the college. I grew increasingly impatient with him for little inconveniences: when he was without a pen, or when he forgot to repay twenty baht he had borrowed (as if I owed nothing to anyone for anything), or when he could not locate a lesson I had handed him the day before. When he requested my attention (for a few seconds), I would condescend-- but my god, I dreaded the updates. Why he tolerated my contempt, I do not know. He still regarded me as a friend. I think he must have had no one else, and I treated him shabbily.

Ah, well. What are friends for.

The deeper his problems, the less help I was. I became a liability to him, as I had, one night after working late, mentioned his minor wife to Paul. I had been asked about Noel's home

situation. Every remark I made was an aside. Everything I said was at his expense. (But then, come to think, Noel himself had mentioned it to one of the Thai staff. He was unusually open about his problems, though I sometimes felt he was casting about for sympathy. All the same, I have a loose tongue.)

We still went for beer on occasion, but mostly to a small eatery across from the college, not to our riverside table. He would talk about some new girl in some new village, or someone he met who would fix him up after the divorce. I often asked why he did not look for an older woman, say fortyish, and educated. I pointed out there were many answering that description who were still twenty years younger than he, quite attractive and probably less trouble. I suggested they might even speak complete sentences and be interesting company.

"I can see the wisdom in that," he conceded. "But, I like them about thirteen. A young woman keeps a man young. It's natural."

"You're a vampire," I replied.

So far as that goes, he might have leveled the same charge at me when I incisively considered the juvenescent student body or ogled the young Thai Culture teacher's petite waist and shapely legs. Looking back, there were many things he might have said but did not. Perhaps from distraction? When I told him I had mentioned his minor wife to Paul, he said "Nieh!" -- nothing more. Then he showed me where his dog had bit him: a row of deep punctures on his forearm.

"I don't understand it. He bit me for no reason. No reason!"

Yes, he was increasingly abstracted. At the end of term, there were many complaints from students about his not being prepared for class, his too low marking, his whiskey breath. His lesions refused to heal. He had a herpes flare-up, and urinating was painful. He sold his motorcycle for one with sediment in the tank, and used the difference to retain a lawyer. He had no home because Thai courts require parties in a divorce proceeding to vacate premises-in-dispute pending sale and distribution of assets. He persevered and endured. There was an aspect incongruously Job-like in his troubles and maladies, the list of which grew ever longer.

He said Boon-chat had come back, bruised and battered, after an absence of several days. He said she was chastened. He confronted her about the hotel photograph. He showed her the letter. She laughed and said it was in Jieyp's own hand, that he had written it in an attempt to drive a wedge into their marriage. He had beaten her when she said she wanted nothing to do with him.

This was all the encouragement Noel needed. He seized the moment to say he wanted to make a clean breast of things, a new start. He wanted a wife, a home, a family. She seemed amenable, he said, but she wanted time to tie up loose ends. She asked for three or four days away. She was gone the next morning.

When Noel reported back to me, he said he believed her. He wanted to believe her. He would believe that she would tie up loose ends and return. He would wait and see.

Then the telephone rang in the department office. It was Boon-chat. She wanted to meet in town in thirty minutes. Noel quickly cancelled classes and disappeared.

At coffee the next morning, he told me she had laughed at his offer of reconciliation. She said he could stay in their house, look after their daughter, and pay her 5,000 baht each month for maintenance. She said she wanted 20,000 baht immediately. Alternatively, if it came to divorce, she wanted the house and furniture, the bank accounts, and a lien on his future purse. She was, he reminded me, a gambler at cards. When he threatened her with raising the issue of abandonment, she threatened to lead trump. She would tell the court that he had slept with her daughter.

He calmly told me this, but I caught a cat in his eye. His pupils were buckshot: little light could get in, and nothing seemed to come out. He was coldly contained. His world had closed down to a cage.

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"'I am the man who...has seen a fric...a fric...'"

"Affliction."

"A fric sun."

"Affliction."

The student, wholly absorbed, hesitated then repeated: "Affliction."

"Good! You are doing much better," said Johanna brightly. "Do you think you can read the whole verse tonight when we talk about 'affliction'? What should we do when we have trouble or affliction? Do you know? Here... I'll read this, and you tell me what it means, okay?

'For affliction does not come from the

dust,

nor does it sprout from the

ground;

but man is born to trouble...'"

I was half-listening from across the room when the atmosphere darkened abruptly, as though a drapery had been drawn. I turned and saw Noel, whose disruptive entrance caused Johanna's voice to drop to a whisper. He leaned shakily over my desk, supporting his weight on pinched-white knuckles. In a whiskied undertone, he said there was a matter of some urgency. He was wraith-like and despondent. I followed him outside the office where we might talk privately.

"You look bad. What's going on?" I said.

"Well, I've not had a bath in two days. There's no water in the village."

"And only Maekhong for breakfast."

"That, too. Listen, I've met a man who says he'll do it for thirty-five thousand."

"I'm sorry?"

Noel pointed his finger and cocked his thumb. "Bang."

His voice bounced off the wall. I was suddenly aware that every sound we made was carried along for all to hear.

"Do you mean what I think you mean?" I said in a hushed tone.

"He'll do it. He's got a pistol... a .38. I've seen it." Noel was oblivious of the reverberation. I motioned for him to lower his voice.

"Is this that kick-boxer you told me about? The lawyer?" I remembered Noel saying the cost was five thousand baht. I had not taken him seriously, especially after he said it could be done for much less. Thirty thousand baht, however, was serious money, and this time there was menace in his demeanor.

"No, not him."

"So who is this guy?"

"He's in the next village. He's not the pu-yai, the village headman, but a sort of assistant. What do you call it? I can't think."

"He's the law, then."

"Yes," said Noel insistently. "He is that."

"It's a set-up."

"He says he will do it for thirty thousand. People say he has pulled the trigger before, and I believe it. I would not cross him."

"Where do you meet these guys?"

"He was at my birthday party. I had a birthday party in a rice field. Some neighbors made food, we bought some whiskey, there was music. It was very pleasant." He smiled at the thought. "You should have come. Nieh! Not many others from your part of the world have done that!...had a birthday in a rice field."

"You can't be serious about this."

"I am. I am that.. It's the only way. She'll ruin me." He said this with unnerving finality.

"Killing Boon-chat is the only way?"

"She's threatening to say I slept with her daughter."

"Did you?" I surprised myself with my own straightforwardness.

He smiled sheepishly. "No, of course not. I might have put my arm around her. To comfort her when her mother was away. Sometimes she would be scared, and come lie down on the bed. But I never... Boon-chat will tell her what to say in court. She will coach her. I've seen her do it on occasion."

My mind was racing. I was trying to think what to say that would not be dismissed out of hand. I remembered our many talks about tradition, culture, religion and ethics. What had he said at different times? I settled upon practicality, and said:

"All she wants is the house and the furniture, so give it up. What is the furniture worth?"

"Nothing really. Ten thousand baht."

"What are you paying in lawyer fees?"

"Twenty-five thousand, so far."

"You'll pay more than that. What's the house worth? You stand to receive half, right? Just give it to her. Cut your loses."

"She wants everything. She wants to destroy me. Don't you understand?"

"It's not worth all this. Leave the country. Teach in Japan. Get the hell out, if you think she can win. You can start over. You'll still have your freedom. You'll never get out of a Thai prison."

He did not seem to hear. He laid out scenarios and stratagems. He provided background. He repeated himself:

"She has made me an offer. Of course, I have refused. I might stay and live in the house if everything stays as it is. I must pay all expenses, and for Daughter's schooling. I may not take a minor wife. For some arbitrary reason, they have decided..."

"Who are 'they'?"

"The family. Boon-chat's family think I am an old man now and have no need for a woman. But it's not true. They will permit me to stay and be a wage slave. While Boon-chat stays with her boyfriend in another village, no less. Don't you recall Senn saying I was in danger? Boon-chat thought I had insurance. The woman has a black heart. She will go to any length for money. She is bragging throughout the village that she will take everything if we go to court."

"So for that you are willing to kill another human being?"

"Yes, I know." His tone allowed misgiving. "I don't like it."

I could not constrain a derisive laugh. "You don't like it?! You don't like it. Right. Well, there's a start."

I looked directly into his face. He stared unflinchingly as I assessed his drawn countenance. Every crease, every pore oozed a plea not so much for empathy as authority: some sanction to set in motion what was already decided. His eyes veiled a murk of nether reaches. I strained to fathom and marked a floating image: a gathering negative resolving toward that slippery fracture of time when discernment becomes unavoidable. My eyes jerked from recognition. The negative formed an aspect, a face, and the face was my own. Son of Cain, Son of Cain.

I had a disembodied sensation of standing outside what was happening, as though I was both character and audience in some absurd shadow play. I listened incredulously as Noel, clearly distraught, spoke coolly about contract killing as though he were considering a balance sheet.

He said he could leave for Hong Kong in the next few days, and be far away when the job was done. I strained to listen. The cost-benefit considerations became suddenly utterly bizarre equations.

"I know," he emphasized. "It's bad. It's not good. What if I should get blackmailed? This is always a consideration in transactions such as this. It can happen. What should I do?"

I struggled for absurd, inarticulate words, and fought their echo.

"Christ, I don't know," I said. "Take two bullets and call me in the morning. What do you want me to say? You want me to say "Gee, that's a great idea, wish I'd thought of it'? Come on. Killing someone is not an option. How can you even think about something like this? Look, as a practical matter, ethics, morality, all that stuff aside, you can not get away with it. You'll get blackmailed or bumped-off yourself. But that's not the point. Doesn't any of this have another dimension for you? You say you are Buddhist. What does Buddhism teach? You were a monk once. How can you... all right. Maybe it's all... maybe survival is all there is, and the rest's only taboo and tradition. Maybe, maybe. But why talk to me? What's the point? Just do it. You want my meaningless opinion? Okay: if you go through with this, you have forfeited any and all claim. You have ensured your temporary survival, but that's it. What an accomplishment."

"I just want..."

"You can claim nothing. How can you claim otherwise? All you can do is howl at the moon." I caught my breath, then said: "I want no more of it."

I left him standing there. I went back to work and managed to concentrate for perhaps an hour, until the implications overwhelmed me. I put my pen down and looked around as if help might be somewhere found.

What if he did it? It was Friday night, with New Year's on Monday. Maekhong would flow freely in the village. Noel was already in a state, and one of his friends had a pistol. I might be held accountable. For what? For not acting? I did not know Thai law. Moreover, what was my responsibility to Boon-chat? I did not know her, but I knew someone might kill her. Yet again, I did not know. If Noel were not serious, and I mentioned his plan to anyone, word would certainly come to the college president. Noel would be dismissed and his troubles compounded. I knew he was being carefully watched.

My position seemed untenable. I had not asked for any of this. I became angry at Noel, who drew me in without any thought to the appalling consequences. His self-absorption was complete. But, I thought, even were he aware, he would only shrug it off the way he had explained his physical lusts being stronger than his spiritual drives. "I am not over Noel yet", he had once said.

I needed a string through the maze, a clear line of thought. I considered the small number of people who might be approached, and rested upon Ezekial Abrams. He seemed the only clear choice, and I sought him out.

The air about his white head was rarefied. He embodied 2,500 years of analytical discourse which, over a span of seventy years, had become his everyday speech. I often thought of him as a vestige, and considered what, other than age, separated us. In large measure, it came down to sources. Where I had watched television as Mortimer Adler talked with Bill Moyers, Abrams had studied under Adler. Where I had skimmed "Aristotle For Everybody", Abrams had read primary sources. At times, I found it exasperating to talk with him, due to his tendency to reduce questions to questions about the words comprising the questions. Abrams was, however, a disciplined intellect, a trained mind, and I trusted his skills of analysis.

Abrams promised confidentiality, and we talked behind closed doors. He listened intently as I provided minimal background, just enough information to enable him to identify issues. No names were mentioned. I think he must have known whom I was discussing, yet he never betrayed any sign of knowing. He was focused on the dilemma, and asked questions purely to clarify facts. When I had finished laying out the facts, he sat back in his chair and looked at the ceiling. He said nothing for some time, then stated there were two aspects to be considered: legal questions and ethical questions. He thought it best to be practical and consider legal questions first, as the law was likely to reflect ethical questions anyway. Further, ethical considerations could be moot and/or rendered superfluous by operation of law.

We talked for an hour. Abrams' ruminations came down to a recommendation of talking to a lawyer, but I had no contacts and even less money. When the words ran out, I thanked him for his help in clarifying questions, and departed.

I was alone in an arid place, with only my troubles. At length I decided that causing difficulties for Noel was preferable to someone else being harmed seriously. I slowly came to feel that I had but one alternative to doing nothing, and that was talking to the college president. He had influence and connections where I had none.

To my surprise, the president was not surprised. He even seemed to know, at least by reputation, the party who was willing to pull the trigger. He said nothing would happen, but asked me again whether or not I thought the situation was serious. He assured me I had no culpability under Thai law, and that the best course was to "wait and see". He said I had done everything I could in this matter, smiled, and extended his hand for me to shake.

I walked away, pleased to have no responsibility.

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It was five a.m., and quiet for once. No one was about on the first morning of the new year as I walked to the college. There were no trucks, no motorcycles, no radios or televisions, no blaring public address systems. Instead were the sounds of birds, animals, leaves in trees-- all the sounds usually buried under the barrage of man-made clatter.

There was a full moon of pale pink slowly disappearing in the western sky, the same moon which had been so high and clear the night before, and so bright. I could see colors as I walked with my shadow.

Then a mountain fog settled in, eating the tops of trees and making all the countryside a muted serigraph. Such changeableness in such a short space, a moment only.

I had been working alone in the department office for some time, when Noel waltzed in and announced he had made a quick trip to Bangkok to seek out another job. He looked so much more stable than three days earlier that I was astounded. I told him that I had spoken to the college president because I had been concerned. Of course, he was not pleased to hear this, but he took it in stride. He said he had decided to let his wife have everything, to avoid a messy legal wrangle. He said he might leave to teach in Bangkok or Korea in early January.

"It's early in January, beginning today," I observed.

"So it is," he smiled.

He asked if I was inclined toward a beer by the river. I declined and spent the day working alone.

Three days later, his desk was cleared and he was gone. Perhaps it was all the same, as he was about to be dismissed, but I feel I made another direct contribution to Noel's difficulties. It happened this way:

When classes resumed after the holidays, Noel was nowhere to be seen. I covered his classes that first day. The next day he was absent again. I remembered what he had said about leaving soon for Hong Kong or Korea. I spoke with Paul, the department Co-ordinator, and then again with the college president. I said it appeared that Noel had departed, and that his classes needed to be covered by someone. We began juggling schedules. The next day Noel showed up. It turned out he had telephoned-in sick. I went immediately to the receptionist to confirm if this was true. She was unflappable, said it was true, and that she had forgotten to relay the message. I glared at her, but knew it was I and my assumptions that had done the rest.

Noel politely indicated I had jumped the gun, but he was now altogether outside his circumstances. He was collected, dried out, and bore little resemblance to the cornered animal of

a few days earlier. He had decided upon resignation as the best course. It would allow him to be away if the court proceedings proved acrimonious. For financial reasons, his intention was to stay on as long as possible, meaning the end of term. The college president made the resignation effective immediately. Noel smiled, shrugged and began to pack his things. When he was finished, he presented me with a book, inscribed in friendship. He bought me a coffee at the outdoor commissary, and produced the photograph of his wife which had so long sat atop his desk. He removed it from its frame and lit a corner with his cigarette lighter. He held it out, as it slowly, reluctantly burned. He dropped it to the ground when he could no longer keep safe his fingers, and in seconds the fire went out. One small piece remained. I looked and laughed. It was the center of her chest.

"Nieh!" exclaimed Noel. "Damned persistent, that one." He lit it again, and a small gust carried away the ash.

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For a while, I saw him occasionally. Now and again, the phone would ring, and he would say that he was awaiting the evening bus or train. We would usually meet at our table by the river. The greetings were warm, the beer cool, and soon he would get down to cases. I listened to stratagems and fancies...

He was going to teach in Hong Kong, then in Korea-- then it was back in Japan.

He would go through with the divorce, wait two or three years, then negotiate a contract kill through a friend in a neighboring village.

He would let her have everything, and then start over. His pension would be coming soon, maybe his inheritance, and then she and teaching and the Thai bureaucracy "can all piss up the fucking wall."

He had made an offer to a sharp-eyed village girl, but she must marry him before he builds a new house. He said she wanted the house built first, and a few extras, so he will have to find someone else. It was entirely pragmatic and business-like, with no illusion. He was willing to settle for a personal relationship on a cash basis. She could even have another man, if she stayed and saw to his needs.

I listened as I always listen. Sometimes I asked questions. Sometimes I gave opinions. Sometimes I imagined myself, years from now, and still living here. Would I do the same? Who knows. God maybe. It is said God knows a man's heart... that which a man knows full well, but will not admit.

Noel went to Bangkok, and I did not hear from him for some weeks until he appeared suddenly with an old friend, a lawyer. They came to discuss the divorce proceedings with a local

attorney; also to go to the house of a friend where Noel was boarding his dogs and storing his furniture. It happened that Boon-chat drove by on a motorcycle, saw him, and dropped off her daughter who cried in Noel's lap for him to come home. The lawyer said it was all an act. The man holding the furniture said it was all an act. The man who will kill for hire said it was all an act. So did others present. Yet, Noel seemed to be moved.

"She cried in my lap. She put her head down and cried in my lap. But it was an act. Everyone there could see right through it. She does not love me," said Noel. "I've learned my lesson. I gave her mother too much, too soon. She soon got ideas. My next wife will be different. I'm doing what my lawyer friend, here, does. Just last week, his wife gave him trouble, and he hit her with a chair. A bleeding chair! Her wrist's in a cast, eh? Do you understand this?" he asked me. "She acted up, and he had to do it."

"Yes," said the lawyer gravely. "I do not want to do this, but, there are times I must do like this. Every now and then, I must, you see. My wife must know my heart." The halting English lent his words a solemn weight.

"There, you see," said Noel.

"Do not worry," said the lawyer. "We find you another wife."

Then the lawyer said to me: "I love this man. He is my friend. He is the good man."

"Aaah!" exclaimed Noel, picking a peanut from a small tray of appetizers. "Do you see this? This... PEANUT. Lawyer, here, has a grandfather who was a very poor man... very, very poor. But these... peanuts!... have made him a bloody rich man a million times over. He doesn't know what to do, he has so much money."

"Yes, he is very rich," allowed the lawyer.

"And how old is he?" asked Noel.

"About seventy-six or eight. I forget," said the lawyer.

"Aah! And he's got thirteen wives. Thirteen!" said Noel to me. "And young, too! I'd like to know how to get in on a bit of that."

I smiled a primeval smile.

We were drinking beer, and the words were settling, when Noel said abruptly:

"I must come up again, soon."

"Why?" asked the lawyer. "Your attorney here will see to things."

"To see about my proposal. About my new wife."

"Village girl? She has no care for you. We can do better for you. We will do better for you, in Bangkok."

Noel considered this, then slammed the table. "No. I must come to see my dog. I miss him, and he misses me. He understands my heart."

The lawyer grabbed his tottering beer bottle and used napkins as a sop. It was an effort to no avail, for Noel slammed the table harder still and cried out, painfully, emphatically:

"My dog understands me. He understands my heart."

PART 2

Was he well? For weeks I heard nothing. Perhaps he had gone to Hong Kong or Japan. Perhaps it was better not to know.

By summer term, with twice daily classes, I had found a groove. The short, intensely hot session, passed before it started-- and then the rains came. The dust became muddy pools. The parched browns turned green. Everything revived. I had made it through a year.

In-coming students, "freshies" they were called, doubled the size of the school. Paul, the permanent fixture, began preparing for a torrent of new teachers. He was more confident of his role, and decidedly pleased when Johanna signed on the line to stay another year. When term began, we three formed the nucleus. The Abramses, however, were still undecided whether to teach in another province or return to America. Paul told them the president was flexible. While they were undecided, they could stay and teach-- a seminar, perhaps-- a full term or a half. Either way, they were welcome.

With the recruits, the department now had twice the former faculty. Their questions were the questions we had asked the year before. Once again, the missionary spoke at the orientation meeting. Once again, he distributed "survival" language manuals with the hapless foreigner on the cover. But unlike last year, there was no other speaker-- no one with an old folder of dog-eared, typed remarks.

Was he well?

At times I was apathetic, at other times relieved. Eventually, I even grew forgetful. The string of passing days became ever more tenuous in its connection to what happened. Still in the midst of some routine I would loose the rhythm suddenly, fall out of cadence, and realize I had not given "it" any thought for some time. Was he well? An oddly pervasive guilt then took hold-- and also cold suspicion about my forgetfulness-- because everything, including no news from Noel, had worked out so favorably.

Favor can be slippery. It is common to be fortunate and then suppose ones circumstances are the result of intelligence or virtue. I had not this luxury. Clearly, I had done nothing to resolve what had happened. It was simply that one day, suddenly, the pressure was off. Inexplicably, I had been spared difficulties. But when one has been spared, one has not been tested. Whenever I fell out of cadence, whenever I remembered my forgetfulness, the doubt gnawed and gnawed, and I knew that I did not want to be tested. I overheard Johanna reading, "Nor shall ye be tested beyond your endurance", and mentally added: Nor inconvenienced, please, we pray. And this admission was the guilt.

I kept myself occupied at the college, arriving earlier and earlier, and leaving later and later. In darkness I went from, and came to, my house in the village. I knew every rut along the road, and what size rock to throw at which dog. I taught persuasive writing and the ethical appeal. I read and read: short stories, history, philosophy, politics, religion. By thinking I tried not to think.

June, July and August passed. Then, September.

The rains stopped in October.

Nights were cooler, late November.

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"And a very good morning!" It was Dr. Ezekial Abrams, to whom the Thai staff now referred as Dr. Zeke. This was his greeting, each morning, as he walked through the door and found me seated before the computer. He knew I would be there and called out before seeing me. It became a joke: I was always first to the office, and he was always second. He was usually energetic, but I prefer mornings to be quiet. On occasion, I could match his ebullience sufficiently to respond "Is it morning, already?" or "That it is!" or "Dr. Abrams, I presume!" Beyond that, we seldom talked. We were both preoccupied: I with staring at the monitor, and he with sorting the papers always waiting under a lumpish stone on his desk. It was well into Second Term, and we had our routines.

Agnostic and skeptical, Abrams took to engaging Paul in quiet debate.

How, he asked, was it possible for anyone to graduate from Tanner College-- in History yet-- without having read Lionel Trilling? Paul would smile sheepishly and say, "I don't know, but I did." Abrams would then suggest that the deficiency be remedied, all the while shaking his head. Paul, for his part, would privately remark that he hated semi-retired geniuses, then laugh. He told me they discussed theology late nights in the Abrams apartment. I was invited to join.

"A three-way discussion would be interesting," he said. "Dr. Zeke, the atheist raised Orthodox; me, the token mainstreamer; and you, the unrepentant heretic. What do you say?"

"We could give it a go, I suppose."

"Tuesday night, then, if you can make it. I should be there about seven-thirty."

I arrived early on the appointed evening. Abrams's wife, Juanita, was clearing the dinner dishes. She handled all their domestic chores and also worked in the college library, helping to establish a card catalogue. Otherwise, she wrote under a pen name in Spanish: poetry mostly, a novel which dissatisfied her (but was in its second printing), and three volumes of critical essays to which she was adding a fourth.

"I finished the final draft today, you know. So we are celebrating, big."

"Whole wheat bread, you observe," pointed Dr. Abrams. "Want some?"

"I've just eaten," I said. "Where did you find that?"

"There's a Chinese woman and she has a shop near the... you know, the big market," said Juanita. "She makes the bread for an Australian gentleman. Today he didn't come. You know, she says she can make it for me every Tuesday, special. That's when she bakes for him. On Tuesday. But Zeke doesn't eat much bread, and we have no refrigerator. Besides, you can see that I have to watch my weight. But tonight is an occasion, specially."

"Sounds like a good night for wine," I said, "if one could find wine anywhere."

"Yes, yes. Qué lastima, but it doesn't matter, anyway," she smiled. "Zeke doesn't drink, either. So sometimes I am trying to remember why did I marry him, exactly."

Dr. Abrams said nothing, just raised his eyebrows and took a bite from a piece of folded, dry bread.

Paul was late in coming, and so they talked about their two years in China, and about how they had met in the Canaries when she was his student thirty years ago.

"What was the class?" I asked.

"Oh, I think it was non-Euclidean geometry, wasn't it?" Abrams winked at me.

"Oh, no, no, no!" Juanita retorted. "How can you forget? It was a poetry class, you know... all young women... and he was so serious."

"It was my first time teaching the subject," Abrams said. "The class was a disaster."

"No, it was not," returned Juanita. "You just read from your notes too much."

"Was she a good student?"

"A-minus," said Abrams, "but I couldn't say anything without her raising her hand."

"Well, I had questions, you see," said Juanita.

"Yes," said Abrams to me. "Always a question, and never satisfied with an answer. But I liked the fire in her eyes."

When nine o'clock passed, I noted it was clear that Paul was somehow delayed, whether by having missed a train or by having died en route in a bus accident. It was but half in jest, because highway carnage was much too common. On the road to Chiangmai, at the summit of a passage over the hills, stand dozens of white shrines, like bird feeders, in memorial to all the souls sacrificed along the way. Paul often travelled the route by "green bus", the standing-room-only common carrier, notorious for dazed and overworked drivers. With a two-hour delay came mild concern.

Abrams said that he would not want Paul's responsibilities at such a young age, in particular having to defend a new school's haphazard curriculum before the Ministry of University Affairs.

"I feel sorry for the guy, trying to run the department while working on a degree. And all that travel. It's too much. Why, designing a new curriculum alone is... Ah, I almost forgot." He looked under a stack of books. "Here. I've made photocopies. Two of them. One for Paul, and one for you."

"What is it?"

"It's a very succinct article written by an old colleague. It raises a few key questions which ought to be considered when writing curricula. I thought it might prove useful. I've referred to it for years."

Abrams and I had approached Paul about renovating the cut-and-paste English curriculum, compiled by seemingly random selections from catalogues of accredited institutions. Paul arranged a meeting with the President, who was also acting Dean. We were told to proceed and experiment, which we were already doing. I had jettisoned the texts for each of my classes in favor of writing my own. In retrospect, I do not know why I was allowed to do this. I had no qualifications to be teaching, much less writing course descriptions. But I was given an inexplicably light rein. It must simply have been the time and the place-- a singular conjunction of certain personalities in certain circumstances, not to be duplicated. Most surprising was that Dr. Abrams, who I sensed had a maverick streak as well, had not dismissed my approach out of hand. Still chutzpah, or hubris, can carry one just so far. I felt a fraud. I decided to ask his opinion about making my own format and materials.

"Well, your instincts are good," was his opaque reply. He may have said more.

I was still thinking what it meant after saying good-night. Did he mean that my intentions are good, but the results are questionable? Maybe the implication was that I proceeded intuitively, rather than methodically. Maybe he meant that, in the absence of formal pedagogical training, I was stumbling upon what works.

Walking downstairs from the Abrams' apartment, I was unsure. Once out in the mercurial air, I no longer cared. The stars were out. The night was oddly warm and seductive. A frog croaked. A pulse of sibilant cicadas.

A serpentine brick walkway wound around campus. It darted along hedgerows and under trees. It stretched over roiling lawn from building to building, coiled in a circus, then slid off to a pond before stealing into shadows. I decided upon the direct way home, until glimpsing a form down a cross path. I hesitated.

A silent young woman, arms around her legs, was sitting on the steps. I recognized the black hair over her shoulders. In class she was attentive and elusive by turns, sitting always in front with legs crossed carefully under a demurely split mid-calf skirt, her low-heeled pump hanging from her toe. It was an almost unconscious art.

We had been ignoring each other since the first day of First Term, when she had slipped into the office to speak with Johanna. She was just sitting down when our glances crossed and locked. That afternoon, she was in class with the third-year students and did not once look up at me. But this term she was taking all three subjects I was teaching.

We worked out a certain verbal distance. We acknowledged each other by nods and asides. We seldom conversed, except in passing on the stair. Then, we would speak from upper and lower landings. There were always backward glances. She was always with a group. And now, under a wide and fathomless sky, in the pale fluorescence of the Liberal Arts floodlamps, she was sitting quite alone.

I sensed she sensed me. Had she seen me coming? She seemed too composed, almost posed. Surely she had heard my footsteps stop? Still she made no motion. Perhaps she was thinking, after all, or wished not to be disturbed.

I wanted to speak, but I said nothing. It seemed better to approach indirectly, to make my presence known without pressing. I felt for a discrete distance, out upon the lawn just beyond the pale pink light. I sat down on the ground, my arms around my legs.

There was Orion, strangely overhead. The North Star, too low to the horizon, was hidden by the trees. Though half-turned away, in the corner of my eye, over my shoulder, I could see her, unmoving. I scanned the sky. A bright meteor crossed behind electric lines (make a wish) in the charged evening air. Seconds passed. Again, in the corner of my eye... she looked away just as I glanced. Her expression was cross, even bored.

Yes. She was bored. And I was suddenly objective-- in much the same way as when pouring cold water over my head these chill November mornings.

It was a mistake, sitting here on the grass under the stars. What had made one think one could.... what? intrude unobtrusively? At least one had remained silent. It could have been worse. One could have said something stupid. Better now to cut, what? Losses? Bait? Anchor? But...

Beat it, Humbert. You play chess? Make a tactical retreat, then. Yes, the plan is...

She rose and smoothed her skirt. Then, simply, she walked away.

****

All was quiet. The campus was dormant for the King's birthday. I wanted to be alone, and a three-day weekend was cause for gratefulness. There was not a soul in sight or on site. I unlocked the door and entered the office without turning on the light.

A letter was waiting in the middle of my desk. There was no return address, and the cancellation was smudged, but I knew Noel's handwriting.

His tone was jaunty. He was in Bangkok, and all was going well. He apologized for the delay in making contact, but, after all, there had been many matters with which to contend before bringing everything to a satisfactory conclusion. His divorce was final. Boon-chat had failed to present herself at court and so his dossier was the sole evidence. Yes, he had decided to let her have it all: the house, the furnishings, the appliances, the motorcycle, the bank accounts, the lot. The court, however, thought otherwise. Noel was permitted to keep his savings, but everything else went to his step-daughter. Boon-chat got nothing. The judge even forbade her to enter the house without her daughter's permission. But, as the girl was underage, she was remanded to the care of her grandparents, two doors down, for the next seven years. There was, he said, some justice in the world.

He had found a teaching post at his former university. He was hired as part-time lecturer, at half-again the going rate, and was working nearly fifty hours each week. Udom, his lawyer-friend, had taken him in until he got back on his feet. Now he was able to pay a small monthly rent, much needed by Udom, whose cases were few. He had but one complaint: he was working so much there was no time for a drink with friends. However, Udom had introduced him to several divorced women in their mid-to-late thirties. They were nice but he was not interested. "I like them about thirteen!" He suggested I visit the university, a "degree mill", because the money was four times my current salary. Further, he could put in a word on my behalf. He included a current address and telephone number. A postscript stated that his manuscript on Buddhist traditions was being considered by a Bangkok publisher.

I put the letter under my journal in the bottom desk drawer, looked slowly around the office from dull metal shelves to identical gray desks, and out the row of horizontal windows. A seasonal fog, heavy and damp, encroached silently. I merely noted it. The time for sliding into reverie is passed. In a few days, another year would be passed. It was time to get busy, time to do something. Turning away, I noticed a partition newly decorated with bright photographs of students and their club activities. Is it? Yes. There. The back of her head, in one... and her profile, in another... looking so unreasonably young, so unseasonably fresh.

I went to the kitchen nook and prepared thick instant coffee mixed with condensed milk. One could not be here very long without acquiring certain tastes.

****

The Thai staff were buzzing. Apparently, over the holiday, something significant had happened. A cleaning woman and a secretary were whispering loudly near my desk, one saying that for weeks she had suspected this would happen. The other was skeptical of such prescience. But she, too, knew there was something in the air.

I kept trying to write. As other teachers, two by two, lagged in to sign the register, information and speculation joined hands and skipped around the room. The brick and concrete walls resounded with simple glee and playfulness. Then, long painted fingernails performed a paradiddle on my desk. I looked up from my journal.

Ajahn Oi addressed me in English: "And you... what about you?"

"I give up. What about me?"

"I suppose we, too, shall hear about you very soon," she said.

"Oh, Ajahn...you, too?" squealed a student typist.

"Me too, what?" I was the only one who seemed not to know.

"Are you going to propose?" said Ajahn Oi, her broad vowels broader than usual.

"Propose what?" I said, thinking of course descriptions.

"Not what. Who," said Oi. "I mean whom. To whom."

"What do you mean?" I shrugged.

"Some beautiful one," said Oi. "Some special one. Perhaps you will ask her to marry, or something."

"Did I hear 'marry'?"

"Moreover, perhaps she will be someone here, too. Like Johanna."

"Johanna?"

"Yes. Paul, you know, he asked her already," said Ajahn Oi, removing a mirror from her purse. "But some other girls, they are pretty, too."

"But you already have two boyfriends, and they are on the same volleyball team."

"Ooohh! Don't talk like this way. It's embarrass, sure. Moreover, it's not to be serious like that you say."

"Oh, I seeeeeeeeee." I liked to tease Ajahn Oi and watch her English fall apart. The exchange ended with her swatting the air in front of me.

The office slowly emptied and the laughter died down. I put away my journal. Dr. Abrams poked his head through the door to peek at the mailbox, said nothing, winked and disappeared.

I asked a secretary, patient with my halting Thai, how anyone knew that Paul had asked Johanna to marry. The gist of her reply was that a fax must have been sent to America. A reply came by fax to the President's office, and his secretary, Tam, had read it.

I could not follow the rest. The secretary must have known I could not understand, so she held out cookies from a small paper bag. I thanked her, and she returned to typing address labels.

By the wall clock, it was now five 'til nine. I got going.

My first class, Contemporary Literature, went as expected. Half the students were still not returned. Those present were disinclined to read a scene from "Casablanca"-- the dialogue between Rick Blain and a young Bulgarian woman-- and much more interested in speaking about Paul and Johanna. I tried a tortured tie-back by noting that Victor Laszlo was played by an actor named Paul. I ended by dismissing class early. They fairly fled. Curiously, just as I was leaving the classroom, the moonlight step-sitter was coming up the stair. She smiled and said:

"I'm sorry I am very late for class."

"No, you are very early," I said, without stopping. "We don't meet until nine o'clock." Hurrying down the steps, at the landing I looked up. "Tomorrow, that is." She was watching me, closely. She hesitated, then shook her head and said something in Thai. I arched an eyebrow and continued on down.

There was another letter from Noel, waiting on my desk. It was the second received in four days. He must, I thought, have nothing better to do. I dropped into my chair. I opened the envelope-- light bluish, with a border of red, white and blue bars-- tearing carefully, along the sender's edge. Inside were four cerulean pages, inscribed front and back in ballpoint blue. For two pages, everything was going well. At the third page he wrote:

"I have reconciled with Aht, and she will shortly join me here. She has left her husband for good this time. Since our most recent meetings, it is clear she is sincere and we can work things

out. True, Udom does not seem to like her much, but he has agreed she can stay until we find a place to call home. He has been a good friend, Udom, and generous to a fault. If you have not already done, you must meet him one day. Have I introduced you? He came north with me last time.

"I am in need of some assistance. I have instructed Aht to pay you a visit at the college. She has returned home to collect her things and is in some need of cash. I will reimburse you when I next return north. She does not require a great deal; perhaps three or four hundred baht would be sufficient. Once she is here in Bangkok, she will be provided.

"You really should visit and see the opportunities available here. Yes, the price of living is considerably higher, but the wages are as well. Why should you continue to slave for such a pittance when..."

I put the letter down. The very next day, Aht came to the college. A cleaning woman announced her arrival. Aht was deferential, powdered, and rouged. Her mouth was painted red, as were the false fingernails of her rough, callused hands. I spoke with her at a small table on the second floor balcony. The office would have been impossible. Everyone who passed was making an appraisal. I wanted privacy, without being too private.

She asked how I was. Did I still like Thailand? How much longer did I intend to stay? The weather, she thought, was becoming very cold. And she was so happy to be going to Bangkok. Ajahn was doing well there. They had plans together. And how was I?

I handed her an envelope with a single, starched banknote. She refused it at first, then tucked it in her purse. She would leave tomorrow, she said, and thanked me.

A week later I was in town walking down a sidestreet. A blue, canopied shuttle truck, with two low benches left and right along the bed, passed in the opposite direction. I must have glanced at the passengers. A voice called out. The truck slowed, then stopped. A woman in a floppy hat climbed down. It was Aht.

"I thought you went to Bangkok."

"Yes," she said. "I go soon. Two or three days."

"Well, best luck, then."

"I go to see Ajahn."

"Yes. Say hello to Ajahn."

"Sure."

"Bye."

"Bye-byeee."

"Good luck."

"Bye-byeee."

****

I wrote Noel to say I had done as he requested, that he should not worry about settling accounts, and that I had seen Aht in town. Otherwise there was little to say, other than to off-handedly ask why he thought Aht had said one thing but done another. I may even have wished them well. My tone, I recall, was distant and noncommittal-- not exactly breaking away, but neither encouraging a response.

Why? I suppose we seemed to be going our separate ways. He was involved in matters no longer of interest, and visiting Bangkok was the last thing I wanted to do. Besides, we were again "on the fly", as he once remarked. What first had drawn us together was happenstance more than gravitation-- our both being "odd man out". We had no common interest, other than drinking beer. As I preferred mine on hot afternoons, there was little to hold us. We were different; different generations and different people. And so much time had passed.

Further, there were examinations in progress. We were already midway through Second Term. I did not want to bother with writing notes, much less letters, at a time when the Ministry of University Affairs did not cotton my assigning students to write compositions upon the legal status of minor wives. They were closely watching the midterm examination. Annoyed, because I wanted something to engage young minds, I decided upon sheer pabulum as an essay topic. It was meant to be condescendingly appropriate-- and indeed, it was approved. But I soon repented my gesture. I expected more of the same type essay each student has written since secondary school-- "My Family"-- yet they rose to the occasion and overcame the potential for inanity.

It was in altogether another sense that I later wished I had drafted Part Two differently. It entailed writing a descriptive narration:

"Write about something that happened to someone you know."

The results were uniformly fine-- much better than the previous year's. They were also much longer and much more depressing. There were accounts about dwindling family fortunes, addicted prostitutes, and friends killed in motorcycle accidents. One story told of a man who had escaped the Khmer Rouge in neighboring Kampuchea. But there was one in particular-- and she-of-the-stairs wrote it-- that I could barely manage.

I watched her, during the examination. She stared out a window for long periods. Sometimes she knit her brow or clasped her writing hand as she read. She did not use her dictionary. When she finished, she gathered her pens and erasers into a zippered pouch. She did not proof read.

She rose from her seat, walked quietly to where I sat, looked me directly in the eye, held out her paper, placed her hands together in a graceful wai, and went away.

The story was entitled "The Fortune of Supatcharee." It began with an observation that good health is regarded in Buddhism as good fortune and the result of ones accumulated merits. This doctrine is not far removed from a Protestant view that ones success in business is connected with ones election to the choir eternal.

She had known Supatcharee in school. The unfortunate girl was born with a blind right eye. She was frail, and at nineteen had a problem with her throat. A doctor advised she should take better care of her health, but as colds were common, Supatcharee thought little about it. Soon she had a lump in one breast. There was pus clogging her nose and she could not breathe. Her family were grindingly poor, but she had good luck because a rich man intervened. He sent her for testing to Chulalongkorn Hospital in Bangkok. There, she was given five months to live. Not six, five. She spent four months there in Bangkok, then returned home to her family. My student would visit her, lying on a mat on the floor and half-covered by a tattered blanket. She could no longer speak, only stare at her visitor. Her mother said that, sometimes at night, rats would bite her-- but she thought Supatcharee no longer had feeling. Wasted to skin and bone, she was dead in a month.

All this was unsettling to read. But it was the final paragraph, with its combination of broken grammar and simple eloquence, that haunted me:

"they were not disturb when she die,
and nobody remember her name. But I.
She is my memory, and so I tell you
about Supatcharee."

When I had finished reading, my chin was resting in my hand. It was perhaps the sixteenth or seventeenth paper in a long line of troubles. I stared at the careful handwriting and crossed-out phrases. It was half the test, and I could not grade it. After a little, I wrote a note: The only way I can be objective about this is to consider grammar. 40/50

Come and see me if you like.

****

Noel was writing regularly now. By the end of term I was receiving two, sometimes three, letters each week. They were long and detailed, and I was indifferent. The more personal his observations became, the more distanced I felt.

Aht had come to Bangkok and, although Udom was reserved around her, he had opened his door. Her days in the city were free, and limited only by a small allowance Noel each morning peeled off a roll in his pocket. She would serve him boiled rice, egg drop soup, and vegetables, and send him out the door by seven. His first class was at nine and he finished at six. The rush hour held him up until about seven-thirty, when he returned home to Udom's. Then Aht would give him a bath and dinner, and they would speak together of the day's events. Bedtime was nine o'clock, or, after a drink or two, at nine-thirty. It was a scene of domestic tranquility, save for one detail.

Noel was not happy at his old college. He never said why. After he stopped trying to sell me the idea of teaching there, he resigned. Soon, money was tight. About this time, a drinking buddy from the Boon-chat days, Maynard, came to Bangkok for a week. He had taught at the same college during Noel's first run. He was now in Hong Kong. With the British lease running out in 1997, Maynard was thinking seriously about "changing his base of operations".

It was damned good to see him. He was a pistol. For a week, it was just like the old days. Maynard seemed to especially like Aht. Even Udom was loosening his tie a little more these days.

They had agreed to form a partnership. Each put up an equal amount, and when Maynard returned to Hong Kong, he routed slightly flawed denim trousers on to Bangkok. Noel, Aht and Udom were soon selling on the sidewalks of Sukhumvit Road. Some days they made several hundred baht. Other days were slower.

Aht became weary of Bangkok. She was tired of spending whole days on the sidewalk, hustling-- tired of the manswarm, traffic, pollution and noise. She wanted to return north, to visit her family and friends. She spent a solicitous, candle-lit evening patting Noel's thigh until he gave her fare for a return ticket, money for a few gifts, and a little extra scratch just in case. She said she would be gone one week.

Early the next morning, Noel and Udom dropped her off at the Maw-Chit bus terminal and headed for their corner on Sukhumvit, Selling was slow, and as Udom had diarrhea, they decided to return home early. They arrived to find Aht rummaging through the bedroom drawers, looking for the cash box. When Udom searched her handbag, he found Noel's faux-Rolex, his gold chain and signet ring. They scuffled. He slapped her hard, two or three times. Noel wrote he was too stunned to say or do anything:

"Aht has a black heart. She has proved herself a liar, a cheat, and a thief. Udom would not abide her, and turned her out with nothing. He was merciful, really. Being trained at law, he might have made things very difficult indeed for her. He was right. He saw completely through her from the first. She is no good, and I want never to see her again."

The aftermath followed in an unexpected letter from Hong Kong. It had been composed on a manual typewriter, apparently in haste, for there were many strike-overs. It read:

"Business has taken me there twice this past month, and so I have had opportunity to assess his situation. Besides, he speaks of you often, and so I don't mind telling you that in the old days, back when he and Boon- chat were married, he was a very heavy drinker. Every evening after work, we made the round of bars, and ended drinking into the wee hours at their flat. I could match him round for round at that time, but I am afraid that I have lately very much curtailed my propensities in that direction. These days I much prefer a warm bath and a beer at home. But if it is any indication at all, there was a wall separating their sleeping area from the sitting area in their apartment. The wall consisted of stacked whisky bottles. Of course, Noel has the constitution of an ox, but he is older now and drinking heavily again. It is worrisome. He has blacked-out once or twice in my presence, and even suffered something rather like a seizure. I took him to hospital, but the medicos could find nothing. Now, he speaks of returning north. It has to do with his pension and, I am told, an inheritance he expects to receive. I thought you should be apprised. I will likely be in Bkk next month. I will be in touch. Regards, Maynard."

****

I had been in Thailand nearly two years and, except for periodic pilgrimages to Chiangmai Immigration in search of the Holy Visa, I had gone nowhere except once-- a day trip to see the ruins at Sukhothai.

I had gone with the Chinese woman from the rich family, the one who had suggested that Thais were barbarians. We met through the college. She was perhaps thirty-two, had a masters degree in botany, and was running a small company which made and exported hand-painted lanterns and umbrellas. She spoke passable English, and lived at home under the thumb of a considerably older, unmarried sister. We saw each other rarely, sometimes for lunch, sometimes for dinner.

I also went to dinner, at one thatched-roofed roadside restaurant or another, with a woman from my village. She was unmarried and had a young son. She had come from another province, and was getting by through sheer determination and perseverance. Except for socks and underwear, she did my wash, mopped my floors twice a week, and generally kept an eye out when I was away from the house. She had a key and came and went as she pleased. I trusted her and paid twice the going monthly rate. She spoke no English, and so our conversations were limited. But she was tolerant, good-humored, and owned a motorcycle. Her name was Arunsri. She also helped me avoid a serious difficulty. A small friend of her young son took to coming

around in the evenings. He was perhaps nine or ten and would simply appear unannounced. He was curious to know what I was doing by candlelight, and he would sit and smile and watch me read or draw for perhaps half an hour, then excuse himself and leave. One night though, he brought his older sister with him. She sat down upon the floor, leaned back against the opposite wall, and tried to engage me in conversation. She was returned to the village after working some months at a coffee shop in Chiangmai. She was nineteen. Her hair was pulled straight back, and she wore an airy plaid shirt. She and her little brother stayed not more than half an hour and then said good-night.

They returned for another visit the next week. This time she sat down closer to me, with her brother crouching and looking over her shoulder. He was smiling as always, but restless, and came and went from the room for short intervals. After a time, he disappeared altogether. She, meanwhile, began letting her hair down to comb it out. She said she knew a little English.

"Did you learn in mattayom school?"

"A little, but I did not complete."

"Oh."

"Do you go to Chiangmai?"

"Only to get a visa."

She looked shyly away, then said: "You look tired. I bore you."

"No, no. But I am tired."

"Do you want a massage?" She almost swallowed the sentence.

I was unsure I had understood. "What was that?"

"Massage?"

I became suddenly aware of her brother's absence, of the stillness and darkness away from the flickering candlelight. There were pillows and a mat on the floor through the open door to the next room. She was leaning toward me. When she looked aside, I traced the contour beneath her clothes, but suddenly felt cold. I did not know her name. The atmosphere became awkward. I was supposed to make a move, but I hesitated.

"Thank you, no."

"Are you sure? Just your back."

"I'm fine, thanks. Just a little tired, that's all."

The next day I spoke with Arunsri. She was clearly annoyed.

"That kid is not good," she said. "She is testing your nature. If she is lucky, you will like her. Then she can go to America. She should not come here, alone like that. Not good. I will ask around."

No more was ever said about the matter, and I never saw the young woman again. Her little brother continued to come around from time to time unannounced. But after a while, he lost interest in the foreigner.

It was the end of term. I was restless to get away from the college and the village and the daily routine. It was time to travel somewhere. I pulled out a map, closed my eyes and pointed. My finger landed on an island off the coast of Malaysia. I packed a bag and bought a train ticket south.

Two days later, I was talking to fishermen about hiring their long- tail boat. They had just put in, and so they were politely indifferent to my suggestion they put out again. One, in a bright red headband, coiled rope unhurriedly. The other, in a display of self-sufficiency, rolled a cigarette and sized me up.

The island, he said, is four hours away.

Yes, I thought, four hours. The L.A. manner of expressing distance. And I am just another long nose with a day pack and high-tech running shoes; possessed of no skills or knowledge useful here; possessed of nothing more than coin of the realm. Whither the current, whence the wind, what the meaning of the clouds or the squawking of the gulls? Answer, if you please, Mr. Quintal. Aye, Sir; who gives a rat's ass, sir.

If we leave now, he continued, the return home will be in the dark. He picked tobacco from the tip of his tongue. He said: one person, six hundred baht.

Ah, me. A boat for hire, and money for fare. Three, I said.

The haggling began. They said I could wait until the next day and take a tourist boat, but it might not be going to the same island. That clenched the matter. I paid their price. They filled a plastic bottle with clear water, checked the motor oil, gave some instructions to a boy on the dock, and loosed the mooring.

The long-tail skimmed the glassy and undulant Andaman Sea. The sun was dazzling and unrelenting. The fishermen raised odd sticks and burlap bags that had been stitched together into a canopy. One stretched beneath it to nap, while the other held the prop steady. Passing boats were few, and then none at all. The coastline disappeared.

There were flying fish, floating gulls, and bobbing styrofoam. There were islands like cupcakes and inexplicable rock fingers jutting out of the water to point at the sky. Carelessly strewn along the sandy spit fronting one tree-mantled island was a pole-hutted hamlet of sea

gypsies, stateless, paying taxes to none, and insular in their secret tongue. I thought on it an hour. Was it freedom, I wondered. A comparatively carefree existence of...

BA-WAKK!!

The motorprop cracked away from the mount, and immediately the tillerman had to handle an oversized eggbeater. He managed to wrestle it near enough to shut it down, then with the help of the other, who jumped awake in the commotion, pulled it into the boat. They both stood, hands on hips, staring at the mount. Then one picked up the head of a bolt which had sheared in half. The other lit a cigarette. They talked. I muttered.

"Here we are: the Horse Latitudes -- in the Middle of the Andaman. Great. Wonderful to be alive." I scanned the horizon quickly. There was not a ship in sight. I might, I thought, be able to float to that dot way over there. Odysseus swam fourteen days, didn't he? I noticed the water slowly leaking through the sides of the boat. Jesus. I could see the sea between the slats. How do they go out in this thing day after day?

The fishermen were unconcerned. They fiddled with a length of rope pulled from under a plank seat. With the prop jerried to the mount, they turned the motor, which immediately churned free. They pulled in the prop, lit new cigarettes, and started again. Their imperturbability was calming. This must not be, I thought, the first time they have done this. In half an hour, the motor was securely lashed and held, and we were again on our way.

By and by we came to the island. There were fishing boats moored in a shallow lagoon. On the strand were four bamboo beach bungles. A service hut stood nearby. No one was in sight.

I disembarked and paid the fishermen, who smiled broadly, came about, then pointed their boat homeward. I walked up to the service hut and sat down upon a rough wooden bench. A disheveled woman with a missing front tooth padded across the sand toward me. She had come from behind a brake of tall grass. She held up six fingers. I held up three. We settled at four-and-a-bent-thumb, and she gave me the key to Number 2.

On the wall in the service hut was a menu written in three languages.

There was fried rice with shrimp; fried rice with squid; fried rice with fish; and plain fried rice. To drink there was water, whiskey, beer, and Coke. I opened the lid of an ancient ice chest. Inside, in the can, was Guinness Stout. Such a long way from St. James's Gate. I did not know it came in anything but bottles.

There was a trail leading to a small village, but I did not go. I walked around the island in the opposite direction. The windward side was strewn with beach huts, and much more developed, but there was no one. I climbed the rocks at the southern end until my feet were raw, then turned back to Number 2.

The evening sun was paradisiacal and kodachromed. It turned screaming red as it dipped into the chalice-sea. The darkling waters were clear and gold and warm.

I swam a time and toweled off. I ate fried rice and drank some stout. My thoughts were far away... a face, a name... years ago.

I read a book under the porch lamp until they turned off the electricity. Then, I slipped under a mosquito netting and tried to sleep.

During the night, I was awakened by the sound of determined rummaging. I lit a candle and saw two beady eyes, a hunched body and a long tail. Picking up a shoe, I flung it at the rat. An hour later, perhaps, I had to fling the second shoe. Then I was left alone.

For a long time after, I laid there, staring into the darkness, and I thought of the fortune of Supatcharee.

I stayed two days. When I returned to the college, there was a postcard on my desk. It was from she-of-the-stairs. She was vacationing on an island in the South. I searched for it on a map. It was in the Andaman. I had passed it in the long-tail boat.

****

"Thank you for the postcard."

"You're welcome," she said. It was registration day for fourth-year students. She had breezed into the office and was standing, expectantly, before me. "May I put my books on the desk?"

"I think that can be arranged."

"I don't understand," she said, pulling a chair alongside.

"Yes, you may put your books on the desk."

She smiled. "Thank you."

"No problem. What brings you here?"

She listened intently. "Ohh. Why do I come here?"

"Yes."

She looked hurt. "Do I bother you?"

"No. You do not bother me."

"Do you have free time now?"

"Yes, right now. I always have free time for you."

She smiled and gathered her thoughts. I waited for her to speak.

"I want to change... no...arai-na... I want to add mi-neur."

I sat back in my chair and looked at her intently.

"You want to change your minor?" I said.

"No. Mai-mee."

"Oh. You do not have a minor."

"Yes."

"So, you want to declare...I mean, choose... a minor?"

"Yes."

"Who is your advisor?"

"Arai-na?"

"Ajahn-puu-preuksaa. Advisor. Who is your advisor?"

"Oh. Ajahn Oi."

"Have you talked with Ajahn Oi?"

"Chai."

"Well then, what did Ajahn Oi say?"

"She said yes."

"Why do you ask me?"

"English. I want English mi-neur."

"An English minor? I thought that was your major."

"Mai-chai. I study major in Communication."

"Communications? But you take many English classes."

"Chai-laeo. So I want to have English mi-neur."

"I am sorry, but I still do not understand. I am not your advisor. And, I have no power. I can not help you add an English minor."

She smiled patiently. "Chai-laeo. But I want your opinion."

"About what?"

"English mi-neur."

"Do you mean, do I think you should add an English minor?"

"Yes."

"All right. Sure. Why not."

"I will study with you in Creative Writing."

"All right. Fine."

"I want you can help me if I have problem?"

"You mean wining, dining and dancing followed by late night tutorials at your place or mine?" I said this very quickly, with wagging eyebrows: an impersonation Groucho Marx. It was out my mouth before I knew I had said it.

"Arai-na? I do not understand."

"Never mind. I will do what I can."

"Thank you, Ajahn."

"No problem."

She slowly collected her books, then rose from her chair. I was sitting with my arms crossed.

"Ajahn," she said.

"Yes?"

"Did you go somewhere during holiday?"

"Yes, I did. I went to an island. Koh-Nok-Lek."

"Koh-Nok-Lek? Really? I went with friend-- four people-- to island nearby. It has picture on postcard. Did you see?"

"Yes, I saw. Thank you for thinking of me."

"Yes. We are close together. I visit Koh-Luang. It is not so far as your island. You could come visit, instead."

"Yes."

"Now, I must to go. See you later, then."

I nodded-- "Yes. Bye"-- and watched her sway away.

A week after classes began, she was again sitting in a chair beside my desk. She was very low-key, and smiled only occasionally and wanly. She said she was having problems with her scholarship. Her housing allowance had been disallowed, and she was afraid she would have to withdraw from school. She said she could work and save money and then return. I asked if she had spoken with her parents.

Rather wistfully, she said she had no parents. Her father died before she was born, and her mother had been killed in an automobile accident when she was three. Her sister, thirteen years older, had raised her after leaving school and marrying a man older by ten years. Her sister now had a business in Chiangmai, and a young daughter. She told me that, after graduation, it would be her responsibility to get a good job and help pay for the education of her young niece.

I listened and listened. Then I advised that she not withdraw, but wait another week to see what might happen. I said I would do what I could. I told her to speak once more with the dean, then come and see me. The next day she said that talking with the Dean had gone for nothing. She cried silently. After an awkward moment, I said I would pay for her housing. She shook her head, but I insisted. It was no good to withdraw in ones final year. I asked about dormitory fees, and told her I would bring the money next morning. She was to meet me in the office before eight o'clock classes. I then spoke with Paul. He said:

"Yeah, she was in the president's office yesterday afternoon, crying. I guess she made a scene. She's been doing it a lot lately. She was only supposed to get money her first two years. But... well, she's managed somehow."

"Does the school have any policy about teachers helping students with tuition and expenses?"

"Not really. I know I've helped one or two in the past. Some of the Thai staff help students, too. Why?"

"I thought I would pay for the dorm. She has enough for tuition, doesn't she? I don't know. I guess I don't want her on the streets."

"Yeah. She's a candidate. But I think maybe she also has a sister with money."

"Well, apparently sister is tapped out right now."

"Hum. Well, it's up to you, I guess."

The next morning she appeared at five minutes to eight. I opened the top desk drawer, withdrew an envelope, and handed it to her. She said nothing. Without looking at me, she made a simple wai, turned, and walked out.

****

Noel's next letter arrived the day before a designated rendezvous at the riverside table. He was entraining north to make preparations for his forthcoming nuptials, and he wanted me to meet his "intended". He proposed a late lunch, at two o'clock.

Out of clinical interest, I arrived early, found a corner table away from the jukebox and near a ceiling fan, and ordered a gin and tonic. The restaurant was a caricature straight from a novel of expatriate life. It was owned by an Italian woman and her Thai husband. She planned the menu and ordered the help, while he sang American popular songs either from the piano or with guitar accompaniment. His repertoire ran from the Everly Brothers to John Denver, sang in the same order, each night. He alternated with a very tall, thin-voiced Thai songbird who sang nothing but Everly Brothers songs, also in the same order. The highlight for me was a local guitarist who nightly struggled through three Villa-Lobos etudes. In six months, by shear repetition, he had nearly mastered them. Otherwise the restaurant was a wooden structure, three levels on an embankment, open and airy, without a bad seat in the house. The bar was stocked with imported liquors, and the menu featured club sandwiches with stale potato chips and something purported to be chicken cordon bleu. They also made pizza with barbecue sauce, luncheon meats and bread-and-butter pickles. I usually ordered Thai food. The largely Australian clientele, however, did not seem to mind.

Noel arrived at two-thirty. He introduced a rather smart-looking woman in her late-thirties. He called her Lola. She wore a bright yellow blouse with the sleeves rolled, stiffly pressed, and tight-fitting Levi's, red patent leather pumps, gold earrings and a touch of lipstick. Somehow it suited her. She looked neither brazen nor fast. I assumed she had lived in Los Angeles or London, and was surprised to learn she spoke no English at all, though Noel was coaching her, and had lived her life in the countryside.

We ordered lunch. I said:

"She seems rather nice. How did you meet?"

Pleased, Noel replied: "It was arranged by Tam-Boon, the headman's assistant."

"The trigger man?"

"If you like. She is his cousin -- something like that -- and a widow."

"Then it's not a shotgun marriage."

"No. Tam-Boon has a .38, I believe."

During lunch I attempted to speak Thai with Lola, who was good-humored about it. At times, Noel helped translate. When he got stuck, I helped. Doubtless, we were scintillating company. But Lola's laughter was polite and well-timed. Finally, Noel asked her permission to speak in English only. "Shoo-er," she replied.

Noel began by discussing his new post. He had located a temporary teaching position at another university where he had taught previously. On average, he was required to put in thirty classroom hours each week, more than the full-time staff, and he was being remunerated handsomely.

"For some reason, however, they seem reluctant to offer a contract. I do not understand it."

His house in England was on offer. However, the economy was not good and the housing market was in a slump.

"For some reason, even though I am asking no equity at all, it simply will not sell. I do not understand it."

And, his inheritance would be coming soon. It would be more than enough, together with his pension, to build a house for himself and Lola and provide for the future. Then, he would set himself to writing.

"For some reason, however, my father simply refuses to die. He is in his nineties now, completely senile, and yet he walks in the garden at the rest home and putters around. All his friends are long dead. He has no interests at all. I do not understand it."

"How long has it been since you last saw him?"

"Oh, that. Many years now, I should think."

"Did you write him?"

"No, not that. I mean, what practical good would it be?"

"I mean before he became senile."

"No. There was no point, you see. He disapproved of my leaving."

"England?"

"Yes, England. Home. That bit."

"Do you think you will ever go back?"

"I should think not. There is nothing there for me now."

"Nothing at all?"

"Nothing."

After we paid the check and were rising from our seats, Noel asked me what I thought of Lola.

"She's not the prettiest woman I have been with," he said.

"I like her better than Aht."

"Yes," he said matter-of-factly. "So do I."

"And you are definitely getting married?"

"It's all arranged."

"So when is the blessed day?"

"Probably within the next month or two."

"You're sure about this?"

"Yes, I think so. I need a wife. I'm no good as a bachelor."

"But you don't know her... that well."

"Does anyone really know anybody?" He lit a cigarette.

Disregarding the lameness of his rhetorical question, there was still something irresolute about Noel's response. I sensed what he wanted was me to confirm that she was attractive, so I said:

"Well, if you don't mind my saying, she does have a nice ass."

He smiled broadly, and exhaled a long tail of smoke.

"Yes. She has that."

****

The Creative Writing students all had writer's block. They wanted me to assign a title or a subject, which I considered no use. I decided to show a video clip, with the sound off, and have them use it any way they wished. I settled upon the scene in "A Room With A View" in which George Emerson, Freddie, and the Reverend Mr. Beebe go for a bathe in the sacred pond. The clip begins with them discussing chance and probability as they make their way through tall grasses to a grove of trees surrounding the pond. There, they remove their clothes and take the plunge. Ere long, they are splashing water at each other, racing around the pond, and soaking each other's clothing. Along come Freddie's mother, his sister, and her fiancé Cecil Vyse, all out for a proper afternoon stroll-- until they happen upon the skinny dippers.

The students were embarrassed, but engrossed. Clearly few, if any, had seen anything like this before. I replayed it four times, as requested. Then I told them to write a story about the people they had watched, and to insert the scene somewhere in their stories. The first draft was due the following Monday.

It was only half-past the hour, but I excused class. The students were talking together animatedly, their writer's block seemingly broken, as they exited the classroom. I turned off the television, ejected the cassette, wound the electric cord, and slid the cassette back into its cover.

She-of-the-stairs had stayed behind the others. She was smiling, but pensive. She picked up the cassette and looked at the cover, a picture of a young couple, sitting on a bed next a window overlooking Florence. They are embracing.

She put it down, rested her fingertips upon it, and said three words, almost inaudible. She was now standing very close, much too close for casual conversation. I knew I heard what she said, but it so surprised me my wits flew away.

"I'm sorry, I didn't hear what you said."

Very simply and directly, she pointed at the picture, faced me, and in a small voice shyly said:

"You... and me."

I laughed carefully, shook my head and smiled.

"Oh, I see... you with an old man. Certainly... why not. It would be funny. Maybe you could write it in your story."

She smiled, but said: "Why do you laugh?"

"Because it is funny. You are a crazy, young woman. And, my favorite student."

"True?"

"Most definitely. Now get to work on your story. I expect good things from you. Now, unfortunately, I have a meeting. Are you going home to Chiangmai this weekend?"

"Yes."

"Then please find a safe bus. I don't want to read about you in the newspapers-- that you were driving with a drunk. Have a good weekend. See you Monday." I collected the extension cord and video cassette, smiled promptly, and walked out quickly.

I decided to find Johanna. During her first year teaching with the Tanner exchange program, fresh out of college, she had been a confidante of my student, who had sometimes participated in English Club activities or gone to festivities organized by the Students' Christian Alliance. Johanna was but four years older, and it seemed natural that she-of-the-stairs would gravitate toward her. When I approached Johanna, saying I needed to talk about "you know who", she said it would be better if we discussed the matter at her dorm room. On the way, she listened to what had happened at that morning's class. In her room, on the dresser, was a photograph of the two of them, cheek-to-cheek, at a party during the first year.

"Do you see her much these days?" I asked.

"Not really. She has kinda drifted away. I mean, she kinda latches onto someone for a time, then disappears. Maybe it has to do with being an orphan, and all. The year before we came here, she was one of Paul's great good buddies. That same year there were problems with a teacher. But, you never met him. He taught psychology."

"He was with the Tanner exchange?" I sat down upon the floor, and she plopped upon the bed.

"Oh, heavens no. He was just a guy. You know, drifting around Asia-- a year here, a year there."

"What does he have to do with this?" I did not welcome the digression.

"Well, he still writes her, I guess. And she don't do anything to discourage him."

"Oh, I see. He became infatuated with her." I stopped myself before saying "involved".

"It's a little more than that. She used to show me his letters, because she did not understand everything."

"A little suggestive, I take it."

"Hardly a little. He used to say what he wanted to do with her, and talk about her body. If you ask me, he was a real mental case."

"Good thing he teaches psychology, so he knows whereof he speaks."

"Well, the president let him go, you know."

"No, I didn't."

"Up. There was an incident on the fourth floor of the men's dorm. Some of the students were earning their tuition on their backs."

"The business majors, I assume."

"As a matter of fact, three of them were kicked out."

"From this quiet little school?" I was genuinely nonplused.

"Listen, all kinds of stuff goes on here. Don't let the uniforms fool yak."

"Yeah-yeah. I've noticed students who look twelve years old are all grown up suddenly when they wear casual clothes. It's amazing at times."

"Well, on the same night that girls were discovered in the men's dorm, she was visiting the mental case in his room on the third floor. Now, she says that nothing happened, but when you read his letters and the way he talks about her, you've got to believe something did."

"But he was released, and she was not expelled."

"He got into other problems, I guess. And I don't know but what her being on scholarship may have forced the school to save face a little."

"As to the letters, maybe his imagination is overactive?"

"But she wrote him back. For all I know, he's still sending her letters."

"You said she did not understand what was being said, sometimes."

"She did after I explained it."

"Did she write him after that?"

Johanna hesitated, then replied: "I guess I'm not sure about that. I just know she received more."

I was quiet for a time. Johanna watched me think and said nothing. Finally I asked:

"Well, what do you think about all this?"

"The real question is, what do you think," said Johanna.

"She's been in four of my classes the past two years. This term, she is taking Creative Writing. She's my favorite student."

"I know. And I think you are her favorite teacher. Or a very close second, anyway." Johanna laughed, and everything lightened.

"Well..." I said finally. "I may be attracted. But even were I not her teacher, and even were we closer in age, I would still think she is manipulative. She reminds me of someone. I think I've met her before, if you know what I mean."

"Just be careful."

"Hey... piece of cake." I rose to go. "Thanks, Johanna."

"Anytime. Door's always open. You let me know what happens."

****

An uneventful month passed. She-of-the-stairs was industrious in her coursework, often writing the same assignment twice from different angles. She often visited my desk, but seldom stayed longer than a minute. When she did stay, she asked detailed questions about her writing, especially those times when she wrote half a dozen versions of a single sentence.

She was now teasing me, good-naturedly, before and after classes. In passing on the stair, she would slap my shoulder for one playful reason or another. She invited me for lunch with her coterie until I relented. She sought me at Wai-Ku, the day for honoring ones teacher, and bound my wrist with an elaborate floral bracelet which she said she had completed at three in the morning. Leaving her group, she would pull me aside for short tete-à-tetes. When talking privately in the office, she would, for emphasis, reach across the desktop and tap my folded hands. The contact was light, tentative, and fleetingly electric, yet it insinuated nothing and seemed to define distance while transgressing it. It began to make me crazy.

Her behavior, which by northern standards I knew to be inappropriate, could not have been lost on the other students. I decided to ignore her, to force her from my thoughts. I tried to direct my energies elsewhere-- but this did not work well. One night, feeling abysmally lonely, I drank too much and made a grab at Arunsri. She was mopping the floor of my house when I came from behind, slobbered on her neck, and felt for her breasts. For months I had known she liked me, but this was disrespectful. I was using her and knew it. When I motioned vaguely to the mat on the floor, she made a tactful retreat. After she left, I sat by candlelight and stared at the flame. The light reflected in the mirror of an ancient wardrobe lent by the college. I began to scrutinize my face, the lines, creases, enlarged pores and spots, and question what was in the reflection's eyes. I stared until its pupils dilated. Gradually, the reflection distorted into a hideously twisted, evil-looking transfiguration-- as though some other presence, utterly malevolent and implacable, were trapped within the outward appearance and struggled to make itself known. It scared the hell out of me. Not wanting to see or to know more, I forced it down, wrenched my face away from the reflection and rubbed my eyes.

The next day I apologized. For days after, I was in a blue funk, until I slid into distraction through reading and writing.

A letter from Noel arrived. The hiatus between postings had stretched some weeks. This time, when I was curious to hear details, the letter was quite short. I felt slighted. It was little more than reiteration of our last conversation at the restaurant by the river.

He was working diligently and living frugally. He and Lola were saving money for a new house in the village. There was still no movement in the housing market in England. Soon, he would be receiving a pension, possibly also an inheritance, and then English language teaching could "piss up the fucking wall".

He mentioned Maynard's most recent visit. Noel had suggested that he retire in Thailand, and marry with a village woman, a friend of Lola's. This just happened to remind Noel that he and Lola had married a few days ago. All the necessary documentation had been gathered by Udom. He and Lola simply went to the district office, paid the sixteen baht fee, signed the register, and walked out as Mr. & Mrs. Thus far he had but one complaint: he could not keep up with Lola, sexually. And, there was a post-script:

"My father is very old now. He is quite senile. His mind is gone, but he ticks along like a clock. He simply refuses to die."

I answered his letter immediately, and suggested we meet again for a beer on his next jaunt north. As it happened, he had business and came up the next two weekends. He and Lola were choosing land for their new house. At the riverside restaurant, I told him about she-of-the-stairs. He seemed keenly interested and suggested that I speak with her and make some sort of discrete arrangement.

"She clearly wants you to do, and it would be good for you. If you have any qualms at all... Well, I suppose one could wait for her to finish with her studies. Nieh! But I do not see the point, really."

I suppose I might have considered this suggestion, but I began to go out of my way to avoid her. If I saw her coming up a walk, I turned down a side path. I went down or up stairs in adjustment to her ascension or descension. In class, I answered her questions by directing remarks to the students, generally. When she came to the office, I kept conversations businesslike and short -- and, without being rude, I avoided making contact with her eyes. The distancing became palpable.

In the week before finals, I decided upon a quiz in the Creative Writing class. The idea was to review active and passive voices together with loose and periodic sentences.

For a Wednesday mid-morning, the students entered with unusually high-spirits -- the elan vital usually reserved for Friday afternoons. When I announced the quiz, they groaned. Donning serious faces, they slid books beneath their seats, selected pens and erasers from zippered pouches, and readied themselves. While I distributed roneographs, she-of-the-stairs changed seats to the front row, center.

There were ten sentences to be recast. I said it was acceptable, in case of a question, to raise ones hand. The students set to work. The first hand in the air belonged to she-of-the-stairs.

"Ajahn. Do you want us to write our name and code?"

"Do you usually write your name and code?"

"Yes."

"Then do what you usually do."

She smiled, then said: "In upper left or upper right side?"

"Sshhh, now. Serious questions, only."

She nodded, stared straight ahead momentarily, then again raised her hand. I looked over to her seat and quietly said: "Yes?"

"Ajahn. I do not understand this word."

"Did you bring a dictionary?"

"No, I forgot."

"Then you may ask to borrow from someone."

She began speaking Thai with a girlfriend seated behind. The girl laid down her pen, opened her bag, and rummaged about until she produced the dictionary. With the pocket edition in hand, She-of-the-stairs smiled at me and began to thumb through its rumpled pages. In very short order, she called: "Ajahn."

"Yes."

"I can not find word."

I took the book and located the entry.

"Thank you."

"Sshh. Get to work."

She wrote perhaps three minutes, then raised her hand. Other students were now looking up at me. I walked to her seat, leaned over near her ear and said:

"What is it?"

"I do not understand." She pointed to number 2.

I looked at the question, then replied: "It's easy. You must change active to passive, and passive to active. You should know this. We have been through it often enough."

"But I forget, Ajahn." She was playfully whining.

I measured out a response: "That, then, is the reason for this little review before finals, isn't it? Tsk." I scowled and shook my head.

The student on her right suppressed laughter, and two or three others looked up from their papers, smiling broadly.

"Get busy, you guys." I walked over to the doorway and leaned against the jamb.

"Ajahn," she called. As I started to move, she said, "Never mind."

I leaned back against the jamb and watched her intently. She feigned absorption, then looked up, chewing on the end of her pen. I looked away.

"Ajahn."

She-of-the-stairs again raised her hand, pen held high, but this time could not keep herself from blushing.

"Yes, my dear..." I said sarcastically. "What is it this time?"

"This test is very hard," she said, smiling. "Could you help me write it?"

Everyone looked up, some expectant, some distracted and annoyed. Then she laughed.

"Okay... that's it." I walked to her seat and said: "Get up."

"Arai-na?"

"Get up. You are going outside." The other students stopped writing, altogether, to watch what would happen.

She squirmed. She had been testing limits, to what purpose I did not know. Now I was breaking her face.

"Mai-ao-ka," she politely refused.

"Right now, or I will help you up and out."

She rose from her seat but still quietly protested: "Mai-ao."

"Move!" I said firmly. I picked up her desk and carried it, shoulder height, through the door and out onto the balcony. The door to an adjacent classroom was open, and the students in that room stared out at the commotion. I told her to sit. She mustered considerable grace, sat down, smoothed her skirt, and quietly composed herself. Then she said:

"Please. I do not want to sit here."

"No doubt," I said. "But you should have thought before acting. You are disturbing the other students. You may not care about this test, but others may. What right do you have to bother them? Do you understand me?"

She nodded, looking down. "Yes. I understand."

I caught my breath, then, in an undertone, said: "Besides, you know very well that I care for you, and you are taking advantage. Aren't you?"

She turned her face to me, but said nothing.

"Here. Finish this." I laid the test atop her desk and returned to the classroom. The students' faces were bemused. They again set to work.

I watched her through the open door. A brilliant white blouse and light gray skirt... bare ankles... her shoes removed. She was in the shade of a column flanked by broad swaths of sunlight. She looked neither left nor right, but concentrated on the paper. She sat straight, with her knees together, her bare feet pulled back under the chair. As she wrote, her sleek raven hair fell from her shoulder-- fell and veiled her profile. She made no effort to sweep it away.

When she finished, well before the others, she unobtrusively entered the room and sat against a wall. She stared pensively.

At the end of the hour, I collected the papers. I heard her voice and turned. She was standing by my side, talking quietly with friends, her back half-turned. She was subdued but quite collected -- and regaining entry to the class on her own discrete terms. Without a word, she

revolved around me toward the door. From across the threshold she looked back, and, for a split second, our eyes met and locked.

Her friend waved: "Bye, Ajahn. See you Friday."

And another said: "Wish for good luck on test."

"Yes," I said. "Good luck on the test."

"Bye-bye. See you."

There were no further incidents. She-of-the-stairs did well on the quiz and then aced the Final. Some days later, when she came to check her grade, she gave me a framed photograph. We talked about this and that. I do not remember what about. Nor do I remember what I did during recess -- excepting two lunches with the Chinese woman and one unsatisfactory visit to a Chiangmai brothel.

When I searched the class roster at the beginning of Second Term, her name was nowhere to be found.

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The highlight of Second Term came after midterms during the holidays. On the evening before Christmas, a kan-tok dinner was held in celebration of the wedding, that morning, of Paul and Johanna at a local church.

I arrived after sunset, just as Johanna, seated on a sedan hefted by four bare-chested men, was being carried down marble steps into a sunken, botanical garden where the celebrants, in traditional northern dress, were reclining upon pillows around the squat, round, elaborately carved kan-tok pedestals centered upon spacious reed mats, spread out here and there among the low palms, slender trees and flowers. A steady pulse from a circle of musicians urged the plaintive refrain of a country song upon the still air. Johanna, resplendent in silk and braceleted in gold, her hair up and face painted, was radiant if nearly unrecognizable. It seemed nearly every woman was unrecognizable. Teachers and secretaries, formally painted and powdered, and framed by severely coifed hair, were transformed in the fugitive torchlight. Students, serving from gold and silver trays, made a game of guessing their names.

Johanna was lowered alongside the large carpet laid out for guests of honor. Paul, girded with a sword, offered his hand as she rose from the litter. They joined their families, flown in from America, around the president's kan-tok. Hands were clapped. Dinner was served.

The president noticed me standing among the columns surrounding the garden. He motioned for me to sit on the mat next his. I stepped down and sat away from the light, but in such a way as to easily see the clearing in the center. It seemed private yet part of the group, and it afforded a view of the entertainment.

Music from the ensemble alternated with recordings. When the taped music played, a dancer appeared from behind a screen under a canopy. She was pudgy, and the first of the evening. Her movements were more assumed attitudes than flowing gestures. An old Thai professor asked me what I thought. I said something polite. He laughed, then told me the dancers would get better, and prettier, by and by.

The food was various and delicious, with sweet, sour, bitter, tart and spicy tastes carefully orchestrated. There were chicken, fish, beef and pork. There were spicy salads and soups. There was a porcelain bowl of delicately splotched pale blue and mauve birds' eggs. There were jasmine and glutinous rices, curries, minced meats, and noodles. There were long platters laden with meticulously carved fruits. There were coffee and tea. There were Fanta, Coke, Pepsi, Sprite, beer, whiskey and soda.

After a speaker wished the bride and groom well, the music resumed and a slender young woman slipped out from behind the screen. She wore a gold headdress and danced with candles between her fingers. She bent at the hips and knees, keeping her back rigidly vertical. Her elbows, wrists, and fingers seemed double-jointed. Her face was impassive, expressionless, but her arm movements were beguiling. The old Thai professor nodded to me and pointed to her. Much better, he said.

A student server knelt beside me and said: "Ajahn. You have guest."

"A guest?" I was bewildered.

"Yes. Guest. Outside." The student motioned away from the garden.

"Outside. A guest."

"Yes. I take you."

I followed her around the perimeter, up the marble steps, along a corridor, down some steps and out into a parking lot. In the shadows stood two men, smoking. I shielded my eyes from the flood-lamp.

"Ahh. There you are!" said Noel.

"Noel? What are you doing here?" I was surprised indeed.

"Well, we went by your house, and a woman there said you were here. This is Maynard, whom I may have written about."

Maynard extended his hand. "How do you do. Noel speaks of you often."

"Would he make a good press agent?" I said, shaking his hand.

"I wouldn't want him," Maynard laughed.

"Nieh! Well, what's all this, then," said Noel.

"A wedding party," I said.

"For whom?" asked Noel.

"Paul and Johanna. Do you remember them?"

"Nieh! The Bible-thumpers have tied the knot, have they? Then we shall have to pay our respects. Which way then?" Without waiting for an answer, he walked straight for the garden.

"He's had a couple," said Maynard, who shrugged and followed.

I hurried to catch Noel. "Then we're going in... just like that?"

"You have an invitation, don't you?" he said, walking along.

"Yes. But I can not impo-..."

"There ought to be no problem. We are with you. And, happy for them, too. Ah... here we are. And there they are."

Noel stopped at the bottom of the marble steps and waved across the garden. Maynard bowed politely. The president and Paul were putting their heads together. I stepped back slightly to gesture with my hands. I did not know what to do. Without smiling, the president motioned to where I had been sitting. Paul, too, nodded that it was all right. I was relieved by their generosity, especially considering the circumstances two years earlier. Noel had left the English department with a mess to clean after.

As we made our way to the mat, Noel off-handedly remarked:

"There is double reason to celebrate tonight. My inheritance is on its way. My father-- may he rest peacefully -- is no longer among the quick and the angst-ridden. I must remember to send a card to someone."

Noel and Maynard removed their shoes, and sat down around the kan-tok. Disregarding the prominently displayed notices, under Plexiglass screwed into the columns, Noel lit a cigarette and exhaled into my face. He was completely oblivious.

Noel may not care, I thought, about giving cancer to others -- or even to himself, for that matter. But would he like others giving it to him?

As the evening passed, Noel got drunk but behaved himself. Maynard drank moderately. He seemed an all right sort, and may at first have been a little embarrassed in gate-crashing the kan-tok, but he made no excuses or apologies. He talked about living in Hong Kong, in "a concrete box."

"I never leave it. I work on the fifth floor, and have a flat on the tenth. The bloody building is like a small city. There's a postal service. There are restaurants, haberdasheries, tonsorial parlors, food stores and the like. There is a gymnasium and a cinema. A discotheque. My physician is on the third floor. My dentist, too."

"What about a good lawyer?" I asked.

"Ah, that. A solicitor. I believe they are forbidden by covenant."

"Nieh!" Noel was holding up an empty glass indicating he wanted a refill. As an aside, I asked Maynard about Noel's health-- whether there had been any further indications, or appointments with physicians. Noel overheard:

"I am fine. The doctor last said I had a very mild stroke-- something like that. My left hand was numb a few days, but it is now much improved." Noel drained his fresh glass and reached for his cigarettes.

"Did the doctor say anything about exercise? Diet, perhaps?"

"Nothing worth listening to, because there is nothing seriously wrong. He wants me to do the usual things. Stop drinking. Stop smoking. That bit."

"Well, you may have been fortunate this time. Next time may be worse."

Noel's reply was all patience: "If I reduce consumption, I should be fine. I am already reduced from three packets of fags a day to one-and-a- half."

I bit my tongue and became engrossed in the music. Maynard stared into his glass, turning it slowly, contemplating the play of flickering light upon its facets, saying nothing. Noel smoked a cigarette, then brightly said:

"Maynard, here, is thinking of retiring to my village. I almost have him convinced. I think once he sets eyes on Porntip..."

I waited for Noel to finish the sentence, but he did not.

"Who is Porntip?"

"Why, Porntip is a friend of Lola's," replied Noel. "We are working out the details. Maynard needs a wife. More precisely, he needs help in finding one. Why? Never satisfied. Forever breaking engagements. What was it last time? A newspaper? Three hundred? Something like that."

I turned to Maynard: "I'm not following this."

Maynard snorted. He explained that, out of boredom and frustration, he had run an advertisement in a Delhi newspaper. He could not say why he chose India. English speakers, perhaps. He thought he might meet one or two interesting women; that was all. He was bored with dating. He would be leaving Hong Kong within a year, and it was time to settle down. So he ran the ad. But it worked out rather differently from what he anticipated. It became necessary to schedule interviews, because he received three hundred responses. He did scheduling and mass mailing with his computer. He flew to Delhi and spent one week in a hotel lobby, interviewing women. There was an initial screening. This was followed by a questionnaire he had prepared. From this he selected which women he wished to speak with again. Some were very beautiful, he allowed. Some were rich. None was suitable.

"What of this Porntip?" I asked. "Does she speak English?"

"Not a syllable," responded Noel.

"So then, do you speak Thai?"

"I can say hello and goodbye. It's the same word, isn't it? Sa-wat... wat-something or other." Maynard frowned.

"Well, that's a start," I said, sipping coffee. The music segued into a languid, sensuous rhythm over which floated a long melodic line.

"Hello," said Maynard, "there's a lovely thing. That dancer, there."

"Nieh!" said Noel. "She is that."

I did a double-take. Was it... yes. It was she-of-the-stairs. Her hair was up, revealing a long neck and bare shoulders. With serpentine arm movements and arched fingers, she swayed gracefully in the undulating torchlight.

I leaned toward Noel. "She's the student I told you about."

"Oh, she's the one, is she?" said Noel. "She looks like she could use a good rogering. And you're the bloke to do it, eh? Nieh!"

I glanced about, hoping no one had heard Noel's remark. There was no need for concern. All the guests, in rapt attention, were following her as she balanced on one bare foot, then the other, turning her torso while bending her knees deeply and extending her lithe arms. Her fingers arched backwards impossibly. The small bells of her ankle bracelets tinkled like a falcon's jess.

"Youth and beauty, what?" said Maynard. "She's gorgeous. Well worth the price of admission."

A sudden surge of jealousy, a current, enervated me. I did not like them looking at her, disrobing her. Yet what difference could it make? I, too, wanted to ravish her.

I felt vaguely exposed and cast my eyes about.

Were other women jealous? Surely some. They would know how we viewed her, and how she allowed us -- wanted us? -- to view her. As what? An object? Why? Only she would know. Perhaps she had her own ends, and we were...what? Objects, too?

Can't be. She's impassive. Everyone is so polite and disinterested.

Could this be culture-- the playing of music and wearing of costume -- while we objectify others as they, in turn, objectify us. Consensual and refined. A civil and polite process, with rules of engagement and deportment. A step up, one supposed, from eating fast food while eyeing whores on parade in a brothel. Venue? Consummation. Sublimation. The difference was a matter of degree-- the degree of objectification. Maybe.

I drew a breath and said: "She's trouble."

"Yes," said Maynard, admiringly. "They always are."

"Nieh!"

We watched for long minutes. Not a word more was said.

The music wound down when she strewed rose petals around the circle. Her circumambulation began and ended at our mat, the petals floating over my head, and landing in my lap.

****

One afternoon, a few days after New Year's, Lola came to the college. She looked anxious and asked to speak privately, out on the balcony. She took a seat at a round table. Following the northern custom, I brought her a glass of cold water, then sat down.

The discussion began slowly. I had to shift mental gears from English to Thai. She had to become accustomed to my accent and, because of my limited vocabulary, speak in circumlocutions.

She said, Noel is ill. She took him to a doctor. The doctor told his head was not good. Then, she called the college in Bangkok.

I asked, how is his head not good.

She said, he has a problem because he drinks too much and smokes too much. There was a party at the village.

I asked, was it a party for Maynard.

No, she said. He went to Hong Kong before. It was Happy New Year's.

I asked, what did Ajahn do.

He drank whiskey. He drank and drank and smoked too much. The next day he had a problem.

I asked, what is the problem.

He does not speak clearly. He does not walk well. This was for two or three days. Then I took him to the doctor, and I called the college in Bangkok. I told them Ajahn is ill and cannot teach. But he thinks he can teach. I try to explain that he cannot teach, but he does not listen.

I asked, does someone at the school not understand.

No. They understand. Ajahn does not listen. He thinks that he can still teach, but his head is not good.

I asked, what did the doctor say.

She said, the doctor told there is a problem with his blood vessels.

I understand. In his head.

Yes.

That Saturday evening, a shuttle truck came up to my house. Lola rang the bell, and then she and her brother helped Noel down from the bench on the flatbed. With one on either side, supporting his weight by holding up his arms, they walked him, left foot dragging, onto the porch and set him down on a bench. With his right hand, Noel placed his left hand in his lap.

The visit was short. I do not remember what I said. Noel, however, said he was much improved, and in a few days would be right as rain. Then he would return to Bangkok. He would teach two more terms, then retire to the village.

The following weekend I visited the village. Noel was walking about with the aid of two canes. He showed me that the use of his left hand was returning. He could open it and close it with only a little difficulty. He intended to return to teach in a few days. But Lola indicated they would collect their belongings from their apartment and return to the village to stay.

She said, he is crazy. He has forgotten Thai. He can not walk. He can not dress himself. He can not write. But he thinks he can teach. He does not listen. He still thinks he can do as he likes.

****

The days grew longer and the nights warmer. I could sit at my desk and sweat. The hot season was coming. The leaves of trees were heavy with dust, the ponds were shrinking, and soon it would be so hot my skull would feel close to cracking like the fissures along the dirt road to the village. I recalled the queer sensation, especially the year before, of my brain being a three-minute egg. It was an oppressive swelter of days and nights, with no relief in sight until, just at the point of murder or suicide, the sky burst and the rains came.

Now the campus walkways were aflutter with strings of brightly colored pennants carrying wishes for departing seniors. Gay banners stretched from column to column. Cartoons were taped to walls. Everyone was glad to see anyone for the last time. Good-bye, goodbye, bye. It was the end of term, another year -- the last minute gasp of finals and graduation -- for some, a sprint to the tape, an amble across the line for others.

For the first time in four months, she-of-the-stairs came to call. She was full of prospects. Listening to her enthusiastic plans, I felt old. She asked could I advise her and help her with English. An interview with a Japanese company was scheduled for the week following, and she wanted to know what to say and what to wear. She asked about make-up and my opinion of short skirts.

For three straight afternoons, I sat in the cool shade of the balcony, listening to her worries and covering her questions. I wondered what was the point, and why she was bothering. When her questions became circular, I said I had no idea what a Japanese company looks for in an applicant. Hesitantly, she stuffed brochures into her purse, readying herself to go. I said: "All you need do is be yourself. Just that -- and you will be fine."

I wished her luck, and watched her disappear down the stairs. For some time after she was gone, I sat there, arms crossed, legs crossed straight in front of me, considering the cracks in the genuine leather uppers of my court shoes.

I did not go to the graduation party at a local hotel. Two or three days after, she-of-the-stairs caught up with me as I walked to the Liberal Arts Building. She held out a packet of photographs taken during the "Night of Stars", a talent show organized by the Communications Department for the night before the big hotel party.

In several pictures she was wearing stiletto heels and a floor-length black dress, with sequined bodice, fishnet sleeves, and split the length of a long bare leg. A pink rose adorned her hair. I must have lingered over one shot in particular, because she smiled, seemingly pleased, and said:

"Toh-laeo-reu-yang?"

Returning the photographs, I quietly and intently replied: "I think... yes... You are quite grown up."

When she took the photographs, our fingers touched. Strange to recall something so fleeting. I still sometimes wonder whether it was by accident or if it was something tentative. But, she said nothing, and she did not smile. She simply did what, it seems to me, she was always doing, and what has become the peculiar way that I remember her.

She simply walked away.

****

I no longer keep a journal. That was one time and one place. There is nothing to discuss now, and no need to explain. I try not to trouble myself with how, and why, and ought. There is only what happened, and the way things are.

I went to see Noel. He was sitting on a rough wooden bench at a market stall outside his in-laws' house. He held his left hand in his right, and looked here and there. He was disoriented.

From Lola I learned that, in the mornings, he went to the local monastery, where he sat for an hour or two, writing in a children's notebook she had purchased. She showed me it and asked could I read it. The words were sensical and gibberish, a sliding in and out of sequential thought, in an unruly scrawl. She said he sometimes spoke a nonsense mixture of Thai and English. There was now little that Ajahn could do. He sometimes helped a neighbor tend his cows, or helped keep ducks from wandering into the road. Somehow, he was able to find cigarettes and liquor. Lola had told people not to sell to him, but she suspected his badgering wore them down. He was a constant worry. When he was not pestering her for cigarettes, he was going on about England. He wanted to go home.

Several long, disjointed weeks passed in which my mood was, at best, a pre-dawn gray. I could not keep the dark hound from the door. I kept thinking what might happen if I stayed here too long. Whenever I was in Chiangmai, I would sit at a corner table in a corner restaurant across from the old city wall, and observe aged expatriates taking tea at their tables, or walking aimlessly down the sidewalk, a newspaper tucked under an arm. They seemed always unkempt, overweight, and... I had no desire to be one day characterized by a succinct phrase for foreigners on the skids: "farang-kee-nok"-- a birdshit farang. At the same time I knew there was no difference between myself and those I studied so critically.

A long letter from Lola followed, written in her small, careful hand, saying that Noel had wandered off. He had managed to walk seven kilometers to the village where he had built a house for Boon-Chat. She was long gone back to Bangkok, someone said. To the South, another said.

Noel made his way to the grandparents' house. His adopted daughter was there, but she turned him out. That evening, he was found by a farmer, sitting under a tree, drunk. His pants were fouled. The farmer knew Noel from a birthday party in his fields. He sent word to Tam-Boon, who came in a truck with Lola.

Noel was in very bad shape after he dried out. Still, within a week, while Lola was busy at a neighbor's, he again dragged his left foot to a roadside stand at the edge of Boon-Chat's village and, on credit, came away with a bottle of rice whiskey. He was found lying by the side of the road. It was clear that he was drunk. It was unclear whether he had received a blow to the side of the head.

There was another stroke. There were more visits to more doctors. He now had to be bathed, dressed, and fed by spoon. Lola wiped him after his toilets. Otherwise, he was incontinent. He

required constant supervision, so Lola could not work. Then, as if these were not troubles enough, there was a problem with the pension checks.

She began to visit me at the college. I would sit and listen. If she brought a letter from the Overseas Directorate or some other bureaucracy, I tried to translate the gist for her. There was really nothing much I could do.

As the months passed, I marveled at Lola's patience and perseverance. Noel was busted after Boon-Chat, and she married him out of her own purse. They were married less than six months before he had the first stroke. In only her mid-thirties, Lola became tied to a willful child twenty-five years her senior. She would laugh about her fortune, though once she cried, when I told her she had a good heart. She said no. It was only that she could not leave him under a bridge at night, because she, herself, did not want to be left under a bridge at night.

****

I see him still, from time to time. Rarely, really. There is little point in going often, and maybe no point in going at all. We can no longer discuss Kant or Kierkegaard. Nor can we easily discuss the weather, because clouds form and rains fall in a sequence.

Besides, I know what I will see when I see him. He will be wiped, washed, shaved, dressed and fed. His hair will be arranged. He will have three loosely rolled cigarettes in a bib pocket, and he will be sitting on a rough wooden bench in the shade of a spreading tree.

It will be the same as the last time I saw him. I went to his new house in the village, but no one was home. A boy sent me down the road a short way to Lola's family compound. The gate was open, and the shutters of a tiny market stand, under the upper floor house, were thrown open wide. There was an old woman, chopping meat with a cleaver. She looked at me bemusedly. I tried to speak, but garbled the words. From a cage hanging near my head, a mynah said something in the local dialect.

The woman pointed. He's watching the ducks, she said, and laughed. She shook her head and brought the cleaver down sharply on the meat -- a lump of gray matter.

I walked slowly around the corner of the stall and past a small patch of herbs and maize. A dog, stretched out on the hard ground, raised its head, yawned at me, and returned to its nap.

Squinting into the unforgiving, white-washed heat, I tried to peer into the orange-limned purple shadows-- to focus upon the apparition of a silhouette of an apparition.

Yes, there…

…across the yard, now in my mind's eye, under a spreading tree, he is sitting on a bench, alone, watching the ducks, keeping them from the roadside and the infrequent traffic -- such

pesky, wandering creatures -- the same ducks which weeks ago had been slaughtered and sold at market.

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James Gardner

Illustration: "Self Portrait as Paul Gauguin" (1990)