

Irregular
A Short Novel

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ABSTRACT

Irregular A Short Novel

This creative writing thesis consists of a short novel, whose plot revolves around an attempt by three friends to establish a language school in northern Thailand. The story is told from the point of view of one of these characters, who is suffering from an unlabelled mental illness. Intertwined with the main thread of the narrative are two other major plot strands: the evolution of the relationship between the characters, and the narrator's attempt to self-diagnose his illness.

Along the way, the novel indirectly touches on a number of themes, including issues of male homosociality (the dynamics of male bonding, the dialectic between competitiveness and compassion, etc.). It also draws attention to how new patterns of intercultural relationships are being made possible by the convergence of North American multiculturalism with the booming world market for English language education

These concerns remain relatively in the background, however. Thematically speaking, the story is first and foremost the recounting of an experience of mental illness and a depiction of how events and relationships are refracted through that experience.

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ONE

I met Nathan for the first time in a small restaurant across from the moat on Moon Muang Street. I generally don't talk much to other farangs. The tourists always ask the same questions and the expats, after you talk to them once, want to sit down and have a conversation with you every time. So when Nathan walked into the restaurant, I had no intention of speaking to him. I noticed him of course. He wore a freshly ironed shirt and pants, rare for a farang in Thailand, and wiped his table clean with a pocket handkerchief before ordering.

What made me change my mind about talking to him was the order itself. In a low, slightly nasal voice he requested a vegetable fried rice and asked that the chef be sure to add lots of *khanaa*. I knew what *khanaa* was, had seen its broccoli-like shape in Thai soups and dishes. Some of the more knowledgeable vegetarians referred to it as "Chinese cabbage" or "Chinese kale." What I didn't know was whether it had some special health benefit, and if so, whether it could help *me*.

When I saw him motioning for the bill I turned all the way around in my seat and addressed him.

"Excuse me, are you a vegetarian?"

He looked up from his plate and his eyes, stern and squinty behind wire rim glasses, took me in for a few moments. The slight frown on his face told me he was not someone who much liked talking to other farangs either.

"No." He paused. "Are you?"

"Yes," I replied. Seeing his face sour further I hurried on, "But it's not for ideological reasons."

His eyes wandered back to the kitchen in search of the waitress. Not seeing her coming, he seemed to make up his mind to resume talking to me. "Too bad. I had a whole rant ready to go." He wiped his lips and the tip of his tongue with a napkin and turned to face me. "Vegetarianism doesn't mean cows and pigs are released into the wild to live free. It just means we kill them off and replace their farms with soybean fields."

"Ah." I could tell the type, I thought. One of these argumentative farangs who sit around all day and try to trap passing tourists into a "discussion." Still, I hadn't had a full-fledged conversation in weeks so I took the bait. "Alright," I said. "But let me play devil's advocate for a minute.

The cows and pigs on those farms are leading pretty miserable lives, wouldn't you say? So wouldn't closing the farms be an act of mercy?"

He removed his glasses and began polishing them with his handkerchief. "I assure you they don't want your mercy. Animals are genetically programmed to do two things: survive and procreate." He replaced his glasses and gave me a withering stare. "How many barn-animal suicide attempts have you read about?"

The tone of disappointed teacher in his voice annoyed me to no end. "I'm not saying the cows and pigs already alive should be killed off," I said, my hands beginning to wave about as they do when I get agitated. "I'm saying they would be prevented from having offspring, so that the farms could close once their generation dried up."

"Alright, so you've spared their generation an untimely death," he replied, shrugging but turning his body infinitesimally closer. "But then what? What about all their children and grandchildren that could have been?" He leaned forward, clearly animated now. "You're still talking about a net loss of life. Millions of animals less on the planet, and why? Because of your soybean fields."

"Last time I checked, cows and pigs weren't an endangered species," I shot back, feeling myself starting to gain the upper hand.

Right then, the waitress appeared with the bill. There was a pause while he counted out twenty baht and placed it on the table. "Khawp khun khrap," he nodded, thanking her. His tones sounded better than the usual phrasebook-mangled tourist-talk.

"You speak Thai?" I asked, a little surprised.

"Somewhat. I've been here about six months now. You?"

"Mine's not bad. I've been here two years."

For the first time that afternoon, he smiled. It was a beautiful smile, deep dimples appearing on both cheeks.

"I'm sure my basic premise is right," he said, "but you're the first vegetarian to make it this hard for me. Usually things degenerate into name-calling by this point."

I smiled back. "I'm Ali," I said, reaching out my hand.

"Nathan," he said, shaking it. "I'm sure I can come up with a rebuttal to your last argument, but right now I have to run." He got up from the table. "Thursday night is quiz night at the Irish Pub. Maybe I'll see you there." He winked and walked out of the restaurant. It wasn't until I finished my own dinner that I remembered about the *khanaa*.

Several weeks went by before I saw Nathan again. The day after our meeting at the restaurant, I got into a fight with my landlord and within hours I was out on the streets of Chiangmai once again with my belongings distributed among half a dozen Seven-Eleven bags.

At a nearby Family Mart I bought two colourful cotton carry-all bags, the kind the street vendors down at Warorot market cram their wares into. I emptied my stuff into the bags and set off down the street.

For most of the last two years, I have lived inside Chiangmai's Old City. The Old City is a warren of small paved alleys, ancient temples and guesthouses. Its shape, when viewed from above, is square, and its two largest streets bisect each other in the middle and head off toward the four main gates: north, south, east, and west. The outer rim is surrounded by a moat, sun-thickened and green, and the aging remnants of a red fortress wall.

I began making my way toward the east gate, where the Old City's guesthouses are most concentrated. It was mid afternoon and vendors lined the roads, the air thick with the smells of frying porkballs, hot coconut milk, sticky rice. School lets out about this time and kids were collecting like tadpoles in the circles of shade beneath the vendors' parasols. Saleswomen in company blazers and skirts looked on from behind glass storefront walls

with some envy. A few years ago the Thai currency crashed and business has been slow all around; yet while salaries stagnate, the workday has gotten longer and longer, and twelve hour shifts are not unheard of.

I felt my arms beginning to ache in a dangerous way under the weight of the two bags. I struggled into a side-alley and collapsed against the wall of a quietly glinting temple. I felt my shirt and underpants clinging to me like a second skin, and swore at myself for being a cheapskate and not flagging down a tuk-tuk. When I caught up with my breath again I glanced down the narrow street and noticed for the first time how nice it looked. Opposite the temple was a small park with benches and a fountain. Further on I could see a few small restaurants of the local kind, with a couple of boiling vats out front and a shadowy interior looking like the inside of someone's garage. There were no Seven-Elevens on the street, no massage schools or go-go bars. At the far end was a wooden house in the traditional Northern Thai style, with bouganvillea trailing from the porch and frangipani trees and an honest-to-God lawn.

Gathering my strength, I tottered down the road toward this house. A quartet of dirty limping dogs dragged themselves out of the shade and sat down again in the middle of the road to watch me go by.

As I drew closer, a middle-aged woman appeared at the door of the house and stared at me in curiosity and some amusement. A ten-year-old boy poked his head out from behind her and asked, "Khun mae, thammai farang chop dern mak mak loey?" ("Mom, why do foreigners like walking so much?")

I grinned at the boy and called out, "Phro waa farang khon nee khe niao lae khe ngoh duay." ("Because this foreigner is a cheapskate and an idiot too.")

The boy cackled and the woman's smile broadened. "<Where are you going?>" she asked in Thai.

"<I'm looking for a guesthouse,>" I answered, stopping and setting down my bags. "<Are there any close by?>"

"<Yes, but they're full. High season started last month.>"

I groaned. She was right, I had forgotten. High season in Thailand starts in late October and runs through the end of February. These are the coolest months of the year and there are weeks, especially around Christmas, when it seems there are more farangs than Thais on the streets. I sat down on one of the bags and wiped my brow. "<Do you know of any that might still have a vacancy?>" I called out.

The woman looked me over for a few moments. "<Are you a tourist?>" she asked.

"<An English teacher,>" I said, which was true, although I hadn't taught in months.

She made a beckoning motion. "<Come inside and we'll talk.>"

The inside of the house was even more beautiful than the outside. The walls and stairs were made from chocolate-coloured teak, as were the doors and window shutters, which also bore carvings of lithe graceful forms -- angels and demons from Thai mythology. The woman indicated for me to leave my bags at the door and led me to the upper floor. A balcony extended over a little garden at the rear of the house. We sat down together at a small table overhung by a jackfruit tree and overlooking a pond where silvery fish made little jerk-and-glide movements beneath the surface.

The woman introduced herself as Mrs. Sirapee and proceeded to gently tap me for information about my work experience, my background, and how long I intended to stay in Thailand.

"<The reason I'm asking>," she said finally, "<is that, though my husband and I don't need the extra money, we could take you in if you'd be willing to tutor our son.>"

My face lit up. "I would love to," I said. She smiled and, reaching across the table, we shook hands, farang-style.

The deal required that I teach the Sirapees' son, Som, forty minutes of English a day. In return, I was given a guest room on the top floor with a pair of magnificent double doors that opened directly onto the garden. The pictures on the walls were reprints of a centuries-old Chiangmai tapestry. Thai and Burmese soldiers clashed at the red gates of the Old City wall, arrows and spears and spirits flying overhead. It reminded me of my father's pictures in our home in Montreal, so much a part of the house they were almost invisible to me: yellowing drawings of medieval Arabs charging on horses, swords drawn above a curving stream of Arabic as small and delicate as a trail of baby eyelashes.

I sat down on my new bed and thought about that house. I had seen the inside of it only once in the past five years, a week after 9/11. My father called us in to witness for ourselves the mint green words spray-painted across the hood of his Honda Civic ("SAND-NIGGERS GO HOME"). It was incredible to think, now, but for a moment we were all united in a common feeling of disbelief and defiance. I even forgot how much I resented them all for not taking my condition seriously. Then Baba said something to set Tarik off, and it ended, as anyone could have predicted,

with shouting and a lot of slamming doors and me in the bathroom with my hands over my ears.

CHAPTER TWO

Initially I had some worries about teaching Som. I had stopped working as an English teacher some three months earlier when my symptoms had become unbearable. It was yet to be seen whether I could handle even these forty minutes a day.

I suppose the thing to do right now would be to describe my symptoms, but I hardly know where to begin. Perhaps it is better not to think of them as symptoms but as sudden fragile moments that require practice and self-discipline to survive.

For example I will be writing an e-mail when, fingers poised, a feeling will flash into my head not to tap that key. I must get carefully up from the chair, gently releasing the mouse so as not to send the arrow flying suddenly across the screen, and back away.

Or I will be walking down the road and spot a car approaching. I must avert my eyes at the right moment. Not too soon, or I will spend several

unbearable seconds in the dark, listening to its growing roar. Not too late, or with a sudden burst of speed it will be upon me.

Or someone will ask me to choose between a morning and an afternoon appointment, or between teaching a Beginner and an Intermediate class. I must pick one quickly, at random. I must not spend any time attempting to weigh the options: that interlude is deadly.

What happens if I disobey any of these rules? Something terrible. Something I can't risk describing now for fear it will overcome me as I write. But have patience, I will describe it somehow or other, later on, in a calmer moment.

I began Som's lessons the following day. A set of lawn chairs and table had been placed in the garden beside the pond, and Som spread his homework out before me. "Hey, I'm not doing your homework," I protested. "That wasn't the deal."

"Ajaan," he said coyly, using the respected name for "teacher", "<I'm just having a little trouble with my English assignment. Can't you take a look at it?>"

Som wore his wiry black hair back with a hairband, the latest style, and newly installed braces glinted from time to time out of his round face.

He was sometimes bashful, sometimes given to fits of excitement. He reminded me of me, when I was that age: tearing around the playground one minute, shy and tongue-tied the next (usually when the girls came round). The difference, I thought, was that he was going to outgrow his anxieties one day and become a functioning human being.

I growled. "First of all, you're *only* speaking English during these forty minutes," I said, setting my watch as I spoke. "Second, I'll help you with your homework only *after* you finish your lesson with me." I gave him what I hoped was a sternly benevolent look. "So if you want me to have time to help you with your assignment, you'd better pay attention."

Som nodded solemnly and we proceeded. I made him concoct a story and relate it to me in the past tense, listening carefully as he sweated through his irregular verbs and raising my eyebrows sharply when he made a mistake, *keeping* them raised until he got it right. After twenty-five minutes I let him stop and he fell back limply in his chair. I slid his English homework toward me.

The assignment consisted of a single sheet of paper with pictures on it. In the first picture a boy stood beside an empty dish, licking his lips and patting his tummy. The example sentence beside it read: "The boy has eaten." Other pictures showed a car beside a lamppost with its hood

crumpled in, and a man lying at the bottom of a flight of stairs with stars circling his head. Besides each picture was a messily scribbled sentence: "The car has crashed.", "The man has fallen."

"Hey," I said, "This homework's already done."

"I have to re-do it," Som groaned from somewhere beneath his elbow. "The teacher said I made mistakes." He lifted up his head and pointed to some red markings on the paper. "See?"

Near the bottom of the page was a picture of a woman with an empty glass in her hand. The sentence "The woman has drunk the water" had a red line through it. The sentence was correct.

"Who's your teacher?" I asked Som. It had been three months since I'd been in a classroom but already I could feel the mental cluck-clucking that shoddy work always brought on in me.

"Miss Orapon. Do you know the teachers at Saphangaeo School?"

"No," I said. "But you're going to introduce me tomorrow." Som blanched. "Don't worry," I laughed. "You didn't do anything wrong." I pointed to the red marks on the assignment and winked. "She did."

The next afternoon I set off to pick Som up from school. Saphangaeo is a private school located dead at the center of the Old City. A formidable-

looking iron gate surrounded the grounds, where a large contingent of the school band stood playing their trumpets and trombones at top volume, seemingly in contest with the afternoon traffic.

At three-thirty the front doors opened and a flood of white shirts and blue shorts and skirts emptied onto the field. I felt the noise level reaching a dangerous high and flattened my palms against my ears to ward off disaster. I pushed through the doorway into a brightly lit hallway and within seconds stumbled by sheer luck into the men's bathroom. I locked myself into one of the stalls and took deep breaths. Gradually I felt the buzzing in my head begin to subside. I kept my hands pressed tight against my ears until the torrent of feet in the hallway had died out, then went back outside to look for Som.

"Where were you?" Som asked, irritated, when I finally found him. "I was just about to go home by myself."

"I got lost," I said. "Now, where's Miss Orapon's office?"

Som pointed back toward the hallway.

"Show me," I said.

We walked together down the hall and stopped at a doorway across from the school secretary's office. "I can't go in there," Som said. "That's the teachers' room."

I smiled at him. "Wait here, I won't be long." I opened the door and walked in.

The room contained two couches and a refrigerator. Four teachers, all female, sat on the couches eating sliced mango that almost certainly came from the fruit vendor just outside the school gate. The teachers looked startled to find a foreigner suddenly in their midst and three of them cast expectant looks over at the fourth, a medium-sized woman with a long ponytail and a beautiful but severe-looking face. This last one stood up and addressed me in near perfect English, "Can I help you?"

"<Are you Miss Orapon?>" I asked in Thai, conscious that I was showing off. The others giggled but the English-speaking teacher didn't bat an eyelash.

"Yes," she said tersely. "What do you want?"

"I'm Som Sirapee's private tutor," I said. "I was wondering if I could have a word with you."

Evidently the other teachers understood enough English to catch on, because they immediately rose and made for the door, smiling at me and winking at Miss Orapon.

The moment the door closed to, she scowled at me and crossed her arms. "<Why didn't you just phone me or have Som leave a message?>" she

demanded in Thai. "<Now the other teachers will talk, and I have enough problems as it is.>"

"<I'm sorry,>" I said, not having expected that I would be the one reprimanded and feeling somewhat thrown off. I looked down at Som's English assignment in my hand and started to feel a little silly, but I pressed on. "Look," I said in English, "You've made a mistake on Som's assignment."

I brought the paper forward and she snatched it. "Where?" she said haughtily, giving the assignment a brief scan. "I don't see any mistake."

"Here," I pointed at the last picture on the sheet.

"'I have drunk the water,' she read out. "That's wrong. The answer is, 'I have drank the water.'"

"No, it's definitely 'drunk'," I said.

"I have a degree in English from Payap University," she hissed at me. "It's 'drank'."

"And I've spoken English all my life," I retorted. "It's 'drunk'." I could feel myself getting frustrated by the woman's stubbornness and somewhere in the back of my head the buzzing started again.

"Look, I have a degree," she said, drawing an imaginary piece of paper in the air to prove her point, "and you don't. <You're not even a

farang,>" she said, switching back to Thai, "<you're khae.>" Khae is the Thai word for Muslim or Arab -- someone, at any rate, with middle eastern features, as opposed to a farang, who is someone caucasian.

At that point my frustration broke into open anger and I opened my mouth to shout something back. But the earlier danger signals had gone unheeded, and already now I could feel the chill of electricity in my neck, the sudden pulse at the temple. "No," I cried to myself, "no no no," but it was too late to turn it back. I could feel all the muscles in my face and scalp going slack, and the numbness washing over me, killing the nascent anger -- killing all the feelings inside me.

Miss Orapon seemed to notice the change. She took a step back as if she was suddenly worried I would strike her, but I felt no urge to do anything of the sort. I felt tired and confused, and without explanation I turned around and walked out the door.

Som was waiting in the hallway. "Did you speak to her?" he asked.

I nodded. "Let's go home," I said.

So now you know what happens when I don't obey the rules. But perhaps you don't grasp all the implications yet. Those feelings of numbness and confusion that were present with me when I walked off the Saphangaeo

School's grounds into the dizzying world of traffic -- those feelings did not leave me after a few hours. They stayed, as they always do, for weeks. Weeks without the ability to think straight for more than a few seconds, without the ability to feel any emotion through the mental fog other than the steady low hum of self-pity.

This is the thing I have centered my life around, devoted all my energies to avoiding, and that afternoon, after three months of freedom, it had once again caught me.

Usually when an attack strikes I curl up into a ball and hide out the days and weeks until it passes. The worst thing to have to deal with during this period is people. Conversation is painful -- I am reduced to mumbling short sentences, and any question whose answer demands a leap of imagination, wit or abstract thought is out of reach. It is also an awful irony that the very thing which is oppressing me, a thing difficult to articulate even at the best of times, is utterly beyond my power to explain when I am in its hold.

So the next two weeks were awful beyond imagining. I had a duty to fulfill, if I wanted to keep my room and board. At 4:30 every afternoon I knew Som would be sitting at the pond waiting for me, and I spent my

mornings in a state of foggy hopelessness, dreading the moment when I would face him, a ten-year-old child.

When the time came, I tried my best. Som began reciting what he had done that day, and I gathered together all my energy and tried to focus on catching each past tense verb as it went by. But my energy wouldn't stay gathered. It slipped through on the left, on the right. No matter how hard I tried to screen out everything else and stay concentrated on those past tense verbs, I became confused. I would lose track of what he had said and try to hunt back in my mind for it, then I would make myself stop hunting and just concentrate on the verbs that were coming from his mouth now, but then I would get stuck on a verb I wasn't sure of myself and lose track of the present and when I finally awoke back to it find that I had lost the verb I was thinking about.

At the end of his recitation Som looked at me with a frown on his face. "You didn't correct me!" he said. "I even made the last verb wrong on purpose and you didn't correct me!"

I didn't even have the imagination to think of an excuse. I just stared back at him dully and said, "Do you want to show me your homework now?"

Toward the end, Som must have said something to his mother, because she began attending our tutorial sessions. "Shouldn't you be correcting him more?" she said, looking concerned. She liked me and was embarrassed to have to confront me like this. The situation was *naa taek* -- face-losing -- for everyone.

At the end of two weeks from the day at Saphangaeo School, I gave up. I didn't know how I would find a new room in my present state, but I had to get out of the situation I was in. I knew I would not have the ability to explain to Mrs. Sirapee, so I waited for the moment when she, her husband, and Som were out of the house, and for the second time in as many weeks I gathered my belongings together and walked out onto the streets of Chiangmai.

This time, at least, I flagged down a tuk-tuk and had the driver help me load my bags onto the three-wheeled vehicle. "Where go?" he asked me, and I told him the east gate, replying in Thai to pre-empt him from asking double the price.

As I expected, there were no guesthouses with vacancies around the east gate. The thought of considering other possibilities and turning them

into plans of action was exhausting, so I dragged my bags over to the moat and sat down on a bench overlooking its muddy bank. Fish rose and darted from the surface, kissing it briefly and sending ripples skimming over the dark green water. Beyond the moat a neverending stream of traffic (there are few traffic lights in Chiangmai) lulled me almost to sleep. I kept myself awake by trying to amuse myself focusing and unfocusing my eyes, transforming distinct motorcycles and pickup trucks into a blurry colourful current. There are far more motorcycles than cars in Chiangmai, far more motorcycles than anything: trucks, bicycles, pedestrians. Once upon a time this was a bicycle city, and what a peaceful beautiful city it must have been. Now the only people who ride bicycles are farangs. Most Chiangmaiites wouldn't be caught dead on one -- it's a sign of low class, of the failure to join the upwardly mobile.

Sometime near evening I realized I would have to make a decision. I could not sit on this bench all night. I lifted up my bags and began to walk, not sure where I was going. My feet carried me northward, parallel to the moat, and then veered westward back into the Old City. Evening was falling fast now. The fronds of trees lining the road were lit with a golden glow, and a distant temple cracked the sky with its fiery spire.

After a couple of blocks I was woken out of my dreamy state by the recognition of a name on a large green sign. The sign read "The Irish Pub" and I knew immediately I had heard those words mentioned recently. I decided to rest inside while I tried to work back to where I had heard them.

I almost changed my mind when I stepped over the threshold. The pub was so crowded I could barely squeeze through the door. Everyone's attention was turned toward the center of the room, where a short thin farang with small round glasses and a white shock of hair held a sheet of paper and was shouting something at the crowd. He had a heavy Irish brogue and in my current state I could not piece together what he was saying, so I shouldered my way over to a far corner of the room and set down my bags.

"The capital of Oman," I overheard someone nearby saying. "For God's sakes, does anyone know the capital of Oman?"

Even in my dazed and dehydrated state I knew the answer to that. I tapped the man on the shoulder. "Muscat," I said.

The man turned around, as did four of his buddies.

"Muscat," I repeated.

"He's not on our team though," one of the other men said.

"Which team are you on?" the first man asked.

"Nobody's. I just got here."

"What's your name?" the second man said.

"Ali."

"OY!!" The first man shouted, waving his hand. "OY! We'd like to make an addition to our team."

The short man in the middle of the room tried to peer over the heads in our direction. "Group Five, is it? What's his name then?"

"Ah-lee," the first man shouted, rhyming the first syllable of my name with the sound a sheep makes (it's meant to rhyme with the sound you make when the dentist asks you to open wide).

"Ali," the short man confirmed, pronouncing it correctly, and wrote my name on a large board along with the other participants listed under Group Five.

My new teammates turned back to me. One of them had a piece of paper and a pencil. "Muskrat," he said. "How do you spell that?"

Group Five lost the quiz by a wide margin. The winners were Group Two, who got every question right except the meaning of the chemical symbol En (which they claimed was Energizium).

After the quiz the pub began to clear out a little. I meandered over to the bar and ordered a Coke, then let my eyes wander about while I waited for the caffeine to do its thing. The pub was decorated with photos of famous Irishmen and expat regulars. Someone had affixed a dartboard to a tree just outside, and customers stood in the doorway and wiggled their tongues as they aimed their shot. I recognized many of the faces strolling about from the photos on the wall, and somehow this depressed me.

A hand gripped my shoulder, and thinking it was one of my ex-teammates, I took my time turning around.

"Ali," a voice said, pronouncing the first syllable correctly.

I swiveled and found myself looking into a familiar face.

"Nathan," the face said, beaming a beautiful smile.

"Nathan," I said, putting out my hand and breaking into a smile myself as the name and the face and sign all came together.

"I thought it was you, when he wrote your name on the board," Nathan said, seating himself on the stool beside me. "Too bad you couldn't save your team, but I know those guys. You were doomed from the start."

It felt so good to see Nathan, though I had met him only once, that for a moment I was afraid to say anything, for fear I would start crying and scare him away.

"What have you been up to?" I said finally. "Your vegetarian thing, did you, ah, did you..."

Nathan half-scowled. "I haven't come up with a rebuttal to your last argument yet, though I've been meaning to. Things have been a little crazy the last few weeks."

"Are you working?"

"Yeah, I teach English over at the international school, but I'm getting kind of sick of it, to be honest. Too many two-faced farangs, always fucking with you."

I let the cryptic remark go by and said, "I've been teaching on and off myself. But I'm... off right now."

"Yeah," Nathan leaned sideways and motioned sharply for a beer, "teaching is just a means to an end for me, you know? What I'm really interested in is starting a business here." A waitress passed him a bottle of Singha and he poured it into a glass.

"What kind of business?"

"Clothes, jewelry, anything import-export. I'm keeping my mind open. I've heard some amazing stories," he took a swig and wiped his lips with a napkin. "You ever seen any of the teak furniture they make around here?" I

wincing at the association but Nathan went on. "If you can find a way to ship it to Europe or the U.S. you can sell it over there for a fortune."

"Hmm. But the cost of shipping something like that..." I said, trying to work my way through to the end of the thought.

"Yeah, I know. That's why it would have to be a big operation. You'd have to ship hundreds of pieces at a time, to get the bulk rates."

"Do you know of anyone with the capital? Willing to go in with you I mean..."

"Not yet. That's why I'm really keeping my mind open." He leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Teak furniture is cool, but even clothes and jewelry, you know, kind of the hippie stuff, would pull in good money on the west coast and Hawaii."

"What about competition?" I asked, pleased that the conversation was going so smoothly with so little need for input on my part.

"Yeah, that's the thing," he said, suddenly glum. "I need to find a new angle, and I'm ages behind here. Every farang entrepreneur in Chiangmai is into this." He opened a new bottle of Singha and offered to fill my glass. I waved him off.

"What about the Internet?" I said. "There's got to be a way to make it work for you."

"Ah, that's another problem," he said, frown deepening. "I'm thirty years old and I must be the only male my age who doesn't know how to program."

"That's ridiculous," I snorted. "I know thirty-year-olds back in Canada who're still scared of a mouse."

"I guess it's just an impression," Nathan said, sipping. "Do you know how to program?"

"Uh, well actually yes," I said, blushing. "I used to be a web programmer."

"Jesus!" Nathan sputtered, staring at me as though he were seeing me for the first time. "A web programmer teaching English in Chiangmai? Why? You could live here for a month off a day's programming salary."

"I quit," I said, not wanting to explain, feeling my head begin to throb at the thought that I might have to.

Nathan did not demand an explanation but he went on looking at me as though I were a new species of mammal. "So web programmer, English teacher -- what else have you done?" he asked.

I brought up my fingers to count, not intending a comic effect but seriously needing the aid to work back through memory. "I started off in journalism, then I did a stint at a publishing company, then I got annoyed at

all the things I couldn't do because I didn't know computers, so I went back and got a programming certificate. After I graduated I worked as a freelancer helping companies set up their online databases and webpage interfaces. Then I got sick of that and came out here to teach," I shrugged and smiled. "Now you know my curriculum vitae."

"I thought you'd be an interesting person to know, and I was right," said Nathan, his lips focusing into a shrewd little smile. "I'm going to take down your number right now, if you don't mind."

"Actually I don't have one," I said, reaching out to stop his hand as he motioned the waitress for a pen and paper. He looked at me in disbelief and so I related the story of everything that had happened since I'd met him last, minus the details about the thing I couldn't talk about.

"So, at this very moment, you have no place to stay," he said, almost musing to himself.

"Pretty much," I replied.

"Do you have money? A bank account here?"

"Yes and yes," I said. "Why?"

"I have a proposal for you," Nathan said, setting down his glass and sitting himself up straighter on his stool. "My apartment is a four and a half. It's always seemed a bit big for one person, and I'm always looking for ways

to save money to invest in my business project. So what I'm asking is -- how'd you like to move in with me?"

I smiled. Any ability to carefully weigh the pros and cons was gone anyway, so I was spared the necessity of deliberating over a decision. "I'd love to," I said.

THREE

Nathan's apartment building was located two blocks north of the Irish Pub, in a winding alley where it was impossible to see more than five meters ahead at a time and motorcycles appeared suddenly around corners.

"You get used to it," Nathan shrugged after one roared by, narrowly missing us. "Stick to the gutter."

Nathan's apartment was on the fifth floor and overlooked the busy labyrinth of restaurants, temples and auto repair shops that make up the northeastern quadrant of the Old City. The apartment was sparsely decorated and decidedly unsentimental. The walls were mostly bare, with an occasional newspaper article or to-do list taped up. There were no photos

pasted to the fridge or resting on his bedside table. Detective novels and CD's cluttered the floor in piles that nearly reached the ceiling.

Nathan gestured toward one of the doorways. "You get the smaller room, unfortunately," he grinned. "I'm not that generous."

Within a few days we had settled into a pattern. Nathan left in the morning to go to work and I spent my day at the Internet cafe around the corner. I was searching for an explanation for my symptoms. They had been getting gradually better since the night at the Irish Pub, whether because of the change of scenery or simply because the attack had run its course, I couldn't tell. But I was determined not to let it happen again if I could help it.

In the evenings Nathan came back from work and we went bar-hopping along the streets of the northeast sector.

Although Nathan didn't look a lady's man at first glance -- he walked in carefully measured steps keeping his hands fastidiously at his sides -- he positively glowed in the company of females, or female Thais at any rate. We would stop at each bar long enough for him to establish at least one contact, and then we would move on.

Yoy Pocket, on the same street as the Irish Pub, was Nathan's favourite bar. The waitresses were all students at Chiangmai University and the turnover was high.

"Say something in Thai," he said, sitting at the bar where overhead lights and a dark low-slung ceiling made us feel like stars onstage.

"What should I say," I said, spinning my glass nervously in my hands.

"Say anything. Ask me something I would understand."

"Chop Chiangma mai?" ("Do you like Chiangmai?") I asked.

"Chop mak. Phooying Chiangmai sooay mak mak." ("I like it a lot. The Chiangmai women are very beautiful.")

The waitress behind the bar, a beautiful brown-skinned girl with large almond eyes, looked over at us and giggled.

"Khun maa jaak Chiangmai mai?" ("Are you from Chiangmai?")

Nathan said to her, smiling.

The waitress nodded. "<From San Patong, in Chiangmai Province.>"

Nathan grinned. "<So you see? It's true.>"

The waitress waved a playful hand at him. "Paak waan," ("Sweet-Mouth") she said dismissively. But she hung around us for the next half hour, Nathan doing most of the talking in a mixture of English and Thai, me helping out when necessary.

At the end of the evening he had four telephone numbers and two more face-to-face contacts that were, in his words, "promising." "What about you," he asked me. "Your Thai is amazing. You could sweep any of them off their feet if you wanted."

I was tempted then to tell him about my symptoms, how they were exacerbated by any strong emotion, negative or positive. But it was too early. He barely knew me. "Just wasn't in the mood, I guess," I shrugged. "Besides, it's fun helping you." I grinned.

On the third day of my Internet search, I made a discovery.

At the Google search engine site, I typed in the phrases "strong emotions", "sensitivity to sound and light", and "symptoms," not expecting much after three days of fruitless browsing. The search returned only one page, part of an online forum dedicated to the spouses of Parkinson's patients. Of course I'd heard of Parkinson's disease, a neurodegenerative illness characterized by muscle tremors and slowness of movement. It didn't sound anything like what I was going through. Still, I read on. In the second-to-last paragraph I found one of my search phrases highlighted: "He tries to avoid strong emotions because it seems to use up the medication faster."

That piqued my interest. What kind of medication could be "used up" by strong emotions? I read on. The medication's name was something called "Sinemet." There were no more details given about it.

I exited the browser, loaded a new Google page, and typed in "Sinemet." Over five thousand pages turned up. As I quickly found out, Sinemet is one of the most common drugs used by Parkinson's patients. Essentially it is pure dopamine. Dopamine, I learned after a few more searches, is one of the brain's major neurotransmitters, the chemicals brain-neurons use to communicate with each other. Parkinson's patients have a shortage of dopamine, which is what causes their tremors and slowness. But reading on I realized that dopamine isn't just related to muscle coordination. Dopamine is the chemical that goes into overdrive when you put a line of coke to your nose and snort. It's responsible for focusing your attention and keeping it focused.

I looked down at the palms of my hands, sweating onto the keyboard from the intensity of the mental chase. Dopamine could turn my concentration into a steady beam, undeflecting. It was the perfect antidote for my attacks.

That evening I made a tofu mango salad and we ate in. "Not bad," Nathan said, wiping his fork carefully clean before starting in on dessert -- peeled rambutan with ice. "Definitely makes up for my day. The director has decided I have an 'attitude problem.'"

"You?" I said, not intending sarcasm.

"Hey," Nathan growled, crunching on the chunks of ice. "I'm not that bad. Anyway even a saint would develop an attitude problem, the way they treat teachers at that school."

"Mmf. School administrators," I said, waving my hand in derision.

"Remember I told you how the last few weeks've been crazy? Well here's why," Nathan wiped his lips and leaned forward in his chair. "There's a newbie they just hired, fresh out of college in the U.S. So the director asks if I'd be willing to let him sit in on my lessons. You know, so he gets a feel for teaching here. I say sure okay. Kid sits in for a few lessons and next thing I know he's teaching the class. The director says 'It's only until the end of term. Besides, you have three other classes.'" Nathan paused, looking at me with his eyebrows furrowed. "What she's really saying is they're getting set to drop me. This kid is my replacement."

"Jeez," I said, not sure whether he'd put the right interpretation on it, but agreeing it didn't sound good.

"Anyway, not to worry. Remember I said I was keeping an open mind about the business project? Well it's a good thing I did, because something may have dropped into my lap." He gave me a quick wink and, picking up his spoon again, returned to his rambutan.

"The teak furniture?" I asked.

"Nope."

"Well, what?"

"I don't want to talk about it yet. I might jinx it." He crunched down on some ice. "But I wanted to give you hope," he looked up and passed me a friendly smile.

I realized that with my hours spent at the Internet cafe and my subdued behaviour at the bars, Nathan thought I was depressed, and had chalked it up to my being out of work. Then I remembered what I'd read earlier in the day at the Internet cafe.

"Nathan, do you know anything about Parkinson's Disease?" I asked.

He paused for a moment. "When I was a kid," he said slowly, "one of my friend's fathers had it."

I realized that this was the first time I had heard Nathan make any mention of his life before Thailand. "And where was that?"

"Baltimore," Nathan said tersely. "Anyway I went back there a few years ago and got invited over for supper. The father was still alive but it had got really bad. He sat there at the table twitching and shaking like crazy and the others just went on with their dinner like this was nothing out of the ordinary."

"Was he taking a medication called Sinemet?" I asked.

"Yeah he had been. But when I saw him that time, they'd already taken him off it. Apparently it made him sort of crazy."

"What kind of crazy?" I said, my fingers tightening around my fork.

"Hallucinations, paranoia, hearing voices, the whole bit. Apparently if you take too much of the stuff it gives you symptoms similar to schizophrenia."

We were both quiet for a few moments, off in our own thoughts.

"How's your friend's father doing now?" I finally said.

"I don't know," he said, looking uncomfortable. "I haven't been back there." He gulped down his glass of Coke and stood up. "Up for another night at Yoy Pocket?" he asked.

The next morning I hit the Internet cafe again. What I was really after was the dopamine, I reasoned to myself. It didn't have to be in the form of the Sinemet medication. If cocaine could deliver it, then there must be legal alternatives that could do the same thing. I typed "dopamine" and "medication" into the Google search engine and clicked "Search." Half an hour later I had two promising answers.

The first was an anti-depressant called Welbutrin. The webpage claimed it increased the amount of dopamine in the brain by inhibiting the reabsorption of dopamine after it had been released by the neurons. An unfortunate side-effect, however, was potential epileptic seizures, so I nixed that.

The second medication was a treatment for Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) called Ritalin. I'd heard of Ritalin before, of course. It's the drug that parents have their children pop to make sure they pay attention during class. It sounded a lot like Welbutrin to me: the webpage claimed that it too inhibited the reabsorption of dopamine in the brain. But there were also differences. Ritalin was an amphetamine, putting it in the same category as speed.

I exited the Internet cafe and began searching for the nearest pharmacy. The chances of them having Ritalin, never mind selling it to me, were pretty slim. On the website the drug was heavily underlined "By prescription only," and with all the stories of kids snorting and shooting it, the best I could probably hope for was information on which hospital might stock it.

The pharmacy at the end of the block, like most Thai street shops, opened directly onto the street with no intervening door or wall. Inside were row upon row of bottles, boxes, vials, packaged and labeled in the most promising shapes and colours. For a few minutes I forgot my mission and roamed the shelves, handling bottles, reading ingredients. Somewhere among all these medicines, I felt sure, was the substance that would cure me.

"Can I help you?" the pharmacist asked. She was middle-aged and pretty, with dark kind eyes.

"I'm looking for some medicine for my son," I said. "He has a condition called 'Attention Deficit Disorder,' I don't know if you've heard of it. He's taking some classes at the international school this term and his prescription has run out. The name of the medicine is... Ritalin?"

The woman nodded quietly through my speech, and I felt sure she knew I was lying and was thinking up ways to delay me while she called the

police. But when I stopped talking she twisted around and drew a silver packet of tablets from a white box on an overhead shelf. "Here you are," she smiled. "Will there be anything else?"

"Uh, no," I said, reaching into my wallet and looking away to hide my surprise. I paid her for the Ritalin and walked back to the apartment.

FOUR

On the way out the door that evening I slipped two pills into my mouth. I had a small urge to tell Nathan what I was doing, for safety's sake if for no other reason. But again I held back, feeling optimistic about the evening and not wanting to spoil it at the outset by talking about *it*.

We walked together down the narrow streets leading northeast. It had rained in the afternoon and the moon winked at us from a thousand puddles. A flat putrid smell, the smell of vegetables left to rot in the sun, issued from the sewers, backed up by the rain.

The first bar we hit was C-Pub. The inside was lit with burnt orange light and shook with Thai rock several decibels too loud for either of us. We pulled up chairs on the terrace outside and ordered a Coke and beer

respectively. After a few minutes Nathan got what he was looking for. A pretty waitress remembered us from two nights earlier and sat down beside us.

"<Why, it's the two teachers!>" she exclaimed, grinning from ear to ear. "Are you going to teach me more English tonight?"

"Why should we?" said Nathan, taking a sip of beer and leaning back in his chair. "What are you doing for us?"

"Shame on you," said the waitress, whose name was Buu. "You are rich farang men and I am just a poor Thai girl." Her calling us "rich" made us both laugh.

"I know what you could do," Nathan continued, grinning at her.

"What?" the waitress asked, raising her eyebrow.

Nathan leaned over and whispered in her ear. Her eyes slid over to me and she laughed. "Why?" she said to him, raising her chin. "What if I want to take him?"

"You're too short for him," Nathan grinned. "I'm afraid you'll have to take me."

"You?" she snorted. "Who would want to be the girlfriend of you?" She stood up, winked at us, and walked back into the bar.

"What was that about?" I asked.

"I told her to find you a girlfriend," Nathan smiled. "I think she might do it too. Cheer up," he said, seeing that I looked nervous, though he only partly understood why. "It'll be good for you."

"Anyway," I said, turning the focus back on him, "I'm pretty sure she likes you. Are you interested?"

"Not sure. It's too early to tell." Nathan shrugged.

"What about that one from Celebration Pub? She was really cute. And sweet too."

"I don't know. I met her for a drink today after work. She was nice. Sweet, like you said. But I don't," Nathan furrowed his brows and frowned, "I mean she's a little too sweet. I think it would start to be a drag after awhile, if we got together."

"Oh well, that's too bad," I shrugged. "I thought you guys had really hit it off. But anyway, this one seems nice too."

"Maybe. We'll see." Nathan drained his beer and looked over toward the bar. "Ah, here she comes now, with a little something for you, it looks like." He winked at me.

Buu strode toward us, grinning and pulling behind her a tall pale girl with long black hair. "Hi again," she announced. "Nathan, Ali, this is Pim."

It would have been much easier for me if Pim were foul-breathed and ugly. Instead she was a gorgeous high-cheekboned Chinese princess. I blanched, feeling my heart lurch and a hint of buzzing at the back of my head.

"<Aren't they cute?>" Buu asked in Thai, and Pim nodded.

"<Why, thank you,>" Nathan said, bowing, and the two girls squealed and laughed.

"<I forgot, they can speak Thai!>" Buu wailed and then she motioned at me with her head. "<Especially this one, he's really good at it.>"

Pim looked me over and I blushed and tried to think of something witty to say. "<Not that good,>" I said at last.

"<See! Aren't his tones amazing?>" Buu laughed and fortunately Nathan broke in at that point.

"Alright, you guys, I can't understand anymore! Too many of these," he said, pointing at the bottles of Singha lined up on the table. The girls giggled. "From now on, tonight is English only! Understand? Pasaa angkriiit."

"Me and Pim are finished work," Buu said. "Where should we go?"

"Dancing!" Nathan said, getting unsteadily to his feet. "I feel the need to dance!"

We paid the bill and our little group set off for a disco on the eastern edge of the Old City. Nathan and I walked out in front, and the girls walked several paces behind, joking and giggling. "How old are they?" I asked.

"I'm not sure, but they must be over eighteen. They're university students."

"Jeez, they're probably ten years younger than us."

"So what. My mom and dad were ten years apart. In fact they were about exactly these ages when they had me."

"Are you thinking about conceiving tonight, then?"

Nathan laughed.

The disco was called "Nice Illusion" and boasted a thoroughly Thai clientele. Thai pop music blared from enormous speakers placed at the four corners of the room, and two performers onstage appeared to be lip synching the song for the audience. The crowd was raucous and happy, with welcoming grins for the two farangs wading into their midst.

Suddenly I felt I was exactly where I wanted to be. The Ritalin was kicking in and I felt the urge to run and jump and generally not stop moving. How fortunate that I found myself in exactly the place where that would be okay!

I wrapped my arms around Nathan and briefly lifted him off the floor. "Whoah!" he said, looking surprised, but when I let him down again he seemed pleased. "What's come over you?"

I pulled off my sweater and wrapped it around my waist. And I began to dance. A crazy dance, trying to hide my feet from my feet without falling over. Buu laughed and came over to dance beside me, leading Pim behind. Nathan joined in and then the four of us passed arms over each others' shoulders and sang (to the best of our ability) along to the Thai pop song.

"Yaak ja rong, rong, ronnrrrrng," I belted out at the top of my lungs. Fingers pointed and faces split with laughter. I grinned, sucked in my breath, and sang louder.

At the end of the evening I found that nothing terrible had happened to my head. The adrenaline of the dance had ridden right over any troublesome feelings I might have had.

"Good night!" Buu waved as she and Pim got into a tuk-tuk. "Come back and see us again," she looked directly at Nathan and added, "daaaaaarling," as the tuk-tuk sped off. Shrieks and giggles trailed back to us and faded into the night.

"That was fun!" I said, beaming.

"I don't know," Nathan scowled as we walked out of the disco's pool of light and headed back toward the apartment in darkness. "Buu's started to annoy me. Is it just me or is she starting to seem a bit clingy?"

"I didn't really notice," I said. "I was just having fun."

"I know, I was too, at first. But she kept looking over at me and giving me these goo-goo eyes. I really didn't like it."

"So you're not going to go back there?" I asked.

"Probably not, but you can," he smiled, slapping me on the back.

"We'll see," I shrugged.

As we plodded through the dark streets and alleys toward our apartment, I felt the goodwill of the evening starting to fade. My heart was no longer beating so fast, and I could feel the adrenaline washing out of my system and leaving me naked and vulnerable. As we walked on, the feeling of sensitivity got worse. I began to dread random noises, the way they jarred and sent buzzing reverberations in my head. I walked on a little ahead of Nathan for fear he might start to speak to me and I would have to cover my ears. When a tuk-tuk approached in the distance the light was so sharp and penetrating I had to close my eyes to slits and look down at my feet, hoping I wouldn't walk off the road.

When we reached the apartment I was sweating from the effort of fighting off all the stimuli. I couldn't understand why this was happening now, after I had survived two hours in a noisy crowded disco. I collapsed into bed and covered my head with my pillow to block out the sound of Nathan showering. At last I fell gratefully asleep.

The next day I threw out my remaining Ritalin. I did this after running a Google search on the drug and discovering, under a section on “precautions and side actions”, the words “rebound effect.” I did not continue my Internet search that afternoon, as I usually did. I was still feeling a mild form of what I had felt last night, and the light from the monitor bothered me. I lay down on my bed and stared up at the ceiling, feeling hopeless, until Nathan came home.

“Oh boy,” he said, poking his head into my bedroom and assuming (it was clear from the “tut-tut” tone of his voice) that I had reverted to my earlier moroseness. “Alright,” he put down his bag and came and sat beside me on the bed. “I was going to save this for later but I guess I’ll tell you now. You look like you need something to cheer you up.”

I sat up and offered him a pillow as a cushion. For once he was not completely wrong.

"Okay. So I've been talking about this business project thing for awhile, right?" I nodded, keeping my eyes on the darkest corner of the room.

"Well, I know what the project is now. And it's not clothes or jewelry, or teak furniture."

"Okay. So what is it?"

"Are you ready for this?"

"Sure. Just tell me."

"Okay," he said, taking a deep breath. "It's a language school."

If I had been eating something I would have choked. "A *school*? Didn't you just say yesterday that -- that you *despise* school administrators?"

"I won't despise this one," he laughed. Then he adjusted his glasses and looked at me seriously, cocking his head. "Or that one," he said, pointing at me with his chin. We sat in silence for a moment. "What do you think?"

"Jeez." I didn't know what to think. I'd been riding life out for a few weeks now, just letting things happen to me, but this was a bit much. "I don't know, Nathan. There are so many language schools in Chiangmai. And you can't put your own name to the property, you know -- only Thais are allowed to own property in Thailand."

"I know," he said, leaning forward on his elbows, his eyes excited.

"That's where Faa comes into the picture."

"Faa?" I frowned. "Is this another one of your conquests?"

"No, this one's strictly business. I met her last week at an interschool meeting. She's an English teacher too, and like me she's looking to head in a more entrepreneurial direction. The school is her idea, actually. She's just looking for partners."

"Okay," I said, adjusting the pillow I was sitting on. "So you've the property problem taken care of. But what about the competition?"

"I've got an answer for that too," Nathan continued. "Remember how I said that in business you always need an angle? Well think of it. Right now in Chiangmai there's a New Zealand Educational Services, an Australian Center, an American University Association, and a British Council. What's missing?"

I saw where he was going. "Ah ha."

"That's another reason I need you," he said. "Starting a school called 'The Canadian Center' when I've never been north of Philadelphia is a problem."

"So my primary purpose in this endeavour would simply be not to alter my nationality."

"Essentially," Nathan grinned.

"Sounds perfect," I smiled, and lay back on the bed.

FIVE

For our meeting with Faa, I put on my best shirt and pants and even convinced myself to wear a tie. Granted, my role in this project was understood by both partners to be minimal. Still, I had never before entered into the world of business administration and dressing up felt like a way to mark the occasion.

We were to meet her in the lobby of the Montford Hotel, across from the east gate. It was late Saturday afternoon and the street outside the lobby window lay quiet. Saturdays are working days in Thailand and people were getting set to lock up at the shop and office. Nathan looked at his watch.

"She's late," he said.

"Only by five minutes. What's your rush?"

Nathan didn't answer but furrowed his brows deeper and went on rocking in his seat, his hands gripping the armrests as if he were going to use them to launch himself through the window into space. He'd been in this

mood all morning, getting irritated when he couldn't find his watch, making a fuss at the restaurant when they put salt in his orange juice (as was the custom).

"Are you having second thoughts?" I asked.

"It's a lot of money," he said at once. "A lot of money. I don't know, Ali, maybe I'm making a mistake. Am I making a mistake?" He had never before asked my advice about anything. I felt almost sorry for him now.

"I -- I really can't say, Nathan. You're the one investing in this. I'm just along for the ride. If you've got a bad feeling about it, you can still back out."

"I don't have a bad feeling," he said, continuing to rock, "but it's a lot of money. Maybe I didn't tell you this, but I don't have any family left. I've got no safety net."

"What about friends?"

"Don't talk to me about that. Backstabbing pieces of..." his voice choked up and he was quiet. "America is a bad place for me," he said at last. "I can't go back there. I have to make my way with what I've got."

Ten minutes later Faa still hadn't arrived. I told Nathan to find a place in the dining room without me if she came, and walked across the marble floor to the bathroom, conveniently located behind a souvenir shop.

In the bathroom I adjusted my tie and looked at myself in the mirror. I tried to imagine what Nathan was feeling at that moment and felt it to be unbearable. The position of being forced to make a difficult decision was the greatest danger of all -- worse than bright lights, loud noise, or strong emotion. Even by trying to empathize with him now I could feel the inside of my skull buzz in protest. I couldn't think this one out for him; he would have to do it himself.

When I re-entered the lobby, the chairs beside the window were empty. I went back the way I had come and found the hall leading to the dining room. The room at the end of the hall was frigid with air conditioning, and filled with farangs dining on very expensive hamburgers and french toast. I scanned the tables looking for Nathan and at last spotted him seated near the back of the room, across from a woman who I could only see from the back but who presumably was Faa.

I navigated my way between the elbows and knees of overweight Americans. Nathan saw me coming and waved me over, pulling out the chair beside him.

"Ali," Nathan said as I placed a hand on the armrest and made to sit down, "this is Faa."

The woman turned to face me and my hand tightened on the armrest in horror. "You!" I said. Her smile disappeared and she too blanched.

"You two know each other?" Nathan asked, surprised.

"We're acquainted," I managed to say. Then recovering myself I held out my hand. "How do you do, Miss Orapon."

"Very well, thank you," said the Saphangaeo teacher, taking my hand and shaking it firmly. "And yourself?"

"Excellent," I grunted, and sat down.

"Faa has been telling me more about the school," Nathan said. "She already has a site in mind. It just went up for rent last week. Tell him about it, Faa."

"The site," Faa said, not flinching but looking me directly in the eyes, "is on the corner of Buak Hat and Samlan Road. Do you know the area?"

"Yes," I said. The corner was just off a main street in the southwest sector of the Old City, across from a park. It was, I had to admit, an excellent location. "There's a park across the street and a restaurant just down the road."

"And a high school less than a block away," Nathan added. "It's perfect."

"How much is it a month?" I asked.

Faa named a figure that didn't sound too bad although I was glad I wasn't the one paying.

"And books, equipment, redecoration, how much will that come out to?" I said.

"The books we will have to buy new, of course," Faa said. "The TV and VCR I can donate myself. And I have a friend who is a painter and can do the redecorating for very cheap."

I looked over at Nathan. His face was aglow with enthusiasm and there was no trace of his earlier doubts. "When can we see it?" he asked.

Within a week all the necessary papers were signed. The school was a white two-story house with a small courtyard and a rock garden out front. The path winding from the courtyard to the door was lined with brilliant purple flowers and overhung with large pale ferns, red-veined like the cross-section of a bloody rack of ham.

Immediately Faa got to work calling advertising agencies and educational publishers and her friend the decorator. For the next seven or eight days every time we saw her she had a phone to her head and a pen scribbling ferociously on notepaper. Soon after, the decorator arrived, as did the supplies -- bookshelves, desks, a new toilet. Faa quit her job at

Saphangaeo and moved into a room on the top floor of the house, which became the command center. From there, she oversaw the painting and re-tiling and arranging of furniture. She became a blur of energy, safe to watch from a distance but dangerous to approach. Sometimes just observing her striding up and down the stairs, barking orders and oozing adrenaline, I could almost feel an attack coming on. I stayed in the courtyard for the most part and gave a hand only when asked.

Nathan for his part was just as enthusiastic about the school as Faa, albeit somewhat less effective. Not being able to speak much Thai, he was limited to helping with the manual labour and poring over the selection of books and educational videos we had to choose from. Occasionally he would ask my opinion.

"What do you think's a better book for Lower Intermediate? Interchange or Spectrum?"

"I like Headway," I answered, invariably.

"Bah!" Nathan waved his hand dismissively. "I'm not getting into that British shit."

He also had trouble deciding on the videos.

"Get a few Mr. Bean tapes," I suggested. "Then you can get the students to watch and try to describe in English what he's doing."

"You Canadians are all repressed Anglophiles," Nathan said disgustedly. "I wouldn't show that stuff to my worst enemy."

So for the most part I just sat and watched while the school began to take shape. The inside walls were repainted bright white and new red tiles and carpets ("Red's a stimulating colour. Studies show it," Nathan said) were installed. Posters of exotic Canadian scenes -- wheat fields, the Rocky Mountains, a beaver looking up from a log with a startled look on his face -- were hung on the walls. Someone even brought in a fish tank.

By the end of three weeks, the school was stocked and refurbished, and we started conducting interviews. The interview process was in some ways the most difficult part of the whole project. The three of us had radically different views on how to teach the English language and this became a problem when it came time to decide on the best candidates. Faa believed in oral drills and lots of pair work. Nathan preferred explicit discussions of grammar and lots of grammar-based homework. I also believed in grammar but preferred it to be taught implicitly ("sneakily," I put it) through games and storytelling and drama.

In the end we compromised and the handful of selected teachers represented a smorgasbord of different teaching approaches.

"At least none of them are tourists," Nathan said, a little sarcastically. He was annoyed that his approach had not won out, despite his impassioned arguments for it.

We put out ads in all the major Chiangmai papers and began enrolling the next day. Nathan was right about his choice of angle: the word "Canada" had a magic appeal in a city where ice cream bars melted away while your head was turned. By the end of two weeks it was almost Christmas and we had enough enrollments to confirm the start of classes on January fourth.

SIX

During the Christmas break Faa started coming over to the apartment a lot. "We're going to go over the curriculum," Nathan said the first night she was to come by, but I thought I detected a note of embarrassment in his voice.

I should point out that over the month and a half since we had first hit Yoy Pocket together, none of Nathan's contacts had materialized into anything. It was always the same pattern: the first couple of nights Nathan

would be absolutely enchanted with his new find. Then on the third or fourth evening he would find something wrong with her, and the next day he moved on to someone else.

When Faa arrived that first night, the tension in the room was palpable. Although I respected her, I had never really grown to like her, and sensing what was in the air, my feelings were not friendly.

She sat down on the couch and drew a sheaf of papers from her handbag. "I've drawn up a list assigning teachers to all the classes," she said. "Tell me what you think."

Nathan looked briefly over the list, nodded and handed it over to me. I looked at it and scowled. "You've put Brian with the elementary students," I said. "He's much too pedantic for them. You should assign him to the upper levels."

"I thought about that," Faa said, folding her hands together. "It's true he sounded quite formal in the interview. But he's the only one who has much experience teaching beginners. Look at his CV." She reached down and yanked a beige folder out of her bag.

I looked it over and, still scowling, handed it back. "Alright," I said.

"I've also brought copies of the curriculum," she said, summoning three blue duotangs out of her bag and passing them out. We spent several

minutes in silence reading them over. We'd all worked together on the rough draft, of course, but this was the first time we'd seen it neatly typed and printed out.

"You've got them learning conditionals before they've finished learning irregular verbs," I said. "How can they make conditional sentences without the past tense?"

"We'll limit the situations they use the conditional in," Faa said calmly. "At the beginning, anyway. When they've finished covering irregular verbs, we'll open it up a lot more."

"I agree with Faa, Ali," Nathan piped in. "Doing conditionals near the beginning means we can give them more conversational options early on."

"I thought you were our grammatical purist," I muttered in his direction. He blushed. "Alright, fine. But what about vocabulary? We have them learning words related to climate and geography before they even know how to describe their own clothes."

Faa found the page in her duotang and looked up at me. "It's like what Nathan just said." She cast a quick glance in his direction. "It's about 'conversational options.' We want them to talk and hear about Canada from the very beginning, make them feel a connection to the school. They can't

talk about the posters on the wall if they don't know the word for 'snow' or 'mountain.'"

I had to concede this was a good argument, but I caught Nathan smiling at her as if in congratulation and so I withheld my praise and merely nodded.

"Is it alright then?" Faa asked after a few moments of silence. "Can I pass out copies to the teachers?"

Nathan gave Faa a thumbs up. Faa looked at me and I nodded again, blushing in defeat.

"Well, I should be going now," Faa said, looking at Nathan and getting uncertainly to her feet.

"No, why? We've just completed a language curriculum," Nathan said, jumping up. "That doesn't happen every day. We should celebrate!"

I had to grin, despite myself. Faa saw it and smiled. "Okay," she said, and sat back down. I swore at myself silently.

"I'll get the booze," Nathan said, disappearing into the kitchen. Faa and I sat opposite each other in silence.

"Is there somewhere on the grounds for students to park their motorbikes?" I asked finally, unable to think of anything else.

"They can park on the street, and if there's no more room they can use the courtyard," she said.

"Oh." We didn't say anything else until Nathan re-entered the room.

"Chivas Regal," he announced, plonking the bottle on the coffee table. "And for you, my friend, since you do not drink," he said to me, bowing like a butler in a British comedy, "freshly squeezed orange juice." He brought the jar around from behind his back. "I bought it today at the market."

I smiled at him in appreciation. "Thanks, I haven't had this in years."

"So," he said, grabbing a cushion from the sofa and settling into a comfy spot on the floor, "what should we do?"

"We could play truth or dare," I said, meaning it as a barbed joke.

"That's a great idea!" Nathan said, his face lighting up. "Not the 'dare' part necessarily, but the 'truth' part. How much do we really know about each other?"

"What's truth or dare?" Faa inquired.

"It's a game where we take turns doing crazy actions or telling something private about ourselves."

"Sounds like a good game for the school," Faa said. I snorted back laughter.

"Well, sometimes the actions get *really* crazy," Nathan said, blushing.

"But anyway the truth part is more interesting anyway, right now. What do you say, guys, should we play?"

"Okay," Faa said, smiling and shrugging. I suppressed a nervous giggle, not quite believing this was happening. Nathan returned to the kitchen and brought back an empty Singha bottle.

"So this is how it works," he said to Faa. "I spin this bottle, and whoever it points to gets to ask anyone else whatever question they want."

"Do we have to tell the truth?" Faa asked, her eyes getting wide.

"Yes! Most definitely." Nathan replied.

"What happens if we lie?" I asked.

"We'll find out and you'll be made to perform all the janitorial work at the school for a year," Nathan retorted. He looked at us each in turn. "Are you ready?" he asked.

"Sure."

"Yeah."

Nathan placed the bottle lengthwise on the coffee table, took it between his thumb and middle finger, and spun. The bottle whirled, kicking light from its edges. It slowed and stopped, pointing at me.

I looked over at Nathan. "Alright Nathan, why don't you tell us a little about your past."

"Okay," Nathan fingered his glass and looked down. "What do you want to know?"

"You can tell us anything you want," I said, a little less aggressively. "But it has to be about your life before Thailand."

Nathan thought for a minute then said, "Alright. I was born during the Vietnam War, and my dad was a draft dodger, so we had to move around a lot. I remember one time near the end of the war, I told a friend about my dad. One of my first school-friends, in kindergarten I guess it was. Anyway, a few days later there was a knock on the door."

Nathan paused. Faa and I were quiet.

"My mother answered it and I saw three officers standing on the threshold. Even at that age I could figure out what had happened. I ran down to my father's study and told him who was at the door and what I had said at school. My dad had an emergency hiding place. The men searched all over the house but they didn't find it, and my mother told the officers to stop wasting their time because my dad had walked out on her. As soon as they left we threw our things into the car and left town."

"Jeez," I said.

"Is he still hiding?" Faa asked.

"No, he and my mom died a few years ago in a car accident. But they stopped hiding long before. The government issued a general amnesty once the war was over."

"I'm sorry about your parents," Faa said, and Nathan said, "Me too." He handed the bottle to me. "Your turn to spin," he said.

I spun the bottle and it pointed to Nathan.

"Faa," he said, looking over at her and smiling. "Tell us why you decided to start this school."

By this time we were all sitting on the floor. Faa wrapped her arms around her knees. "I could give you a short answer or a long answer to that question," she said.

"The long answer, please," Nathan grinned.

Faa sighed. She loosened her ponytail and scratched at the back of her head. "Okay. If you listen to my accent when I speak Thai, you can tell I'm not from the Chiangmai area."

Nathan shrugged. "Fooled me."

"I'm not. I'm from Nong Khai, in northeast Thailand. I lived there until I was seventeen. After I graduated from high school I decided to set up

a business there. My father and brothers and cousins all laughed at me. They said a woman can't start a business by herself, unless she's a prostitute."

She paused to drink from her glass.

"Anyway, they were wrong. I had been working as a cook through my last two years in high school, and I had saved a little capital. Not much, but enough to rent a small property downtown. Laos was starting to open to tourists at that time, and a lot of farangs began coming through Nong Khai. I opened a cooking school, advertising both Thai and Laotian dishes. I had an English exercise book and tapes that I worked on at night, and there were weeks when I hardly slept at all. Gradually I started to speak more clearly and understand my students' questions better. Many people began talking about me and by the end of a year I had more students than I could handle."

"What did your family think of that?" Nathan said.

"They stopped laughing, of course," said Faa. "And they demanded I hand over my profits. I couldn't say no. That's part of the custom in the Northeast: a daughter puts her family first.

"Soon they started asking for jobs in the school too, even though their cooking was terrible and their English was even worse." Faa paused to examine something that was caught in her long fingernails.

"What happened?" I said.

"Oh. The business collapsed," Faa sighed. She flicked the piece of dirt or whatever it was away. "But I saw it coming. I had to look at my business and say 'I love you like a child, but I have to let you go.' I sold my share of the business, took the money and came to Chiangmai to study English."

"And your family?" Nathan asked.

"I haven't spoken to them since the day I left. That's why I have so much hope about this business," she said, her eyes brightening. "This time I will be free of them."

"Okay but you still haven't really answered the question," Nathan said playfully. "Why now?"

"Because you guys have found a great idea," she said, "and because I've found a great property. And," she continued, looking at both of us, "because I think we'll all be great partners."

Nathan blushed. Faa passed him the bottle and he spun it. When it stopped it pointed back at Faa.

"Ali," she said, looking up at me. "Tell us why you came to Thailand."

It was an innocent question, but in fact she had struck a very sore point. I debated whether to tell them about the symptoms, the attacks, the fruitless doctor's visits in Montreal. God knows they had opened themselves up just now. Why couldn't I? I couldn't, came my own answer, because

talking about my symptoms and experiencing them were not separate things. To talk about them *was* to experience them.

"I had some problems there," I started, faltering. I shifted my cushion. I could feel their eyes on me. "With my job, I mean." I thought back to the endless nights sitting in front of a computer screen. "Programming is not like other jobs, really. It doesn't feel like a job. It feels like being on crack cocaine. Twenty-four hours a day. People talk to you and have conversations about everyday things, but always in the back of your mind there's a space where you're working out a problem. Why is this routine going into an endless loop? Did I initialize all the variables? What would happen if I switched this line just a little bit?"

The others were quiet. I didn't know how much of this they understood.

"You never knew when you would have a breakthrough. Sometimes I would be miles from my computer, shuffling through snow, and all of a sudden I would realize where the bug in the code was. And then – you'd think I would be happy, that I'd file it away somewhere and go congratulate myself with a hot chocolate – but no. I would start thinking up solutions to how I could proceed now that the bug was out of the way. I would rush into the nearest public building and run around the room, looking for a piece of

paper and pen. Then I would sit hunched over in some corner until I had got it all out, sometimes in programming code. People thought I was insane."

"Yes, it sounds that way. Are all programmers like this?" Nathan asked.

"No. Most learn to handle it, I guess. The problem with me is that I couldn't shut it off, even temporarily."

"So that's why you quit," Nathan said, more to himself than me.

"No. I liked it. The high when I solved a difficult problem, it was... better than sex," I said. Faa laughed.

"So why did you stop?" she asked.

"I--" Here I had a problem. There was no evidence that the programming and my symptoms were linked, but there was also no question that it was the symptoms which had made me give up programming. "I needed to move on," I said lamely.

The two of them waited for me to say more, but I was done.

"I think I understand," said Faa. She looked from Nathan to me.

"We're all in Chiangmai for the same reason, *chai mai*?" She grinned.

"We're all in some kind of recovery." She laughed self-consciously.

I looked up at her, surprised and grateful. Somehow she had understood me without knowing the details. I smiled at her and nodded.

"Alright guys, I'm getting sleepy," Nathan said, rubbing his eyes. All three of us stood up. Nathan walked Faa to the door. "Will you be alright driving home this late?" he whispered in a tone that was more than mere politeness.

She nodded and looked over at me. "Be careful, it's slippery," I said to her, smiling. She smiled back and there was a brief flash of triumph in her eyes before she walked out the door. She had, I realized then, as Nathan waved goodbye, come here tonight with the intention of winning my friendship. And she had succeeded.

SEVEN

By the time the first day of school came round, Nathan and Faa were being open about their relationship. Somewhere over the preceding two weeks Faa had stopped going home in the evenings and on some nights Nathan would go over to the school and not come back until the next day. Nathan was as happy as I'd ever seen him. When Faa wasn't in the apartment he would walk around the room in a daze, and any question I asked him would remind him of something funny Faa had said the other day.

"She's really good at puns," he said. "Did you know that half the time she's speaking English, she's making English-Thai puns? She says it's a game she plays with herself."

I was happy for them both, but I was also worried about the state of the school. The two of them had put the lion's share of work into it, but now in these last crucial days they were leaving matters more and more in my hands.

The first day of school was pandemonium. There were to be six classes divided into two time slots. The first three classes -- Intermediate, Lower Intermediate, and Advanced -- were scheduled to begin at 4:30 p.m. and end at 6:00 p.m. The second three classes -- Elementary, Upper Elementary, and Upper Intermediate -- were scheduled to begin at 6:30 p.m. and end at 8:00 p.m.

By 4:00 p.m. it became apparent there were serious problems. Nicola, who was supposed to teach a 6:30 p.m. class, had shown up at 3:30.

"You mean I'm not teaching now?" she said, when I asked what she was doing at the school so early. "But it says so on my list of hours. Look."

I took the piece of paper from her and gazed at it, frowning. "Maybe the secretary can explain it," I said.

The secretary, Soong, was a twenty-year-old hired for his knowledge of English and his friendly smile. Although he was able to commiserate with Nicola very articulately regarding this strange mix-up, he was unable to explain why it had happened.

I was tempted to just apologize to Nicola and forget about it, but I had a chilling feeling -- an instinct for detecting systemic problems inherited from my programming days -- that there was more to it than that. I asked Soong to look up the other teachers' hour lists. Sure enough, one of the teachers who should have been teaching from 4:30 to 6:00 had his hours listed as 6:30 to 8:00.

"Shit!" I shouted. Immediately it was clear to me what must have happened. Faa had made a number of rough drafts of the teachers' assigned classes before coming up with the final copy. Soong must have used one of these drafts when typing up the teachers' hours.

"Get John's number, fast!" I said to Soong. I looked at the clock. It was 4:10.

"Ali," said another of the teachers, appearing now in the stairwell, "could you come down for a minute? We've got a problem."

"The phone's busy, Ali," Soong said. "What should I do?"

"Keep trying," I shouted, already on my way down the stairs. "If he picks up tell him his class is *now*."

On the ground floor students were already starting to file into the building. Four unhappy-looking women stood near the door, with their sons and daughters standing restless at their sides. "These mothers are upset about something," the teacher said, "but I haven't a clue about what."

I approached the women and put on my best smile. "<Is there a problem?>" I asked.

One of the women stepped forward. "<There certainly is. What's my son doing in Upper Elementary, when all his friends are in Intermediate?>"

"<We asked all prospective students to do a language assessment test, ma'am. The students have been assigned to classes according to their scores.>"

"<Well clearly there is something wrong with the test, then. My son and his friends are all in the same grade at the same high school. There's no way he could be at a different level.>"

I groaned silently. There were at least three other kids in this situation, and perhaps more. If I caved for this boy, I would have to cave for every other case like this that turned up. On the other hand, if I refused outright, I would probably lose their business. "<Listen,>" I said, taking a gamble,

"<I'll tell you what. At the end of today's class, I'll let your son write the assessment test again. If he gets a higher score, I'll move him up. If he doesn't, he stays in the class he's in. Sound fair?>"

The woman grunted and gave her son a light whack on the head. "<And don't screw up this time!>" she muttered to him. The other women agreed to the same arrangement, and no sooner had the last one turned her attention from me than I bolted back up the stairs.

"Any news from John?" I yelled at Soong.

"I have him on the phone now," Soong replied. "But... he doesn't want to come."

"Give me that," I snapped, and grabbed the phone from him. "Hello, John? There's been a mix-up. You and another teacher have the wrong hours printed--"

"I know and I don't care," John fumed back. "This is extremely unprofessional! I haven't prepared a lesson yet! I don't see why--"

I saw the direction he was going and headed him off, switching to a softer tone. "It's completely our fault, John. We take full responsibility," I said. "It will never happen again, I promise you. But right now we really need you. It doesn't matter if you don't have anything prepared. Just having you show up in that classroom will make a huge difference. It's the first day

of class so you can be real informal. And you have my permission to let them out early."

I paused and waited. If his anger had risen high enough, I knew he would ignore me and quit anyway. "Alright," he said finally. "I'll be there. But don't ever do this to me again." He hung up.

I breathed a sigh of relief and wandered into the teachers' room, which was a flurry of last minute activity. A tall man in a polo shirt spotted me and made his way over. His skin was tanned almost to a crust and there was a thin layer of white foam on his lips. "Where's the photocopy machine?" he asked.

"The photocopy machine..." I repeated. I hadn't seen one passing by during the weeks of decorating and arranging, but it seemed inconceivable that Faa would have forgotten it.

"I've checked in every room of the school," the teacher said. "You don't have one, do you." Alex, his name was Alex: I remembered him now from the interview. One of Faa's picks.

"I'm going to have to check with--"

"Don't bother," Alex said. His tone was not angry, it was disdainful; dismissive.

Could Faa have really forgotten so major a detail as a photocopy machine? It seemed impossible. And yet two minutes later I was dealing with the same question again.

"Where is it?" said a panicky-voiced woman who I remembered from the interview as having appeared quite poised. "I can't do my activities without it!"

"Alright people," I said, raising my voice to address all the teachers in the room. "We have a problem with the photocopy machine today," -- I heard a quiet snicker from the back of the room -- "but don't worry. Remember that this is the first day. All you need to do is introduce yourself, get the students to talk a little about themselves, discuss what you'll be doing during the term, and play a few games."

"But how can I play games without my activities!" the woman shrieked.

I looked up at the clock. It was 4:28. I closed my eyes. "Look," I said, realizing only at that moment how I could save the situation, "give me the things you need photocopied, write down how many copies you need, and by the second half of the class, you'll get them."

There was a panic among the teachers to count and scribble and rush their books over to me as the last two minutes before class melted away. At

last I was left standing alone in the center of the teachers' room, feeling very dazed.

"Wasn't that great?" Nathan said at 8:30 p.m. when the last of the teachers had left the building. "It's like a dream! I had to keep on reminding myself that this school is ours!"

I gave Nathan a horrible look but somehow he missed it. What had become clear to me by the end of the day was that the teachers and secretary saw me differently than they saw Nathan and Faa. Nathan and Faa were the "big bosses," remote and untouchable. I was the "little boss," the one to come to when there was a problem. Nobody had arranged things this way, they had just happened: humans have a great knack for creating a hierarchy when one isn't already there.

"I think we should celebrate," Faa said, and Nathan walked over and kissed her on the nose.

"You two go on without me," I said. "I just want to sleep." On the way out the door I yelled out, "And Faa, you forgot the photocopy machine!" I was consoled at least to hear her say some very bad words in Thai, as I made my way down the stairs.

The next few days were only slightly less horrible than the first. Every day at 6:30 I would pace around nervously for ten minutes until, at 6:40 on the nose, Maggie burst into her Upper Intermediate classroom, sweating and breathing heavily. On the third day I realized that for the first time in my life, I would have to discipline another teacher.

I took her aside during break time. "It's not my fault," she said defensively, guessing what was coming. "I get back from my day job at six - - that only gives me half an hour to eat."

"No," I said, feeling like the asshole boss from jobs past, "that gives you half an hour to eat *and* get over here. If you eat at home, you'll have to prepare supper before you leave in the morning. Otherwise, there's a noodle shop right around the corner -- they can have a plate in front of you in four minutes."

Maggie gave me a dirty look and went back to her class. The next day, she was on time.

A few days later, I had a discipline problem of another kind on my hands. John came to me at the end of his shift, a look of weariment and disgust on his bristly face.

"I don't think I can take anymore of this," he said, wiping his brow with a hairy hand.

"Anymore of what?" I asked.

"Lower Intermediate. They're vampires."

"Behaviour problems?"

"Worst I've ever seen," he said, plunging his heavy mass into a chair and looking up at me dazedly. "They're all from the same class over at the elementary school. They all know each other. And they all treat this as some kind of recreational period." He groaned. "It's a nightmare."

"Give it one more day," I said, kneeling down beside him. "I'll come by and watch tomorrow. We'll figure something out."

John nodded. He got up and wandered away.

The next day I positioned myself just outside the Lower Intermediate classroom. The walls of the classrooms were made of glass, so I could see directly inside. I seated myself in a chair and pretended to be reading the Bangkok Post. I didn't want the students to know I was watching them: I wanted to see them in their natural state.

John and I exchanged a secretive nod as he went in. The door closed. I waited and watched.

The first few minutes were alright. John went over the homework from the previous day and answered questions about it. He then divided his class into two teams and launched into his warm-up activity. The activity that day was "word tennis". The teams competed with each other to name English words from a given category -- animals, fruits, vehicles. The students were spirited but not out of control. The warm-up activity ended. And then came... chaos.

John turned his back to write the title of the day's lesson on the board, and one of the students lifted up his homework assignment and brought it down on his neighbour's head. The neighbour made to get out of his seat and the first student jumped up and fled across the room. The neighbour changed his mind about getting up and instead threw an eraser, which missed the first boy and hit a girl square in the nose. The girl put her hands to her face and started to bawl, objects began flying back and forth across the room, and a mad chase involving three students started up between the desks. John turned around and stared in horror, then sent a pained look in my direction.

I motioned him to step outside.

"It's too much," he sighed. "I don't think--"

"I have an idea," I said quickly. "It's clear they're all really antsy. They've been sitting in their seats at the elementary school for eight hours, and now their parents have sent them here for more. You've got to make them move, get the energy out of their system."

"How? Make them do push-ups?"

"Something like that. Have you ever heard of 'runners' dictation'?"

"No."

"You divide the class into teams, like you did before. Then you line them up and yell out a word. The first student in line on each team runs to the board and writes out the word. The team that spells it right first gets a point."

"How long does this go on for?"

"Until they're exhausted," I grinned. "Then you can teach them anything you want."

John shrugged. "Okay, I'll give it a shot."

Two minutes later a sound like the Burmese army invading on elephants resounded through the school. Carol, the teacher who panicked over the photocopy machine, opened the door and looked frightenedly around as though Armageddon was upon her. "What in hell *is* that?" she shouted, seeing me.

"An experiment," I shouted back. "Just ignore it!"

Alex opened his door as well. He walked over to John's class and surveyed the scene coldly. Then he walked back to his classroom without saying a word.

After about twenty minutes the sound stopped, and an hour later John stepped out of the classroom, beaming. "It worked!" he said happily.

"They're quiet as lambs!"

The other teachers in the 4:30 slot gave me cold looks. The next day I spotted them grumbling among themselves, and when I passed by they stopped talking and Carol looked down and studied her shoes. Alex leaned back and stared me straight in the eye, a defiant smile on his face. I ignored them and walked on.

Little did either of them know, the daily noise was much more distressing to me than it was to them. Behind my ears and at the nape of my neck, I felt the buzzing begin again. And although it faded after the running stopped, it stayed with me throughout the afternoon and late into the evening, disappearing completely only when I fell asleep.

EIGHT

I rarely saw Nathan at home anymore. In the evenings I ate a late supper alone and thought about my situation. I knew from the near-constant buzzing in my head that sooner or later I was due for another attack. Not because of the Lower Intermediate students' feet, but because of something I myself was doing every day. Two years of watching my symptoms had taught me that making difficult decisions was the worst of all possible triggers. And here I was, every day, making such decisions: deciding whether to replace Soong or hire a second secretary (at Nathan and Faa's insistence, I hired another), deciding whether to rent a photocopy machine or buy one (I rented), deciding whether to fire a teacher part-way through the term because his work papers weren't in order (I didn't). An attack was just a matter of time.

Unless I could prevent it. I thought back to the pharmacy, to the rows and rows of plastic bottles, each with a different label and a different promise. Surely somewhere among them was an answer, the reward of a logical process of investigation. I went back to the Internet cafe and redoubled my efforts.

After days of typing in words and phrases in various combinations, I entered "increases level of dopamine" into the engine and hit the Search button. A page dedicated to the biochemistry of nutrition popped up. I scrolled down past the weird-looking pictures of hexagons and began to read. Dopamine, the webpage told me, is created in the body out of substances eaten over the course of a day. The main substance is a protein called "L-Tyrosine", contained in foods like meat, eggs, and nuts. In order for the body to transform L-Tyrosine into dopamine, it needs plenty of vitamin B6, contained in such foods as meat, bananas, and potatoes.

That set me thinking. If I couldn't take Sinemet because of the danger, and I couldn't take Ritalin because of the rebound effect, couldn't I just increase my dopamine by eating foods with lots of L-Tyrosine and vitamin B6? It seemed logical. But why stop there? Why not buy L-Tyrosine and vitamin B6 in pure form?

I entered the two words into the search engine. A Canadian pharmaceutical webpage informed me that vitamin B6 could be bought online, but that selling L-Tyrosine in its pure form was illegal in Canada.

But would it be illegal in Thailand? I left the Internet cafe and walked excitedly toward the all-night pharmacy. I might have the solution to my problem in my hands tonight! In a couple of minutes!

The pharmacist did indeed have both products on the shelf. As she lifted them down to me she asked, "How's your son? Is he still in school?"

The sight of those two bottles had driven me into such a state that it took me several moments to realize what she was talking about. "Oh he's fine," I said. "Yes, still in school."

"Will you be taking more Ritalin for him, then? His packet must have run out by now."

Whether the woman was genuinely concerned or whether she knew I was a liar and was gunning for an extra four hundred baht, I didn't know. Not caring, I bought the Ritalin too and threw it out on the way home.

The L-Tyrosine and B6 combo made no noticeable difference the first week, but I stayed optimistic and increased the dosage. Somewhere during that time my birthday sneaked up and surprised me, in the form of a knock on the apartment door. I opened it to find Faa and Nathan standing at the threshold, big grins on their faces.

"*Suk san wan gert!*" they shouted in unison, and I took a step back.

"How did you know it was my birthday?"

"Your CV," Faa said simply, stepping into the hall and taking off her coat. (It was late January and there were nights when you could see your

breath, like in Canada.) “You gave it to me when I was preparing the promotional pamphlets, remember?” She added Nathan’s coat to her own and cleared a space for them among the dirty cups on the coffee table.

“So where should we go, kid,” Nathan said, winking at me. “How about another trip to Yoy Pocket? They must be missing us by now.” He looked over at Faa to check her reaction but she refused to be baited.

“We’re going to the Gusto,” she said to me. “Get dressed.”

The Gusto sits on the bank of the Ping River, on the eastern edge of Chiangmai proper. Getting there means leaving the walls of the Old City and crossing the wide waterway, thick and coffee-coloured by day, sleek and black by night, the crests of its waves lit by city lights.

A live band was performing when we arrived, and I asked the others if they would mind sitting outside. We were led out onto a wooden patio overlooking the river, lanterns strung over the awning, a candle at each table. We sat for awhile in silence, watching the night-boats drift by.

“What do you call those in English?” Faa asked Nathan. “It’s a long word, I remember. Sounds like an animal.”

“Catamaran,” Nathan laughed.

““Catamaran,”” Faa repeated. “It’s a beautiful word.”

Nathan grinned mischievously. "Now say it ten times fast. Catamaran catamaran catamaran catamaran catamaran catamaran catamaran catamaran catamaran."

"Catamaran catamaran caramatan canamarat.... *Ai! Khon baa!*" Faa shouted, and smacked Nathan's shoulder as he leaned back and bellowed laughter.

"In Thai we call it *reua song lam*," Faa said, when Nathan's chortling had subsided. "Let me hear you say it."

"*Reua song lam*," Nathan said.

"No, *song*. It's a different 's' from English. You've got to hold your tongue between your teeth."

"*Reua sssss...*" Nathan began, gripping his tongue with his teeth and making a sound like the fading hiss of a kettle.

"No, don't stop, you almost have it," Faa said.

"...sssss....," Nathan continued, brows furrowed, until finally, scowling, he stuck his tongue all the way out and blew a raspberry. They both laughed.

Feeling left out and annoyed, I stared at the city lights' reflections on the water. Each time a boat passed they bounced like Mexican jumping beans on a string before settling again. I thought back, trying to remember

the last time I had seen Nathan and Faa outside of school, and was astonished to find it had been only three weeks ago. It felt like so much more.

“Did you hear me? I said the school’s doing very well,” Faa said, leaning toward my ear. “Soong is getting so many applications for next term, we may have to add a couple of classes.”

“That means we’re going to need an extra classroom,” I frowned, turning away from the boats. “Maybe we can section off part of the computer room. Or the library—”

“Ali, relax!” Nathan slapped a large white palm over my shoulder. “We’ve got weeks to sort that stuff out.”

But *who*’s going to sort it out, Nathan, I thought sullenly, ignoring him and turning back to the river. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Faa watching me and considering.

“We have something for you,” she said at last, drawing a wrapped package out of her handbag. “I hope you like it.”

I slipped my finger under the scotch-tape and undid the wrapping. Pulling it away, I found a silk shirt, midnight blue and soft as the inside of a balloon. “It’s beautiful,” I said, momentarily awed. “Khawp khun mak.”

“It’s from the Northeast, where I’m from,” Faa explained. “Nathan helped me to pick it out. He knows you like blue.” She was watching me closely as she spoke, measuring how resentful I really felt.

“I was going to get you a coupon for a full-body massage, but she stopped me,” Nathan said, winking.

I looked from Nathan to the shirt to Faa’s watching eyes. I blushed. “Thanks, both of you.”

Ordering from the menu took three times as long as usual. Nathan insisted on learning each of the items he was unfamiliar with, and Faa coached him through the pronunciation.

“Not ‘naam nuu’, ‘naam *ngoh*’!” Faa remonstrated. “If you order ‘naam nuu’, the waiter will think you’re asking for rat piss.”

“Fine with me. As long as you’re willing to kiss me after,” Nathan crooned. Faa made a face and shook her head.

At their insistence, I ordered ahead of them, then folded my arms against the cold night and watched Faa, trying to figure her out.

Most of us have a problem taking foreign speakers of English seriously. We may not admit it to ourselves, but somewhere at the back of our heads we find them clumsy, awkward, less intelligent. It shows in the

way we respond to their questions, talking down to them like children, explaining simple concepts as though they must be hearing them for the first time.

And this is probably what you would do to Faa too, if she moved into your neighborhood tomorrow. Unconsciously you would take note of the way she drops the final “t” from “don’t”, of how she makes “take” sound like the word “tech.” You might even have to stifle a snicker to hear her say the word “ham-BUR-ger.”

But Faa had her own way of making you take her seriously. She looked you straight in the eye and read your face closely, taking in every twitch and tremor it betrayed. Talking to her, one had the distinct impression of talking to a teacher, an *evaluator*. Was it any wonder then, it occurred to me now, that Nathan, who had rejected the easy attentions of the C-Pub and Yoy Pocket girls, had become so fascinated with her?

At last our food arrived and I broke off my musing to dive hungrily in. Halfway through the meal, Nathan put his arm around Faa and said, “We have something else to celebrate tonight besides your birthday.”

I almost choked, but then Nathan continued, “This morning Faa and I discovered that our names have the same meaning.”

I looked at them quizzically. “‘*Faa*’ means ‘blue,’ I said.

“Or ‘sky,’” Faa commented.

“Your name means ‘sky’?” I asked Nathan.

“It means ‘gift from the sky,’” Nathan said. He paused, looking at me, then added with a little irritation. “Actually it means ‘gift from God,’ but my parents weren't big on religion, so ‘gift from the sky’ is what my mom always told me when I asked what it meant. But *anyway*,” he said, spreading out his arms. “Our names have practically the same meaning. That’s quite a coincidence, isn’t it?”

I snorted. “This from the skeptic who wants to tear down the vegetarian establishment,” I mocked him. “You’re not going to start spewing stuff about destiny now, are you?” I leered at him and spooned some tofu into my mouth. His brows furrowed and a gloomy look came into his face.

“It’s not... I’m not...” he fell silent but his eyes remained on me, the hurt pride in them showing through clearly.

“Nathan,” Faa said, reaching out and putting a steadying hand on his arm.

“It’s okay,” he said to her in an annoyed tone. “You don’t have to treat me like a child.” Faa withdrew her hand, confused and hurt. Nathan turned back to me.

“Of course I don’t believe in destiny. I’m just saying that it’s interesting, that’s all. Put two people from different cultures together in a room and what are the chances their names mean almost the same thing? It’s interesting... *mathematically*.”

Faa made to get up from the table and Nathan’s expression did a one-hundred-and-eighty degree turn. “Darling,” he said, grabbing her arm. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to take it out on you.”

Faa looked at him uncertainly and Nathan got down on one knee and, raising her hand into the red lantern light, kissed her knuckles and wrist and forearm until she broke into a smile. “*Haam taw!*” she cried. (“Don’t go any further.”) “I forgive you.”

When both of them sat down again, I apologized. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I don’t know why I said that. I’m not usually so insensitive.”

“Forget it,” Nathan smiled, back to his old jovial self. “One day when you’re least expecting it, I’ll get you back.”

“Let’s drink a toast,” I said, raising my Coke and clinking each of their glasses in turn. “Here’s to the sky.”

Nathan and Faa grinned. “And here’s to the birthday boy,” Nathan proclaimed. “May we finally find him a woman so he can get off my case.”

We all laughed and the evening ended well after all.

NINE

Over the following weeks, the pace at work did not slacken. Just as Faa had predicted, increased demand meant we were short on classes for the following term. I did the calculations and concluded we'd need two more. Word got around fast, and by the end of the day four teachers had approached me and asked for the extra work.

I suspect that managers with even the slightest training know how to handle a situation like this. I did not. I considered going to Faa or Nathan for advice, but they had left so much of the school's running in my hands by this time that it seemed pointless. Finally, on the Monday of the last week of term, I snatched a piece of paper, wrote down two names, and posted it on the teachers' bulletin board.

John and Nicola came by at the end of the day and thanked me. Maggie scowled at me on her way out, but said nothing. Alex waited for the others to disappear down the stairs, then closed the door and turned to face me.

"Four teachers applied for the classes, am I right?" he asked. I was somewhat taken aback -- the applications had been filed privately.

"You don't have to answer," he continued in an even tone. "It was a rhetorical question. So. Maggie, Nicola, John, and myself." He paused, taking his time, watching me carefully. "Maggie has a punctuality problem. John doesn't have work papers."

This time I was openly shocked. Nobody but me knew about John's work situation. I stared at the white crust in the corner of Alex's lips, feeling outflanked.

"So that leaves Nicola and me," he finished, still not showing any anger, only supreme confidence. "Or it should."

"There are other factors to consider," I said.

"Like?" said Alex, widening his eyes, truly curious.

Only now did the motives behind my choice become clear to me. Alex was right, there was no logic to them. Logically, I should have excluded Maggie for her lateness and John because his situation made him a risk, however slight, for the school. That left Nicola and Alex. But I *liked* John. And I *disliked* Alex. That was how I had made my choice.

Alex seemed to be seeing all this as I was thinking it. His lips cracked into just the tiniest smile and he said, "I think we can both agree that the best thing for you would be to reconsider."

I stood still, unable to reply, and he walked out of the room.

Was Alex's statement a threat? My gut told me it was. Going over the sentence in my mind, though, there was nothing that sounded overtly suspicious. He wanted me to reconsider, that's all. And if I didn't? What could he do?

I began to pace up and down the teachers' room. He could call the police and rat on John. The school would be slapped with a fine for hiring a teacher without papers, and John would be booted from the country. No risk for Alex whatsoever.

I cursed myself for not asking anyone's advice earlier. Swallowing my pride, I walked down the hall and found Faa's bedroom door open.

Faa stood facing out the window, her long black hair turned toward me. I could see her brown fingers squeezing into her upper arms, turning them milky white. Behind the bathroom door I could hear the sound of a shower running.

"Faa," I said, and she swiveled, a look on her face like a child caught in the act of stealing cookies.

"Another night on the town?" I said, guessing the reason for her guilty expression. She blushed.

"Just a short one this time," she said, brushing back her hair and composing herself. "I told Nathan I want to get up early tomorrow to work on some promotional material."

I nodded but she began pacing the floor. "I know we're not doing as much as we should, Nathan and I," she said. "I'm sorry. I don't know why I'm behaving like this. It's not like me at all."

"It's OK," I said, though it wasn't, really. "You've got other things on your minds."

She stopped and looked at me earnestly. "He makes me feel a way I've never felt before. *Sabai jai*, you know? I'm not sure how to translate it into English. 'Relaxed heart,' I guess."

"<I understand,>" I said, switching to Thai to remind her that I did, after all, speak it. "I think Nathan feels the same way. He's a different person when he's with you."

Faa smiled, lifting the corners of her mouth up as far as possible without opening her lips. (A habit, I learned later, from having bad teeth as a child.)

"He's like a little kid," she said, her eyes shining.

"Faa," I said, wanting to wrap up the conversation before Nathan got out of the shower and turned it into a social event, "I need your advice about the school. Do you have a few minutes?"

"Yes, of course," she said, instantly throwing down her purse and pulling up a chair. "Sit down and talk to me."

I explained the entire situation, starting with the decision to add two classes and ending with Alex's could-be threat. Faa sat still through the recitation, her face impassive.

"You have no choice," she said when I finished speaking. "You will have to give the class to Alex."

I stared glumly at her. This was not what I had wanted to hear.

"Alex is not a very nice man. I see that now. But he *is* being logical. John doesn't have work papers, and that is a dangerous situation. You shouldn't have given him more work than he already had."

"Alright, but now Alex is threatening us," I said. "Should we just give in?"

"What choice do you have?" Faa shrugged. "If you don't give him the class and he reports John to the police, we'll have to pay a *lot* of money in bribes. And the police might come anyway, even if he doesn't do anything. I've heard they sometimes do random checks."

I shifted uncomfortably in my chair. "But if these papers are such a problem, *we* can get them for him, no? All we have to do is pay some kind of fee and sponsor him for a work permit."

"Yes, but there's not enough time. He would have to leave the country and re-apply for a work visa. The space between the end of this term and the beginning of next is four days."

I groaned. I could see she had a point, but the thought of giving in to Alex's threat was anathema.

"Ali," she sighed, seeing the trouble I was having. "It's okay. It's your decision." She stood up. "We've left so much to you already, *you* should be the one who decides."

I grunted a thanks and got to my feet. On my way out, I caught sight of her in the mirror, brows furrowed, fingers dug into her arms.

That night I paced endlessly back and forth across the empty apartment. To reduce stimuli and help me think, I shut off all the lights.

Bright moonlight bounced off the gold-edged shingles of a temple and through the apartment window, sending cracks in the window pane spidering across the room.

Faa was right. As an ex-programmer, I could see that. But every time I thought of Alex's crusty skin and shifty smile, I rebelled. Why *should* I give it to him? I was the boss. Surely I had the power to resist the threat of a single employee. And how could I go to John and tell him I was taking his class back and giving it to Alex, who I was sure he despised as much as I did? If I gave in to Alex's threat and did this, what else would I give in to? What kind of manager -- what kind of *human being* -- would I turn out to be?

I wrestled with the decision far into the night, and the next day slept until it was nearly classtime.

I woke up, still having no clue what my final decision would be, pulled on my clothes and rushed out into the street. A tuk-tuk appeared around the corner and I flagged it down. The sun was mid-way down through the sky and the air was thick with bitter fumes and the ear-grinding roar of passing motorbikes. I hunkered down and we flew down the moat road along the rim of the Old City, sun flecks on the water chasing us along.

Alex and John had both begun teaching when I arrived at the school, so I washed up and took to meandering back and forth between their two classrooms, watching them, trying to make up my mind.

The wooden stairs creaked monotonously under my feet and the fish tank clanked every time I passed by, sending the goldfish diving from the surface with an audible plop. Soong appeared several times to offer his conversation or a cup of instant coffee, black sediment clinging stubbornly to the rim, but I refused both irritably.

Finally, with ten minutes to go before the end of class, I came to a decision. I would do the logical thing. I would give Alex John's class. I was outside Alex's classroom at the time, staring through the wall at the Lower Elementary students with their heads bowed fearfully over their work, and I was overcome by a feeling of pure misery. Right then I looked up and saw Alex watching me himself through the glass. There was an awful smile on his face, and looking at his eyes there was no doubt in my mind that he was laughing at me. For a second I saw myself as I must appear to him, wandering back and forth from classroom to classroom - a struggling little bug. I felt an electric rush from the base of my spine to the tip of my scalp. A flood of chemicals entered my head and my jaw set. I looked him dead in the eye and mouthed the words, "No way." Then I turned and walked two

steps and a brittle something in my head snapped. Everything went dead, the rage was gone, and I collapsed into a chair. Nothing mattered anymore. The attack had struck.

As it turned out, Alex's threat -- if that's what it had been -- was a bluff. No police turned up at our door. The second term began as smoothly as ever. But I heard about these things second-hand, because I was no longer "little boss" of the Canadian Center -- I was "absent boss".

The day of the attack, I went to Faa and told her I could no longer run things. I did not explain why, since that is one of the very things I cannot do after an attack, when my mind is like a slab of tongue filled with novocaine. Nor was I able to determine or care what her unspoken feelings about it were. I went home and thought fuzzily about suicide.

When self-pity is one of the only emotions you are left access to, thoughts of suicide become a luxury. I began standing at the ledge of the apartment, looking down through the tops of trees at the asphalt expanse of the auto repair shop below. I imagined allowing myself to topple over the railing and fall the intervening five floors, and the final crunch, which I imagined to be like the sound of a large insect caught underfoot. I began drawing the fantasy out, lingering longer and longer on the satisfaction of

that final sound, and the concentration of self-pity began to make me feel better.

Other times when I was not near the balcony, I found a way through difficult five-minute stretches by imagining thrusting a dagger into my chest, over and over. Eventually, though, both rituals began to lose their magic. I found Faa's sewing kit in Nathan's closet, then, and discovered stabbing myself with pins, watching for blood. At any moment, seeing blood brought satisfaction. Sometimes my self-pity would reach such heights that I would transcend myself: I felt cut down and dead, blissfully equal with all the cut down, dead things in the world. I was at peace.

But it didn't last, of course. Sooner or later I was forced to compare what I was now -- a numb insect-brained mess -- with what I had once been -- a tickle of a memory of a wide open world -- and I couldn't imagine ever recovering.

How long did I go on in that state? Two weeks? A month? I'm not sure. What I know is that when I finally felt well enough to return to the school, things had changed drastically.

TEN

From asking some carefully-phrased questions, but mostly just from observing, I was able to piece together what had happened in my absence. The day I left the school Faa called the staff together. She told them (accurately, as it turned out) that I was on sick leave and that from now on they should report directly to her. Her old self reasserted itself with renewed energy. Within a day she was striding around issuing orders and solving problems in her curt, no-nonsense way. She was a born leader -- that was clear to everyone -- and the first term rolled into the second as smoothly as if she'd always been running things.

But there were other problems. Nathan couldn't understand why I had left, and didn't appreciate being deprived of Faa's full attention because of it. Also, he was increasingly unhappy about being left on the sidelines while Faa did all the work. It seemed to him that if they loved each other, they should be able to work *together* to run the school. About a week and a half into the second term, he began appearing in the teachers' room prior to classtime. He asked each teacher to give him an oral description of their lesson plan, then gave his comments, sometimes having them make changes

with only seconds to go. The teachers began considering him a nuisance: sometimes he would issue orders directly contrary to those Faa had given.

Faa for her part was too worried about Nathan's feelings to confront him directly and tell him to butt out. She tried to work around him by waiting until he reemerged from the teachers' room and then quietly slipping in herself and, when necessary, undoing what he had done. The teachers were growing confused and unhappy. The new hierarchy was breaking down, and they didn't know who to listen to anymore.

This was the situation when I returned to the school in early March. The carpet was more marooned by the sun and more fraught with dust bunnies than I remembered it. Also the goldfish in the tank had been replaced by blue and yellow tropical fish, and someone had purchased a coffee maker. Still, there was a pleasing familiarity to the place, and I broke into a smile when I saw Nathan appear in the stairwell with a sheaf of papers in his hands, lips puckered in grumpiness.

He looked up and spotted me and I could see both happy surprise and irritation dance across his creased forehead.

"About time," he said with a scowl. "You just about used up your vacation pay."

I nodded. Nathan had no idea what I had gone through the last few weeks. On the rare occasions he had returned to the apartment to pick up a new change of clothes or some soap, he had made some similar joke about my "vacation" and I, being in no mood to communicate, had not defended myself.

"Looks like things have changed a bit around here," I replied, noticing as I said this that he too appeared thinner and more drawn.

"Yes, your throne's been toppled," he said, and now I saw that beautiful smile that I realized I had been missing for so long. "Faa and I are king and queen now."

"You will face no court rebellion from me," I said. "I've happily retired."

"No way," Nathan said, shaking his head and actually placing his hands on his hips. "You're not getting off that easy. This is just a temporary arrangement until we divvy up the work more equitably. You won't be sitting on your ass for long."

Soong came into the room with a telephone in his hand and I left the two of them to discuss whatever needed to be discussed.

Of course Nathan was wrong about the future of our work arrangements. Even if I had wanted to join in again, there was no easy way to split the work in three. The organization of a school requires a genuine pecking order, and already with two co-bosses our little operation was falling into disarray.

I realized how bad things had got when I saw how Nathan handled Alex. By this time Alex knew too much about the school for anyone to safely fire him. He knew about John's papers, knew that Faa had bribed an official to get parking space reserved out on the road and, being Canadian (from Toronto, as it turned out) knew that the school's Canadian connection was tenuous at best. Also, he had proven himself to be a decent teacher so there were no grounds on which to fire him. Faa realized all this and handled Alex as she would a venomous snake: with extreme caution.

Nathan, on the other hand, went into fits of almost childish rage at Alex's attitude. During his daily pre-class interviews, Nathan would make suggestions and Alex would not even pretend he would implement them.

"That is the most ridiculous suggestion I have ever heard," I overheard him saying to Nathan. "And I have been working as an English teacher for twenty years."

"Listen," said Nathan, already starting to shout, "This is my school, and I want things done a certain way around here."

"Is it your school?" Alex replied, keeping his voice calm. "Maybe you should start asking some questions. Nobody else seems to think it is."

Nathan went livid and stormed out of the room. Alex got up and gave me a thin smile before walking into class.

Often now, I took walks in the park across from the school to get away from the chaos there. The park was a carefully constructed thing, with small bridges spanning over tiny streams, well-tended hedges, and cypress trees surrounding it like a fence. What I liked best was to walk out into the grass on an overcast day and look up at the sky.

Chiangmai is located in a mountain valley, overshadowed by tall peaks due west of the city. On days when rain is forecast, you can hear thunder directly overhead yet look up to see a clear blue sky. The sound of the thunder comes from the west, and if you stand up and look in that direction, you can see another sky, dark, gray, and angry, impinging on the blue expanse above like a mid-day nightfall.

It was on a day like this that I pulled myself up from the grass, meaning to look toward the storm, and saw Faa only twenty meters away,

seated on a park bench. A group of kids from the nearby school were playing in the stream, trying to pick up fish with their hands. Faa was watching them.

My first thought was not to disturb her, but something about her expression, the way her whole face seemed to have slid a half-inch downward on her skull, made me change my mind. I came up beside her and sat down.

She looked up, startled. "*Ai!* Ali. I didn't see you."

"I was lying in the grass back there. Just wanted to make sure you're okay."

"Yes, I'm fine," she said.

"You don't look fine," I said. She was silent.

"Faa," I said. "The school is falling apart."

Her normally impassive face gave way and crumpled. "I know," she said.

"You know what you have to do. Talk to Nathan. Tell him to take a backseat, like me."

"I can't," she said, folding her face into her hands. "I just can't."

"Remember the advice you gave me about Alex? I'm returning the favour now. You have to talk to him. It's the only logical thing to do."

Faa looked up at me angrily. "Who are *you* to say that," she said.
"You didn't even *take* my advice."

"That's not the point. The point is, it was *your* advice."

She groaned and turned away from me. "You don't understand," she shook her head. "You're his friend but you don't really know him. He's a kid -- a little kid." She turned again, her face concentrated.

"The first week after you left I got sick for awhile, so I told Nathan to take over. On his very first day, he called all the teachers together. He told them that from now on they must start their class with a half-hour of explicit grammar instruction, even the elementary classes. The second half hour was to be spent doing written and oral exercises, and the third half hour was for review." Faa groaned and squeezed her forehead as if trying to exorcise the memory.

"It was a disaster. The students were so bored that many of them begged their parents not to make them go back. We lost nine students in one week. When I learned what had happened I got so angry with him, *na*, I called him a *khwai* – stupid buffalo -- and he got so hurt. Like a little kid. He wouldn't speak to me until I apologized.

"After I returned to work, he wanted us to divide the managing of the school. I told him, 'It's okay, darling. You don't need to do anything. You

can relax.’ Ha.” She flinched at the recollection of this. “That was even worse than calling him ‘buffalo.’ He began to shout at me. He said, ‘You don’t think I’m good enough, do you?’”

She sighed, glancing up at me. “But I understand, *na*. He feels *noi jai*, you know: very small. I understand and I want to take care of him, let him feel good about himself. So what I do now is let him think he has a little control. It doesn’t hurt anybody.”

“You’re wrong,” I said. “It does. The teachers don’t like it and in the long run you won’t be able to keep it up. You’ll end up spending all your time cleaning his messes.”

The rain started suddenly. Big drops began making quarter-sized circles on the paved pathway, and within seconds vertical streams of water appeared all around us to the sound of barrels of dry rice spilling onto paper. The kids jumped up from the stream and pulled their shirts half-way over their heads. They ran across the grass, through the line of trees, and disappeared.

“It’s okay. I want to,” she shouted over the sound of the rain. “I want to take care of him, *khao jai mai*? A woman takes care of her lover. This is the Thai way.”

"Listen," I said, shouting back. "If the school falls through and he loses all his money, that isn't 'taking care of him,' is it?"

Faa didn't reply. Her hair had transformed into a streaming wet curtain that she had to flick continually away from her eyes. She stood up and we walked together back to the school, the rain pinning our clothes to our skin. Just before we went inside I turned to her. "Look," I said. "Don't worry. As long as you guys still love each other, you'll pull through this."

She nodded uncomfortably and looked away. I said goodbye to her in the hall and went to look for a change of clothes.

ELEVEN

Over the next week, I watched Nathan and Faa's interactions intently, albeit discreetly. When the two of them entered the same room, Nathan's gaze would immediately fix on Faa and remain riveted to her until she noticed him and returned it. Faa, on the other hand, moved constantly in a blur of her own energy, and it was only in watching her this closely that I realized how distinctive she was, how different from any other woman I had ever met. All her movements were informed by perfect confidence -- she

was stern, and yet she was not on edge. She was enjoying herself, feeling her way through the school's problems the way a musician feels her way through a piece of music. But all that fell apart the moment she noticed Nathan looking at her. Then her eyes would grow wide and she would become awkward and ill at ease. She would make excuses to stay in the same room with him until he left. But it was not longing that was in her eyes as she checked nervously in his direction every few minutes. It was fear: the fear of a mother watching her child pedal onto the freeway.

If the nature of Faa's affection was changing -- and it was something I could only conjecture at this point -- Nathan's feelings were only growing stronger and more volatile. He waited more impatiently for the end of the school day than any student. In the minutes between 8:00 and 8:30 he would pace the hall outside Faa's bedroom, waiting for her to finish with the teachers and secretaries and come up to see him. Sometimes I would pull a chair out of one of the vacant classrooms and keep him company.

"I've told her a hundred times," he complained. "Stop taking on so much work. Let me do more of it. Let *us* do more of it," he said, looking at me dubiously. In the weeks since I had returned I had made no effort to take back any of my former duties.

"It's not good for the staff to have so many bosses," I said, as I did every time the subject came up. "It makes for a bad work environment."

"That sounds like an attempt by a certain someone to get out of work to me," he replied coldly.

I shrugged. "Hey, don't forget our business agreement. All you asked of me was that I remain a Canadian. Everything beyond that is overtime."

Nathan scowled. "My opinion of Canadians has plummeted dramatically in the last few months." He was talking, of course, mainly of Alex.

"Stay away from that guy," I said, meaning that it was for his own good, but Nathan took it the wrong way.

"Fucking Canadians, always sticking together if it means pissing on an American," he sneered. "Don't think we've forgotten Iraq."

I wanted to tell Nathan he had misunderstood me but I was too shocked by his words. Perhaps he had forgotten that I wasn't just a Canadian but an Arab-Canadian. Faa arrived soon after and I returned to the apartment alone.

The next day, I went to the pharmacy and bought my first bottle of Sinemet. The anxiety of watching the school slowly disintegrate and the

argument with Nathan had caused the buzzing in my head to start up again. This time I was determined that I would not suffer another attack, and I was willing to take any risk to prevent it. I did not know whether Sinemet would work. I did not even know whether dopamine was the key ingredient required, as I had hypothesized. But I didn't care. I tore open the package and gulped down my first pill, confident that my very recklessness had made me invulnerable.

The situation between Faa and Nathan was deteriorating more rapidly every day. Even the teachers could sense this now. When Faa slipped into the teachers' room and tried to exercise damage control following one of Nathan's whimsical orders, Nathan would now try to catch her at it. He walked constantly around with a look of displeasure bordering on misery. I tried to talk to him about it but ever since his Canadian remark a certain distance had grown between us, and he replied to my conversational offerings with curt stock phrases.

Faa for her part was looking more and more tired and worn down. She could see that the situation between her and Nathan was making running the school impossible, but she still did not say this to his face. She continued to move around the school, trying to find out what Nathan had last said to

everybody and then changing it, but the confident imperial stride which had once been her hallmark had been replaced by a sad, weary shuffle.

In the evenings after the teachers left the building I would sometimes hear Nathan in the hallway outside her bedroom, banging on her door. She complained that work was giving her headaches, but it was clear to him and to me that she was withdrawing from him.

On a Tuesday near the end of the second term, the situation exploded. I was in the teachers' room when Faa walked hurriedly in and, seating herself beside John, whispered that he should disregard what Nathan had just said about increasing the Lower Intermediates' homework. John was just in the act of nodding in agreement when Nathan strode into the room, looking furious.

"I was watching you," he snarled at Faa. "John, did she just tell you to ignore my suggestion?"

John looked nervously from one to the other and said nothing.

"Did she or not?" Nathan said, raising his voice. Other teachers looked up from what they were doing and the room went quiet.

Faa got up from her seat. "Yes, I did," she said. Her eyes narrowed to angry slits and her upper lip drew back. "It was a bad suggestion."

"And why, O clever headmistress, was it a bad suggestion?" Nathan sneered.

Faa paused and looked around at the teachers, all of whom were watching. Her face changed again. "Nathan," she said, her features trembling. "Please, don't. I don't want to do this."

"So you admit you were wrong then," Nathan said, folding his arms. "And that you'll stop contradicting everything I say."

Faa took another look around the room. Her glance lingered on me. I knew she was trying to make a decision. She was trying to choose between logic and something else.

Finally she turned back to Nathan and crossed her arms. "Because," she said, "John is already giving them enough homework, and this is exam time at the elementary school. Giving them more homework right now will only overwork them and perhaps make them fail their exams. Their parents will then look at those exam scores and decide that the extra education they get here is not working."

There was silence. Faa's argument was unanswerable.

"Fine, then," Nathan said, salvaging his pride. "But next time come and discuss it with me instead of weasling around behind my back." He

turned and walked out of the room. Faa cast a last look at me, a pleading look that I couldn't interpret, then walked out of the room after him.

In the days following, the shouting began. Whenever Faa overruled one of Nathan's "suggestions", whether openly or not, the two of them stepped out into the hallway and began to fight. Nathan's loud accusing words could easily be heard through the thin walls of the teachers' room, as could Faa's, who had begun to detail to him with increasing succinctness how his behaviour was destroying the school. The teachers looked nervous and tried to go about their business as though none of this were happening -- all except Alex who seemed to openly enjoy it -- but clearly it was having an effect. On occasion Nathan and Faa's shouting matches even took place during class time, and through the glass walls I saw the stunned faces of children and the embarrassed faces of their teachers. Complaints began pouring in. Students stopped showing up to class and some parents vowed never to enroll in the Canadian Center again.

By now I was taking 600 mg of Sinemet a day. If there was any benefit to the drug, events at the school had outpaced it: the buzzing in my head had reached dangerous levels again. I maintained my dosage and

stopped going to the school. There seemed little I could do anyway. Nathan had retreated from both me and Faa. He had moved his things out of Faa's bedroom but he did not come back to the apartment. Instead, he found an unused room on the downstairs floor of the school and made that his new home.

A week went by in the apartment. I read Nathan's detective novels and tried to forget about the school. More and more, though, I began to wish I had some way to spy on Nathan and Faa in their separate rooms on separate floors of the schoolhouse. In my daydreams I conjured up ways I could contact them without triggering my symptoms: an out-of-body experience, perhaps, or a carrier pigeon.

Finally on a Thursday night there was a sharp knock on the apartment door. I opened it to find Faa staring at me with furious eyes. "Where have you been?" she said. Her long hair was dry and brittle-looking, and her clothes had that faintly mouldy smell that clothes get in Thailand when they aren't washed frequently enough.

"I— I've been indisposed," I said. She glowered at me. "Are you coming in?" She gave an exasperated sigh and strode into the living room. I closed the door behind her. My hands were trembling. I knew the time had come to explain, but I couldn't see how I could bring myself to.

"You're Nathan's friend," she hissed, turning mid-way to the couch and staring at me. "He needs you now more than he's ever needed anyone before."

I shrugged uncomfortably. I was thinking about Nathan's remarks in the hallway on the day of our confrontation. "I offered him my help and he refused it," I replied. "I have to worry about my own life."

"What life," she snarled, eyes flashing. "You disappear for no reason and spend all your time in here reading *these*," she gestured at the books lying spine-down on the sofa and coffee table. "Explain to me how that is more important than helping a friend in trouble."

Her words cut me. I thought now of how Nathan had taken me in at the Irish Pub, even in my foggy, slow-witted state. Then I thought about the night at C-Pub and the way he had tried to set me up with the Chinese princess. I was surprised to feel tears welling in my eyes. "I have reasons," I said, but I could not keep the lump in my throat out of my voice.

Faa softened and came closer. She put a hand around my arm and looked into my face. "What is it?" she asked. "What's been bothering you?"

Part of me wondered if this too was just a strategic move, like the night of truth-or-dare or the gift of the shirt, but the compassion (real or feigned) in her voice unlocked the tears brimming in my eyes and they rolled

slow and hot down my cheeks. I sat down on the couch and told her everything, from the day of the first attack two years ago to the attack with Alex last month. By the end my cheeks were salty wet and my eyes stung, but it felt so good. She was the first person I had told outside a doctor's office.

“Have you tried Mulberry Green Tea?” Faa said after she had passed me a tissue. “It’s very relaxing. Maybe it could help. Or perhaps acupuncture? Or Thai massage?”

I wiped my cheeks and nose clean and began to giggle.

“What’s so funny?”

“It’s just that... you remind me of myself,” I said. Faa cocked her head and considered me, not completely understanding but looking pleased anyway.

“Look,” she said forcefully, standing up and moving to my side, “we’ll do this logically.” She placed an authoritative brown hand on mine. “We’ll go to the pharmacy tomorrow morning—”

“No, we can’t test two drugs at the same time,” I interrupted. And I told her about the Sinemet I was taking, omitting the details about the side-effects.

Faa nodded in approval. “Good. I want you to report to me every day how you’re feeling. You should not be doing this alone, you should have told us before.”

“I didn’t know how to explain it. I didn’t want you guys thinking I was... I guess, crazy.”

“Ha!” she snorted. “If you’re crazy, then what are we?”

“You’re in love,” I said, a little uncertainly.

“Stop saying that!” she snapped. “How do you know what I feel?”

“I’m sorry,” I said, blushing at the realization that I had been fishing for an answer, and she had caught me out.

Then she did an incredible thing: she sank her forehead into my armpit and began to cry. Faa, the most intimidating woman I had ever met, sobbed in my arms like a three-year-old. “<I feel so alone,>” she said in a muffled voice. “<I don’t feel anything for him anymore. But he loves me crazy-strong> -- *baa rak loey*.”

I passed her a tissue, wet from my own face just two minutes earlier, and she pressed it to her nose and honked.

When her sobs had died down to sniffles she removed her head from my shirt and dried off the mess she’d made of it. “I loved how he used to make me laugh,” she said, settling onto the couch and staring at her brown

hands. "But after I took over running the school, he stopped being a funnyman. He changed, became *arom mai dee*, always sarcastic and scolding me about something. Maybe I'm a bad woman, you know, but I couldn't love him after that."

"You're not a bad woman," I said. "These things happen." I put my hand over hers and a thrill flashed through me, violent and obscene. I caught myself looking past her fingers at the pale brown thigh beneath, at the tiny hairs along it that tickled the flesh of my palm. Was Faa reading my face now, I wondered. Could she tell what I was thinking?

"Nathan's known you for, what, three months?" I said. "It'll be painful, sure, but in the end he'll, he'll get over it." I ended my sentence with less certainty than I had intended.

"Maybe," Faa said, "but it will take too long." She broke into fresh sobs. "And the school will collapse, and all the money he's put into it will be gone." I remembered what Nathan had told me the day of our first meeting with Faa, and my skin went cold.

"We'll figure something out," I said, wrapping my arms around her to contain her shaking. We stayed that way a long time. It felt so good to hold her close to me, her skin right up against mine. I didn't want to let go and she didn't ask to be. We fell asleep and slept right through to the morning.

TWELVE

After that night it was inevitable what would happen next. There was no need to rush it or speak about it. I went back to work the next day, and every time I passed Nathan in the hallway I felt a pang of tenderness but also a terrible coldness in my belly. But when I passed Faa and our eyes met, I felt a thrill fill my whole body and nothing else mattered.

Somehow the electrical feelings that ran from the soles of my feet to the base of my jaw didn't trigger my symptoms, as they normally would. It was then that it dawned on me that the Sinemet was finally working. "Strong emotions use up the medication," the website had said. Well, I had used enough medication and I could feel strong emotions again. My gamble had paid off.

Nathan avoided speaking to either of us more than was strictly necessary, and in the evenings he went straight to his room and didn't come out until the next morning. I doubted he suspected anything because this was exactly the way he had behaved before. I still continued to try to be friendly

to him, but I never got so much as a hint of his longed-for smile.

How can I explain to you what Faa meant to me, what she still means to me? I was never very good with the opposite sex, even before my symptoms made romantic relations with them unthinkable. An anxious person by nature, my anxieties would reach incapacitating heights in the presence of an attractive woman. A woman like Faa, beautiful, intelligent, intimidating as all hell, should have remained far beyond my grasp. So why were things different now? How had I managed to come so close to her? A partial answer is the Sinemet, which allowed me to look at her – her body smooth and lean and coffee-coloured, her long black hair spilling over her shoulders onto her breasts, her eyes shining like silver pirate treasure -- with a focused, unselfconscious lust that would have been impossible before. But I have a second theory on why Faa did not set off my anxiety alarms, sensitive as they are: *she snuck in behind enemy lines*. First I saw her as a bigot, then as a boss, then as a friend's girlfriend. She was never a potential, and so she was never a danger. Until she was so close that the alarms couldn't detect her.

One evening I answered a knock on my apartment door and found Faa standing in the doorway, looking a lot more reticent than usual. "May I come in?" she asked.

"Of course," I said, doing my best to hide the beating of my heart which I was sure showed in my face. I closed the door behind her.

Both of us were nervous. We each thought we knew what the other was feeling, but there was always a chance that the other person would be horrified and never speak to us again.

Faa sat down on the couch and looked at her hands. "How's your head doing?" she asked at last, looking up.

"Good. I think the medication is working," I smiled. "How're things looking for the end-of-term exams?"

"Good," she nodded. "Nathan's been interfering less recently..." her eyes darted briefly away at the mention of his name, "so the teachers have been preparing better lessons. And the shouting's stopped, so Soong hasn't had to spend his whole day fending off complaints."

"Good," I said, and there was an awkward silence. "Do you want something to drink?" I said at last, moving from the chair.

"Oh I'll get it," she said quickly, rising at the same moment, then blushing to remember the reason she knew everything in the apartment so well.

"Let's both get it, then," I suggested.

In the cramped tightness of the kitchen all our awkwardness magically melted away. Wedged into a corner between the cupboard and the sink, our bodies were brought up against each other. I brushed the base of her chin with my forefinger and she turned to face me and I kissed her. She let her glass fall back to the counter and wrapped her arms around my shoulders. We kissed for a long time, feeling our soft way through the notched smoothness of each others' bodies. Then we walked arm in arm to the bedroom and cleared the detective novels from my bed.

The next day was both the happiest and the most difficult day at the school for me thus far. Every time I smiled at Nathan in the hallway now I felt like the worst of hypocrites, and when I asked him if he was doing okay, I felt like Judas Iscariot himself. Nathan for his part took no more or less notice of these overtures than usual, replying that he was "Fine," and not breaking his stride.

Faa was taking it even worse than me, and now when she saw him walk into a room she got that same look of concern (this time mixed with a healthy portion of guilt, no doubt) that I had seen in the days before the shouting matches.

But when Faa and I were in the same room together, it was bliss. Every other sound and movement in the room was muted and I could always tell where she was, even when my back was turned to her. I knew exactly what she was going to do or need at any given moment of the day, almost as though I were a part of her presence moving around the school. When no one else was looking and our eyes met, I felt her all the way down to the backs of my legs.

In the evenings we sat around the apartment and talked and played cards. We didn't go out, on the off chance that Nathan or someone who knew Nathan might see us. Faa talked to me about the Northeast and her family. Some of the stories reduced her to sobs. One such story was about a childhood friend sent by her parents to work in a Bangkok go-go bar. The friend sent money home for five years and then returned to Nong Khai half-dead with AIDS. The family wouldn't even let her near the house.

Why was Faa hanging about with a guy like me? I didn't have much to offer in the looks department, nor did I have Nathan's brash confidence or

his spontaneous joke-telling ability. But what I had – and I was keenly aware of it because it was my trump card – was a firm understanding of what Faa needed, what she had not got enough of in Nong Khai or anywhere else since.

And so I listened to her attentively while she spoke about her parents and her cousins, laid her head in my lap every evening after work and let her talk and talk and talk until her voice ran hoarse and neither of us could keep our eyes open anymore.

As the weeks went by I could see that both of us were changing. Faa was becoming softer even as I was becoming sharper, more focused, more alive. Sometimes I would come up from behind and grab her, twist her around, squeeze, just for the hell of it. I had more energy than I knew what to do with.

Faa for her part smiled more often, even when she thought herself unobserved. Things at the school were going well, and there were long stretches when we didn't mention Nathan at all, although his unspoken name continued to generate its own presence.

“Did you know he tried starting a business once before, when he was in the U.S.?” Faa asked me one evening.

I looked up in surprise from my novel. We had studiously avoided the subject of Nathan for over a week, and all of a sudden here it was, front and center.

“No,” I said, putting down my book and sitting up on the sofa. “He never said anything to me.”

“It was clothing and jewelry, import-export.” Faa was sitting on the couch across from me, halfway through preparing a roster list for the upcoming term. It occurred to me that the scratching of her mechanical pencil had been silent for almost an hour now. “He needed capital so he asked his best friend to join him as a partner. His friend said he didn’t have the money, but he put Nathan in touch with a guy who did. A ‘loan shark,’ as you say in English.”

She got up and walked over to where I sat. She was wearing a short white skirt that showed off her legs flatteringly, and I cursed myself for feeling aroused even now.

“The business did OK at first, I think,” she said, sitting down beside me. “Then Nathan’s parents died. After that things got worse and worse. In

the end, the interest payments were too much and he was forced to close down. He had to sell off everything and pay his remaining debts with his parents' inheritance money."

Our hands reached out and met. Faa continued.

"A few months later he found out that his best friend and the loan shark were in it together -- the whole time. The same months his friend had been consoling Nathan about his parents, he'd been collecting 40% of the interest payments."

I closed my eyes tight.

"That was three years ago. You and I are the first friends he's made since. We're the first ones he brought himself to trust."

I felt dizzy and a little sick. "Why are you telling me this now?" I asked quietly.

"The Sinemet," Faa said simply. "I wanted to make sure it was working before I told you. I didn't want you to have another attack, *na*."

"Thanks," I said, kissing her on the forehead. The story left an ugly taste in the air, and we were both quiet for a few minutes.

"I thought it was better if we both knew," Faa said.

I nodded. "It is. It's not fair for you to carry it alone." I paused. "But look, Faa. You can't compare what's happening now to what happened then. We're trying to save his money, not steal it."

Faa looked at me uncertainly. "Please explain."

I stood up and began pacing the room. "Think about it. As long as he's dependent on your love and your approval, his ability to make good management decisions at the school is pretty much shot."

Faa nodded. "Go on."

"Right now, it's true, he's miserable. He's in love with you and you're not in love with him. Wait," I said, seeing Faa's face turn somber. "I'm not finished. My point is, when you're in love, you don't usually see things clearly. But a year from now, when he's over you, he'll thank us for having stepped in and stopped him from destroying the school and his own bank account."

Faa knit her brows. "You're saying that by letting him see me as little as possible, we're doing the best thing for him, *chai mai*? He'll get over me faster, and that means his professional abilities will come back faster, right?"

"Exactly!" I said.

Faa's face relaxed a little. "It sounds logical," she said. From nearby came the sound of a temple bell ringing out the call to evening prayer. Faa sighed. "You know, I miss him."

I sat down beside her and nodded. "I miss his smile," I said.

"I miss his jokes." She cocked her head. "And the way he would always try to correct my grammar."

"Did I ever tell you about our debate on vegetarianism?" I asked.

Within minutes we were smiling and laughing again, the ugly edge of the story gone, already fading into the history of the evening. We were able to do that, I still believe, not because we were callous, but because we had convinced ourselves we were taking the best course of action. But from that night on there was a subtle change in the way we thought about him. With our jokes and our cute anecdotes, we had already begun to speak about Nathan as though he were from another lifetime. What we were really doing, I see now, was eulogizing him.

THIRTEEN

My own worst problems started two weeks later. The third term had just begun. Although a few of the parents had made good on their threats to withdraw their kids, there were still enough students left to maintain the eight classes we had. The teachers seemed happier and less grumbling now that Nathan had retreated into the background, although he still made some of them nervous by his quiet lurking in the teachers' room.

On a Thursday afternoon I became convinced that Nathan was reading my mind. I was flipping through the pages of a Bangkok Post when it started -- a disquieting sense of doubleness, as though there were two consciousnesses thinking through the words on the page. The feeling was strange and vaguely irritating, like trying to read while someone is looking over your shoulder. I looked up from the paper and stared at the unevenly painted wall. Still I could sense the second consciousness shifting around in my head, observing and making comments to itself, unintelligible but distinctly present.

The feeling waxed and waned throughout the day, but it was always strongest in the teachers' room. As there were always many people about, it was not until the end of the evening, when Faa was downstairs locking the

front door and Nathan and I were alone in the room, that I understood. Panic began to form an icy layer inside my stomach. Immediately my thoughts turned to Faa, and the necessity of keeping her out of my mind, even as images of her began to flash perversely through it. Pushing the images violently away, I made for the door. Crossing the threshold, I turned my head carefully toward his corner of the room. Sure enough, he was looking at me.

That evening I told Faa about what I had felt. She looked worried, and asked to see my medication again. "I'm going to go check the side-effects of this," she said.

"Don't bother," I told her. "I know them." And I told her about the hallucinations and the paranoia.

"So there," she said, her face brightening. "You know it yourself." She had been worried that my sense of reason had taken a blow.

But even though I could see that, in theory, it *must* be an effect of the Sinemet, in practice it was different. In practice I knew what I *felt*. It was like walking into a park and smelling the flowers, pricking your finger on a thorn, listening to the wind in the grass, and then being told, don't trust your senses. I know you think there's a park there, but actually there isn't.

At school now, I avoided the teachers' room but I lived in mortal fear of running into Nathan in the hallway. Once he popped suddenly out from behind a bathroom door and I made a mad dash for the stairs, hoping the adrenaline in my blood would keep me from thinking about anything.

Soon the teachers and secretaries began looking worried again. They could tell by my wild eyes and my constant river of sweat that something in the school was wrong, but they didn't know what.

After a few days, I stopped coming to the school yet again. I stayed in my apartment and waited for Faa to come over in the evenings. But I did not feel better there. Nathan was not going to let me go that easily. His powers were expanding even as I was retreating.

Sometimes I had horrible moments when everything would go quiet and time seemed to stop. Then my eyes would fix on some object, a lamp or the motionless fan on the coffee table, and that object would grow and grow in evilness, while my whole body would fill with cold-hot terror and my eyes refused to tear away. It got so that I had to start being extremely cautious, not allowing my eyes to rest on anything for longer than a split second. Because of this, I moved around constantly, and when Faa found me in the evenings I was bathed in a cloud of sweat.

"Please darling, stop the medication," Faa begged me, crying, but I refused to stop. The medication *was* working. Otherwise how could I experience such extremes of terror and shock without so much as a single buzz? I refused to go back to my former life, and I began to worry Faa would hide my medication. I bought ten extra bottles and hid them around the apartment, just in case.

The drug was affecting my relationship with Faa in other ways as well. Sitting alone in my apartment, I began to feel increasingly cut off from my feelings for her and Nathan and everyone else I had ever loved. I could "see" the feelings, the way a scientist sees and handles a specimen, but I was not *in* the feelings -- I was outside them. Sometimes spending time with Faa would make me feel better again, but more and more I connected with her only on a sexual level now: the feel of her fingers against my skin, her tongue sliding along my belly.

When we had sex now I asked her to scream for all she was worth, and she did. Even before the drug had become a factor, what I like and what I guess most men like is to have our name screamed out at the height of frenzy. It is *affirmation* that we want, more than anything else. The affirmation of our presence, physical and emotional. But what I got out of Faa's screams was one step beyond this: I knew full well that her screams

were an act, put on because she loved me. That she would *do* this for me was the supreme act of affirmation, one of the few things that could still give me any kind of emotional pleasure.

Faa's managing at the school became more and more erratic, as I learned much later. She would forget to sign the teachers' cheques until they came angrily asking for them. When parents came to inquire about their children's progress she would send them to the wrong teachers. Once she even disciplined a teacher for five full minutes for being late, before realizing the teacher wasn't even working that afternoon.

Not surprisingly, the teachers' morale began to slump again. And Nathan, perceiving the power vacuum, stepped in and began issuing orders, making things worse. Faa did not have the strength to confront Nathan this time or chase teachers around correcting him, so his orders stood.

Within a week the complaints began pouring in again. Parents complained that their children were getting too much homework, were being disciplined too harshly or not harshly enough, and that the methods by which the children were now being tested did not match the methods by which they had been taught.

Faa saw all this happening but this time she did nothing to stop it. She watched as her school fell slowly apart.

Meanwhile, my fear of Nathan had reached a new level. Moving my eyes constantly was not feasible anymore. The moment I rested them so much as a split second, a household object would catch them and hold them while it filled my frozen body up with terror. These objects were Nathan's spies, doing his command in revenge for what I had done with Faa. How stupid of me to have remained in the apartment, where he would know I was!

There was no time to waste. I closed my eyes and fumbled around the apartment, feeling my way around furniture and wall corners. Somehow I managed to pack all my things back into the two carry-all bags with just the barest of squinting. I left the apartment and began wandering the heat-stricken streets.

A hot afternoon wind blew in my face, setting giant palm leaves aflutter and red dust somersaulting past. I wandered for hours, crossing from one side of the Old City to the other, passing rows of silvery one-eyed tuk-tuks and crowds of skeletal dogs. Everything looked menacing and I could not bring myself to stop anywhere.

Finally at the south end of the Old City, exhausted and dehydrated, I stopped and rested on a bench inside the grounds of a temple. A yellow-robed monk moved sideways across the cement tiles, sweeping up leaves and dirt. He looked up at me from time to time and smiled nervously. He looked young, barely twenty. I kept my eyes transfixed on him. He was one of the few things that day that didn't make me nervous, and the regular motions of his broom soothed me. Finally he stopped sweeping and addressed me.

"Hello. Am you America?" he asked. I guessed from his English that he was from one of the poorer villages outside Chiangmai.

"<I'm from Canada,>" I said, and he grinned broadly.

"<You speak Thai!>" he said.

"<Yes.>"

"<Have you been here long?>"

I paused. "<Too long,>" I said. He came over and sat beside me.

"<Are you having problems in Thailand?>" I said nothing, afraid not so much of him but of someone or something else that might overhear me if I talked about it. "<Do you have a place to stay?>" I shook my head. He put down his broom then and offered me his hand. I took it and he led me toward the head monk's office.

FOURTEEN

My first days at the temple were hard. Although seeing the monk, or novice as he turned out to be, had given me a temporary sense of calm, nothing else at the temple did. At night in my new quarters, which the head monk had generously given me free of charge, I lay curled in my bed stricken with horror at the fiery red spirit-house outside my window. The little wooden house, the size of a birdcage or a computer, was draped with all sorts of alien-looking objects and lit from within by an orange glow of soul-piercing eeriness. I lay shivering in my bed afraid lest by some involuntary movement I should turn my head toward the corner of the room where the window was.

The only thing that gave me any peace, I discovered, was being in the presence of the novice who had found me. By the second day I knew which room in the three-story dormitory was his, and at night when I was sure no one was about I crept over to his room and curled up outside his door. It was the only way I could get any sleep. I'm sure some of the other monks must have noticed me, but no one said a word.

The temple was both extremely organized and fantastically lawless. Dogs and chickens wandered in and out of the office, the dormitory, even the temple. Sometimes I would spot a row of monks kneeling in prayer while inches away a loud cockfight took place. But the monks themselves followed an almost military schedule. They awoke at five in the morning, not so much from the gentle ringing of the temple bell as from the raucous baying of dogs it provoked. Throwing on their robes, they filed down to the temple and prayed and meditated for two hours. At seven o'clock, the monks ate a quick breakfast and spent the remainder of the morning doing a variety of tasks, many of them intensely physical. My novice once spent an entire morning on the hot metal roof of the dormitory, fully exposed to the sun, banging away at some broken sheeting. At noon they had their second meal, and fasted for the rest of the day: no food was available until seven the next morning. (I too was expected to follow in this, but I cheated and had large quantities of instant noodles smuggled into my room via a roadside vendor.)

Gradually the Sinemet began to wash out of my system. I had forgotten my entire supply back in the apartment, and I was too fearful to leave the novice's presence long enough to get it back.

I spent a good deal of my time in the carpeted interior of the temple, leaning against one of the thick red supports that lined the center of the room,

preferably in the crosswind of two fans if I could manage it. As the excess dopamine left my system I began thinking more and more of Nathan and Faa. What had become of them? Why hadn't I left Faa a note explaining why I had gone?

Sometimes I would feel such love and tenderness toward the two of them that my head would begin to buzz again and then I would have to get up and walk around and around the temple until the buzzing stopped. The monks were impressed: they thought I was doing walking meditation.

More and more I tried to understand my symptoms, not from a logical but from a psychological point of view. Were there ever times when I had managed to escape my symptoms without medication? I thought of those moments during the aftermath of the last attack when I seemed to escape it all by imagining myself cut down and dead. It didn't seem like a promising avenue but it provided a clue. During those thoughts, I remembered, I felt at peace and no more special than a dried leaf or some muddy water or anything else in the world. Death had made us all equal. Why did that thought help me? What kind of succour could I possibly draw from a feeling of absolute insignificance? And one day it came to me: the feeling could be reshaped into a message without lessening it, and the words

to this message went something like this -- stop thinking your own problems are any more important than anyone else's just because you happen to be you.

Thinking this made me feel calm in a way that made my stomach go all relaxed when I breathed. There was something that made me feel very good when I saw the world with myself not as the main player but as just one of the many players. Of course, these thoughts did not cause my symptoms to go away. But as the days went by they made me more willing to live with them and go on with my life. They made me see that an attack was not the end of the world and that life went on during the two weeks the attack lasted, even if I myself had to be absent from it during that time.

Around the same period I came to these realizations, it became suddenly and glaringly clear that I must return to the school at once. I shrank in horror at the thought of all the damage my absence had probably caused. I thanked the head monk profusely for his generosity, said a warm goodbye to the novice, and left the temple.

When I walked into the school again, I hardly recognized it. Giant red maple leafs adorned the walls and a large map of Canada hung behind the reception desk. A new receptionist who I had never seen before got up and walked toward me. "Are you here for the interview?" she asked.

"I work here," I said, not having a clue what she was talking about.

"Oh? Were you away on vacation, then? Mr. Morgan didn't mention you."

"Who's Mr. Morgan?" I asked, starting to feel irritated.

"Just a minute please," the woman said, and returning to her desk, she leaned over and spoke into what I recognized as an honest-to-God intercom.

Half a minute later there was the sound of feet stepping briskly down stairs and I turned around to see Alex peering at me from under his bronzed forehead. He grinned.

"Didn't expect to see you again," he said.

A horrible memory shot through my skull. It was the memory of the teachers' list the day after Nathan, Faa and I had approved it. Names were listed in alphabetical order and I could remember now, halfway down, the name "Morgan, Alex." I stood and stared at him. I could not understand what was happening.

"A little confused?" said Alex in his confident even tone. "I guess you've missed a few things while you've been out galavanting."

"Where are Nathan and Faa," I said slowly.

"They no longer work here," said Alex simply. "Nor does Miss Orapon own any part of this school, at the moment of speaking."

"How?" I breathed. "How did this happen?"

"Not too long after you disappeared on us for the last time, your brave girlfriend," he lingered on the word to let me know he had noticed everything, "decided to take off as well. In fact, certain members of the school, including your friend, were under the impression that you had left together." His words hit me like a rocket-launched boulder to the chest. My whole body sagged.

"Your incompetent friend fought valiantly to save the school, but luckily for all of us he was never given the chance to succeed. Miss Orapon, being absent, defaulted on her rent payment for the property. The owner came by, along with a representative of the Thai Commercial Bank. Your friend pleaded for them to accept the money directly from him, but of course the laws of this kingdom forbid that," said Alex, savouring every moment of this recounting of victory.

"Fortunately, I had a Thai business contact who was immediately ready to step in and pay all the bills. The whole thing was sealed and done within a few hours. My partner and I are now the managers of The Canadian Center," he concluded, "and much more competent ones at that." He smiled and leaned into my ear. "Now, get out."

I returned to the apartment and found all of Nathan's belongings gone, down to the toothbrush holder in the bathroom. The only thing remaining that was not my own was a sealed envelope labeled "From Faa," which he had left unopened on the coffee table. I tore out the note inside and read it. It said simply,

Dear Nathan and Ali,

I know I'm going to miss both of you so much. I am leaving Chiangmai and not coming back. Please forgive me, especially you Nathan, for everything I've done. Goodbye,

Faa

I heaved loud bitter sobs as I held the letter, shaking, before me. To compound things, Nathan had not even read the note and so probably still assumed we had run off together and made our betrayal permanent. In one fell swoop I had lost my two best friends, probably forever.

Time gave me some much-needed perspective. After the first few days of grieving, I realized that all was not lost. Faa had talked enough about herself that I knew the name and location of her family in Nong Khai. I flew out there the next day and took a tuk-tuk from the airport to their house.

The parents were every bit as stubborn and selfish as Faa had described them. They refused to help me even a little bit and were glad to hear Faa's second business attempt had failed. "Serves her right," they said.

As I was walking away from the front door, however, a coffee-skinned girl in a brown skirt motioned me over from the side of the house. She was Faa's sister, Air, she said. She had been trying to contact her sister for years but had had no way of knowing her address. She grieved that she had missed knowing at last by just a matter of a few weeks, but she gave me some hope: a list of Faa's childhood friends that she felt certain Faa would contact now that she was away from Chiangmai and in need of solace. I hugged her and promised that if I ever found Faa I would get her to write Air using a friend's address across town.

I have been searching for Faa for about three weeks now. So far she has not contacted any of the names on Air's list, but I am confident that one day soon she will. And I will be waiting for her.

As for Nathan, on that subject it is harder to escape the pincers of despair. There are some wrongs that we never get the chance to right ourselves, and what I did to Nathan was one of them. I don't know where he's gone, or whether he has found a way to recover from my betrayal, but I pray that he is alright. Nathan, wherever you are, I think of you often, and I miss your smile.