

sample chapters

salvage operation

“I’m not a crook!” screamed Nixon. “Awk! Not a crook!”

At least I think it was Nixon. The other birds had picked up the expression now, and you didn’t know who to believe. Five mynah birds in bamboo cages hung around the wrought-iron enclosure in back of the Cheri-Tone. Nixon was the biggest and baddest of the five; he also managed to look twice as depraved as his closest rival. I believe he had the avian equivalent of mange, and the feathers on his head stuck out in all directions.

“You crud! Awk! You crud!”

“I’m going to wring your neck, Nixon,” I said in a quiet voice. I just about meant it, too. After all, it *was* a Saturday morning and he was kind of shrieking.

“Hello, hello.” The whole assembly welcomed Eddie as he emerged from the back of the guesthouse. “*Sa-wasdee krap*. Awk!”

“Get stuffed,” said Eddie.

“Get stuffed!” rejoined Nixon, backed up by one or two of the others. “Hello. Get stuffed!”

“You want a beer?” asked my host. He looked a little under the weather, and I had the feeling I was supposed to say “yes.”

“No thanks, Eddie. I guess I had my fill last night.”

“Hoo, boy. Me, too. Yeah, you’re right—best have a coffee.”

I had come over for a late breakfast with Eddie Alder at the Cheri-Tone Guesthouse.

“How’s business?” I asked.

“Let’s just say it’s lucky I have a contempt for money.”

“Not a full house?”

“We’ve got two Canadian ladies who’ve just gone off to the Seventh Day Adventists in search of high adventure and natural peanut butter. And as though that’s not enough, we’ve got *another* guest, even. I haven’t seen this specimen yet, but Lek tells me he’s straight in from Kuwait and a perfect gentleman. Of course, Lek thinks anybody with a clean shirt and no backpack is a perfect gentleman.”

Lek was Eddie’s wife. She and her sister Meow really ran the joint. Eddie only kind of hung around with the birds and worked on his novel.

“From Kuwait?” I said. “What’s he doing *here*?” I didn’t mean to cast aspersions on the Cheri-Tone, but funseekers from the Middle East generally scorned such modest accommodation, and this particular guesthouse wasn’t within a convenient stagger of any of the conventional nightspots.

“I don’t know, but here’s our man now. Let’s ask him.”

The young man who had just appeared wore a preoccupied air. He also had big red ears that stuck out and a little blond mustache, the kind you sort of notice after a while—you say “Oh, yeah. That’s a mustache. He’s growing a mustache, I think.”

It turned out his name was Trevor Perry and he was from Norwich. He said he had arrived from Kuwait late the night before, his flight having been delayed eleven

hours. Exhausted, he'd been. He told the taxi driver he wanted the Sheraton Hotel, and he was promptly transported straight to the Cheri-Tone.

"I was too tired to argue," Trevor said, running a fingertip over the blond fuzz on his lip and sighing mightily.

"If that doesn't beat all," Eddie mused. "Do you think Lek's started paying off the airport cabbies?" Normally, of course, it would be some backpack traveler trying to get to the Cheri-Tone who'd be shanghaied to the Sheraton.

"Do you want a coffee, Mr Trevor?" Lek called from the doorway.

"No, thanks."

"How about a cold beer?" said Eddie, his whole manner suggesting that anybody just off the plane from Kuwait who didn't want one had to do some serious reflecting on his basic aims and priorities.

"No, it's okay. I'm waiting for my champagne to chill."

"You're doing what?"

"I'm waiting for my champagne to chill."

"Ah. Okay When did you put it in the cooler?"

"An hour ago."

"Maybe it's ready," Eddie suggested.

It wasn't. It needed another half-hour, in Trevor's judgment. In the meantime, he told us a little about himself.

It seemed he was a traffic engineer from Norwich working in Kuwait, and this was his first time in the Far East. Trevor was not a reticent type, for an Englishman, and before long we discovered that this was kind of a business vacation he was on. But it

wasn't traffic he was interested in, no matter how much of this commodity there was to be found in Bangkok. No, what he was after was a wife.

"Eighteen months I've been in Kuwait," he told us, "without a break. And I have to go back."

Was he on parole, then? Why did he *have* to go back?

"I'm buying a house in the UK. In Norwich. And I want to get a flat in London—as an investment, you know."

"So you've come to Bangkok to get stuck into the go-go bars," Eddie summed it up with a flourish. "Do a little shopping for a missus to look after this ancestral home you're acquiring."

"No, no. No, I've heard enough about that kind of thing from some of my associates back in the Gulf. No, that's not for me. But I do need a wife. You can't live in Kuwait longer than two years if you don't have a wife."

For a callow youth with reddish jug ears and a sort-of mustache, Trevor could do a remarkable job of looking like a man wise beyond his years. Especially when he stroked at his upper lip with a forefinger and gazed sternly off into the middle distance.

"You want to have a woman with an education—someone you can talk to, and someone who can raise your children. Someone you can introduce to the boss's wife. You really want to know something about her background."

"How long do you plan to be in Thailand?" asked Eddie.

"Three weeks," said Trevor. "Three weeks here, and then three weeks in Manila."

"So I guess it's Manila for the honeymoon, right?" I asked.

Trevor chose to take me seriously. “Oh, no. I’m not going to get married right away. No, first I have twenty-five dates lined up in Bangkok, and thirty more in Manila. These are going to be like preliminary interviews.”

Eddie and I looked at each other in wonderment. This in-other-ways-unremarkable young fellow who had never been to the Far East before was apparently contemplating fifty-five dates in six weeks. And he claimed he was going to stay away from girlie bars. Evidently, traffic engineers knew things about planning and scheduling the rest of us mortals did not.

Indeed, Trevor went back to his room to fetch his schedule and he showed us, with understandable pride, the projected outlines of his first vacation in eighteen months. It wouldn’t have been possible, of course, without his specialized background and the use of modern computer technology. He had employed a computer and a word-processing program, over the past year, to correspond with several hundred ladies.

“It’s not as bad as it sounds—I only used four different standard letter series. With the word processor, changing the salutations and any other reference to names is no trick at all. The computer, on the other hand, lets me keep track of sequencing—where I’ve got to with each candidate—and it files the ladies according to criteria such as physical attributes, educational background, and distance from their residences to the base of operations in the field. In this case, the Sheraton Hotel, Bangkok.

“When it came time to make my trip, it was a simple matter of informing the computer of my requirements, specifying the anticipated length of stay and so on, and this is what it gave me.”

On the printout there was a list of fifty-five names, addresses, personal notes, dates, times, and even suggested locations for the assignments. It seemed the floppy disk had become the little black book of the Space Age, at least if you were about to do some gallivanting on the scale Trevor had in mind.

“Before it’s over, I’ll have made considerable investments in postage, transportation, meals, etc.,” said Trevor, “but I expect it will have been worth it.”

Eddie and I expressed amazement and admiration at his resourcefulness and his grasp of modern technology. For his part, Trevor’s ears burned vivid red with modest pride and his sort-of mustache virtually quivered with some similar emotion.

Not that he didn’t enjoy the ambience at the Cheri-Tone, but his plan specified the Sheraton as the optimum base of operations, as he had said, and he would be leaving to take up residence there that very afternoon. In the meantime, perhaps we would like to join him in a glass of champagne to celebrate the inauguration of this mass courtship?

With no noticeable hesitation, Eddie said he would get a couple more glasses. Trevor already had his Thai International Airways glass, which he had scored at the same time he’d negotiated the bottle, and which he’d chilled together with the wine.

Showing more animation than he had all morning, Eddie did a funky little shuffle and sang a snatch of song: “Gon-na have a par-ty . . .”

“*Mao laaoh,*” said Lek’s sister Meow with disgust. “Drunk already.” She went over to Nixon’s cage and starting a language lesson: “*Mao laaoh; mao laaoh . . .*”

Eddie told us he was of the opinion Lek’s sister learned more from the birds than they learned from her, but he said this in a kind of undertone, not being too foolhardy.

Later, Eddie and I were to agree that this must have been Trevor's first champagne bottle. Unless it was just all the heat and excitement.

Trevor was opening the bottle as Eddie was wiping a couple of eight-ounce tumblers. That is to say, he was shaking the bottle furiously and looking straight down at it as he worked the wire free.

"Hey . . ." I started to warn him, but it was too late—it went off like a mortar.

The cork caught Trevor under the left eye, knocking him butt over bewilderment right off his chair. He hit the back of his head on the next table as he went over and mercifully, perhaps, was rendered unconscious. Lightning quick, Eddie managed to catch the gushing bottle and get it to a glass before the loss could assume tragic proportions.

Seeing that everything was under control, I figured I had better minister to our casualty, poking him fairly gently in the ribs with my toe, and saying "Trevor? Trev?"

"Hey, this is good stuff." Eddie, meanwhile, had filled both tumblers and the champagne flute, and he was sipping appreciatively. "How's old Trev?" he asked.

"Out cold. He's breathing okay, though, I think. Reckon we should get a doctor?"

"Naw. He'll probably come around in a minute or two. Looks like he'll have a real shiner, mind you."

In truth, his eye was already swelling, and it promised bigger and more colorful things to come. Lek had slipped a towel under his head and Meow was mopping at his face with another. Lek was also muttering under her breath. The mynah birds had started a committee meeting, Nixon trying to bring things to order by reiterating "*Mao*" in an unpleasant but authoritative tone. The others mostly made traffic noises and assorted squawks and whistles.

“Holy smokes, if that cork had gotten him directly in the eye . . .” Eddie started to snicker. We both collapsed laughing into our chairs, taking care at the same time not to spill our drinks.

“Did you see the way his head snapped back?”

“You think it was a suicide attempt?”

“This stuff goes down a treat. Top you up?”

“Okay. Shouldn’t we leave some for Trevor, though?”

“He’s got that glass I poured him, there. We’re entitled to salvage rights, aren’t we? I mean, if it hadn’t been for us, there wouldn’t be any at all.”

“That’s it. Salvage rights. Yeah, fill ’er up.”

This was turning out to be one of Eddie’s better Saturday brunches, all things considered.

In the course of time, Trevor came to, and while waiting for me to get him a taxi which he said should take him to the *other* Sheraton, he gave his glass of champagne to Lek’s sister, who had never tried champagne before and who quickly got quite silly.

Eddie tried to convince Nixon he should say “*Meow’s mao*,” but this finally caused Lek to become angry and she threatened to set him to painting the loft.

Such was his condition when he departed, that Trevor left his computer printout behind. Eddie had it delivered to him at the Sheraton, and they all got a letter of thanks a week later.

About five weeks after the morning he shot himself, to everyone's surprise Trevor reappeared at the Cheri-Tone. Good old Trev was carrying a big bottle of champagne, already chilled.

"All *right*, said Eddie. "This could get to be a habit."

"I thought you were supposed to be in Manila," I said.

"No need to look further," Trevor replied, wearing the inane grin of a besotted swain. "I may be in love." The impression of besottedness was exacerbated by his newly naked upper lip. He looked even younger. "I canceled all my dates."

"Whoo, boy. That cork did more damage than we suspected." Eddie looked pretty concerned. "And she's vetoed the mustache already, has she? Where did you meet this girl, anyway?"

"She's a waitress. Quite a nice place, really—it's called Sonny's Cherie. She works in the daytime, but she's got today off."

Trevor asked me if I would like to open the champagne, and Eddie set up some nicely polished glasses.

Sonny's Cherie, eh? Eddie and I tried not to look at each other.

"So where's the lady—back at your hotel?"

"She isn't *staying* with me." Trevor was indignant.

"Why not?"

"What do you mean 'Why not'?"

"'Why not' is what I mean."

"Listen, this girl still lives with her parents. I don't think she's ever even had a boyfriend. She really likes me, though. She says we should get married."

“And you’re in love. How long have you known her?”

“I met her the day after I left here. At lunchtime.”

“Oh, well, then,” Eddie conceded. “It’s been quite a courtship. Friendship blossoming into love, exchange of background details and all that. That’s okay, then. You’ve got my blessing.”

I figured Eddie could have eased off a bit. After all, he was drinking the man’s champagne. Again.

“So where is she?”

“Right here, in the front, talking to Lek and Meow. I’m going to get them.”

As soon as Trevor had disappeared inside, Eddie and I exchanged bemused stares.

“It’s a miracle,” I said. “A virgin working at Sonny’s Cherie. A *virgin*.”

“Could be one of these ‘born-again’ virgins you hear about. That must be it. I wonder how long she’s been a virgin?”

At that moment the happy couple emerged from the back to be greeted by wolf-whistles from the birds, not to mention a startled chorus of “Legs!” from Eddie and myself. Not what you would call discretion, but it was a Saturday morning, and we were more than a little surprised. For it was none other than the legendary Legs, a.k.a. “Long Tall Lek,” who used to be the star dancer at Shaky Jake’s, ’way back before her feet started acting up and she had to retire.

“Eddie. Harry,” she said, not too thrilled to see us. And I don’t know how she could have gotten my name wrong after all those colas I’d bought her when she was thirsty.

To say Trevor was registering consternation would about sum it up, though maybe on the side of understatement. His ears were practically incandescent, and, even without his mustache, he looked sterner than I had yet seen him.

We drank his champagne, though this time Trevor managed to scarf more of it than anyone else, and we talked about old times with Legs.

Eighteen months is a long time for any single, healthy man to spend in Kuwait. Eighteen *days* is a long time, in fact. When such a man does finally come out, not just into the world, but into the world of Thai womanhood, then perhaps he can be forgiven if he loses his sense of proportion. Even if his name is Trevor Perry and he has to keep his girlfriends' phone numbers on a floppy disk.

Lek and her sister are very keen on Trevor. They say he looks "smart," he's polite, and his ears stick out just like Prince Charlie's. Not only that, but he's blond and almost rich. And this is not even to mention his refined British accent, although Meow says trying to understand him is worse than trying to understand a Chinese speaking Thai. They have sworn to help him find a nice girl when he comes back in eight months time on another foray.

Trevor came around again the day before he left for Kuwait, bearing yet another bottle of the bubbly. Meow, for one, was developing quite a taste for the stuff. All's well that ends well, Trevor allowed, and he thought he had come out of it in better shape than he might have. In fact, he said, he felt somewhat beholden to us all, and felt there were rich lessons in life to be salvaged from the whole experience. Meow smiled at him

fondly, though I would have given you ten to one she had really understood no more than the word “rich.”

“Good luck! Awk! Wow! Ha, ha.”

“Shut up, Nixon,” Eddie said. “I’ve got a headache. I should never drink champagne in the morning.”

I had a funny feeling, nevertheless, that there would be further occasion for champagne breakfasts at the Cheri-Tone. Meow just sat there smiling and smiling.



Snapshots

There was a sudden sharp report, like a gunshot, as the minivan we had come in backfired and left. I winced, and winced again as the boat motor started up, the boatman racing the big engine, impatient to be gone.

We piled into the longtail boat off the old wooden pier, the six of us. Bags and backpacks had already been stowed under a tarp up in the bow. Mr. Macho was still going on about whitewater canoeing in Canada. Heady adventure it was, real hot stuff. Exactly what I needed, what with two whole hours sleep behind me, and what with feeling as though somebody had just shot Dead Man’s Rapids using my skull for a boat. Mekhong -- Thai whiskey -- is okay if mix it with lots of soda and ice. It’s okay, that is,

as long as you don't drink too much of it. And as long as you don't first lay down a few large Singha beers as a foundation.

“Oh, yeah. No problem. As steady as a church, is this boat.” Mr. Macho felt it was incumbent on him to reassure the ladies. Maybe me too, since an innocent bystander could've been forgiven for thinking I was sea-sick even though the boat wasn't moving yet.

About thirty-five feet long and narrow, gaily painted yellow, orange, and blue, the craft swept up to a high pointed wooden prow, the beak of some exotic river bird out of Thai mythology. In the stern, where the boatman sat on a raised bench to one side holding the tiller, there was a diesel truck engine mounted at an angle, the long steel propeller shaft trailing behind. Engine and prop could be tilted and swung with ease when it was necessary to clear floating water hyacinth or other obstructions. The longtail boats on the Chao Phraya River, back in Bangkok, were usually covered with canvas awnings which ran their length; this one, however, was open. Great, I thought, looking up, going glower to glower against the dark monsoon sky: five hours in an open boat in the rainy season with a gargantuan hangover. And Mr. Macho.

Besides Mr. Macho, the Australian world traveler, there were two girls in their twenties, a married couple from the States, and me. Everyone except the boatman and myself were on vacation. The boatman, of course, was driving the boat, while I was mostly wishing I was back in Chiang Mai sleeping off the previous night's indiscretions. But I'd had some time and I'd booked this boat-ride, figuring I could get some extra local color *en route* to my appointment next day. I was going to talk to people in a hamlet on the Mekong River -- not the river I was on now -- near where the borders of Laos, Burma,

and Thailand came together. As notorious opium warlord and commander of a rebel army had reportedly put prices on the heads of Americans and their dependents living in Chiang Mai -- at least on those in any way connected with drug enforcement. Thai officials, with the help of American agents, had just grabbed off about half a ton of best quality No.4 heroin, and the warlord was unhappy. Money aside, there was the small matter of face; the authorities had done some amount of crowing in public about their big bust, and the local papers were full of it. So I was in the Golden Triangle to get some background for a story I wanted to write. A story I had wanted to write. Just at that moment I didn't want to do anything except maybe toss lunch over the side and then sleep for a week. To tell the truth, I wouldn't have minded seeing Mr. Macho get eaten by a crocodile as well, before I went to sleep, but I guessed crocodiles were pretty rare items in these waters, these days.

It seemed we were to travel in convoy. Another longtail boat, more crowded than ours, was loaded and ready to go. They angled out into the current first, taking the lead. I noticed they had an armed and uniformed guard riding shotgun, but if he was meant to reassure us, I didn't find it very reassuring. Why wasn't there another soldier in our boat? Anyway, if we ran into bandits, there were going to be more than one of them, and you could bet they wouldn't be carrying what looked to me at a distance like a WW II-vintage M-2 rifle. They'd come much better equipped than that. Realistically speaking, of course, there was a very small chance of any such encounter. But there you had it -- hangovers always made me morbid.

I didn't bruit these thoughts about, and no one would've heard me if I had, sprawled the way I was in the bottom of the boat down by the boatman on a sheet of

polyethylene, cocooned in the racket from the engine. The other passengers were up near the bow, to all appearances engrossed in each other's company. Mr. Macho was evidently still the center of things, much as he had been on the bus. He was all extravagant gesture, tanned skin, and laughing white teeth. In part, he was attired in the standard uniform of a Southeast Asian backpack traveler: baggy cotton trousers, probably from India, and an embroidered Shan State shoulder bag. On top, however, next to his bare skin, he wore a studded leather vest which you would've thought was extremely uncomfortable in that weather. In a final triumph of style over comfort, he sported lizard-skin boots with a boot knife in a hidden sheath. He had pulled the knife, with studied nonchalance, when one of the girls wanted to cut a thong on her pack. He also wore aviator sunglasses with mirrored lenses.

“Well, yeah; I was traveling with this German sheila,” he'd told the ladies on the bus, “but I left her in Kathmandu.” The way he said this, he wanted you to know he'd left a lot of sheilas in a lot of far-out places, and probably most of them were still combing the world trying to find him again. Oh, yeah, he'd been into Burma overland from Thailand with a *laisser-passer* from an insurgent army; he'd been white-water canoeing in Canada; he'd lived with the estranged wife of an Italian czar of industry, floating about the “Med” on a fifty-foot motor yacht until it turned out there was no more money for fuel and his ladyfriend was going to be broke flatter than the dregs of yesterday's beer until she got her divorce, but he wasn't going to hang around when there was so much world out there, so many things to do. Too right, he'd said, sliding his newly-polished sunglasses back on with both hands and grinning in the way healthy young adventurers

grin when they are impressing young ladies. Or maybe I just envied him his vitality, that muggy gray day in August.

“Been there, done that,” Wife had said admiringly.

“How many times have you had the clap?” asked the Libber. The Libber was at least as fascinated with Mr. Macho as were Wife and the Braless Wonder, the Libber’s Scottish traveling companion. Only her interest, she’d have had you believe, was less admiring, perhaps more that of the entomologist confronted with an intriguing species of insect.

The lad’s peregrinatory accomplishments were inspiring an entirely ingenuous wonder in BW, on the other hand. Actually, if I hadn’t been lying in the bilge waiting to die, I might well have been led into a contest of checkered histories, BW was that tempting a morsel of maidenly charm, what with her dewy golden skin and nipples sticking out everywhere. This was not even to mention the arm-holes in her tank-top, teasing windows on a fine musky world of heavy swells and smooth curves. And there were her beautiful big gray eyes, as well, great pools of willingness-to-believe anything you wanted to drown yourself in.

No matter how much Wife had lavished admiration on Mr. Macho, Husband had talked with quiet enthusiasm of photography the whole way to the boat landing. He’d seemed to direct his conversation to the assembly at large, though I’d been the only one who’d even pretended to listen.

“I have just the one lens,” he’d said, at least twice. “This is it, you see; it’s a 35-200mm. That’s all the range you need for hand-held photography. Any more than

200mm, you should have a tripod. Of course, sometimes I could wish I had a wider angle, but ...”

“Did you hear that, dear? Wife had interrupted. “Our friend has been to China; he went in through Tibet. Isn’t that something?”

Husband had nodded. “We could’ve gone to China, sweetheart,” he said in mild tones, “but you didn’t want to. You said it was still too uncomfortable to travel there. Too primitive.”

He’d turned back to me and gone on: “Of course a zoom doesn’t really give you first-class images, but it’s plenty good enough for most purposes.”

“No, no,” Mr. Macho was protesting, taking off his sunglasses so the Libber could see how big and round and honest his eyes were. “She wasn’t a prostitute. A hooker? Oh, no. This was China. This sheila was a government official. But still and all, if we’d been caught at it... This was China, you know.”

“And it’s a bit slow,” Husband went on. “All zooms are slower than your fixed focal-length lenses, of course. But no problem.” He rummaged in a bulging pocket on his camera bag, pulling out boxes of film. “See? 200 ASA. 400 ASA. With the fast films, these days, you can get good color saturation, very adequate resolution even at 400 ASA. In this kind of overcast, this rainy-season weather like today, you have to use at least 200 ASA film if you want results with a zoom lens. At longer focal lengths, anyway.”

Husband’s camera was in his lap, the strap around his neck. He held the erect zoom in one hand as he dabbed and blew at the lens.

Wife, whom I would’ve sworn hadn’t been listening at all, had cut in with, “Two-hundred ASA, schmoo-hundred ASA. It all comes out the same, once my husband gets

his hands on it. He carries that big bag around and spends all that money for what? I tell him he'd do better to buy a little digital automatic like yours." She looked at Mr. Macho.

"Idiot-proof?" suggested the Libber, with a sweet smile for the Australian hunk.

"What kind of boat is it going to be?" BW had asked Mr. Macho. "I hope it's safe; I'm not a very good swimmer. Have you been on this trip before?"

No, he had not, Mr. Macho had disclaimed modestly, but he had been white-water canoeing in Canada, and he proceeded to tell us about this at length.

*

And now we were on the river. I tried closing my eyes and resting my head against the hull. The vibration from the motor rattled my teeth, which distracted me from my despair for a while but also kept me from sleep. A fine drizzle had been falling for some minutes, cooling my fevered brow. Opening my eyes, I was greeted with the sight of Husband and Wife in hooded rubber jackets. Who, I asked myself, would travel in the tropics with rubber anoraks? Husband and Wife, obviously, for there they were. But it would be hotter and wetter inside the jackets than it was outside. I broke into a sweat just thinking about it. Prepared for anything, was Husband. Earlier, I had noticed a combination digital watch-compass on his wrist. I bet myself he'd been a Boy Scout.

From my vantage point in the bottom of the boat, all I could see were the tops of jungled hills going by on either side. My companions evidently were finding much to comment on, however; I could see them pointing and jawing away excitedly from time to time. All I wanted to know about was if someone spotted a nice hotel with a nice dry bed.

You could have kept your herds of elephants or hilltribe villages or whatever it was that was enjoying everyone's attention.

The miserable, muggy overcast weighed heavy, together with the assorted physical and psychical vestiges of the previous night's booze-up. When I thought about bandit attacks, for example, or when I felt the passing urge to engage Mr. Macho in some duel of words, I experienced mild flashes of dread, rather like the premonition I'd had the night before when I'd switched from beer to Mekhong. I wanted to be out of the boat, on the road or, even better, in a hotel. Asleep. I'd already had enough of this ship of fools, our impassive boatman at the tiller, director of our destiny along this wild and remote stream, around this bend and the next, our fate in his hands and the river's for hours to come. I had the feeling, mind you, that if I could sleep for even a few minutes, all this would pass, and I'd start to enjoy the trip, like I was supposed to.

As I was musing thusly, I was seized by a sudden surge of alarm at the sight of the Libber getting up and charging towards me. In fact, she was only clambering back to stand over me and scream at the boatman. He clearly didn't understand, or couldn't hear, a thing she said, but she kept jabbing a finger at the shore, her whole manner proclaiming a call of nature which demanded an answer without much delay. The engine throttled down and we put in to a spot where a little stream tributary trickled down through a cut in the steep bushy bank. What an excellent place for an ambush, I thought.

Silence bellowed as the boatman switched off the diesel; I felt suddenly exposed, vulnerable, my comfortable shell of high-decibel sound gone. I sat up and stretched. It occurred to me I could use a leak, myself, and I tottered up to the bow to drop down onto the sand.

“Are there any snakes?” Wife asked Mr. Macho.

“You just be sure you shuffle your feet along -- make lots of noise. Snakes are more afraid of you than you are of them.”

“There was a beautiful snake in the shower at this bungalow we stayed in down south,” said BW. “Really brightly colored. A lovely pattern.”

“I killed it with a stick,” the Libber told us.

The Libber was somewhere ahead of me as I made my way up the little ravine, refusing to shuffle, looking for a place to pee that would disturb neither snakes nor fellow travelers.

“I’m going over here,” hollered the Libber, though I was pretty sure this wasn’t an invitation.

When I got back to the boat, Husband was speaking; this time, it looked like, he held the attention of one and all.

“But you don’t think there’s any real danger, do you?” asked BW, her fine sandy-blond hair blowing loose across her face, failing to hide her huge gray eyes. “Thailand is supposed to be really safe.”

“Oh, it is,” said Wife. “He’s just being silly.”

Using his tongue, Mr. Macho was rolling a dead, half-smoked cigarillo back and forth between his lips, something he must’ve seen in a movie somewhere. “It can happen, mind you. They wouldn’t jump us here, though; how would they know we were going to land exactly here? No, they’d come out with boats, or they’d think of something to draw us ashore.”

“What would you do if bandits did stop us?” said BW.

“Oh, I’d hand over whatever they asked for, I expect.” Mr. Macho managed to make this admission seem like a tough stance. Maybe it was the cigarillo.

“That’s one thing,” he continued. “Out here, they don’t put the same value on human life. They could kill you just because you looked at them wrong. Or just because you didn’t have enough money to give them.”

“What?”

“Too right. Loss of face. These boys’ll kill you as soon as look at you, if they think they have to save face.

“I always keep about 300 baht out where it’s easy to get at. But you see this belt, here?” He was wearing a broad leather belt. It looked like elephant hide. “I’ve got a couple thousand baht and \$700 zipped up in this here.” He gave BW a big slow wink and then relit his cigarillo, dragging a lungful of smoke and exhaling it without removing the butt from his lips. “And there’s more in here,” he added, tapping the same boot that concealed his knife.

“I’ve never been robbed, mind, though a couple of drongos tried it once, in Calcutta.”

We waited for the story, but it never came. He merely took another big puff and then flicked the stub out onto the water. “It’s going to piss down,” he said, directing a canny gaze at the sky. There was a flash of distant lightning.

The Libber came out of the bush and we all piled back on board. I asked about the other boat, the one with the guard, and was told there’d been no sign of it since shortly after we’d first set out.

“We lost them a long ways back,” said Mr. Macho. “Don’t know what it is, what with them loaded down with ten or twelve people, and them with the same size boat and engine, but I guess they’re running lots faster than we are. Lost ’em way back there on the second bend; we came around it and, just like that, they were gone.”

“We haven’t seen any boats,” said Husband. “Only a big raft of bamboo being floated down by a couple of guys. I got some good shots of it, I think.”

I was feeling better, and I was sitting up front near the others. For the first time since we’d left the pier, I had a proper look around.

Rugged cliffs limned in white mist, steep, heavily forested hills receded from rich greens to grays and black in the misty drizzle, enormous gum trees, ancient teak giants towering here and there above the jungle canopy. Then we came across a stretch of low flat ground on either side, jagged limestone outcrops covered with thick vegetation thrusting out of intensely green rice paddies which, unaccountably vivid, vitiated the prevailing dullness. Husband was fussing that it wouldn’t translate onto film. You’d really need your own darkroom so you could print the images just the way you wanted them, dodging and burning to bring out the depth and subtleties of light and color.

The river ran fast, squeezed between high banks covered in tangled undergrowth. I found myself looking along the river, scouting for likely ambush sites. Almost any given spot would’ve done the trick nicely. We came up on a hilltribe village, a few little huts with woven bamboo walls and thatched roofs perched precariously on a muddy slope slashed out of the green. Pigs rooted about under the stilted dwellings. Several colorfully costumed hill people waved from the water’s edge as we went by.

Husband had drawn a bead on them with his camera, fiddling with the zoom and focusing rings, shaking his head fretfully and adjusting the aperture. "Not enough light," he said to no one in particular. "Should've switched to 400 ASA."

I heard the shutter fire up close to my ear; he recoiled it and fired again. "Waste of film, really," he said.

"So what's new?" said Wife.

Husband told me how his zoom was a good lens, but that it was a nuisance having to focus separately at each focal length. And your focusing had to be right on, in this light, because you couldn't get any depth of field at all and still use a fast enough shutter speed.

BW was talking to the Libber about bandits, and about Mr. Macho's approach to getting robbed.

"You're a man," the Libber turned and accused him. "That's okay for you; but what about us? 'Give them what they want.' Sure. They might want something more than money."

BW's eyes got bigger and rounder. "But Thais are so kind. They're so gentle, and nice!"

This was true. Land of Smiles, and all. It was nevertheless also true that Thailand had one of the highest murder rates in the world. It was also true that Thai fishermen, for example, regularly robbed and killed Vietnamese "boat people," refugees adrift at sea. Yes, and raped them, too. Then there was the bounty this warlord had allegedly just put on certain Americans in the country -- men, women, and children alike. But I thought it best to keep these thoughts to myself.

Mr. Macho had no such compunctions. “Did you hear about that couple -- Canadians, they were -- the ones that got robbed in Chiang Mai a while back? They shot the guy in the head. Killed him. Then they beat up the girl with a two-by-four. It had a nail in it, and it left her blind in one eye. Right there on Doi Suthep; they’d rented a motorcycle to tour the mountain.”

This charming anecdote might have been better left for some other time and place; it was clear that even BW was critical. She signaled her displeasure in part by suddenly deciding I’d been rehabilitated sufficiently to merit her interest, no longer quite the sodden, surly hulk reeking of dubious spirits I had been earlier. She asked me what I did, and I told her, and she wanted to know about the story I was working on. I told her I was interested in what was being done to develop alternatives to opium farming in the Golden Triangle.

Wife asked me whether the hilltribe cultures were threatened the way the American Indians had been. Under cover of gazing abstractedly while considering this proposition, I caressed the blonde fuzz on BW’s legs with my eyes.

Wife suddenly pointed and I turned to see a small dugout canoe shooting out from the bank on an intercept path. It darted across the surface with a speed and ease that was astonishing, especially when we realized it was being propelled by two little hilltribe urchins, a boy and a girl. They grinned at us with pure delight as they glided across our bows, paddling with simple bits of split board, digging in with deep strokes, one a side, in perfect unison.

Husband was panning and zooming like a pro. Then he swore softly and cocked the shutter, too late to get his shot.

Wife hooted. "And there's another one that got away."

There was a second village, much like the first, this one with a couple of water buffalo down by the water where a dozen naked children splashed and gleamed, waving frantically. We were past and out of sight before Husband had time to waste more than two or three more frames.

"God, I wouldn't want to swim in this; it's filthy!" The Libber wrinkled her nose at the water in much the same way she liked to wrinkle it at Mr. Macho.

The river was indeed a muddy brown in color, but it was only good clean soil of the land, more material for the already rich lands to the south, you might say. Perhaps I could use the notion in a story: a northern river representing the more general drain on the impoverished North. This muddy stream would symbolize the flow of resources -- the depletion of the forests and erosion of the soil together with the migration of the young population, the one to replenish and enrich the fertile rice-lands, the other to man the engines of progress in the south...

"There's nothing wrong with this water," said Mr. Macho. "It wasn't doing those tots back there any harm, was it? You city types," he added with disgust."

"Piss off," the Libber suggested. Then she announced it was time for another pit-stop, and headed down to the stern to instruct our pilot. You could see a certain amount of heated argument going on for a bit, with the boatman shaking his head vehemently and pointing ahead. The Libber came back to tell us he wouldn't put in yet. "I think he said there's some fucking place farther along. I don't think I can wait."

When Mr. Macho mentioned he'd told her so, and she shouldn't have eaten that green papaya salad back before we'd gotten on the bus because it had been sure to give her the shits, she replied that he gave her the shits, if he wanted to know the truth.

BW was telling me all about Samui Island, and I was listening with great earnestness, gazing into her eyes and finding new reason to live.

After a few minutes, during which the Libber kept to herself, tightly contained, our boatman found us another cozy little beach, pretty well indistinguishable from the first, and ran the bow up onto it.

"Shuffle your feet," called Wife as the Libber disappeared up over the bank and into the bush.

The sky was by this time darkly ominous. Husband decided to change to a 400 ASA film even though the 200 wasn't finished yet. He jumped off the boat and asked us all to look natural while he fired off a few, using flash fill to get detail in the foreground subject (us) against the black sky behind. Really, you need two cameras," he said, "so you can have two different films going at the same time."

"Two cameras, he needs now!" Wife appealed to the gods in disbelief.

I was feeling almost normal again, though a little sleep wouldn't have done any harm. I was looking forward to the rest of the trip, never mind we were about to get stormed on in a big way. And then there was tomorrow; it was about time I got a good story together, for a change, and I had a hunch this was going to be a good one.

I arranged myself on the wet tarp which covered the baggage, thinking I would nod off for a minute or two. Thus refreshed, was my plan, I'd set about getting to know BW better, swimming in her big gray eyes and peeking up her armholes and all.

I was dreaming I was in a canoe, hurtling through white water, and somebody was yelling at me. I woke up, and had the idea the boatman had just hollered something in Thai, and that there had been other voices. What I saw when I opened my eyes convinced me for a moment I was still dreaming.

“This isn’t happening,” said Wife, which expressed my thoughts exactly.

The Libber had just been pushed sprawling onto the sand at the bottom of the bank. She looked thoroughly frightened. There were two young Thai men with her, dressed in jeans and T-shirts. One had an M-16, the other had an automatic pistol, and both items were pointed towards us. The one with the rifle had intricate blue tattoos covering his arms, while other had a fine droopy moustache. Standing spread-legged on top of the embankment was a third man, his M-16 cradled in his arms. He barked something at his colleagues in tones which suggested he was their leader, gesturing impatiently towards the boat with his weapon. They indicated BW, who was standing on the beach between them and the boat, and replied with something that made him laugh. His face, his whole manner was crazily animated with drugs or excitement, or both.

One of the men made a sharp comment to our boatman, who raised his hands. Wife and I followed suit immediately. With some show of reluctance, Mr. Macho also put his hands up, clasping them on top of his head. For a moment I thought BW was going to go to the Libber, but then she turned and ran towards the boat, floundering in the sand, finally falling against the hull with a sob. I saw Husband out of the corner of my eye, down behind Wife, and I wondered what the hell he was doing rummaging in his camera bag at a time like this.

I could speak a little Thai, but the exchange between our boatman and the others had been conducted in a rapid-fire Northern dialect, and I hadn't understood any of it. Now, however, our boatman told me slowly and clearly that we should give our money to our visitors. All of it. He seemed exceedingly relaxed, to me, for someone under the gun. Maybe it was because he didn't have much to lose anyway, or maybe it was because these guys were countrymen and he was sure they wouldn't hurt him.

Though they probably could have worked it out for themselves, I relayed the message to the others.

"I don't have any money on me," BW said to me in a quiet voice. "It's in my pack. Under the tarp."

For sure, with her loose sleeveless top and tight shorts and bare feet there was no obvious place to stash a bankroll. I advised her to stay put for the time being and see what happened. One of our new friends interrupted to suggest I keep my mouth shut. Then he indicated I should hand him over something, and my best guess was it was money he was after. Cautiously, I reached into my hip pocket and removed my wallet. There wasn't a lot of money in it, and only one credit card, which I could cancel soon enough. Driver's license and Thai employment card were only minor nuisances. They also wanted my watch. Small loss; I never wore a good watch on this kind of excursion.

To my relief, Husband had stopped fooling around, and he handed over his watch and wallet as well. His camera bag, however, was nowhere to be seen, probably pushed up under the tarp. Wife was good for a handbag and a Walkman.

Mr. Macho was standing with one hand on his head while he forked over 300 baht with the other Tattoos said something to his friend, who trained his pistol directly on Mr.

Macho. The Pistolero reached up and prodded Mr. Macho gently in the groin with his weapon. Mr. Macho surrendered the shoulder bag containing his little automatic camera. Another advantage of little automatic cameras, it didn't hurt so much when you lost them. He patted his hip pockets and vest to indicate they were empty, putting on his honest face as best he could while wearing the shades. The Pistolero stared silently into his face for a long moment, and then signaled he wanted the glasses. Slipping them on, he turned briefly to get his partners' approval. It could not be denied -- they did wonders for his image as a bandit. Mirrored lenses are very useful; no one can see what your eyes are really doing, and if you're also holding a gun, your victims' imaginations will provide you with eyes sufficient to make their blood run cold.

I noticed that Mr. Macho's eyes were watering. He started to wipe them, but the man with the shades wagged the gun barrel at him, and he returned his hands to his head. The Pistolero reached into the shoulder bag and removed Mr. Macho's cigarillos, opening the neat leather case and extracting one with an air of great satisfaction. He lit the little cigar and sneered, staring hard at Mr. Macho and blowing smoke up at his face. "*Nah phooying,*" he said contemptuously. "Face of a woman."

I could sympathize with Mr. Macho's discomfiture. It was easier for me -- I hadn't had a chance to promote my own hero image, what with the hangover and lack of sleep and all. Relatively speaking, it was okay for me to stand there like an impotent wimp in face of all this outrage. Or so I told myself. I'd been pretty much the Invisible Man the whole day anyway, and now I concentrated on perfecting the role.

At least they had left him his belt and his boots, I'd been thinking, but then they took those too, and Mr. Macho also had to worry about his baggy pants falling down,

standing there with his hands on his head. On second thought they also took my belt, a nice narrow conservative belt you'd never have suspected held two \$100 bills folded up tight, not to mention a couple of \$500 travelers checks. They left me my sandals, however, and I was grateful for small mercies. I made my face look inoffensive, even friendly. Solidarity with the oppressed masses, and why shouldn't the wealth be redistributed? Sure. After all.

It was funny, now that I thought about it -- I hadn't seen the boatman give over anything. Maybe these were some of those "communist insurgents" you read about in the papers: take from the rich; leave the poor alone.

Attention now turned to BW. She had tried to go to the Libber, who was still collapsed on the sand, but Tattoos intercepted her. The Pistolero walked back to join them. The loony with the other M-16 called down to them from the bank and the three of them had a good laugh together.

"You bastards!" It was at this point that the Libber suddenly launched herself at Tattoos. He turned to meet her rush with a full slap that spun her reeling to the ground. He walked over and kicked her hard in the side, and she curled up tight, gasping, but otherwise silent.

Now the Pistolero held BW from behind while Tattoos approached her, thrusting his gun at her midsection, snagging BW's T-shirt with the barrel and hiking it up, scraping her soft belly and revealing the heavy underswell of her breasts. He made it plain what he wanted her to do, and the Pistolero released her so she could pull the shirt off over her head, bending and tugging and then standing again, shaking her fine mane of hair into place. Her demeanor was calm but fragile; she stood erect, proud, perfectly

tanned, pear-shaped breasts defying their own weight and fully preoccupying the assembly. The aureoles were big and pink against gold, and I wondered why they weren't tanned as well. The Pistolero pulled at the tight front of his jeans, making room. There was a wheeze from the Libber, and BW began to cry silently, not bothering to wipe at the tears running down her cheeks.

This was really getting rough, I thought. One's code of gentlemanly conduct indicated one should go to the ladies' rescue. Only I didn't fancy being dead, especially now that the hangover had almost cleared up. I looked over at Mr. Macho; it was hard to tell what he was thinking, though anybody could see he wasn't having a good time. Husband, I noticed, was swinging his camera up to focus on ... Oh, my Christ, no, I thought. He wasn't ... But he was; he was going to take a picture of the loony on the embankment.

The Loony had been distracted by the events unfolding on the sand, but now he noticed Husband. Casually, with a mocking smile and appearing relaxed for the first time, he swung the M-16 up to his shoulder. The muzzle moved through a short arc and he fired.

Wife was already screaming "Noooo!" in a voice filled with urgency and despair. An M-16 makes a rather unimpressive noise -- really not that much of a bang. Still, the top of Husband's head, just above the zoom lens, blew right off. He stood there looking silly for a moment, while Wife reiterated her denial: "No! Please!" Then he slumped backwards, buckling at the knees and falling over the side of the boat into the water. I noticed how quickly clouds of red billowed and eddied away in the current.

A moment of time extended in silence. Stretched out forever. Then Wife screamed again. "You filthy sons of bitches! Noooo!" She sank down on the tarp, giving herself up to sobbing, choking grief.

Tattoos and the Pistolero, meanwhile, were losing control. The muzzles of their weapons nodded and waved and winked nervously as they tried to cover the situation and at the same time tried to determine what the Loony expected of them now. They paid no attention to BW as, still bare-breasted, she moved to help the Libber to her feet. Up on the bank, the bandit chief was wound tight, high on adrenaline and who knew what.

"Kha man tai hue mod," I heard. "Kill them!"

His colleagues seemed almost as alarmed as I felt, waving their guns about as though to fend us off more than threaten, glancing back and forth between us and the Loony.

He snapped something else at them that I couldn't make out. I heard a splash, and I realized the boatman had gone over the side. I was myself preparing to crumple over backwards into the water with the first gunfire. I preferred to do this alive, of course, and this meant I shouldn't be their first target. The Invisible Man. It's better you take Mr. Macho first; he's an asshole.

The Loony shrieked something in rage and swung his M-16 across his men and towards us. This was it. They steadied down and their guns leveled with cold purpose.

At that moment there came the sound of a motor -- a longtail boat coming up fast around the bend. No one moved, except for BW and the Libber; they were lurching towards us, oblivious to the imminence of violent, shocking death. At that range, the flat, nasty smack of bullet against flesh and bone comes an instant before the sound of the

shot, an almost simultaneous splat-bang. I waited for it, willing my knees to buckle on cue -- at the split instant of the first gunfire.

The racket of the diesel cleared the turn in the river, racing towards us.

The guns wavered again. Then a quick fat splatter of raindrops strafed the beach. There was a breathless pause before a crack of thunder rent the stillness, and the storm broke. Tattoos and the Pistolero looked at each other, struck with consternation, and then they turned and ran, much like a couple of au bouffant debutantes caught out in the rain. The Loony fired a wild burst in the direction of the approaching boat before disappearing into the deluge, dropping out of sight down the other side of the bank.

I had gone over the side; a neatly-executed backwards tumble, an award-winning portrayal of a dead man going into the river. I landed right on top of the boatman. It was entirely unnecessary, of course. But what the hell, the way the rain was coming down I wouldn't have stayed any drier in the boat.

By the time the other boat had pulled in, Mr. Macho had taken Wife in charge, and was hollering at me through the downpour, asking me if I had any brandy. I didn't have, more was the pity. I covered BW and the Libber with my polyethylene sheet, and tried to get them to say they were okay. A soldier and the driver from the other boat, together with our driver, fished Husband out of the river and wrapped him up in plastic. Wife seemed uninterested in his mortal remains -- a sensible attitude, I thought, though one that wouldn't have made for very good cinema.

There were several travelers in the other boat; they were most helpful, and had some Mekhong whiskey Mr. Macho could feed to Wife. It wasn't really the same as brandy, mind you, and she got sick on one mouthful and wouldn't try another. Mr.

Macho managed a good belt of it himself, though. The Libber had a big stash of Valiums; she gave three to Wife before dispensing some more to BW and herself. Mr. Macho had another pull at the whiskey.

A sodden, dispirited crew we were. I guess we were all in a bit of shock, as well, now that I think about it.

“Oh, yeah,” Mr. Macho was saying to the new gang of travelers. “We’ve had a rum go of it. She has, you know -- the wife, I mean. It was that sudden. And the rest of us, we were that close to having the biscuit ourselves I could feel the bullets. Too right. There was nothing you could do; that was the worst of it.” And so on. This would become a better yarn than whitewater canoeing in Canada could ever be.

We were taken back in convoy to where we’d begun the river excursion earlier that day. The remainder of the boat-ride was uneventful. I devoted myself mostly to getting cozy under the plastic, steaming away with BW and the Libber. BW was actually named Eunice, I discovered, but she hated the name and preferred to be called Sandy. I liked Sandy -- both name and girl -- and I offered to take good care of her and the Libber, too, if I had to, once back in town. After all, as I told them, I had more travelers checks in my bag, thank God the bandits had never gotten around to unloading the luggage. The Libber was called Jerry, which was short for Jessica or something, and she told me they could look after themselves quite nicely, thank you anyway. The two of them did some of the requisite blubbering and cuddling, and Jerry let me know one way and another that Sandy had all the protection she needed and I could stay under the plastic with them because it was raining but this didn’t mean we were old buddies and chances were we never would be either. I found myself thinking it would not have been a bad idea if this

lady had stepped on a snake, after all. But Sandy didn't give me a sign, so maybe it was never fated to be in any case.

We didn't have to wait long at the pier for the police to arrive and to escort us to the police station in Chiang Mai for questioning. Jerry was looking after Sandy, and Mr. Macho had Wife in his care, so I gave the police the benefit of my perceptions. My main theory was the boatman had had something to do with it all. How else could there have been bandits at just that spot at just that time? But they were unimpressed by this line of reasoning. Nor did they think it peculiar that the second boat, the one with the armed escort, had abandoned us right at the outset. What did impress them was Husband's stupidity. You almost got the feeling they felt he had deserved to get himself shot, he'd been such a lamebrain. Anyway, they took our descriptions -- three young men in T-shirts and jeans, one looking like a loony, one like a pistolero, one covered in tattoos -- and assured us justice would be done, no matter our descriptions fitted half the young men in northern Thailand.

But Husband's camera promised to make it easier for them. After the storm had broken, I had noticed Husband's sturdy old manual Nikon lying in the bottom of the boat where he'd dropped it. Tucking it away under the tarp, I suddenly wondered if he'd gotten that last picture, just before he died. What a great photo to illustrate a story. For a moment, I found myself weighing the pros and cons of removing the film and pocketing it. Of course, this smacked more than a little of looting the dead, and even if I were to have pleaded journalistic license, the police would've called it removing evidence in a murder case. However you looked at it, it would've been a crummy thing to do, I suppose. Under questioning, both Mr. Macho and I had the distinct impression the shutter

had fired before the M-16 had. Snick-splat-bang, it had gone. Wife told the cops they could take film and camera, when they asked, and she didn't care what they did with them.

Mr. Macho had been the only one to lose all of his money in the robbery, and I lent him a bit to tide him over -- so he could buy something to wear on his feet, and whatnot.

I met him in Bangkok a week later, to collect my money. His name was Robin Pilcher, but I could call him "Robbo." He was still grinning and glowing away with tanned good health, and he was still wearing a vest with nothing underneath. I saw he was sporting brand-new lizard-skin boots, and I wondered if he had a new knife. Robbo and I ordered more beer, and he told me how he'd stayed there in Chiang Mai for a few days and looked after Wife. Actually, her name was Ellen. Ellen Brown, from Sandusky. Husband's name had been Stanley.

I waited for him to tell me how he'd shagged her back to normalcy, and how she had begged him to stay with her for ever after. What he really said was she'd been doped up most of the time, and he only met her for meals and helped out through the hassle with the police. He hadn't seen much of Sandy and Jerry. Jerry was a flippin' bull dyke, anyway, in his opinion. He told me how shit-scared he'd been, and how ashamed he was he couldn't do anything to help the girls. I told him I knew exactly what he meant. Stanley and his damn-fool camera. It was hard to say what would have happened if Stanley hadn't gone and gotten himself shot just when he did. Things might have turned very nasty indeed. Robbo said the cops gave Ellen back the camera and the slides, only

she hadn't wanted the camera. "Gave it to me. I didn't want it; give me an automatic any day. I flogged the thing on the train coming down here."

"What about that film?" I asked. "The one in the camera -- did they find anything on it?"

"Naw. Nothing -- just a blur. Camera shake and underexposure, both. In fact, none of the pictures was worth looking at."

"When I think of the story I could've written to go with that shot: 'Split Second From Death, Man Photographs Own Killer'."

"Yeah; what a drongo. His wife was right: that guy just couldn't take pictures."

I never did get that story I'd been after, I told Robbo. When I finally arrived at my contact point, nobody ever showed. I got a little background, maybe, but nothing I really had to go all the way up there for. A wasted trip. And I hadn't had a good story in months.



A Day at the Beach

I am collapsed out in a beach chair, drowsing, looking at the girl draped across that big inner tube floating in the shallows. Looking at her dark tanned skin, oily taut, almost, as the black rubber skin of her inner tube. The fine long lean muscles of a gogo dancer. Her skin glistens, salt water beading on what I have a hunch is aromatic

coconut oil. Coconut oil always makes me salivate. This girl makes me salivate, she is so self-conscious in the sun as she rocks gently in her inner tube, eyeing me, pulling at her toes, pushing back her glossy black hair, squeezing water from it. She pouts and points her toes at me. She has delicate feet unusual in a Northeastern Thai bargirl (She looks Northeastern). Normally she would have feet like hooves, unshod for generations, strong ugly Lamarckian feet evolved by peasant children of the soil. But these dark brown feet pointing at me from the inner tube are gracile brown pink-soled appendages which nicely finish her smooth fine-boned legs. She rolls over on her tummy, the inner tube bucking and rearing; she clutches and squirms and writhes back into control of her nautical steed, presenting two gleaming oily globes of delectable flesh embellished by a lime-green string bikini, lime-green against warm brown cinnamon which I know at a range of thirty feet is redolent of coconut oil simmered in the sun and I simmer and salivate and have warm earthy thoughts while the lime-green of her swimsuit and the happy wholesome youth of her smile and teasing eyes make me think of cold lime sherbet, sweet frosty warm things and now I hunger for her but I also think of Sunantha who is not here. The girl in the inner tube is looking back at me over her shoulder and grinning. She kicks her legs with languid allure, and I'm sure I can smell coconut oil.

"Dink, dink, dink. All the time dink too much," Sunantha had been saying. I'd felt a dull resentment that might easily have flamed into hot words, had I not felt so subdued by the hard business of continuing to exist at all, never mind getting into a fight. Wedged like a refugee into that ridiculous seat on that crummy bus.

The talcum powder Sunantha used after my bath was some new mentholated stuff she had bought at the market. About a kilo of it, dead cheap. A novel sensation, it had been-sort of a cool-hot tingling. One could conceivably have called it refreshing. But the tingling had not gone away. In fact, it seemed to me it was getting more pronounced, if anything. At least in certain areas. Actually, if you were to have asked me right then to report on the current status of this new sensation, I would've told you my fucking balls were on fire. There you go. And Sunantha claimed to have spent three years as a nurse.

"This bus good. Is cheap. Why you want to spend money? No need. Air-condition bus too expensive."

Traveling between towns in Thailand, you find a variety of vehicles at your disposal. Westerners, however, almost always use the train or an air-conditioned tour bus. Not only are the latter two modes of transport fast and cool, they have also been designed with the possibility in mind that some people might be more than 5'4" tall. Someone like myself, for example, at 6'2", is able to find room for his legs, so long as the passenger ahead does not recline his seat.

But this fine morning I was not on a train or a nice air-conditioned tour bus. I was on a roht doysahn. The fare on one of these buses was half of what it would cost you on a tour bus. Big deal. Half of just about nothing was just about nothing.

"You say you want to sail, you want to play windsurf; but you never go since I meet you. All the time dink."

"Drink," I said. "Rr. Drink. Jesus Christ. Rrr."

How I had allowed myself to be led onto one of these mobile torture chambers, I wasn't sure. Maybe it was because I was still semi-comatose. Maybe it was

guilt. One thing was pretty clear, Sunantha had the idea that a wee dose of discomfort this Saturday morning would be good for my character.

"Don't complain. This bus cheap; and you always say we spend money too much. Thai people take this bus all the time."

No doubt this was true, but I wanted to point out I was the only individual on this infernal vehicle who by necessity had one knee up under my chin, and the other leg out in the aisle where I had to keep shifting it so people could visit up and down the length of the bus. There was no air, even with all the windows open, and sweat had saturated my shirt and was trickling through the waistband of my underwear. The bus wasn't moving, and the ceiling fans had not yet been turned on.

Bangkok was hot, that April. Very hot. And humid. The cool season was merely a poignant memory, while the rainy season was still a hopelessly long way away. The heat came down like a hammer. In the little lane outside my house, the scrawny, mangy dogs slipped from shadow to shadow, tongues lolling, avoiding the sun like vampires home late from their nocturnal carouse. There was no respite, even after dark.

I had been feeling out of sorts, lately, anyway. Sunantha said she figured it was time to get out of town. Go to the beach. She told me I'd had two or three too many hangovers this past month or so, for one thing, and I should maybe stop boozing for a while. Here's a good idea, she said: why didn't I promise not to drink at the beach? And all next week, too, come to that.

Unbelievable. We had been hanging out together since New Year's, but she'd never said a thing. Until now. Suddenly I was some kind of alcoholic or something, and I should watch my drinking. Our relationship was overdue for some review and maybe

some redefinition, it occurred to me, by Christ. It wasn't like we were married, after all. After all.

It was funny, Sunantha said, that I kept complaining I hadn't been sailing or windsurfing or anything since I'd met her. Like she was to blame. But I spent all my time in bars and restaurants, when I wasn't lying abed complaining about the hangovers which ensued, together with the growing paunch and general flabbiness of spirit which, she said, was causing me to become less endearing than I could be at my best and so on and so forth.

I could see we would have to have a talk about things, but I didn't feel up to it right at that time.

So let's go to the beach, she said. She only got the Sunday off work, but one day was better than none. We could take an early-morning bus down to Pattaya, spend the day on Jomtien Beach, and come back up in the evening.

In fact, the seaside sounded like a good idea to me. I figured we could have our talk another time. So I said "Good idea," and then I went around to Boon Doc's on Saturday night and played six-five-four till all hours with Big Toy, Leary, and Eddie Alder, and came home leglessly drunk. Just for the hell of it, I guess. I didn't really plan it that way.

Next morning, with iron disregard for my protests and promises of some other weekend to come, definitely, Sunantha hauled my sodden carcass out of bed and forced me, quite prematurely, to confront the damage several Kloster beers and an indeterminate quantity of Mekhong whiskey had done to the delicate machinery of body

and mind.

"Eat this!"

She had fed me khao tom, rice porridge, with extra garlic and two raw eggs; she'd massaged me from end to end, bathed me, balled me, bathed me again, and sprinkled me all over with talcum powder.

Then she'd slipped into a loose batiked shift that tied up behind her neck and clung to her curves rather appetizingly, never mind I had one foot in the grave, the cheery reds and oranges glowing against her fine skin. She tied her long black hair up in a pony tail with a piece of bright red net fabric. She looked excellent in anything she wore.

And now we were at Ekamai bus station, sitting on the Pattaya bus. At this early hour there was already a mob of Thais milling about, youngsters, for the most part, waiting to embark for various points upcountry. The Westerners would appear later, at a more civilized hour. Thais like to set off early, before the heat of the day rises. So far as I was concerned, however, there was no time before the heat of the day, that April, especially with a hangover. I wanted air-conditioning. I craved air-conditioning. And I needed a smoke. And some sleep. But I had quit smoking, and sleep was going to be out of the question, I figured.

"I brought the nail-clippers," Sunantha informed me.

What relevance did nail-clippers have to a dying man, I had to wonder; pretty well nothing had been farther from my mind at that moment than nail-clippers.

Suddenly I felt a sharp object enter my ear, a particularly jarring sensation, given my general state of being. The sharp object turned out to be Sunantha's fingernail.

"I'll clean your ears tonight," she said.

Great. Sure. Now everything's okay, now I've got that to look forward to. I found myself getting pissed off, and at the same time ashamed that I was, for some reason. Which pissed me off even more. I was conscious of Sunantha's steady regard, conscious of her awareness I was out of sorts, of her ongoing campaign to empathize completely, to merge her being with mine, to possess me to an extent that weighed down like a vast heavy blanket of guilt and dread.

I was smothering. When was this christly bus going to get moving, anyway?

"Do you want a drink? Do you want me to call the boy?"

She couldn't just leave me alone to come to terms with my misery. If only she could learn to leave me alone. She just didn't know when to leave some distance between us. It was probably a cultural thing, I thought; Thais simply don't recognize the same need for privacy, for some private space in which to be alone with oneself. Even when your self was bad company.

"I'm going to get a Coke," she said. "Do you want something? A Green Spot?"

"For Chrissakes, I'm okay; just leave me alone, okay?"

"A beer?"

Sure. Have a beer. Fail the test. That's what I should've done, I thought. Only I didn't want a beer. I really only wanted to be left alone to meditate on my sins.

The problem was this, I decided: she was warm and bright and funny and pretty, but she didn't have enough interests. She had one interest, primarily, and that was me-my whereabouts and general welfare at any given moment. My fingernails, my ears,

my mood, my drinking habits... If we were to stay together and have kids, just the thought of which caused a great weight to descend on me, the brunt of her interest would shift to the children, I supposed.

I felt Sunantha take my hand, and I experienced a flash of irritation. After a moment I gently disengaged myself. "It's too hot," I said, feeling like a bastard when her face tightened with hurt and she turned away.

The big orange buses stood shimmering in the exhaust fumes which rose from their idling motors. Rank upon rank of torture machines, chromed grills grinning, waited to be stuffed with happy funseekers fleeing the city. Pai tee-oh, the Thais called it- tooling around having fun, that is to say. Extravagantly decorated with bright enamel colors and chrome trim, these magical machines were in the business of gleaming and glinting in the morning sun, promising sweet memories of distant places and good times to come. That was how it was supposed to be, anyway-how it was supposed to grab you.

Already I could hear the pounding jungle sounds of the big conga drums. Drums and castanets and guitars. Traditionally, they started up before the kids got on the bus, the jam session continuing throughout the return trip. A locus of group identity and audible assurance everybody was having a good time. Very audible. Convention just about demanded it. The young men would keep the beat going in shifts, and once on the beach both girls and guys would periodically rally around the drummer to dance. The rhythm could in fact be hypnotic, intoxicating, especially if it was accompanied by regular infusions of Mekhong whiskey. In the early morning in the middle of a heat wave with a hangover, though, the effect was different. It was driving me crazy. I was teetering on the edge of sanity, while Sunantha was gabbling in excited Thai to some kids in the

seat behind us, and I was promising myself I would get off this nightmare express and take a taxi home when the bus pulled out and we were on our way. I thought about throwing myself from the moving vehicle, but the impulse passed and I sank back into despair.

I think I will betray Sunantha if I ask this girl to come sit with me in this place where only an hour ago Sunantha sat. But maybe if I ask her to come back up to the Sugar Hut and drink a cold drink with me it will be okay, because that is my place and not Sunantha's. Then I think of V.D. and I think I must use a condom. I don't like thinking about V.D. and I don't like using a condom. What would Sunantha do if I got VD? Jesus. And now there's AIDS; what would I do if I got AIDS and gave it to Sunantha? I would pretty well have to marry her, wouldn't I? Now I see the girl is getting impatient; she does not want to float around in this inner tube all day and why doesn't this stupid farang, this Western ninny, stop making eyes and writing in his little book? He should come down here and talk to me and take me to his hotel and fuck me and give me money. Maybe he's on holiday from his big job in the U.S.A. and will stay here for a week and we will come here every day and play in the water and he will drink beer on the beach and I won't have to go sit in the bar trying to make strangers come in and buy drinks. Then when he goes away he will give me a beautiful present maybe some gold chains and some more money and I will get Bon the cashier to write nice love-letters for me, not thirty-baht ones but the fifty-baht ones that are two pages long and tell him the times I think of him every day and ask him when is he coming back. And he will come back next year and ask me to marry him and I will go to live in the U.S.A. and I will have

two maids and two cars and I won't have to talk to strange men if I don't want to. Or maybe he's from Switzerland. Lek at the Caligula Club says Switzerland is very beautiful. Maybe he will buy me that nice dress Lek and I were looking at yesterday. It was only 300 baht.

The noise level on the bus was amazing. The driver had some Thai rock 'n' roll going full tilt on the stereo, while at the same time the drums and castanets were jamming away at the back. There was something in the Thai national character, I reflected, that led them to crave noise. Anything that was supposed to be sanuk, "fun", was defined by its vehicle of noise. I guessed we had to be having a ball, then.

I looked at Sunantha, and saw she was falling asleep. Noise? What noise? she seemed to be saying. She and I lived in different worlds, I thought, not for the first time. Our life together would be a constant grinding of cultural gears.

Behind us and across the aisle were a gaggle of teen-age girls. Very pretty girls, excited and happy. Unfortunately. Their lively chatter was a significant part of the general bedlam which imprisoned me. "Lively chatter" didn't quite do it-it sounded as though somebody had just tossed a grenade into an aviary, or maybe even bombed the whole goddamned zoo. Their ringleader, a doe-eyed cutie-pie with bangs and dimples, was twice as happy and twice as excited as her nearest competitor. I was trying to find a better simile than "like a distraught parrot" when I inadvertently slipped off to sleep. I would've told you it was impossible, but I definitely dozed off for a few moments.

He can't be a homosexual, can he? Why is he all alone? But he is looking at me and I can see he is interested in me. I think he has a nice face, though maybe he is a little old. And he has a pretty big stomach, but he looks strong and healthy. What is this "AIDS" everyone is talking about? You have to be a homosexual to have it, Lek says, and the men get all skinny and tired-looking, and this man looks healthy and rich. Maybe his wife is dead and he is lonely. Why doesn't he come down here to the water? Now I'm giving him a big smile. Is he shy? He's writing away in his book, maybe he is a teacher. Do teachers in the USA make a lot of money? He looks very intelligent and kind maybe I will go up and ask him if he will rub oil on me. But he looks so serious and polite, how can I just go up and talk to him? Why doesn't he come down here to swim? Looking at me and writing in his book.

Writing in this book full of pointless thoughts and very little punctuation, what Sunantha doesn't know won't hurt her and realistically speaking the chances of getting AIDS, especially if I use condoms, is minimal, about the same I'll bet as having a big shark come up and eat me here in this beach chair.

I had definitely been asleep, right up till when the distraught parrot banged on the back of my seat and shrieked "You! You!"

My eyes opened to find a cellophane packet of something that looked a lot like dried and pressed cowflaps being thrust at me.

"You eat! Good! Aroi!"

Sunantha said something to the Good Samaritan in Thai, and she subsided into her seat, the object of much admiration on the part of her companions-she had baited the foreigner and lived.

Awake again, gritty-eyed with misery and fatigue, I said to no one in particular, "My fucking balls are on fire." Which was true.

"Why you say 'fuk-ing' so much today? It doesn't sound very good." Sunantha sounded enough like my mother to piss me off some more. I thought about having a cigarette, and became conscious of a piteous kind of mewling which, it turned out, was coming from my lips.

"You sick?" asked Sunantha. "You want to stop bus?"

I couldn't get back to sleep. I closed my eyes and breathed in and out, deeply and regularly, counting odd numbers in and even numbers out. I got up over a thousand nine hundred and fifty before we rolled into Pattaya.

Just the fact of being off the bus and away from the drums and the maddened jungle birds and having no knee under my chin was making me feel much better. And there was the sea. Beautiful.

Pattaya Bay was calm, but further out I could see there were whitecaps. Jomtien Beach, south and around the point would be perfect; it would be a fine day for sailing.

Aside from bargirls, Sunantha was about the only Thai woman I knew who wasn't all but heliophobic. Sunlight darkens the skin, and dark skin is ugly, as any Thai will tell you. Pattaya Beach bargirls will sunbathe, of course; they'll play in the sun

because they don't care if polite Thais think they're ugly or not, and they know that Western men are attracted to a good tan, so it's good for business. Otherwise, however, it's a rare Thai lady who'll expose herself to the sun except maybe at gunpoint. Most of them would just as soon have leprosy as a suntan. Sunantha was different. She had told me again and again, up in Bangkok, how she missed the sun and the sea, and how she loved it when her skin turned dark, it made her feel so healthy and beautiful. Of course, I had to wonder how much of this was for real, and how much was part of her plan to reinforce the ties that bind.

On top of that, she was a good swimmer, she said. An unusual accomplishment for a Thai lady. If it was true, I had told myself. As it turned out, though, Sunantha could swim, and that morning I rented an eighteen-foot catamaran and we sailed out from Jomtien Beach towards the island of Koh Larn.

What I liked about catamarans was their easy speed, their grace and ease of handling. Not wishing to alarm Sunantha, however, I had neglected to tell her my experience as a sailor had been limited mostly to mono-hull dinghies. I had taken catamarans out a couple of times before, of course. Never in exactly these conditions, mind you, but what the hell: a sailboat is a sailboat, right?

Sunantha and I hung from our toestraps, leaning hard against the wind as we flew along, one hull of the cat in the water, the other, our perch, lifted in stylish defiance of the wind which sang in our sails. We flew, we stormed from one swell to the next, creatures as much of the air as of the water. With one hand I had the mainsheet hauled in tight, while with the other hand on the tiller I worked the rudders, feeling for the perfect

synergism of wind and sea, coaxing the last bit of speed from our craft. My hangover was a thing of the past, swept away in the stream of briny exhilaration.

"I am so freee!" Sunantha's joyous scream tore from her lips and whipped back at me. She was grinning like an idiot, holding the end of the jib-sheet across her straining thighs. She had never looked more beautiful.

We sheered diagonally down off one big swell, and I suddenly had to let the mainsail out a touch and thrust the tiller over to avoid plunging right into the base of the next wave, big as a house. The bow of the far pontoon dug in ever so slightly, an abrupt tug merely hinting at the awesome power hidden in those massive volumes of water as they swelled and rolled. I'll be darned, I thought; I'll bet you could turn somersault with this thing, no problem.

Hardly had this idea entered my mind when, skimming the water like a gull, we crested another big one, skated down the far side, and plowed right in with the starboard hull.

"This is lovely, lovely!" Sunantha was yelling as, with a casual disregard for her epiphanic delight and my seamanship both, we were grabbed and hurled arse over teakettle into the sea.

Sunantha hollered in outrage, and I had a pretty clear idea what was bothering her.

"It's only jellyfish, for Chrissakes!" I screamed, my legs and lower torso on fire. "Don't for Chrissakes panic!"

In fact, she wasn't for Chrissake panicking, as she pointed out to me in fairly calm tones. "Jerryfish?" she asked. "You mean maangapron? Are they dangerous?"

No, this kind wasn't really dangerous. No more dangerous, I would bet, than her cut-rate mentholated talcum powder, I told her as we clambered up on the lower hull.

We stood to hold on to the higher one.

"Are we okay?" she asked.

Fortunately, we hadn't actually turned turtle; we were on our side with the sails flat in the water. I uncleated the jib. "No problem," I said.

I was impressed and pleased at her sang-froid. Not your typical Thai lady, in my experience. I told her we would simply get the boat righted, and it would be back to the beach for some nice noodles. Sure, and cold coconuts, if she wanted. No problem. The stings would burn for a while, but they'd go away. No, there'd be no scars.

I hoped that was all there would be to it, anyway. If we had been in a dinghy, I would've had no misgivings whatever. This was a catamaran, however, and I had never capsized a cat before. There was no centerboard to stand on, for one thing, for leverage to roll the boat upright. But I could see I'd better do something soon, because if the boat did go right over, with the mast underneath us, we would for sure never get it righted again. We'd have to wait for who knows how long, on a day like this, waiting for help. As we rose and fell on the swell, I could see the beach a few miles distant, and the hills around Sattaheep half obscured in the haze behind it.

But I didn't want to pass on any of these reservations. If Sunantha started to panic, things would be a mess.

"Does this happen often?" she asked in a matter-of-fact but rather disappointed tone of voice. I got the feeling all exhilaration had pretty well passed.

Oh, sure, I told her; all the time. No problem. I unlashed a couple of spare sheets from the canvas deck and spliced them before going into the water to tie the line around the mast. There were no more jellyfish, I was pleased to report to Sunantha when she expressed concern for me.

Once back standing on the lower hull, rope around my waist, I threw myself back as far as I could, hoping my 190 pounds of weight would be sufficient. I repeated this maneuver again and again, standing on tiptoe at the very edge of the hull before throwing myself back in the attempt to gain maximum leverage. Before long I was bruised and bleeding from rope-burns, at the same time I was swearing profusely in two or more languages.

Sunantha told me I shouldn't use bad language. She stood on the hull, tugging futilely at a bit of the rigging. "We need help," she suggested finally, without specifying exactly where this help was to come from.

About then I suddenly felt some give. Definitely, the mast and sails were lifting. A wave caught us just right, and I heard Sunantha give an exuberant cheer as we fell backwards into the water; the starboard hull came down with a crash and the mast snapped upright, sails flapping wildly in the wind.

Then the wind caught us and capsized the boat again.

The mainsail slapped down to cover us both, and I felt Sunantha kick against me as she swam out from under. When I popped up beside her I heard her ask me why, and did I really know what I was doing? I could tell she was annoyed. Annoyed but under control; let down but willing to be fair. Fair enough, I supposed. I felt a little deflated myself.

I told her how we needed to get the bows pointing into the wind this time, or the same thing would happen when we got the boat righted again.

"Why didn't we do this before?" she asked, reasonably enough, but I didn't have a good answer.

So we both kicked and pushed and managed to swing the catamaran around into the wind. I told Sunantha to stay in the water kicking, while I got up on the hull again and had another go at sawing myself in half with the rope trick. In the course of time we did get it righted again, and this time it stayed up.

I took it easier going back in to the beach. Still, I could see Sunantha was getting back into the spirit of things. She gave me the idea she wouldn't have argued too much if I had suggested we do one more hour before going in again. I was a bit worn out, however. Anyway, we were paying by the hour, and we had already been out a good long time. I hadn't brought very much money with me, as I'd told her.

What a lady, though. When a windsurfer went whizzing past us, once, the guy hanging in his harness, one with the elements, Sunantha told me she wanted to learn to do that; could I teach her? I could see she meant it, too. Extraordinary.

I could see Sunantha was getting sunburned. I had told her to put on the sunblock cream. She also had raised welts running across her tummy and her thighs from where the jellyfish tentacles had lashed her. She told me it didn't hurt very much anymore, though. Mine were just red tracks, by now.

"It was like fire," she said. "I thought it was joss."

"Joss?" I asked. "Karma?"

"No, no-joss. You know: big fish, like in the movies. Joss."

"A shark, you mean? Jaws?"

"Yeah, yeah. Sharks." She put her arms around me, then, and squeezed hard.

"I thought sharks were eating us."

"Don't worry," I said. "There aren't any sharks around here."

"Really?"

Well, really there were, but why think about it? I had done some diving here and there in the Gulf of Thailand, and I hadn't seen all that many sharks. In fact, a few friends and I had spent some time trying unsuccessfully to get close enough to photograph them underwater. So if we couldn't find them even when we wanted to... Of course, there was the old wisdom, it occurred to me, about there never being a taxi around when you wanted one, but when you didn't... "No," I told her again. "You won't find any sharks around here. Don't worry."

Back on the beach, we enjoyed the happy relief of shipwreck survivors. We had neither been eaten by sharks nor been required to spend the night floating around the Gulf of Thailand waiting to be picked up, preferably not by pirates. The noodles were delicious; we had two bowls each.

Sunantha was bubbling. She was full of plans to come back to the beach. She was going to learn to windsurf. She was even going to go sailing again. She kept asking me how I liked her suntan, and I kept telling her she was burning, put some sunblock on.

One thing led to another, and before you knew it she was looking at me in that way-like she wanted to climb in through my eyes and take up residence. In fact, taking up residence turned out to be the very next thing on the agenda-an old issue, well-worn over the past several months.

"But why?" Sunantha asked. "Why don't we get a house together? Why should I spend money on my apartment? I stay with you all the time."

This was true, she did. Almost all the time, anyway. But I kept trying to find an opportunity to tell her that she couldn't go on staying with me all the time. Not all the time.

I didn't want to share a house with her. This situation, the way things stood, had just kind of crept up on me; by no means was it something I had planned. But as long as she had her own place, and kept at least some of her gear there, then we each had our own independence. That's what I wanted to think.

"We can save money if we get a house together. I can give you the money I spend for my apartment. I want to be with you all the time," she said.

I had been bitching about money. What I really meant, but didn't say, was that there wasn't enough for me to lead the life of a thirty-six-year-old arrested adolescent and to undertake fully the responsibilities of a household. I was still trying to find myself- I was only thirty-six years old, after all-and I wasn't ready to have my horizons narrowed unnecessarily. I had chosen to live in Thailand for a while, trying to make it as a free-lance writer, and I'd been doing pretty well by local standards. Still, most months I didn't earn the housing allowance of many Westerners working in Bangkok, the oilmen and engineers and suchlike.

"I do like you, Sunantha. I like you a lot. But we live in two different worlds, when it comes right down to it. We would never get along if we were married."

"I didn't say we should get married. I don't want to get married to you. I hate you."

I wonder how much I would have to give her. Probably 500 baht a day. And I'd have to give some more to the mamasan back at her bar, I don't know how much. Say 750 baht total for her and the bar. Ridiculous, really. You can buy fifty red roses-the ones Sunantha likes-for only twenty baht, back at that market by the river in Bangkok. For one measly dollar. How many would 750 baht buy, then? 3,000 roses? More. Christ. I wonder how old she is; nineteen or twenty would be okay but who can tell with these girls, she could be sixteen years old. Look, she's running her hand under her bikini top, easing the lime-green cloth away from her flesh; I can feel her erect nipple by telepathy, she's looking right at me. I wonder how much English she speaks. I should go down there and swim. I can say something to her maybe that's a nice bathing suit you've got there.

"But I can't stay here tonight; I must work tomorrow!"

"Right; but I don't have to be in Bangkok tomorrow," I told her. "Why shouldn't I stay another day or two? I haven't been windsurfing in months."

Listening to myself, it occurred to me I was almost whining. I put more authority into my voice: "I'm staying. Finished. Understand?"

"I can't go back alone."

"Why not?"

"I am your woman: I came with you, I should go back with you."

If this was syllogistic logic, I couldn't follow it. Or maybe-most likely-it was another case of East meets West. Whatever it was, I was getting annoyed. Why the hell

couldn't I stay at the beach if I wanted to? We weren't married, after all. If we were married, come to that, there'd probably be no problem-this was worse than being married.

But what I said was: "Listen, I'm not married. If I want to spend a couple of days at the beach, I'll spend a couple of days at the beach. Understand? Now, have you got enough money? Good."

It was getting on towards late afternoon and, as luck would have it, a detachment of bargirls chose that moment to troop down past us and bivouac on the sand in front of a klatch of ursine German men. The girls were very young and each was more beautiful than the one before and they were wearing little 'Baby Gogo Bar' half T-shirts and string bikini bottoms. Of course I looked at them as they went by. I didn't ogle or anything; I just looked at them. You couldn't help it, really. Anyway, you would have thought Sunantha would've learned trust in all our months together.

"You come back to Bangkok now," she said.

I said I wouldn't.

She said I would screw around.

I said I'd windsurf.

She said I'd drink too much.

I said it was none of her business if I did, but I wouldn't; I'd go to bed early that night and windsurf the next day.

And so it went, until finally we exchanged hot words. Her last sally was "So. Then. You won't come back with me?" This was delivered in tones of hurt accusation, with distinct undertones of ultimatum. I had managed to accomplish what neither "jerryfish" nor sharks nor shipwreck had done-Sunantha was in tears when she left. I felt

like hell; I felt a dull resentment, at the same time, that she had led me to act like such a prick. I almost went after her.

But now Sunantha was gone and all I was left with were the aches and pains left over from my nautical adventures and a nagging feeling of guilt. Guilt compounded and confused by irritation. Irritation that Sunantha should feel she had this kind of claim on me, and irritation that I should feel guilty simply for having established my basic rights as a person.

I should've ended the affair long ago, I reflected. It wasn't fair to Sunantha, and it wasn't fair to me. After all, there was no future in it. There was no way we were going to get married; I knew better than that. No matter how attractive, no matter how sweet the lady was, our backgrounds were too different. Our basic interests and objectives in life were worlds apart. And so on and so forth.

Down the beach, where the German bears were at play, I watched as one of the Baby Gogo girls stepped high into the water. A portly graybeard strutted along purposefully behind her, as if to say "I'm a busy man, but now I'm on vacation and enjoying myself so let's get on with it." As he closed in on the statuesque arse ahead of him, his head swung this way and that, probably looking for ways to make a buck.

That's not the way to have a good time, I thought.

She says her name is Oi, which means 'sugarcane'. She smells of coconut oil but I am too inhibited to lick and nuzzle her oily warm brown skin right here on the beach. I can't believe I'm doing this. But I'm only talking, we don't have to go to my hotel. Do we? Actually we do. I want to say we do have to go, this is bigger than the both

of us. I should be in vaudeville. She speaks very little English, and my Thai is not so good. What have we got to talk about anyway? She says she is seventeen years old. I could almost be her father. I am glad I am not. She's smiling at me at pointblank range now and I see her teeth are brilliantly white and she is slightly buck-toothed which makes her even more desirable, I don't know why. Would she like to sit and have a drink with me here on the beach? Yes, she would and she screams at the vendor up by the road. She has the kind of voice that makes fishwives look up in amazement. She screams once more leaving this sunny day in shards all around my beach chair, and I am relieved to see the vendor finally coming down to see what's happening. Oi asks for a cold coconut and a bowl of noodles and I think about having a beer but I have a coconut instead, the coconut water sweet and strengthening, the flesh young and soft so you can scoop it with a spoon. Oi wants to know how I got all scraped up, and I tell her, although I don't think she understands completely. Where is my fen, my girlfriend, she asks, and I tell her back in Bangkok. We don't have much to talk about, we only joke a little and Oi eats her noodles and I go for a little swim. The salt water stings in my scrapes and cuts. The rope-burns around my waist hurt like hell. Oi tells me to lie down on my towel and she will rub oil on me. She is so gentle and nice I can't believe these hands belong to that voice. After she rubs oil on me I rub oil on her , and this feels even better. I wonder how Sunantha's sunburn is; I told her she should be more careful, she had been a long time away from the beach.

The sun is almost down and Oi says she has to go to work now. When I say nothing, but only wait for Fate to make me an offer I can't refuse, she says again, more loudly, 'I go work now.' In case I haven't yet got the message she adds 'You pay bar, I no

go work now; I go with you.' So that's the way it has to be, I tell myself. I pay for the food and a route-bus we take into Pattaya where we go to the Hot Licks Gogo Bar and I give Oi 200 baht which she gives to the cashier who says you want a beer, but I say I don't, I don't know why. Now Oi belongs to me for twenty-four hours or so. She goes into a back room of the bar to change into her street togs, which turn out to be a shocking pink cotton halter-top worn together with leopard-skin tights with cutouts either side to show the skin of her haunches. An ornate silver belt holds the tights up. Oh, yeah, and green high-heeled pumps. Holy Jesus, I think. There's no rhinestone in her navel, though.

We walk along the beach in Pattaya to see the sky turn red and orange and violet and to see the lights on the boats and along the shore in North Pattaya. She buys a bag of fresh mussels with hot pepper sauce and a baked crab from vendors on the beach and we eat as we go. She won't let me feed myself; she pops morsels into my mouth saying `Aroi, delicious!' each time; we are still short of conversation. One of the mussels is gray, I see by the light from a lamp-standard, and I say I've heard gray mussels are bad. But she just says `Aroi' and I eat it anyway. It tastes exactly like all the others, with the pepper sauce on it. She gives me another mussel and tells me it's called hoi in Thai. She corrects my tone when I say hoi, and then takes my hand and rubs it over her crotch. `Hoi douay', she giggles. This is hoi, too.

There is the piquant aftertaste of the mussel sauce, the warm velvet night with the stars and the glow of the floodlights from the shrimp boats on the horizon. And this warm, sweet girl with the voice like a catfight hugged up against me as we stroll. But I am sad; I am sad thinking about Oi's sister who she tells me is fifteen and who works at

the Caligula Club. Her momma and poppa live in the Northeast and get money from Oi and her sister every month.

I am probably some kind of neurotic. We walk back into South Pattaya, and we go to a seafood restaurant where Oi tells me she wants more hoi, only this time it's not mussels she wants, but cockles and oysters instead, which are also called hoi. We have besides this a big steamed snapper with grated ginger, green papaya, spring onions, mushrooms, and things, and crab with mustard sauce. Oi asks me if I want beer, and I say I don't. The waitress asks if I want beer and I say we will have two glasses of lime juice. Oi has ice cream for dessert, rum-raisin, while I have a plate of fruit.

Now we are back in the hotel, and Oi takes off the ivory bracelet I bought her after dinner. She's turning it in her hands and rubbing it. I don't know why I bought it. Probably because we had nothing to talk about. And because I felt sad and didn't know how to cheer myself up. Oi is only a bargirl, and she'll still expect her money in the morning. What's wrong with me? I never buy anything made from dead elephants because this encourages poaching, and soon there will be no wild elephants. Sunantha always says elephants are like people, and we should never hurt them; she says this with great sincerity, but I'm not sure what she means.

This is her lucky bracelet, Oi tells me. 'Suay', she had said in the shop when I bought it. 'Beautiful-suay dee.' But she'd really wanted the gold chain necklace. 24 carat. That's like pure yellow gold-it's readily negotiable in time of need, which enhances its aesthetic value no end. Oi puts the bracelet down on the night-table and takes her clothes off. I am somewhat disconcerted; I haven't even kissed her yet, and she's walking to the bathroom in nothing but the briefest of panties and no inhibitions whatsoever. I sit

on the bed and think she is astonishingly lovely and sweet. But it is all a bit clinical; I haven't even kissed her yet and she's naked in my shower. She is lovely, though, and so young and-I don't care if she is a bargirl or not-unspoiled. Just a minute: I've forgotten to pick up some condoms. These days you've got to be out of your mind not to use condoms with one of these girls. It's hard to imagine this little package of vitality being sick, but there isn't necessarily any sign, and the consequences of being unlucky can be extreme. Now what? I wonder if they have some downstairs. Or maybe Oi has some in her bag. I don't like condoms, though.

To tell the truth, right now I'm thinking I would rather be going to sleep and getting up early to go windsurfing. After all the sun and exercise and the big feed of seafood I think I can sleep very well, indeed. I can't talk to this girl, and just at the moment I don't really want to do anything else with her, though she is very ornamental and pleasant to have about the place. Like a Siamese cat, all sculptured form and sinuous grace. She's sexier than a cat, though. Now she comes out of the bathroom, clean and glowing and fragrant and surprised to find me still dressed, coy rascal that I am. She helps me down to my underwear and escorts me to the shower, where she invades my shorts with much giggling and nicely simulated expressions of delight. She turns on the water and begins to lather some parts of me when suddenly she comes up with an exclamation of a different sort, suspicion and alarm being mostly what she means to convey. Quite rudely, I think, she yanks my reproductive organs out for closer inspection and asks 'What's this?' in a voice which reminds me what she is capable of, vocally. At first I am surprised she doesn't know what this is, given her line of work, and figuring her to be by no means a virgin. Then I take a closer look myself, and I see what she means.

There is a funny rash all over my groin. Like a million ants have been grazing in the area. `What ho?' I think. Then it hits me-Sunantha's talcum powder. Like a curse. `You sick?' Oi asks, not unreasonably, now that I've had a look. But I say no. No, this is merely the aftermath of a nice rub-down with cut-rate mentholated talcum powder exacerbated, possibly, by the stings of a giant jellyfish. `You sick,' she decides, no matter what I tell her.

It looks as though she's going to leave, and my feelings about this are mixed, with there being maybe more than a little bit of relief in the mixture somewhere. But she can't leave, it turns out, because she's already washed her clothes in the bathroom sink, and they won't be dry before morning. I tell her mai pen rai, never mind, she can stay with me, not to worry, I won't make her sick. She probably thinks I'm a weirdo, but she says okay anyway, and we climb into the sack, where I have to wear my shorts. We snuggle up spoon-fashion, and she's asleep in one minute or less, a nice uncomplicated girl who should be asleep back home with her sister in the Northeast, dreaming of village dances and young suitors with many buffaloes. All in all, I'm glad the way things worked out, I think. After a while, however, propinquity sets in and I get to thinking this girl is considerably more interesting than any cat, Siamese or otherwise. To tell the truth, I'm wondering if perhaps my rash hasn't gone away already and maybe she should wake up and we can renegotiate. Only I hate to wake her up, she's sleeping so soundly, and I don't have a condom. I am not uncomplicated, I guess, and whatever innocence I still possess it is not of the kind that lets me get to sleep easily this night.

`What's wrong? Pen yang ngai?'

I have been dreaming. I have fallen face down into a golden, dusty, sweet-smelling field of sun-dried hay, and all of a sudden I am covered with swarms of big stinging ants, and I am thrashing about wildly trying to get them off me. I wake up to a very dark room, and a frightened voice beside me in the bed is asking me what's wrong. I am disoriented for a moment, this voice doesn't sound like Sunantha's. Then it comes back to me-where I am and who she is.

But what's this? My scalp is itching like I've never felt anything itch before. I scratch, I have no choice but to scratch so hard I am tearing my hair out. I go into the bathroom and switch on the light to investigate.

At first I don't recognize this thing I see in the mirror. But then I figure out it's me. My face is swollen horribly, lips distended, a bright red rash running down each side of my nose. There is a bit of drool coming from the corner of my mouth.

'Hungh, hungh, hungh,' I say. I sound something like a big fat boar which has found cause for alarm. Come to that, I look more than somewhat porcine, lips distended till they're all but turned inside-out, piggy little eyes trying to goggle with horror. I really want to yell 'Holy shit!' but it seems the requisite facial muscles are pretty well paralyzed. That's why I'm drooling, and that's why I can't talk. What I can do is waggle my eyebrows and roll my piggy eyes about frantically. Oi is standing in the doorway now, and I turn to her to say 'Holy shit, get a doctor!' but what I actually say is 'Huh, huh, hng (slurp), uhng.'

At first Oi is surprised to see a huge porker in the bathroom, but she quickly adjusts, and I am subjected to gales of unpleasantly shrill laughter. It's three o'clock in the morning, it turns out, and I pace back and forth, occasionally going into the bathroom to

grunt and goggle at myself in the mirror. I am wondering if I should try to find a doctor somewhere. But are there any doctors in Pattaya at 3:00 in the morning, and what can I tell him if I find one? I would probably get the same reaction I got from Oi. Oi has gone back to sleep, the pacing of large pigs in the boudoir having proved quite restful, it seems. What could it be, I wonder. Something I ate? All that shellfish? I'm not sick, though-no headache, stomach's okay. I feel fine, except my scalp still itches and I've metamorphosed into a pig. After a while, I am convinced the swelling is going down a little, and I manage to articulate "God help me" so that it's fairly intelligible. My scalp feels better and I lie down beside Oi and finally I get some sleep.

I gave Oi 300 baht in the morning. She seemed very pleased with that; I think she was also pleased to see the end of this poxy farang who went around turning into a monster in the middle of the night. She didn't laugh at me any more, though, and she suggested I see a doctor.

The swelling had gone down, leaving a residual puffiness around the eyes and cheeks, the skin blotchy, the pores gaping at me as I examined myself anxiously in the mirror before checking out of the hotel. My face still felt stiff and unnatural, and my speech was badly slurred. I was self-conscious about encountering people in the hard light of day, but the girls at the desk seemed to find nothing remarkable in my appearance. They had probably seen much worse in their time.

I didn't go to a doctor, and I didn't go windsurfing. I got on the first bus out of town-an air-conditioned bus, this time. I told myself I would see a doctor in Bangkok, if things weren't back to normal by the next day. It was still a mystery to me what had

happened. I mean, I never got ill; I never had skin problems; I never had V.D.; I hardly ever even caught a cold. And now, in the course of a single day, I had come up with something that did a good job of passing itself off as terminal crotch rot, and then I'd fallen victim to the dreaded Swollen Pig-Head Syndrome. And this is not even to mention jellyfish stings, sunburn, ropeburn, and all the other souvenirs of violent encounters with my environment I'd collected. I was exhausted, as well, what with the lack of sleep and all.

I felt hungover, even though I hadn't had a drop to drink. I discerned annoying intimations of guilt and anxiety in myself, never mind my behavior had been more or less beyond reproach. If this whole business was some kind of Judgment, then I felt hard done by. Or maybe Sunantha had put a curse on me.

But I was blameless, really, if we were to overlook one or two little sins of only half-assed commission. Only half-heartedly contemplated to start with, and wholly unsuccessful in the outcome. Tell it to the judge, right? Sunantha would probably have argued there was also a sin of omission to be taken into the account-I had failed to behave in the way an honorable friend and lover would have done. "Huh!" she'd said. "Khon mai dee. You're a no-good man."

But what was the big deal? So I had decided go stay at the beach one more day. I'd heard of worse things. Sunantha was old enough to spend a few hours on the bus by herself.

Now that I thought about it, I wished she could've stayed at the beach. I could've taught her some windsurfing.

Anyway, I hadn't gotten pissed, and I hadn't done any tomcatting. None to speak of. I hadn't done any windsurfing either, come to that. If anyone should be upset, it was me. Well, yeah. Still, East is East and West is West and Sunantha, I knew, would be in a real funk. Nothing I couldn't fix, but it might take some doing, this time. I hadn't handled things very well, I had to admit.

I wiped a bit of drool away from the corner of my mouth. My lower face was still partially paralyzed. It must've been the mussels, I thought, or the cockles. Probably the mussels. They told you to be careful of the shellfish around here, especially if it wasn't cooked. Well, now I knew.

I wondered if Sunantha would come home right after work. I meant to my place. But she probably wouldn't be expecting to see me yet.

I wanted to see her. She'd been a nurse, after all, and perhaps she'd know what was ailing me. Even if she didn't, she'd know how to make me feel better. I had a good idea-I would stop and buy her a couple of shiny red apples from that lady by the bus-stop. She's always saying how much she loves apples, never mind they're exhorbitantly expensive in Thailand. Sixteen baht apiece.

The bus wasn't very full; not that many people travel from Pattaya to Bangkok early on a Monday morning in the hot season. I had two whole seats to myself and the air-conditioning was going like a blizzard. I felt better; as I drifted off I thought I would feel a lot better again after I had had a little sleep. And after I'd seen Sunantha.

'You're drunk. Don't you talk to me. First you leave me alone, and then you come home and you're drunk.'

Even though I know the swelling has almost disappeared, my face still feels bloated and I feel at a disadvantage. I can't talk very well; I'm still drooling and slurping a bit, and the words, after I've painstakingly articulated them as best I can, are nevertheless badly slurred. As though I'm punch-drunk or-Sunantha's best guess-just plain drunk.

I was at first pleasantly surprised to have Sunantha appear at my place, where she found me applying cold cream to my groin. She said she hadn't gone to work; she'd had some things to do. These things turned out to be coming to my apartment and packing up all her things. Now she's waiting for a friend who has a big car to come over and pick her up.

I can't believe this. She is leaving. I've spent the last couple of months wondering how I can break it off with her, and now, just like that, she's leaving. I'm free.

But this isn't the way I had thought it was going to be. And right now isn't the best time. So I'm trying to reason with her, trying to explain things. Only I can't talk very well, and my self-image as a bloated pig isn't lending my manner the authority it needs. It doesn't even help when I put my shorts on and wipe the cold cream off my hands.

`Dink, dink, dink,' she is saying. `All the time dink. Not care about me.'

`Drink,' I want to say. `Rrr.' And then I want to explain, again, how it isn't drink. But in my condition what I say sounds like `Nuhh dink uhhng. Shi!'

Later, after Sunantha left, I went around to Boon Doc's, where I met Eddie Alder and a few of the guys. Been to the beach? they asked me. Oh, yeah; it's nice to get

out of the city now and then. Christ, it's hot this year, isn't it? Hey, you don't look so good. Better have a beer.