**Note to Laem and Others Interested**

 The following story is true, a *true story*. Each chapter depicts a story you have told me over the course of our marriage (predating it, probably). I’ve tried to faithfully transcribe your tales into the coherent, fascinating story you lived. Perspective is set at the age you were when that respective chapter takes place. Keeping the story as you remembered it at the time, as a child especially, is important. You have done an excellent job in telling your experiences rather than editing them to fit what you know to be true as an adult. Of course, I tried to be disciplined as well and recount only what you told me, uninfluenced by whatever research I conducted.

But I wasn’t there. So I’ve indulged in creative liberties, liberally. That is, I’ve invented dialogue and imagined your dreams. BUT, I took the speech and mannerisms I’ve loved for over three decades and attempted to retrofit and resize them to your child and young adulthood. So, even though the dialogue is necessarily imagined (hopefully not contrived), events out of chronological order (maybe even combined with other events), dreams completely fabricated, everything I have written is either based on what you or Punya, Tit Noi, and others have told me, what I have observed firsthand, or researched for background. Even the dreams are based on recurring themes of yours. I hope the voice I have given you in the following story rings true, that you see yourself in my depictions. Memoir authors get away with “dramatizing these things because the essential gist is captured – if done skillfully. They get some leeway because nobody expects conversations and minutiae to be remembered verbatim decades later. This isn’t a true memoir, of course, because I’m writing it, not you.

So, please read this with a pen close by and don’t hesitate in the slightest in marking the hell out of anything that is inaccurate or doesn’t ring true. Yellow, or shaded sections are sections that need more work, or input from you. PLEASE write anything that comes to your mind – use arrows, margins, the back pages, wherever you want to write.

That’s it for now. Love you forever.

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**Chapter:**

**All the Water Buffalo’s a Stage**

 “Lee-um! Lee-um! Lee-um!” the crowd chanted in wild anticipation as Laem confidently stepped onto the water buffalo’s knee and then onto her back. Smiling her famous smile, she strode to the microphone. Knocking a few clumps of dirt (ever the optimist) from the hairy apparatus she obligatorily said, “test, test, test” and then launched into a crowd favorite. Momb, her water buffalo (slash stage) acted unimpressed by her stardom and waded deeper into the canal. Laem, aware of the crowds’ wariness towards crocodiles, moved to center stage and belted out her number one hit. Understandably the crowd went wild.

 But sometimes she wondered if starting her day at 03:00am was a price worth paying for being a famous music star. It’s not like she had a choice though, beloved singer, or not. Saffron hues gathered each day at 05:00am quietly bringing morning to their doorstep. Rain or shine, Saffron hues. Monks (easily identifiable in their saffron colored robes) came knocking at 05:00 so their bowls of rice had to be ready and waiting. That was fine, she surely wouldn’t begrudge the merit the task earned her, but she was more than willing to let someone else do the earning. Her mother of course saw the matter differently.

 “Laem, bring me the bag of rice,” Manope would ask.

 “You have legs,” Laem might grin, dodging to the left the instant Manope released her grip on the pestle (her favorite projectile). She read her Mother’s body language in much the same way a batter recognizes a beanball. Laem’s mouth and reflexes were fully functional the moment she lifted herself off her sleeping mat (however slow that may have been).

 “Bring me the pestle. Hurry up!” And preparations would continue.

So the bulk of the household chores fell to Laem since her two older siblings were out of the house. Tit Noi, Laem’s older/oldest brother was………… Punya, AKA (to this day) Pi Chuuk, took a waitressing job up in Chang Mai, an act that dramatically altered the courses of two lives – Punya’s, of course, and our heroine’s. Details as our story unfolds, bear with me. That left her two younger brothers, Dang and Tape. Totally useless. Sure, protected in part by sak yant tattoos inked and blessed by their father, they did keep the dastardly Burmese at bay, but that came later. Ask them to push a mop rag around the floor and they fell back asleep with their butts high in the air. Worse than useless – they left muddy footprints. Was this the kind of doo-doo other famous singers had to put up with? Laem suspected not.

Manope (Mom) left the house early to hustle her wares; a wide assortment of fruit, fish, things made from fruit or fish, etc……….So that left dear old Dad, Sook. Dad, a shaman respected throughout the land, probably beyond, had his own affairs demanding attention. But he did lend a helping hand when Laem fell behind in her chores. She was expected to fulfill her obligations, and usually did, but sometimes Dad finished up.

Water buffalos from corral to hay pile.

School offered a respite from chores (if she forgot about the ironing, shoe-polishing, and homework the night before). So off she skipped to school surveying the varied trees for ripe fruit. Poaching fruit was a risky and exciting proposition: 1) the payoff, mmm; 2) risks – many, most immediate, dripping juice onto her uniform. Risk tolerance was Laem’s middle name, or would have been if she had deigned to sport a middle name, which she didn’t.

Occasionally a \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ tree bearing juicy, delectable inner seeds, incongruously reminded her of dental hygiene. Grabbing a few leaves she’d hastily polish her world-famous enamel (and sections of her pink gums if she got too exuberant) and then break into a trot because now she was (literally) running late.

Formation came first: Yao (her nickname meaning “long”) was always first in line by virtue of her height. Through the years Laem either lined up next to Yao or as far away as three spots down. Out shot their hands for inspection. Items checked: cleanliness (including dental), uniform appearance (ironing & stains), and jewelry (especially lack thereof). Once they were deemed worthy to engage in scholastic battle they broke into their respective classes: A, B, & C. Laem was careful to reign in enough brainpower to stay in the socially desirable B class.

That was about as much effort as Laem allotted to fitting in. She hung out with boys, eschewed sarongs in favor of shorts, joked at inappropriate times, and talked back to adults (when, in her mind, they were wrong). Her own mother, Manope, refused to buy her the pretty shoes all the other girls wore.

Promptly at 4:00pm the school spewed children in all directions. Neighbors, cousins, and Laem then reassembled in a pack to amble towards home.

DIALOGUE……… Ghosts (cultural mythology)! Insect battles! “YOU WALK LIKE A GANGSTER.”

Kid stuff was engaged in: joking, teasing, running, chasing, roughhousing (for the boys). \_\_\_\_\_\_ , Uncle \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_’s son and Laem were particularly tight. “Why do you hang out with him so much,” girlfriends would ask. Or, “You’re such a tomboy,” a particular comment Laem wore as a badge of honor (deliberately misinterpreting the inferred meaning). They peeled off to their respective homes one by one (or as siblings) thus disbanding the pack.

Laem trudged the final steps home. It was Eden: Banana, coconut, mango, grapefruit, pineapple, guava, kafir lime, etc trees thrived on their property. Candy had nothing over sweet and juicy mangos, especially with sticky rice. Lemongrass, several varieties of basil, bird chilies, sugar cane, a cornucopia of vegetables unknown in the west, and every herb needed for cooking except garlic and onion (they required too much space) grew next to the house. In a culinary sense, it was Nirvana. Fruit trees, 10 kinds of vegetables, mangos, bananas - 3,4 kinds, 10 coconut, big grapefruit, chomoo (rymes with shampoo, pear like, crunchy), starfruit, taro(water), tapiocca root(water), sugar cane(water), boab(not sweet), wintermelon(soup) Farm animals - waterbuffalo 3, ducks(eggs) 12, pigs (briefly), chickens 12, dogs communal, playpen for chicks.

But the price was chores. They lurked around every corner threatening to occupy every free moment up until bedtime. First up, animals to be tended: ducks, chickens, turkeys (to adorn the yard), pigs, and the water buffalos. Collect the eggs, clean the coops, feed the fowl. Slop the porcine and whatever else you do with pigs; they were Dad’s short-lived project and were gone before Laem was entirely clear about what she was to do with them. Then collect the water buffalos and take them to the far field: via the klong if the water was low, or the long way across the bridge if the water was high and swift.

Momb was matriarch of the three water buffalos. She was docile and therefore Laem’s preferred ride. So Laem set the parade in motion with a gentle heel into Momb’s thick hide. The other two she led by their noses (through which hung brass rings with attached rope). And then the aforementioned singing would commence.

 When the hoofed water beasts were moved she commenced with the other chores

**Chapter:**

**The Art of Drum Making**

 It’s not rain as much as percussion; insistent, driving, days on end. Cymbal beats on tin roofs, doors opening to enthusiastic applause. Life didn’t slow much on account of the rain. Hiding indoors didn’t accomplish what needed to be done.

 “Mmmm, that smells good,” Laem tells Manope.

 “It’s for tonight. Get what you need for the klong, but remember you have to carry fish back.”

 “Ugggh. I bet I have to clean them too?”

 “What do you think?”

 “Pinch the head, squeeze the poop. Pinch the head squeeze the poop. Pinch the head…Ow! Ok, I’m going.”

“See ya later, Momb. Stay out of trouble.”

 “I will if you will,” Momb replied, in body language, which Laem read fluently since water buffalos are not very loquacious and stick to only a hoof-full of tried and true phrases.

 “Ha ha, good girl!” Laem praised. Conversely, Momb translated Laem’s sounds flawlessly: “Blah blah, blah blah,” which was about all she ever said. (On the other hoof, Laem’s body language was much more eloquent and Momb often wondered why she bothered making sounds with her mouth.)

Laem tied her one-way fish-basket around her waist, grabbed her bamboo spear, a knife, and an empty can of condensed milk she’d been saving. Nestled within a massive chore, an opportunity presented itself and she was more than prepared to take advantage. Boredom was never a problem; no time for it. Chores, (un)naturally, demanded most of her time, then school, and then whatever help her mother needed. But her mind was never idle. Lastly, she donned her hat.

 Conical straw hats are ubiquitous in farming communities. They protect against insanity; that is, from pummeling, soaking rain, or broiling solar radiation. Bumbershoots, or umbrellas (if you prefer) require at least one hand and do not stand up to monsoons. So Laem cinched up her conical straw hat and pointed it into the downpour.

But why? Why does the rain drive everybody outside? It’s a chain reaction. Rain redistributes nutrients to all sorts of alternate places, including bodies of water. In turn, insects are drawn to the aqueous buffet table. An alternate reality lies beneath the buffet table surface as fish gobble up as many insects as they can. Humans notice that fish are congregated in large groups and learn to scoop them up in bunches at a time.

So Manope would do the fishing, while Laem waited for her. Then they would carry the fish back to the house then clean them immediately before salting. Aloi mak, mak (delicious). Her mother knew food, but it was a lot of work, long hours. Laem wasn’t dwelling on it though, she was preoccupied hunting frogs. Big frogs, Laem had particular specifications.

Quishk! Right through the brain, dead instantly. Similar technique she was asked to demonstrate in culinary school on a lobster (albeit with a knife). Laem put the frog with the new imperfection into her one-way basket and continued on.

What to do with the meat though? Give it to her mother she supposed. Frogs were one of the few things Laem ate – she didn’t eat eel, snakes, field mice, or insects. Adults ate those things with their buddies over beer, or whisky. Sometimes, around a fire.

Perfect! Laem settled herself inconspicuously on the fire’s perimeter. Shortly thereafter the frog was free of it’s skin. Surreptitiously she handed the naked frog to Ah Pew. Acknowledgement was subtle, difficult for the untrained Western eye to discern. No mistaking though, her frog was a welcome snack. This was exactly how she hoped to spend her waiting time.

 “Ever hear about his time in the Army? He trained horses for the Cavalry. Well, a colt he was training kicked him in the mouth so hard his kid has a crooked smile!”

“AHEM!” Ah Pew coughed toward their loud friend, nodding in Laem’s direction slightly.

“Anyway,” their friend continued at virtually the same decibel level, “during the war one night he was deep in the jungle. No moon. Nothing going on, so he thought he’d rest his legs. He plops down on this big old weathered log - no bark or branches, smooth. His seat is so comfortable he nearly nods off. In fact, his eyelids get so heavy he can’t keep them open and as he finally lets them close the python decides to move on! Ha ha ha ha!”

“I’ve heard that one, but it’s still pretty funny,” Ah Pew says.

Chuckles around the fire, nodded heads.

 “I, for one, am glad he didn’t get eaten,” said a friend of the Laem’s older brother Tit. “This one time in Burma,” her brother’s friend continues, “we were in close combat, a lot of hand to hand fighting. Everything was moving so fast, but at the same time in slow motion. Next thing I know I’m on my back. I must of tripped, or something, I really don’t remember. I look up and a Burmese is pointing his rifle down at me. He pulled the trigger. I heard the shots, but didn’t get hit! Next thing I know HE gets hit and goes down. Sook’s tattoo is the only thing that saved me. I should be dead,” her brother’s friend testified.

“He has other powers too,” an older man says soberly after awhile. “A few years ago my brother, Somchair, saw Sook fast walking. A few older heads nod.“Somchair was looking for place to nap, or maybe he really was trying to keep birds off the rice like he claims.” Deferential chuckles. “Anyway, he spots Sook from the corner of his eye, thinks nothing about it, blinks, and from the corner of the other eye sees Sook disappear into the tree-line. Three rice paddies separate the tree-lines.”

After a several beats, another farmer (they were all farmers) said, “Not all shamans are on the side of good, like Sook, though. Up north there is a shaman you can get to do very dark things.”

“Hold that thought,” Ah Pew says, catching the speakers eye, “don’t want the snacks to get burnt.” The hint was grasped and, indeed, exotic meat slid off skewers almost as he finished speaking. Laem idly noted the food was a contrived excuse to change the conversation for her benefit. Would have been interesting; oh well. “And what would you like Laem? There’s some tasty Eel,” offered her Uncle with a twinkle.

“No thank you,” unaware her repulsion wasn’t masked as well as she thought.

“Snake, then – less slippery for sure.”

“No thank you Uncle.”

“Ah a nice plump mouse!”

“No,… “Well, I’m afraid all that’s left is frog,” Ah Pew teased impishly the way Uncles do. He knew full well that Laem was a finicky kid; especially for a Thai, even for a girl.

“That sounds good Uncle, kap kuhn ka.”Laem ate her frog, tossed the bones, and returned to her project. She cinched the frog’s skin over the condensed milk can. In the days to come it would shrink and harden. Drumsticks would consist of rubber-bands wound over small bamboo sticks. Life wasn’t so bad.

Time passed; only the dead and dying, physicists, and shamans think to deal with time in any other way

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Pwitoowee, “Laem.” Manope, and nearly every other woman Manope’s age, chewed betel nut. It transformed naturally beautiful women to ugly, blackened teeth, then bestowed oral cancer in exceedingly high rates. Mai pen rai. It was the Thai progression to womanhood. Laem certainly didn’t give it a second thought. Punya, through shrewd career moves (and later, marriage), broke that cycle. Laem, not aware there was a cycle, never dreamed she too would break it.

Laem was on her feet a second after betel nut juice splashed the ground. She scurried to unpack the food her mother had made that morning. “Eat,” her mother commanded. So Laem ate. With frog still filling her belly, she felt a twinge of guilt, but reasoned, “Mom wants me here after all.”

So they ate (again, for Laem). It was delicious, aloy mak mak, of course. The extracurricular eating distended her stomach uncomfortably, (an unfamiliar phenomenon to Laem, or to her third-world brothers and sisters). Without a word, Laem went to gather the fish her Mother left for her to carry home. (To say it was a heavy burden for a child to bear would be imputing Western (new-world) work-ethics into a situation where it was not welcome; pussies).

**Chapter :**

**Pinch, Squeeze, Toss**

So Laem carried. What, she was going to complain to child welfare; labor relations? At least she hadn’t had to pick the fish and shrimp from the net. It was a long, dark, wet trek back to the house. Her mind soon filled with what every kid in the world thinks about on long, wet, dark treks alone: ghosts. In the West busy lives, light pollution, high-speed transportation, etcetera, inhibit paranormal interaction (not to mention communing with our own thoughts). Belief in ghosts is outgrown, discouraged, pooh-poohed. Not so in Thailand. Ghosts are respected, given wide berth. Houses are built for ghosts to appease them. Were Laem to confide in her Mother about a ghost, for instance, Manope would likely reply, why do you think nobody walks across that field.

Between Ah Pba and Ah Phe’s houses grew a nice big tree of the type preferred for center-poles in the construction of new houses. Center poles, kwan posts, were an important part of the house and as such Sook was called upon to bless them. Wood from trees like these were highly desirable. Ah Pew split and planed smooth many such trees and this one was a perfect specimen. It wasn’t needed for shade, or aesthetics. Yet it still stood. Nobody knowingly disturbs a haunted tree, let alone chooses it for their home. Laem was glad to see the haunted tree because it meant she was practically home.

Manope set up quickly and they began cleaning the shrimp and fish. It was long day for Laem and the end seemed nowhere in sight. While her mother pulverized the shrimp for paste Laem cleaned the fish. Her hands moved mechanically, swiftly for a kid: grab a fish, pinch off? it’s head, squeeze the out the poop, toss it into the rock salt, repeat. In the morning the fish would be rinsed then set out in the sun to dry. But for now, grab a fish, pinch the head, squeeze out the poop, toss into the salt. Pinch the head, squeeze the poop. Pinch the head, squeeze the poop. Pinch the head, squeeze the poop. Such heavy eyelids. Pinch the head, squeeze the poop. Don’t really need to keep them open. Pinch the head, squeeze the poop. In fact, I bet I could actually do this in my sleep. *Laem, don’t forget to put the animals to bed. But I’m still cleaning fish Mom. You can do both, stop fooling around…*

**Chapter:**

**The Hazards of Bathing**

 “*Good Momb,” Laem cooed leading her charge by the nose. As she had hoped the harder-headed youngsters followed her mother into the house. All the animals were now accounted for. While the ducks nestled on the counter were not exactly the place Laem had in mind for them she was afraid that rousting them would upset the calm of the general population. Dogs were leaving the chickens alone and heck, even the pigs seemed content just to mill about. Best to leave things be. With this strange chore accomplished, Laem lowered herself onto the hammock and fell instantly asleep. She saw herself in her classroom, intrigued by her ability to dream within a dream, but ultimately she chose a more relaxing dream. “Mmmm,” she murmured as the hammock swayed gently. It continued swaying. It swayed slightly further out and back, still very relaxing. Then further out. Laem tensed slightly to adjust, unconsciously. Still the arc the hammock traced continued to grow. Laem was now aware within her dream of tensing in order to stay on the hammock. And still the arc grew. Now she even rolled a bit from side to side. With each change in direction the hemp rope whispered her name from within the eyebolt, “Laem,” swing, “Laem.” Now that the motion included lyrics, her name even, the hammock once again became comfortable; “Laem,” swing, “Laem,” swing, “Laem,” swing. But of course the swinging became more vigorous, the singing more insistent, and shortly it was beyond slightly uncomfortable. “Laem,” SWING, wow she thought,* and opened her eye to see her mother kneeling over her, rocking her, “Laem,” rock, “Laem, get up.”

 “Mmmmph, morning mom.” Manope got to her feet and let Laem get ready for the day. Laem straightened her sleeping mat, and dressed.

“Laem, go get some cooking water,” Manope commanded, when Laem came downstairs.

 “I’m not hungry Mom, maybe later.” Manope fleetingly considered the mango, but Laem stayed put knowing that her mother would never hurl something she could sell at the market. Instead the kindling wobbled end over end and Laem jumped aside for appearances sake. After retrieving the firewood for her mother she grabbed the pot for her trip to the klong.

 “Take a bath while you’re there too.”

 “Yes Mom,” for while the above exchanges happened (more than once) they were far from the usual responses to each other. (That doesn’t mean these exchanges won’t become a my crutch. FYI.) So she stuffed some clothes, a towel, and a bar of soap into a backpack and set off. Since it was monsoon season she’d be making the trek without her water buffalos (not bison, or Canadian Geese, etc.). Monsoons brought high water, obviously, and everyone knew the high water flushed crocodiles from their normal hiding places out into the klong. She’d be bathing quickly, near the shore, but there was no way she was riding Momb across to the other side. Momb probably would agree. So she bid Momb good bye (there, she practiced her English) and set off.

 Ga La Noi (Little Star) wrote the songs Laem sang that morning (and nearly every day). Of course Laem was perfectly capable of making up songs and indeed her set list included several of her own. But Ga La Noi fascinated Laem. Laem farmed, Ga La Noi sang! In an exotic city no less! So Laem sang, which she would have done regardless. While her feet dependably took her to the klong, it was song that transported her far beyond her family’s rice fields.

 Well into her second set, Laem arrived at the klong. She filled the pot with cooking water, set it aside, then waded in. With the high water and the threat (however unlikely) of crocodiles, Laem bathed close to the riverbank. Lather, scrub, rinse – no wasted motions. Yet it wasn’t fast enough. “Aiii!!” she screamed, swatting her calf while scrambling up the bank. The grotesque thing took her blood and filled her with disgust. It was firmly attached and while it stung like the dickens it was her revulsion that was overpowering. Laem swatted again, harder and more accurately, thereby detaching a leech the size of her father’s thumb. Blood ran from the new dime-sized divot in her calf. The scar is visible to this day.

 “Chang! Chang! Chang! Chang!” ???? instead of Ga La Noi???

 Chang, chang, chang, chang, chang

 Nong kei hen chang rue plao

 Chang man tua tho mai bao

 Jamook yao yao riek wa nguang

 Me kiew tai nguang riek wa nga

 Mee hoo mee taa hang yao

 Repeat

**Chapter:**

**Back-Walking and War Stories**

Sook was sitting where he often sat in the mornings, which was on the ????, a wooden platform typically at the front of the house (or under the house since most were built on stilts) that served as the social gathering place. It might have reminded a typical American of a low deck, or portion of such. Luong Mien (Grandpa Mien, as Laem thought of him) was shuffling down the lane towards the house as he usually did a couple times a week. He was exceptionally short (reaching the height of Sook’s sternum), bow-legged, probably hard of hearing and despite a heavy speech impediment neither Sook nor Laem had difficulty understanding him.

Sook, of course, was accustomed to neighbors and others coming down the lane seeking his administrations. This was different. Luong Mien, also adept at Thai massage, visited a couple times a week to exchange massages.

“Sa wat dee, Luong Mien,” Laem said.

“Sa wat dee, Laem!” Luong Mien replied. Laem enjoyed Luong Mien’s company, and they both relished her father’s tales of training horses, and men to stay on them.

“How did you ride two horses at once?” Luong Mien asked, although both he and Laem had heard the act described many times before. Sook had begun kneading Luong Mien’s calf muscles. Both men had strong hands which they used to dig deep into tissue.

“Well, I rode one and led the other around in a big circle. When the two were running in-step, or close enough, I slowly got up on my knees, then to my feet, and finally stood all the way up.”

“How did you stay on?” Luong Mien asked (as Laem was busy trying to look busy rather than what she was actually doing, eavesdropping).

“You match the horses’ rhythm, up and down, up and down, up and down, and if you don’t you take a tumble.”

“Does it hurt when you fall off,” Laem blurted.

“If you don’t get away from their hooves it does,” Sook said grinning the family grin at her. Laem blushed and attempted to look busy again.

 “So how did you not see the enormous python,” asked Luong Mien, swerving into the next tale.

Sook smiled patiently and said, “We were pretty busy dodging bombs, looking for any kind of cover. The grass was lower than anything else so we dove into it.”

“Didn’t he move when you landed near him?”

“Well, he was digesting a deer so he wasn’t interested in us.”

“How did you know it was a deer?” Luong Mien asked.

 “His stomach was stretched so tight the deer’s form stood out clearly. But as you know,” Sook said, alluding to the many secondhand accounts, “I didn’t know right away that I was sharing something else’s space. When things quieted down,” Sook’s euphemism wasn’t meant to downplay the carnage, but rather to reserve the memories for a later, more reverent telling, “I noticed the grass was flattened. Why is the grass flat, I asked myself. So I looked closer and that’s how I saw him.”

“You thought he was a log?” Luong Mien asked.

Sook grinned. “That part of the story is true! He was very sluggish, not moving. Eventually, he tired of my company and slithered off – very slowly.”

After a while Luong Mien and Sook switched roles. Manope drifted past at one point and raised her chin in a subtly intimate nod to Sook; her gesture was instantly reciprocated. After awhile, the tales dwindled to amiable silence so Laem returned to her chores, and other diversions. With Laem safely out of earshot, Sook told Luong Mien the war stories in which Sook and his comrades rode their horses into battle against the Japanese war machine.

There was a reconnaissance airplane, a brief period of foreboding and quiet, then strafing, bombs, concussions, blood from ears, death. Few from his unit survived. Sook escaped into the jungle with his Siamese Mauser carbine rifle until the ceasefire (five hours into the war). Thailand, like Switzerland, maintained its neutrality up until Japan attacked. They fought fiercely, were overwhelmed, negotiated a ceasefire, joined the Axis, then fed the Allies crucial intelligence.

Bronze medal with elephant. More…

**Chapter:**

**Applied Physics**

“Sook.”

“Uhh.”

“Why does your rifle need to lean against this pole for me to knock over,” Manope asked. Each night both passed the pole (and the rifle) on the way to bed. If careless, they could easily knock the rifle over, and in fact, had on a few occasions.

“Well, I want to greet unwelcome visitors properly, no matter the hour.”

“Uhh,” Manope replied lifting her chin. She considered this for several moments. Even in the country burglars, and worse, existed. Her husband had just transformed the obstacle by the bed into a potentially useful tool. “Can you show me how to use it?”

“Uhh,” Sook said, by which he unmistakably meant, “of course.”

Laem raised her butt in the air, which leveraged her head up off the teak floorboards. It was becoming light out, which meant she’d slept in extraordinarily late. Dang and Tape were still sound asleep, but she knew without looking her parents sleeping mats were made up for the day. She looked over despite herself. Something was out of place and she studied the area until she realized the rifle wasn’t leaning against the pole. Interesting.

Dressed, mat straightened, she gave her brothers a sisterly nudge until each stirred, then went downstairs which, while under the upper floor, was still outside. The living area, the second (and only floor) was built on stilts in order to be out of the water during monsoon season. It had been raining so it was wet out, but it wasn’t monsoon season so the rain had stopped. Her parents were seated on the platform facing each other with the rifle lying between them.

“This is the bolt,” Sook said lifting the mauser slightly with one hand while pointing with the other. “Lift it up, slide it back, and the bullet goes in here.”

“OK,” Manope said.

“Put the bullet in, slide the bolt forward and back down. Now you’re ready to shoot.” He reversed the process and removed the bullet. Sook put the rifle in Manope’s hands and was about to watch Manope go through the steps herself when Dang and Tape came down the stairs. Dang was crying about something, his face bright red (dang, his nickname, means red). Tape was stark naked. This wasn’t unusual for either of them. Tape started to chase a duck when he stopped suddenly and squatted.

“Laem!” Manope called.

“I see him, I see him,” Laem grumbled grabbing the shovel. She dug a quick hole, buried her brother’s scat, and put the shovel back. Before she could return to her former vantage point Tape stepped in her way thrusting his arms high in the air (the universal children’s gesture for carry me!)

“I don’t think so,” Laem said, grabbing his hand, twirling him in the opposite direction in a dance-like pirouette to whisk away for cleaning.

“Put some clothes on him too,” Sook said. “We’re going on a little outing.”

“Where?” Manope asked.

“To get some target practice.”

A short while later Laem and Tape reappeared, dressed. Sook helped Manope to her feet, slung the rifle over his shoulder, then set out to lead his family on a rare adventure. Almost immediately Tape whirled into Laem’s path with his arms high. Laem scooped him up and placed him on her hip, barely slowing (complying with his demands was easier and faster for all.) Dang brought up the rear. The energy dedicated to reddening his face was given completely to curiosity; a happier shade now colored his face. “Where are we going?” he asked his sister.

“How should I know,” Laem said. Redness again threatened Dang’s face. Then Sook suddenly halted at the edge of a rice paddy. It looked like a good crop with the recent rains and somewhat higher water levels.

“This is far enough,” he said. It wasn’t much of a hike, but then hiking wasn’t the goal. Hiking, in fact, would have been a foreign concept to them: walking? For pleasure? Don’t we walk enough? Strolling, maybe, but that was for lovers and old men. No, Sook’s goal was to keep errant projectiles away from the house and domestic critters. The section of the footpath he chose was wide enough to accommodate a marksman, his wife, and a small gallery of kids. Rice and water were to the front and back of them (for as far as the eye could see, adjusting for banana trees, mango trees, bamboo trees, etcetera. There were sightlines of nothing but rice until the horizon, but then they had to shoot at something, didn’t they?

 “Put the butt against your shoulder, like this,” he said demonstrating. Manope nodded, so he handed her the rifle and she hefted it to her own shoulder. “It will kick a little, so make sure its snug against your shoulder. Now, see this notch at the end?” he said pointing to the front sight. “Line it up in the middle of this notch,” he said pointing to the rear sight. “Go ahead and try it.” Manope looked for the notch, found it, then tried to put the front notch in its middle. She couldn’t at first. She stretched her neck hoping that would marry the two sights – it didn’t. So she moved her face around the rifle, then moved the rifle around her face until Sook said, “Always remember you’re holding a very dangerous weapon.” This sobered Manope. Sook made some subtle adjustments to her grip and suddenly the sights aligned.

“Now point the front sight, the notch, at what you want to shoot. That’s how you aim. See the clump of leaves at the top of that bamboo tree? Aim for that. When you are ready, squeeze, don’t jerk, the trigger.” Carefully, Manope lined the sights up with the bamboo tree. She took a deep breath, and exhaled slowly, evenly. Manope was the figure of concentration. Laem, Dang, and even Tape were as silent as they had ever been, transfixed by their mother. Manope squeezed the trigger.

BOOM/ SPLASH!! Manope lay still in the rice paddy.

Sook immediately doubled over (battlefield experience was insufficient preparation for viewing his wife in such a condition). Laem, Dang, and Tape also saw their mother fly violently backward; confused, they took their cue from their father and erupted in laughter. Manope sat up bewildered, wet, and muddy. Immature strands of rice hung from her face and clothing. Being a slight woman and barely taller than the rifle itself, a proper shooting stance was crucial to dignity (and safety, of course). She smiled despite herself, but never touched the rifle again.

**Chapter:**

**That’s One Small Screen for Man…**

Ah Pew loved the fights. Muy Thai (which further incorporates the bony cudgels of elbow and knee into the fray) was his favorite. Consequently, he was an early adapter of technology. When he discovered he could watch pugilism in the comfort of his home he rushed down to Best Buy and purchased a television. It may not have been a Best Buy exactly, and there were intermediary steps involved before he could plug the elaborate box into a socket (chiefly getting electricity) but he made it happen.

While Bangkok had decades ago become a thriving, modern city, boasting mass transit and other crowd pleasing amenities, farmers in remote Nakon Nayok province still snuffed out their candles shortly after being lit. Furthermore, the concept of flushing away bodily waste would have seemed hysterically farfetched for those who had never visited the city. But that was before fights became televised.

So Ah Pew cogitated the logistics of getting his favorite pugilists onto a cathode-ray-tube set up in close proximity to his “porch” (for lack of an appropriate western translation). He sweated out several schemes while awaiting sleep (he wasn’t nervous, but literally hot – it was Thailand, after all. Despite the window shutters having been flung all the way open, the breezes were still often inadequate). Would palms need to be greased? Whose? If not, what do I need to learn to get electricity to the house?

The good news was electric wires already ran to the nearby school, hospital, and other governmental properties. The government wasn’t against progress, as long as it was the government progressing. Same old benevolent story.

So, there’s a good chance Ah Pew did a lot of the work himself because farmers are prone to doing things themselves. Besides, he wanted to watch the fights before growing old and the nearest electrician was, well he wasn’t sure. Even if he had the luxury of hiring out the work he definitely would have had to personally grease the necessary palms. (Government corruption is unique to Thailand, not! LOL.)

Ah Pew was hardly the only one who loved the fights – nearly every red-blooded Thai man enjoyed the fights. From the beginning Ah Pew’s porch was the gathering place on fight nights. Rather than rushing out and buying TVs of their own the men were content to gather at Ah Pew’s house. An electric fan, the first privately owned electric fan for several kilometers, soon joined the TV. It was years later (the 70s?), however, before electricity started appearing in other houses.

“The Americans are flying to the moon,” Laem told Somjai one day.

“That’s crazy! Humans can’t fly to the moon! Who told you that?” Somjai demanded.

“Why? You don’t believe me?” Sook told her, then news-readers over radio waves confirmed her father’s otherworldly pronouncement. Sook’s household (and many others) boasted access to electricity in the form of “D” cell batteries. Humble, yes, but powerful enough to reach out and grab radio waves then transmit them through tinny speakers ensconced in plastic.

“The Americans and the Russians have been flying in space for years now. Why not go to the moon,” Laem badgered.

“I don’t know. It just seems like make believe.”

“What’s the matter with make believe?

“Nothing, but”

“Have you seen my Uncle Pew’s TV?”

“Yes, but what’s that got to do with anything?”

“Doesn’t watching people move around inside a glass and plastic box sound like make believe?”

“Well….”

“Exactly. I’m going to my Uncle Pew’s watch men inside a glass box land on the moon.”

 Exciting times.

 She had no idea. Only those directly involved did. INSERT DESCRIPTION FROM NASA ABOUT LANDING ON DARK SIDE, COMMUNICATION WENT DARK, NAVIGATIONAL COMPUTER WENT OUT, LANDED FREEHAND, WITH ONLY 30 SECONDS OF FUEL LEFT.

But back in the states it wasn’t, exciting. It was grainy black & white and the boring men talked on and on forever and didn’t show anything exciting. So they played nearby.

 While her father rolled unpalatable, foul-smelling medicine into pellets, Laem rolled inedible clay lumps into projectiles. Little cycle of life pills. Sook’s pills traveled as fast as a particular digestive tract allowed, while Laem’s “pills” were slingshot. She was deadly accurate (literally). Violent little girl, you say. Well sure, but what’s not violent about life?

Many mouths take many bites from the farm. Soil gets fed first - crap, and other shit. And soil will let just about anything impregnate it so weeds quickly arrive to leach away nutrients. The crop itself feasts, and in turn battles worms underground. Battlefields expand exponentially when the crop pokes aboveground. Armies of insects, namely field crabs and grasshoppers, can lay ruin to large swaths. Mice, guinea pigs, and paddy birds wield even bigger mouths. These latter creatures are bigger targets, however, and are themselves desirable (in a flash-fried, or spit-roasted sense).

So birds are drawn to rice paddies for rice, insects, and water. Some crave rice over insects, which makes them fair game for slingshot-wielding kids like Laem. It’s a balancing game – rice versus birds versus meat-eaters. So Laem aimed her little clay balls at the crop eating pests and turned them into ready for flash-frying, delectable treats. In a sense, her “pills” helped keep their rice crops healthy. All the sweat, toil, and blood (albeit bird blood) would be for naught without…

NOTES: Early, 3-4 in morning to plow when sun not so hot, take warterbuffalo home, while mom planted rice, by throwing, more in the way. Waterbuffalo to and from field. 2-3 miles, forever so long, fall asleep riding & walking, start before sun Manope. Fold-up shelter Sook didn’t do much, at home mostly cause people came and saw him. One handled plow, one for plowing to tilt dirt one way or another – other hand for the reins. Try to get done before noon. 2-3 days, longer if dirt dry (need to crosshatch) not much land. Not many kids in field (except for weeding) – needs to be done right or rice wont live. School all year long. If not a landowner you usually work for someone else (most own land).

Before humans get to masticate the end product

Pests: field crabs, worms, grasshoppers, paddy bird, guinea pig, mice.

Other animals: waterbug (stingers in mouth), fish (climbing perch, \_\_barb, three spot gourami, silver rasbora), leeches (buffalo & needle), flamingos(?), mongooses(?), snakes, cobras, turtles

Plants: watercress, “turtle’s liver

Rice fields are a source for many unique epicurean morsels. Then again, Thais eat nearly anything (Laem being the exception, as noted previously).

**Chapter:**

**Momb’s Feast**

*By the time the water buffalo had begun eating (and trampling) the neighbors rice Laem had safely plunged into the pond behind the family house. Her breathing was a bit labored; not because of the all-out sprint to get to the pond, or the fact that she was underwater, but because the ghost terrified her. Waving gently amongst the submersed vegetation was comforting and she quickly calmed herself. More importantly, though, the pond was impregnable.*

 *When the danger was over she hopped out of the pond, grabbed her long bamboo stick, and jumped to the top of a nearest mango tree. Deftly detaching the ripest fruit with a flick of her stick she then executed a hands-free cartwheel onto a lower branch for the catch.*

 *“Bai!” her Aunt Ah Pba shouted at her. Laem tried, but failed to suppress a glistening mango smirk. She ran atop a few more mango trees then launched to the top of a coconut tree. From her new vantage point she glimpsed Momb feasting on her Uncle Ah Pew’s rice. The real world crept in and established a foothold. Waking thoughts nagged, “better go get her.” So she floated down to the road and walked towards her napping body. She hopped, skipped, then slid headlong back into her corporeal body.* That particular act nudged her into wakefulness of course, but with lingering omnipotence which almost immediately burned off leaving contentedness.

 Grabbing her bamboo stick with one hand while brushing herself off with the other she traipsed back toward the last place she remembered leaving Momb. The defining scene from her coconut treetop dream halted her in her tracks as she realized that it was very plausible that at that very moment Momb was munching Uncle Pew’s rice. But then she thought, “So what? Momb deserves a little fun now and then too.” Nevertheless, she broke into a run straight for Uncle Pew’s field.

 Momb raised her head, chewing, drooling, as she took in Laem with her placid eyes. Splashing through the rice Laem grabbed the rope dangling from Momb’s nose, laughed and said, “Thanks a lot Momb! I’m gonna get it now!”

**Chapter:**

**Indeed She Did Get It**

 Hay is for horses, so they used to say out west (way west), but rice, succulent rice, is surely meant for water buffalos, right? Momb didn’t make such gastronomical justifications, but simply obeyed her gut. Right or wrong, Guilt, those are human concepts. Momb, like other ruminants the world over, was an eating machine. So she ate – Ah Pew’s rice. Her job wasn’t to choose which food to eat, that was Laem’s job. Placing one hoof in front of the other the rice simply appeared. She had no choice but to eat it. Laem didn’t lead her elsewhere so obviously Laem wanted her to eat rice. But I’m putting words into Momb’s mouth (which was too busy chewing to speak about such things).

Kindly Ah Pew stood red-faced in front of Sook presenting his grievances. “And when I told her to get her water buffalo out of my field, she said *‘If you didn’t plant your rice there she wouldn’t have eaten it!’* She really said that!”

Sook listened patiently as Ah Pew detailed the ruination that represented days of toil and weeks of nurturing. Left unspoken, but acutely understood by both men, was the subsequent loss of income. Both knew farming’s slim profit margins. Ah Pew and his wife Ah Pbe (Sook’s sister) lived nearby. Sook’s other sister, Ah Pba also lived nearby with her husband Chone. Thus ten of Laem’s thirteen cousins also lived nearby.

So Laem needed spanking; for being irresponsible sure, but just as importantly to preserve harmony within the family. “Go find me a switch,” Sook told her (unaware the phrase had long ago become cliché).

“But DAD! I wasn’t asleep THAT long!” Laem was the only one in the family that stood her ground with her father.

“It’s your responsibility to keep the water buffalos where they belong.”

“I know, but…” Not only did no one else disagree with Sook, doing so never occurred to any of the rest of them.

“Our actions have consequences, Laem.”

“I know, but…” In fact, it was unusual behavior for a child in all of Thailand.

“Sometimes the consequences are more serious than other times.”

“But DAD, when do I get to have FUN? What about Momb? Can’t she have just a little rice, ever? It’s not fair!” Amazingly, Sook never discouraged Laem’s unique trait. However…

“Bring me a switch Laem,” Sook commanded softly.

By evening Laem was struggling to hold onto her anger. First came the frogs; their nightly ope-ope serenades were pleasant. Her father was sitting cross-legged when Laem laid down on her mat. Sook’s Sanskrit chants methodically eroded Laem’s anger. The familiar chant of words she didn’t understand soothed her mind. Each Syllable drew her closer to her father as together they approached the portal to other realities, the axis mundi

.

*Allowing her body and appendages to undulate with the currents, she eventually rocked ever so slightly, ever so slowly, off the bottom of the pond. Gradual additions of buoyancy floated her to the surface. She squeegeed her face then opened her eyes to a powerful jaguar lapping the water. Bright crimson blood highlighted his lethal maw. “Grow your horns carefully, Laem.” The surfaced smoothed and Laem watched her reflection coalesce into that of a waterbuffalo burdened by an enormous horn. She followed her horn to the bottom, watched the sediment explode around her eyes, and with the soles of her feet facing the sun she was once again undulating with the currents.*

*Sook left Laem to her dreams and continued on his journey. Pathways leading from the axis mundi were infinite, so shamans of disparate cultures used navigational aids, hallucinogens; Sook did not. Furthermore, neither he nor his family referred to him as a shaman – healer was what they saw, so that was how he was referred to, lacking as it was. “Healer,” however, understated the essence of who he was. Healing didn’t just happen though; information needed gathering, countervailing forces understood, directed. Healing was much more than slapping on a Band Aid.*

*Past, present, future; micro, macro, or midcro: those were Sook’s destinations, vastly simplified. So you see, he had (has) infinite universes to explore; infinite universes, in fact, (to the power of infinity). Put metaphorically, an experienced traveler could control the direction of his dream PLUS retain the knowledge gained from his voyage.*

*Your head is exploding. Mine too. Yet, Sook did this nightly (after dealing with Laem during her waking hours). So, let’s pretend Sook took a simple path, down the here-and-now, on a microscopic level. It’s all perspective: to get to the outer reaches of the universe, he lengthens his stride; innermost, he must shorten his stride (and probably legs, as well). The microverse (any of the infinite) is infinite, so careful navigation is prudent.*

*Sook is a prudent, and an experienced traveler. Still, a few billion pairs of what lay travelers call DNA, need perusing for each “patient.” Of course, the problem could just be in the patient’s “head.”Should the problem originate in the “head” Sook merely had to nudge one of 86 billion neurons (in the average brain) to fire in a different direction (if at all), at an exact time.*

*Naturally (relatively speaking), Sook would have had to take into account the various gravitational forces (Sun, Moon, Mercury, other planets (and their moons) in our solar subdivision, etc., ad infinitum, Latinum Platimus) on the particular day of that specific neuron’s firing.*

Modern medicine, for the past several centuries, has embraced the marriage of …….

Though radically divergent from Laem’s, Sook’s journey was also in search of truth.

Dreams are truths rearranged into puzzles. It was a purposeful journey, one taken nightly. Sook’s chants cleared away the distractions so that the path to deeper truths was clearer. By the time Laem began growing into her own person a significant length of Sook’s path had become clear.

 *Swinging her feet idly below the branch of the mango tree, she listened to the great cat. “Running is temporary. You must kill the root.” Ghost entrails snagged on branches fluttered with the wind. She snuggled closer to her father and closed her eyes for a moment. She was as content as she had remembered ever being. All was well with the world. Then the great cat lowered it’s head, nudged her gently, but repeatedly, until she fell off the branch. Her startled reaction ripped open another reality. Flying, swimming, punching, kicking, she tried everything in her arsenal to stay in the current reality. Amused, the great cat said…*

“Wake up Laem, time to study.”

To which Laem replied, “Mmmgphht,” and rolled over on her cotton stuffed mat.

“Laem,” more emphatic.

“Morning Dad,” Laem said groggily, thereby surrendering unconditionally to her new reality. Sook placed her notebooks in the candlelight near her. “Here Laem.” The best time to study was early in the morning when everything was quiet Sook believed. It would still be a few more hours before any of the animals stirred. Fortunately, bedtime came shortly after sunset as there were no light bulbs to prolong the day.

“Thanks Dad,” she said and began sorting her notebooks.

Under sepia colored photographs of teachers, and their teachers, Sook settled himself onto his own mat. Only a few others in the world studied the material he did. Study probably wasn’t even the right word, Laem thought. Observation yielded some snippets about her father, and stories people told through the years colored in some gaps, but the truth was she knew little more of her father’s “work” than anyone else.

He was a healer, obviously, but the ingredients he ground with his mortar and pestle were not the same ingredients Manope ground with her flight-prone pestle. And even though Sook occasionally took to masticating his concoctions, it wasn’t the culinary arts he practiced. Even so, people showed up at their door from all over the countryside to ask her father to spit on them. Laem’s giggled inwardly at her flip irreverence; but envious as she was of the attention bestowed upon strangers, she was always the proud daughter of a man doing good for other people.

**Chapter:**

**Harvest & Threshing**

Armed with a slingshot, astride her favorite waterbuffalo, singing at the top of lungs, Laem was living the life. Never mind that it was an ephemeral snapshot of her life and that it only tangentially related to rice farming (the family’s livelihood), Laem was her happiest in these moments. But, in another sense, Laem was responsible for maintaining essential farm equipment – Momb and her offspring. She made sure they were properly fueled and ready for work.

That was about as far as it went though concerning rice. That’s not to say she didn’t help, she did, but her big picture knowledge of the process was still developing, sabotaged by daydreaming of life beyond the farm. She was given chores essential to planting, harvesting, or nurturing, but the whole held little interest for her. She didn’t hide from work, but she didn’t seek it out either. Work would find her if it was important enough; it sure found adult family members.

Harvest was an inordinate amount of hard work. They woke well before dawn in order to get as much done before it got brutally hot then worked late into the night under big bright lights. Thankfully, the families took turns helping one another until all crops were completed. Everyone in the village worked – if you didn’t own land you were hired out by a family that did. Manope usually hired two to three field hands (Thai women are not subservient and often appoint themselves to do the finances).

Cutting the rice was a fluid and graceful act. With a swipe of the hand rice stalks were bunched and ready for the immediate swipe of a sickle from the other hand. There was a mesmerizing rhythm to it - except when Laem tried. Laem enjoyed swinging her sickle thru the stalks of tender rice bunched and taught in her other hand and then the sudden termination of resistance. Maybe she enjoyed it too much. To the adults she was so plodding and slow that they relieved her of duty.

 The rice was then piled in rows and left to dry for a few days. Then was gathered and put in the shed, or whatever.

Threshing began inauspiciously with the collection of dung. Ah Pew’s cattle contributed the bulk of the raw material with maybe a few dollops from Momb’s brood as well. A dung slurry was mixed to seal the ground for threshing. The recipe wasn’t too complicated – gather poop, add water, stir to an even consistency. Presumably Laem missed these events by attending school.

 But the fun part, she imagined, was spreading the slurry on the ground with brooms. Then bake at 90° or current daytime temperature. The smell, ugh. School seemed like an acceptable alternative considering. When the dung had dried, and the ground sealed, it was time for Ah Pew’s cattle.

 Next they covered the sealed ground with stalks of rice. Four or five cattle (because they were more docile and manageable than water buffalo) were hitched together with harnesses, the team tethered to a center pole. Then methodically the beasts were led round and round late into the night (bright lights shone down high atop poles) until they traipsed over the harvested stalks.

WORK LATE INTO NIGHT, BRIGHT LIGHTS – EVERYBODY PITCHED IN, AUNTS, UNCLES, TIL ALL FAMILIES DONE. IF NOT A LANDOWNER YOU WORKED FOR SOMEONE. WHEN YOUR FIELD WAS WORKED YOU SUPPLIED THE FOOD & DRINK

**Chapter:**

**He Spit on Me!**

“HE SPIT ON ME!” a small child wailed from downstairs. Curious, Laem set her dishrag aside and looked out the window. On their landing an agitated, topless toddler flailed about in the clutches of a worried looking woman as if he was drowning and she was water. He repeated his mantra several more times, “HE SPIT ON ME,” which did nothing to reduce the redness in his face. The redness on his back however would soon lessen and had he been a rational child (they only exist in horror movies) he would have noticed the cooling and connected it to Sook’s application of medicine.

The mother soothed her child a little longer then cleared him off her lap, stood, placed her hands together, bowed, and thanked Sook, “Kap kuhn mak ka.”

“Mai pen rai krop,” Sook replied.

Holding her son’s hand, she then retrieved a beautiful orchid from their boat and offered it to Sook.

Sook nodded and smiled in reply (the expected reply for someone of his stature)

Remembering how he had helped his mother pick out the right orchid the child inserted himself into the important exchange, “Mai pen rai!”

“Sook replied smiling broadly this time.

 NO BOATS!! ONLY NATURAL DISASTERS!! With his flailing behind them the risk of overturning their boat was minimal, so they untied from the porch rail and shoved off. Sook found a place for the orchid amongst the other orchids as Laem returned to her dishes. She heard the woman who had just left exchange greetings with her mother as they passed. Manope tied her boat to the railing then greeted Sook perfunctorily. Their greeting certainly didn’t betray to the outside world how close the two were.

Each evening however the two sat on the floor and put their heads together, literally, and talked so quietly their conversations were unintelligible to the kids. Laem surmised they hashed out their disagreements, the day’s business, the kids, that kind of stuff. Each treated the other with respect, never otherwise when in the presence of others. Disagreements happened of course, but her mother (the hotheaded of the two) would simply lift her chin and chuff out a “hmmphf.” Although Manope’s temper was quick, she moved on almost as quickly and didn’t hold grudges. That was the in-laws modus operandi.

Modern Western culture, the arts especially, romanticize True Love. They portray youthful, impulsive choices as, well, the True Love. Fact of the matter is life goes on just fine when romantic life is given sober direction. Of course there were always rebels, and they have been romanticized for, well, ever since (and before) Romans started sneaking their name into every other word! Anyway, expect a return to this subject – arranged marriages, not the damn Romans.

So, like many others in Thailand, Manope and Sook had their love lives mapped out. Just not with each other. Obviously they eloped, but that you already know. Manope, otherwise sticking to custom, moved to Ba Na with Sook (and the in-laws). Life couldn’t have been more idyllic: husband off to war, kids, a farm to tend to, but there was always the love and support of the in-laws – or not.

What did she expect, she went against the plan. While Sook was in the jungles straddling pythons for his country, Manope was dealing with his sisters and mother. So Ah Pbe and Manope just plain didn’t talk, ever. Ah Pba and Grandma \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ barely more .Strange tidbits, unusual lumps in Laem’s formative clay. Strange how mother and daughter butted heads.

Flash-Forward VIP Military Choppering in for Funeral

**Chapter:**

**The Funeral Pyre**

GHOST DREAM?

“Sa wat dee krop, Laem.”

 “Sa wat dee ka, Somjai.”

 “What are you doing, Laem?”

 “Fighting sand fleas.”

 “That’s kinda mean.”

 “They ever bite you.”

 “Yeah.”

 “Well they can bite each other. Here,” Laem says reaching up from her squatting position to offer Somjai a freshly plucked strand of hair, “tie this around it’s neck and go dip it into that mound over there.”

 Somjai did as he was instructed and was instantly riveted by the ferocious battle he set into motion. “You going to the funeral,” he asked several minutes later.

 “Yes, of course. Is your family going?”

 “Yes.”

 “Have you ever been to one before, Somjai?”

 “No. You?”

 “No.”

 Very nearby Sook was, coincidentally, constructing the spirit house for the funeral pyre. Stalks, peeled from big banana trunks, lay in a neat pile (think celery, Jurassic era). Onto these stalks he carved traditional decorative designs. Sook then pressed red, green, and (most auspiciously) gold pieces of paper into the designs’ recesses. He then assembled the life-sized spirit house.

 Sook was known for his artistic spirit houses; being an especially revered shaman gave the spirit houses that much more protection from ghosts and evil spirits.

The coffin would rest on a platform. It would be open at the bottom to allow for the flames. Dry, seasoned wood would be stacked underneath the platform, ready to be ignited. Corpses themselves were “seasoned” for about a year at the wat until the time came to be cremated. While the wat was the central clearing-house for the dead – storage, cremation, mausoleum space – the monks did not take part in the earthly tasks. As fire consumes the spirit house the guest of honor is transported to a (presumably) better life.

 Without explanation, Laem abandoned her sand flea to face certain doom and ran up the stairs. Her mother occupied the same space and time since their last exchange.

 “Why aren’t you outside playing?” Manope asked. “Do you want me to find something for you to do?”

 “Nope. Bye.”

 And Laem ran back down the stairs with the rhinoceros.

 “Here,” Laem offered.

 “What’s this?” Somjai asked, taking the proffered little box.

“HISSSSSS,” interjected Somjai’s new rhinoceros beetle who was itching for a fight and to be free of his confines (mostly the latter). To the trained ear (which would have been exclusively insectile) his inflection was wrought with regal disdain for Somjai’s sand fleas. It wasn’t really deserved, as the pitiable sand fleas neck-tied by Laem’s locks would rule human-kind were the roles reversed (any given insect is much stronger than all other terrestrial beings, proportionally).

“A rhinoceros beetle!” Somjai said, nearly shrieking (remembering just in time that men, young ones especially, didn’t shriek, especially in front of girls). “Where did you get it?”

“By the rain-barrel, eating a leaf.”

“Kap kuhn mak, krop!”

“Mai pen rai, ka.”

 “So, are we taking turns fighting him?” Somjai hesitantly asked.

“No, he’s all yours. Take good care of him.”

“You’re not going to the fight?”

“No, maybe next time,” but that was unlikely since Laem wasn’t into blood-sports (other than the retaliation she was currently engaged in). That’s not to say she didn’t introduce chaos into the lives of burrow-dwelling critters with her bamboo stick. Mischievousness and curiosity are frequent conspirators.

 The corpse was resting (comfortably, presumably) at the wat awaiting completion of it’s spirit house. It was a year ago when the villagers came to the house for an occasion westerners would call a wake. Close enough; not all translations gain from exactitude. Surviving family members kept busy cooking for the visitors; food was the focal point, after paying respect to the deceased. Of course, food is the focal point in most Thai occasions.

Evenings, when the visitors dwindled, they took turns keeping the corpse company, which was the best method to discourage harassment from bad spirits. It was a sacred duty, which usually lasted a couple days, no more than seven; there was no refrigeration, after all.

Staying awake was crucial, but hard to do in the long hours before sunlight. At least two people watched the body, largely to keep each other awake. Occasionally they took jibs from Mekong whiskey. Gambling, illegal in most circumstances, was tolerated while watching the newly departed; police are members of the same culture first and foremost. Despite the whiskey and gambling the tone was subdued, respectful and far from raucous.

The corpse, Ju Li, was next to be cremated. Naturally, this made Ju Li senior amongst the other corpses awaiting cremation and since burial was a virtually nonexistent practice, they all were awaiting cremation. Death liberated Ju Li from her body, for the most part. Occasionally she felt compelled to revisit her corporeal shell though, especially on those occasions the living would consider fraught with emotion. Conflagration of one’s former “skin” was an auspicious occasion for most disembodied.

Ba Cha was haunted, as all children, and most adults, including monks, knew. Often, there was spiritual activity behind the wat, Ba Cha, usually benign though, just souls checking in on their corporeal remains. Most were content to transition; but sometimes, as in life, unresolved turmoil escaped containment.

*Ju Li recalled a tale from when she was a fresh corpse. Time is a meaningless concept to the dead, which complicates retelling (did it happen, is it happening, will it happen – same, same, and same). Mai pen rai. To speed up storytelling, spirits slip back into the linear concept of time (which doesn’t speed things up at all, since time is irrelevant; but it feeds their “human” nostalgia, so that is the accepted structure).*

*“There had been an incredible amount of human activity that evening,” Ju Li began. “When I got here, there were thirty or forty of the living sitting quietly. It was safe enough because they were watching a movie,” there were polite chuckles to the old “living caught by the movie screen” reference. “I was new to this side so maybe I wasn’t very careful and I was a little slow getting out of sight when the movie ended.”*

“Did you see that!” Pen whisper-shouted at Laem.

She startled Laem, who asked “What?”

Pen looked again, but saw nothing more. “Nothing, I guess.”

“You scared me, Pen.”

“Sorry.”

*Busted! I kept out of sight after that, of course – any of us would.” They all nodded, some vigorously. Interactions with the living unsettled most benign spirits. “They made their usual noises, the fussing over their worldly possessions, brushing soil from their rears, talking, and finally footfalls. I peeked out when it got quiet, but there were two stragglers, girls. I hid again, quick! Anyway, anybody else tell kids that ghost story where the, can’t think of the fruit, it’s on the tip of my tongue…” nods all around, but no help. “Anyway, remember how we told them that after it crashed through the palms to the ground that if you picked it up and it was ‘face-up’ it was a ghost?” This was met with spectral smiles and vigorous nods. “Well I was safely hidden, I learned my lesson,” ripples of laughter, “it was quiet, not even an ope-ope from the frogs. Even the two stragglers were quiet, for girls.” Polite chuckles. “Then the whatever-fruit crashed through the palms and smacked loudly on the ground. Like I said, I was out of sight, but there was a dog resting by the tree and boy did it jump. The girls jumped too when they heard the fruit splat, and looked over despite themselves. They saw the dog’s glowing red eyes and ran!*

 “THERE!” Laem shrieked, pointing. A pair of glowing red eyes locked onto hers. Both girls shrieked, and ran.

*“Well you know how dogs give chase when the living run. Cats, rats, humans, doesn’t matter. This dog was no different; the falling fruit probably made it even more aggressive. The girls looked behind them, saw the bright red eyes, ‘our eyes’, and thought one of us was after them.” The assembled roared with inaudible laughter.*

Laem and Pen sprinted for their lives. Laem, dared to look behind her and saw the glowing red eyes closing the distance! “IT’S COMING!” Laem screamed; Pen harmonized with her.

*“Pretty soon they were out of sight, but not earshot.” Chuckles, Ju Li had her audience entranced. “I had to see how it ended. I was reckless and followed them. The dog was hot on their heels so I told myself they wouldn’t see me. All of a sudden the one girl stops in her tracks and whirls on the dog.”*

Laem stopped and whirled around so suddenly the dog was thrown off its game. She thrust her trusty bamboo stick out for the dog to see and shouted, “BAI!” Two glowing red eyes immediately disappeared, two remained. After a moment’s consideration, the mongrel turned and trotted back the way it came.

“Those stupid dogs!” Pen raged. “I thought they were ghosts. You showed them!”

“I hate bad dogs,” Laem said, but she really didn’t. “I thought they were ghosts too.” They looked at each other and broke into a fit of giggles that ended only when they parted ways.

*“Busted again! If I was still alive I would have peed myself!” Behind the wat in the Ba Cha if any of the living had looked, they may have noticed unusual activity that wasn’t quite wind; or not.*

Ju Li watched the mourners from a distance. Living friends were disquieted by pyre-side reunions, so re-acquaintances were postponed. Besides, her living years were a fuzzy recollection, at best. So she was surprised at the number of mourners snaking around the pyre to view “her.” Apparently she had been somebody of note. Frankly, she didn’t get it; it was just an empty container being disposed of and both sides knew it, rationally. Yet, the emotional draw was irresistible.

“How many were family?” Ju Li wondered. “How many close friends? Acquaintances? How many were there for the food? To be seen?” Nobody in line drew her attention emotionally, or otherwise. Then like a flipped light switch (which you still had to go to the city to do) Ju Li’s aura lit up at seeing the *dha khao* girls, especially the one that wielded the bamboo stick! Ironically, she probably hadn’t noticed the child during life. Ju Li waved reflexively as if she were still living (then put her arms down just as quick even though daylight was generally safe for such missteps). “Oh no! No, no, no, no! That is no sight for a child!”

But Laem and her family inched closer to the corpse. When they approached the foot of the casket Laem picked up her incense and lit it as her parents and other mourners had. She found the smoke pleasant. Ju Li could not watch; this is not how she wanted to remember the child.

Sook bent slightly over and reverentially placed his incense inside the coffin. Manope did the same. Laem mimicked the adults’ solemnity and reached her incense towards the coffin. Being shorter, the corpse’s face wasn’t readily visible, so under the guise of offering her incense she brought herself closer, and looked inside. The mummified remains grinned as if expecting Laem. A hand closed around Laem’s forearm pulling her away. She was too terrified to scream! She looked around wild-eyed and into Manope’s stern, but sympathetic eyes. Laem was grateful to be pulled back to a safer world.

**Part Two**

(Older, rebellious)

Chapter: Meanwhile – Punya/Joe Meet

You’re Not the Most Beautiful but you’ll do

**Chapter:**

**Punya Return’s with Joe**

Asks for Punya’s hand in Marriage? Already Married?

Ah Pew Climbs Palm Tree

Chapter: Laem Gets Punished for Hanging out w/Smokers

Chapter: Tit Noi’s Grad Party

Laem’s “boyfriend” dancing – his parents and Laem’s parents got along, so…

Weddings, parties, etc are occasions for villages to interact, young to flirt

Chapter: Falling off Momb, Passing Out from Heat

Go to School! You’re not farming! I’m going to Bangkok!

**Chapter**

**There’s Nobody Here for You: Back-Story**

 Sook was losing his daughter, again. Fever this time. His ministrations would take time to work, but meanwhile she was fragile, susceptible. Soon the ghosts would sense her vulnerability and try to take her. Laem needed time.

Sook and Manope already had lost three children, two when they were still young. Older son they lost to a stupid drowning accident. Parents are never free from the threat of tragedy, of course, but losing him on cusp of adulthood, after years of nurturing and bonding was especially devastating; it was unfair, he was practically raised. When older son returned to them Sook and Manope recognized him immediately even as he arrived in the form of an infant girl with completely different features. They named her ‘Laem’ in recognition.

 ‘Is she going to live?’

 ‘Not if she stays here, she doesn’t have time.’

 ‘What can we do, Sook?’

 Evil was now palpable about them and immediate action was required. Sook bent down, wrapped Laem in her blanket, then picked her up. They descend the stairs and walked to the small dirt road. Above them the sky was dark, almost black. Sook lowered his head next to his elbow, tucked Laem close to his chest, and fought through the missiles of dead vegetation and grit the wind was launching against them. Manope followed in Sook’s wake as they quickly made their way to their neighbor’s house.

 ‘Sa wat dee, Sook,’ their neighbor Luong Bli greeted in a questioning tone after his guests were safely inside.

 Sook got right to the point. ‘Laem is very ill. Evil spirits are close by and she’s too fragile to fend for herself.’

 ‘What can I do?’ Luong Bli asked confused.

 ‘Please be her father until she’s stronger,’ Sook pleaded. ‘That will confuse the ghosts. When they can’t find weakness they will move on.’

 ‘Of course, Sook. It will be an honor.’

**Chapter**

**Sook’s Coin Box**

 “What races are you running,” Boonsri asked. Laem looked up interested in the answer because she enjoyed track herself. She knew there was a meet the next day but she hadn’t given it much thought because you had to pay for your own transportation. Her parents didn’t give her extra for frivolities. Suddenly, all eyes in the group (in which she belonged only peripherally – they were going in the same direction) were focused on her. “I haven’t thought about it really,” Laem confessed. “Hundred meters, maybe?”

“Long jump,” Kulap replied to Boonsri as if Laem hadn’t spoken. “She runs like a cat, hits her mark, then jumps like a frog!” Interesting picture, Laem thought.

“What about the relays,” Malee asked. “Every other race someone stays home. She’s probably faster than Naak anyway.” They were now a few paces from the road and going their separate ways.

“Yes!” Kulap agreed. “Anchor leg maybe,” she said pausing at the dirt road.

“See you tomorrow Laem,” Boonsri decided for her.

“Sa wat dee, ka,” Laem answered. She had some quick thinking ahead of her.

Sook was sitting cross-legged in his usual spot on the klaat. He had no visitors, advice seekers, nor anyone receiving his ministrations. Laem saw her opening and pounced, “Dad can I have bus money?” She knew asking her father for money was a long shot, but it cost her nothing to try.

Sook got a kick out of his daughter’s boldness. Nobody else spoke so directly to him. He arched an eyebrow, “For what purpose, Laem?”

Omitting the reason was a feeble tactic, she knew better, and felt bad about pulling it on her father. “There’s a track meet tomorrow. Everyone is going.”

“Mmm.”

“So, can I?”

“Not this time, Laem.”

“Mai pen rai,” Laem replied conversationally. It was the answer she expected so there was no reason for histrionics. She sauntered off and awaited her next opening.

After awhile Sook got up and strode away. He was probably headed toward the wat since he hadn’t asked Laem to join Manope and him out in the field. Laem’s opening had opened. Like every other house in the area (and most of Thailand, for that matter) the house was built on stilts to minimize monsoon damage. Laem grasped her multi-tool (a bamboo stick), climbed the steps and went inside.

There was only the one big room; Laem, Dang, and Tape congregated their sleeping area on one end, Sook and Manope another. Framed photographs hung offset from the window adjacent to her parents’ sleeping mats. They were of Sook’s teachers and his teachers’ teachers. The photographs were very old, a couple from the very beginning of print photography. Directly below the pictures, but still higher than the top of the window sill, was a shelf.

Laem headed straight for window, bamboo stick in hand. Lying atop the shelf was her father’s money box, her target. It was not locked, but it was far beyond her reach – Sook himself had to stretch his hand above his head to retrieve it. Grabbing the left side of the window sill with her free hand Laem raised her right leg to chest level and placed as much of her foot as possible onto the bottom sill. Straining, she brought herself to full height (well short of her target) and placed what she could of her other foot onto the bottom sill. This was the easy part she knew, from experience.

Her first experience raiding her father’s money box had arisen from an obsession to join classmates in an impromptu trip to the waterfalls .Like the track meet she had to come up with her own funding. As difficult as it had been to get to a standing position (the first attempted raid had taken a few strenuous tries) tip-toeing on the balls of her feet to the corner of the sill until she was balancing on one foot, hanging with one hand, and reaching the bamboo-wielding hand high as high and as far over as she could reach was extremely strenuous and couldn’t be held for long before muscle fatigue set in. Yet that wasn’t the most difficult aspect of the caper. In addition, she had to focus on the space between the slats of the shelf so that she could furthermore zero in on the gap in the bottom of the box itself. Once she acquired the target’s vulnerable opening she had to wiggle her bamboo stick through said cracks and only then could she fish around for suitable, that is, anything that could be manipulated to fall through aforementioned cracks. She only required five baht; it would have been a lot easier if she could have just opened the box and take exactly what she needed, but no – she had to fish around.

So, that first expedition was an eventual success. Conditions for money transfers of this type wouldn’t be this good much longer (governments around the world, Thailand included, would soon become infatuated with minting money via pulp-products, paper predominantly) – money with heft is much more susceptible to gravity and manipulation than fiber-printed mintage.

Five baht was just enough, that first monetary fishing trip, to ensure a spot on the bus to blank falls. Laem went to school as usual. Focusing on academics that morning was grueling, but eventually lunch time arrived. She bought milk, as always. Having to grab just the amount owed for her milk was a novel feeling and reignited the anticipation she had finally tamped down.

“Sa wat dee, ka, Laem,” what’s her name said when Laem sat down with her lunch.

“Sa wat dee, ka what’s her name,” Laem replied, then asked “How are you doing?”

“Fine, kap kuhn mak, ka.”

Thais in the sixties and early seventies survived on far fewer calories a day than their western counterparts, especially in rural areas. Obesity was rare. Malnourishment, however, was familiar enough. Laem wasn’t a nutritionist and was unaware a medical discipline was devoted to addressing the condition she was observing. “You need to eat more,” any Thai (grown or not) would have unabashedly advised, often unsolicited.

Laem took in her classmate’s condition and her priorities shifted, significantly. Astute for her age, Laem recognized that her classmate was understating her difficulties. The falls and the popular crowd now seemed less pressing.

“I know you don’t need this,” Laem said offering what’s her name her hard earned five baht.

“Kap kuhn, mak mak, Laem.”

“Mai pen rai.”

Once again Laem was flush with money, relatively. Even though she hadn’t actively avoided what’s her name she did feel a slight pang of guilt in recognizing that she was relieved she didn’t run into her. But, how would she fare if Laem wasn’t around? Laem deposited her five baht into the coin slot and joined her classmates.

**Chapter:**

**Crab & Fish**

 Everybody in the house did laundry daily. Every day Laem’s mom, dad, brothers would enter the laundry room, close the door and begin doing laundry. That is, they dipped an aluminum pot into a rainwater-filled cistern, poured it over themselves, then lathered up with soap. Clothing, for the most part, was kept on and lathered as well. Lather, rinse, repeat. Laundry, shower, same difference. Finally, the freshly laundered clothes went into the dryer, which was anywhere on the other side of the door.

 School uniforms, her father’s work clothes, and other finer clothing were laundered more conventionally on the weekends. There was no multitasking for this chore – only clothing was washed. This was just another in Laem’s long list of chores, but it was one she kind of liked doing. Armed with a scrub brush and a metal tub she attacked dirt and grime while enjoying the company of her own mind.

 Manope was constantly busy. Finding, and taking goods to the market occupied most of her day. Many of the items she took to market were found within a few steps of the house: tree fruits like the several varieties of mangoes especially. Salt fish though was Manope’s niche, the reason people sought her out.

 Although they butted heads often, in this regard, Laem was like her mother. Laem, however, had an eye for crafts. In particular, she was adept at fashioning shopping bags out of glossy magazine pages, then selling them to store owners. MORE…

 About twice a month though, Manope put productive endeavors and chores (whatever few there were that Laem didn’t do) aside to hide in the bushes gambling. Impromptu games of chance were illegal so secrecy and concealment were, theoretically, paramount; theoretically, because the byproduct of such games, enthusiasm, is hard to bridle, infectious, all of which negate stealth. So with each game the location changed as word was passed along throughout the week. Often times this worked, sometimes it didn’t.

 The law is the law and sometimes the law wins. Payout, literally. But a fine line separates enough from insulting (the former an earned gift, the latter insulting, connoting bribery, corruption). Falangs may learn the art of paying off officials, but Thais’ innate sense of exchange usually seals the deal. There is a protocol, etiquette really, to offering “gifts.” An intermediary is often enlisted to approach the potential recipient and engage in the delicate matter of price. Again, enough versus insulting.

 It’s a game, of course, but why risk losing? Why dilute the pot? This is where lookouts come in. The concept obviously is to alert all involved and for all involved to look out for number one by scattering to the wind. One day Manope volunteered Laem for this auspicious duty.

 “Laem, stay by this tree. Tell me at once if you see the police.”

 “OK. Why?”

 “Mai pen rai.”

 “Sure, why not,” Laem mumbled.

Manope, out of character, missed Laem’s disgruntled tone entirely. Should Laem have sounded an alarm each participant would have grabbed different parts of the game and scattered. Pitching in removed the game from sight expeditiously, but more importantly incriminating evidence was minimized for each player. “If one comes this way run over and tell me as quickly and quietly as you can,” Manope reiterated. Her mother was already striding away before Laem could verbalize her response.

She watched her mother lower herself onto her haunches amongst her friends. A colorful mat unfurled and die were produced. The game was Crab & Fish since the squares on the mat depicted crab, fish, and…. Someone, Manope maybe, maybe someone else, maybe all of them, produced *mak* and en masse masticated the chew until their teeth and lips were horror-film parodies of *The Land of Smiles* travel posters. (That is, the *mak* produced a red juice that turned their collective teeth and gums red, with ample leftover spittle to redden their lips as well.)

Had Laem been given a few more years to experiment with rural Thailand’s detrimental habits and illicit diversions there is no doubt Laem would have….OK, there’s some doubt that Laem would have ended up like all the other older women of her village; Laem may just have refused the self-destructive trends, pressures, etc sheerly out of her contrarian nature, or, because she learned to think for herself early in life. Who knows? Life is hard.

Sentry duty that afternoon was uneventful. But Manope wasn’t the only adult seeking to put Laem’s maturity to their advantage.

FLASHBACK? LAEM GAMBLING RUBBERBANDS LOOPED AROUND HER WAIST IN 10s, ELABORATE, STATUS. POUCH FOR CLAY BALLS (WON FROM MARBLES-LIKE GAME). ONLY 3-4 KIDS MAX, SAME AGE.

**Chapter**

**Meanwhile Inside a Royal Thai Compound**

Meanwhile (because all good stories have a meanwhile), in the far away metropolis of Bangkok, Punya held a coveted nanny position inside one of the Thai Royal Compounds. It was less backbreaking than farming, cleaner, but it was still work and the hours were still long. So long in fact that a couple of years had flown by before she realized she hadn’t gotten out to see the sights, an important consideration in taking the job.

Regardless, she performed her duties admirably and after awhile earned a promotion to Nanny. Here the story gets mired in boredom because even though her wards were several degrees removed from the throne, one still respects royalty in Thailand. So instead we’ll visit the Royal Wet Nurse

“What’s all the commotion about?” Punya asked a coworker one day nodding her head towards the feast being laid out.

“(*Name withheld*) has returned to visit!” her coworker informed Punya. (Since Americans follow Thai royalty as closely as we follow 60’s era Thai country music the reader (you) will know exactly who the honored guest was!) “May is throwing a feast for him.” In fact, May threw a feast just about every time the crooner returned to visit.

Breastfed Children and their breastfeeding mothers bond closely. Widely known. Punya can attest that in some cases this “fact” also extends to wet nurses and their charges. “(*Name withheld*), this is Punya,” May announced unabashedly as Punya walked in on the grown man nestling his head in the older woman’s lap. “He’s taking a short break from touring to visit us,” she purred stroking his hair.

“Howdy Punya,” (*Name Withheld*) said.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance,” Punya replied professionally.

And time flew by….

Sook, with Manope’s help, ushered each of his children into the world. Nine of them. Laem knew five. Punya, all nine. Psychology 101 students could point exactly to what the sisters were too close to see: Punya’s formative years were punctuated with horror (certainly for her parents). Laem, given away to her Godfather when she had a bad fever so as to confuse the bad spirits, and throw them off her trail, experienced nothing remotely similar.

Both sisters were born in the year of the, (what’s the polite Western substitution), ah yes, *Rooster*; Punya a house rooster, Laem a forest rooster. So, they were Night and Day, but the same. Punya, the eldest sister, bonded with her mother. Laem, with her father. Manope was a doer. Laem pondered, given the chance. Punya it seemed was born pragmatic. Sure, she left as soon as she could for Bangkok. And, part of that consideration was to see the Big City. However, she wouldn’t have gone if she couldn’t send money (and honor) back to the family. And send she did.

So after a short visit home, Punya boarded a train back to Bangkok. AND this is where our story bears fruit: for, if not for this fickle decision our story goes untold: people don’t get born, other people are born, or not, all sorts of alternate realities assert themselves.

So, melodrama! Hahaha! Sorry. Anyhoo, changing trains at about the midway point between Ba Na & Bangkok, Ploy

 recognizes Punya (or vice-versa, who really cares except the two referenced) and Ploy

 pitches Punya a job at a luxury hotel. The job paid 350 baht, or one hundred baht more than she was making at the Royal Thai Compound.

“Oh, I don’t know. It sounds good, but I can’t just quit.”

“Why not? It’s just a job. They’re very important people, but it’s still just a job. Why not make another one hundred baht?”

“Well, what about the working conditions?”

“Are you kidding!? It’s a luxury hotel! Only well to do people can afford to go there. You’d be serving all sorts of important people. Army generals, politicians, businessmen, entertainers, all sorts.”

“I don’t know. What would I tell my Mom and Dad?”

“You’re a grown woman! Tell them you got a better job! What do you say?”

“Well…”

“The train’s leaving, come with me.”

“Haha! OK!”

**Chapter:**

**Continually-Adjusting Handle-Bars**

Laem inherited Tit Noi’s bicycle. He didn’t need it anymore, being a big-shot Buddhist and all. So she mounted her inherited conveyance and promptly steered it into a tree. Colorful raspberry abrasions now adorned Laem’s legs and forearms; damn learning curve. But bicycles won’t trample you to death (on their own; attach humans, going downhill in the Pyrenees as part of the Tour de France, eets possible).

“Sa wat dee krop, Laem. You sure have an interesting riding style.”

“Kap kuhn mak mak, Somjai! The handlebars keep moving up and down. It’s not so easy to steer.”

Falling, scraping, banging, pain: these negative reinforcements motivate normal people to stay upright. In that respect, Laem was normal. Tit Noi’s bicycle was not normal; it had a screw loose. Each ride a thrill-ride because Tit Noi’s bicycle sported continually adjusting handlebars. In other words, the screw holding the handlebars in place was missing, probably rusting peacefully somewhere along the side of the house. Laem adjusted, continually. She learned fast (even though the brakes worked fine).

 “So where are you going?”

 “Just up and down the road, maybe to the wat and back.”

 “To show off for the monks? Try to make them to smile?”

 “Maybe.”

 People of all ages and temperaments laughed readily at Laem’s jokes, her antics. Classmates guffawed. Sook’s eyes grinned, his lips and teeth occasionally betraying mirth. Even the old women who snuck Laem food at the celebrations she crashed laughed involuntarily. Almost nobody was immune.

Laem stuck out. She was bigger than her peers, a tomboy, feminine clothes ditched as soon as she got home. Closest friends were boys because girlish activities were boring. She spoke back to adults (when they were wrong). These tendencies made it easy to be laughed at. Some did. Many laughed with, as planned.

Monks were a tougher audience though. Revered, pious, stoic; especially stoic. Therefore Laem’s goal in life was to get them to laugh, or at least smirk. She had tried before to no avail. Now astride her unwieldy new prop she was cautiously optimistic.

The dirt road from their house to her school, the wat, and the main road was textured with ruts, puddles, tree roots, and vegetation, but otherwise flat. Increased speed decreased wild over-corrections which increased her confidence commensurately. Counter-intuitively then, the faster she peddled over worsening topography, the more stable she became. Jerky reactions morphed into subtle adjustments. Natural, not conscious; a mechanical symbiosis not unlike Laem and Momb’s perambulations.

Laem pedaled up the road confidently, reveling in the sensory feedback universal to new cyclists. Ruts, roots, puddles, divots – didn’t matter. Laem was riding in the zone.

“Wow! Look at you, Laem,” Pen, her classmate and friend, said as she passed. Naturally, this bolstered Laem’s confidence, and she pedaled harder. She was flying now. Truth be told, she felt a little out of control, if she dared to admit it to herself, but…

“Go Laem!” another youthful voice she recognized, but couldn’t immediately place, yelled. So “Go” she did. She was flying. Then she hit some gnarled roots and suddenly she was pushing with all her might (superhumanly it seemed) to keep from bashing her sternum into the crossbar. Unscathed, buoyed no less, she pedaled harder, confidently even, through weeds, puddles, and ruts – she was unstoppable.

Unconsciously, her plan changed. Like other good drivers, regardless of vehicle driven/rode/herded, she looked down-the-road rather than immediately in front of her. She was too good of a rider to pull off a goof predicated solely on inexperience.

She saw saffron. Expected. Exact color that pooled at her front door before sunrise: monks! But her mission had changed: en-lieu of slapstick, she would wow them with athletic prowess. Tit Noi’s pedals never saw such vigorous application. Laem was closing fast on the wat.

Ahead lay her last obstacle, a small bridge. In the creek under the bridge rusted bolts nestled in sediment. Sometimes materials fall during construction. Sometimes materials fall during aging. Laem confidently transitioned from road to bridge, but not smoothly.

Tit Noi’s bicycle and the bridge’s loose plank exchanged mathematical calculations then negotiated physics. Predictably, the monks were inscrutable (their physics, metaphysics at that, were on a higher plane). But when Laem steered Tit Noi’s bike onto the bridge’s adjusting plank their expressions were suddenly scrutable: interest.

There was no time for the usual slow motion reel: one moment she’s pedaling onto the bridge, blink, she’s extricating her face from muck, struggling into a sitting position. Excess mud and rotting leaves are wiped away to reveal an ear-to-ear grin. The monks broke character, and laughed.

**Chapter:**

**Meanwhile in Korat**

**(The Courtship: Short & Sweet)**

 The maitre d’ seated Joe personally. He had important business to conduct. Important people conducting important business frequented the restaurant. Waiters stood unobtrusively along the walls at the ready. The maitre d’ knew that to important people trying to accomplish important things food was usually only important if done poorly which thus interrupted business, otherwise it was hardly the focus – exacting standards were expected. Where appropriate, it was just as important to know the business of the guests’ and how to facilitate. The maitre d’ was good at her job so she was prepared to aide Joe with his agenda: he was ready to find a wife.

 Punya was given nine tables to start. Though only her second day on the job, she was competent, smart, and as per universally accepted hiring requisites, beautiful. She knew just enough English to perform her job. The maitre d’ gave Punya a heads-up that a special guest was seated at one of her tables. Punya thought this was an unusual warning – her impression was that all guests were to be given special, if not VIP, treatment.

 At her table, Punya saw a dapper, fit, well groomed gentleman twenty-some years her senior. First impressions were mutually favorable, so Joe returned, repeatedly, and their interactions soon progressed to dating, then courting. Punya knew some English, Joe knew some Thai.

He was a steamfitter, he told her, and that was what brought him to Thailand. The Merchant Marines taught him his trade and let him ply it out in the Pacific somewhere during the war. Her father, she said, trained cavalry horses then was a jungle-fighter (albeit briefly) in the same war. Afterwards, he mustered out on the west coast. Tales of friendship with Hollywood types made him seem even worldlier to Punya.

Joe made careful appraisals and assessments befitting a man his age courting a much younger woman; Punya approached the potential relationship likewise. After ensuring Punya met his criteria, Joe ended the courtship by declaring, “You’re not the most beautiful, but you’ll do.”

**MERGE with Above Chapter:**

**Drinking Buddies**

Pictures were being taken. Eventually, irresistibly, he would view them. But Joe was caught up in the moment, understandably. “Am I going to survive this,” he wondered. As if outside himself, Joe realized there wasn’t a hell of a lot he could do but observe; he wasn’t accustomed to impotency.

 Sure enough, the pictures caught up to Joe. “He’s sure got a pair,” Joe mumbled as he thumbed through the pictures. Frame by frame the horror of the moment was laid bare in black & white. Compared to the reality of the event, they paled monumentally. The pictures, taken out of the context of immediacy, seemed sterile, academic.

Yet there they were: an airplane in the distance; closer, slight wisps of smoke trailing behind; closer still, trailing smoke discernible; angle of attack indisputable, smoke all-engulfing; attack angle more acute, beginnings of disintegration; structural integrity gone; pieces of Japanese metal splash around ship, harmlessly.

 Joe, like his peers, didn’t brag to strangers about staring death in the face. Humility, not the absence of social media, kept his generation from bragging about their exploits. Nevertheless, America knew. So when Joe, a teetotaler, sauntered unassumingly, into a bar in the Hollywood section of Los Angeles, the regular clientele noticed.

 Those are the facts. A kid from Arkansas farm country (redundant?) joins the Merchant Marines, sees action, then improbably finds himself discharged on the opposite side of the country. It’s still farm country, but a viable city metastasized amongst the citrus decades ago, pushing outward, infilling vacancy.

 Facts begging elaboration are these: Joe knew Bing Crosby, Mae West, and Mickey Rooney. The latter, he didn’t much like. Big deal, I guess. Hard for subsequent generations to imagine the mindset:

“You should have seen the searchlights when National Velvet premiered.”

“They gave us special goggles in the Bikini Atoll.”

“I played a washed up jockey in a Hollywood film.”

 “Uh huh. We ushered a Japanese Kamikaze into the Pacific ocean.”

**Chapter:**

**Thorhea! & Fighting Rhino Beetles**

“We need water, Laem,” Manope said.

 “We have plenty, I went yesterday,” Laem countered.

 “Drinking water!” Manope barked, hurling a banana hard and fast for added punctuation.

 Laem leaped more than was necessary – she abhorred bananas. She had had plenty as an infant, mashed into her perfectly fine rice, then spoon-fed to her in the guise of “baby food.” Somehow the gastronomic memory persisted even though all other infantile memories retreated into the inaccessible folds of her brain. But just as soon as she was able to walk away from that prolonged gastronomic torture along came not one, but two younger brothers entrusted to her care - to include feeding; guess what culinary horror Manope demanded she concoct?

Ever since Laem was able to lift a pot onto the burner she cooked rice. She regularly reheated Manope’s cooking to go with the rice. Nothing beat her mother’s cooking; Laem’s freshly cooked rice with her mother’s leftovers was next best in the household (Sook rarely cooked). Her mother’s baby-food recipe was an affront to her young culinary senses though. Smashing bananas into hot, freshly-cooked rice intensified the pungent banana smell until it was overwhelming. The smell gagged her.

“Fine,” she mumbled, “I’m going.” Bananas were everywhere though. They were next to the house, in the yard, lining the dirt road, lining the highways, they were everywhere. Bananas were so prevalent they weren’t content with just one variety. There were three or four (?) different kinds just in their yard.

“And bring some lemongrass… basil too!” Manope yelled at Laem’s retreating back. Lemongrass and basil were planted next to the house along several other herbs and vegetables including a few different kinds of basil, bird chilies. Another, bigger vegetable garden was close too.

 Gathering water was a short trek, unless it was summer. Behind the house was a shallow pit that held water. Sook, possibly Manope, had dug it not long ago. The water table in the area was pretty shallow, so collecting it wasn’t much of a chore. The pits weren’t very deep, so others had to be dug from time to time. The hardpan behind the house was a moonscape.

 Unfortunately water from the back pit was sour, unpalatable. Water from the back pit was used for the gardens. Rain-barrels collected runoff from the roof. It was filtered, and furthermore settled after awhile, and thus was the main source of potable water. Hot summers sometimes dried out the rain-barrels which meant a long trek to a community pit where the water was filtered through sand and wasn’t sour.

 When the heat was most oppressive was when it was necessary to walk long distances for both drink and watering water. Fetching water for the vegetable gardens was the worst: it meant a long walk to the klong and then carrying two heavy buckets, one on each end of a pole balanced on her shoulders. Her main protection against the brutal solar assault was a large straw hat.

 Laem had her pan ready to collect the water when her eye caught the movement of a rhinoceros beetle. It was big, sprightly and ready to defend itself. So she flipped the pan over and corralled the mighty beetle. She sprinted back to the house and up the stairs.

 “Where’s the water?” Manope demanded, stirring the food on the burner. She saw Laem running towards her bed and grabbing something unnecessary for collecting water. Reflexively, Manope let another banana fly. “Stop fooling around!”

 “Back in a flash!” Laem flew back down the stairs with small box (type?) in her hand. The beetle had escaped as Laem guessed it might, but it hadn’t gotten too far into grass. She blocked the path of the beetle with pan then flanked it with the box. The rhinoceros reared up and hissed ferociously at Laem. Laem bravely scooped it into the box then stored it in her pocket. She collected her water and bounded up the stairs.

“Sisssssss,” her new captive suggested. The beetle was itching for a fight. He was just about to strike against the monolithic being that blotted out the sky when the brown dungeon swallowed him from behind. Turning was impossible so he couldn’t strike back. Then he was being slammed up then down, up and down, sideways some, but mostly up and down. “Sissssssssss!” “Hissssssss,” even! Such anger! A slight lull followed where he slid slightly to one side or the other. It was just enough movement to keep his anger simmering. Then… a final hard bang from beneath; no room to strike! Such anger! “Hissssssssss!!” the boxed beetle demanded.

“Hmmmm, let me think about it,” Laem replied, almost entirely to herself, in thought. Like Manope and her gambling cronies Laem and her friends occasionally got together to gamble on such things as marbles, pitching pennies, 21 (with at least one or two missing cards to a deck), and a game with rubber bands called blowfrog. The object of blowfrog was to blow on your rubberband until it “hopped” onto your opponents rubberband. Laem was competitive and won much more than she lost. But she didn’t participate in fighting insects, especially rhinoceros beetles, against each other like a lot of her peers did. She would probably end up releasing her new detainee.

 “Go,” Manope told her.

 “And?”

 “Play!”

 Before a third banana could be thrown, Laem scampered back down the stairs and outside. Complete freedom was unusual. Sure, she goofed off plenty, but almost always there was an explicit, implicit, or standing chore that needed neglecting. She couldn’t think of any. Nor could she think of what to do with her unexpected freedom; her mother had just turned Laem’s mischievous momentum against her, jiu jitsu style.

Her multi-tool (bamboo stick) was right where she had left it – but she had forgotten where that was, so it took a few moments to find. While Laem’s mind was very sharp, her organizational habits were all over the place – literally, sometimes. This would cause undue stress to others later in life, but on the other hand, maybe the frequent retracing of steps kept her mind sharp in her later years. She found her bamboo stick just before the thought of leaving it behind occurred to her – a few seconds. Six or seven warm-up swings brought her to the road. Juicy, ripe mangoes halted Laem in her tracks. They belonged to their neighbor Ah Pbe (Sook’s sister) and Laem coveted them. And with a deftly applied tap thwack! of her bamboo stick a mango fell into her hands.

“Thorhea!” Laem’s aunt screamed at her. Laem startled, recovered, turned and grinned. “Thorhea! Thorhea!” her aunt repeated, coming towards Laem. If her father wouldn’t confront his child, she would! Laem continued grinning, which further enraged her aunt. “Thorhea!” And Ah Pbe watched impotently as Laem raised the mango to her mouth and bit into it. “Thorhea!” Ah Pbe yelled one last time as her niece scampered away with her prized mango.

**Chapter:**

**Punya, the Falang, and Ah Pew Climbs a Tree**

“Do it again,” Dang demanded.

“No,” Laem said.

Tape just stuck out his hand palm down.

“Last time,” Laem sighed. She was too old for this children’s game, nevertheless she pinched the back of Tape’s outstretched hand and lifted his skin. Dang then pinched a piece of Laem’s skin just behind her big knuckle, lifted and together the three hands formed a spider dangling from its thread. With sing-song voices they chanted:

*Mang moomb kai young lung ka,*

*(spider dances on the roof,)*

*Maiow gin pla, mar gutt ga pomk gon.*

*(cat eats the fish, dog bites your bottom.)*

Their infectious giggles and the tactile pleasure of the game were too much for Laem – she grinned. Just when Dang was about to ask, beg probably, for another mang moombing a strange car pulled up in front of their house. Any car pulling up in front of their house was a strange sight in those days.

Cars weren’t unknown in the neighborhood though; in fact, the taxi that took Ah Pba’s bigamous husband to his other family parked next door. Chone’s fifties-era taxi was new sometime in the fifties; occasionally he parked a bus there instead. That was about it for motorized traffic though. So Laem, Dang, and Tape watched as if a likay troupe rather than a Range Rover was pulling up to their house.

 Sook and Manope were far less surprised because Punya had written days in advance. Calling was faster, theoretically, but that method relied upon someone being on the receiving end of the line. Conveniently, one of the Chinese stores in Ba Na had a phone they could use (there wasn’t a phone in the house, or their neighbors’ houses. Outgoing calls required far less clairvoyance). Eventually the adults knew Punya and Joe were coming before they arrived.

 Two doors opened and two men emerged. One, the driver, looked like the rest of them; the other, the falang, was so white Tape shielded his eyes. Laem reached sideways and lowered Tape’s hand; his free hand immediately shot up to the withdrawn position. The falang, Joe, was a sharp dresser. His clothes looked new to Laem, western in style, and accentuated the fact he wasn’t from around there.

Joe was still a curiosity to Laem and her younger brothers even though he had visited just a few months before. Joe hopped around the car to open Punya’s door. She got out smiling as their driver unloaded luggage in the background. Like before, there were the awkward smiles all around, but the body language was less stiff. Nervous excitement emanated from Punya and Joe so Laem stuck around long enough to hear her sister tell Sook and Manope they were now married. This didn’t make sense to Laem – wedding celebrations often lasted for days. Did they mean they were planning to get married? Manope hadn’t prepared anything! Punya showed her ringed finger as clarification. Did they go to Joe’s family in America? She heard something about a judge, but didn’t know what that had to do with getting married.

Despite Tape, Dang, and Laem’s extreme initial curiosity with their pale brother-in-law they soon grew bored as there was little salacious conversation, or much conversation at all, to eavesdrop on. Survival Thai, even weaker English was painful to follow. So Laem didn’t. They went off and played.

It was an occasion for food, that much was clear at least. They chewed, traded smiles, and finally Joe ventured, ”Aloy mak, krop!”

“Kap kuhn, ka,” Manope said accepting the compliment.

 Joe bore the brunt of the conversational load. His lifestyle in Korat exposed him to Thai language; Punya had some exposure to English. He had been working as a steamfitter for awhile in Korat and had picked up some phrases by the time he had met Punya. Looking to settle down provided further linguistic motivation. He punctuated his halting Thai with broad, easy smiles.

Sated, they retired outside to sit about the klat. Neighbors found errands to do that took them by the Punnark household. Greetings, or waves were given in exchange for surreptitious gawking at the falang. The Sanfords and Punnarks sat mostly in amiable silence until Ah Pew ambled by. Ah Pew commandeered the mood with his wide smile and cheerful banter. One topic drifted into the next and before anyone knew how the conversation arrived at climbing trees Ah Pew was set to give a demonstration.

A few minutes later Ah Pew was back with a machete strapped to his waist and a rope. “The rope goes around the tree, then around you like this, and you fling it up as you go. Simple.” Then he laid the rope aside and using only hands and feet climbed up to where the coconuts were hanging. He drew the machete and subjected a few choice coconuts to gravity. Then he scampered back down.

“Amazing! Just like a monkey!” Joe exclaimed.

**Chapter**

**Glossy Women’s Magazines**

Punya left behind a stack of gently read women’s magazines, Joe the *Bangkok Post.* Sook gathered them up and placed them with the rest of the toilet paper other visitors had left behind; they were better than sticks (toss-up when pitted against leaves). Daily newspapers comprised the bulk of the pile.

“Did you see the magazines Punya left me?” Manope asked.

“Unnnh,” Sook replied with an upward lift of the chin, and a slight tilt to one side for directions.

“Uhnn,” Manope grumbled. Sometimes; he knew she liked to look at the pictures. Once in a great while, when something looked important enough, she would get Laem to read

the text for her. Almost always, though, the subject matter was self-evident. She gathered

the magazines and went off to read.

A few days later the glossy magazines caught Laem’s eye. She remembered Punya bringing them, of course, but hadn’t thought much about them. Laem snatched them from the pile of toilet paper.

“Those seem to be popular,” Sook commented.

“I’m making bags for my bananas,” Laem answered.

“Uhnn,” Sook acknowledged.

Laem was going to make fried bananas and fried sweet potatoes at the upcoming movies. She wouldn’t be alone, there would be several other people selling comestibles prior to the movie. The day before Laem will make batter from rice flour. It is light, kind of like panko. Both sweet potatoes and the bananas will be coated with her batter. She also makes dipping sauce, of her own recipe. Presentation and price were Laem’s competitive advantages. The fried bananas will sit upon a banana leaf within a bag made from the glossy magazines. As if that wasn’t enough, she sells them cheaper than any of her competitors. She sells out fast.

Bags she could prepare ahead of time, food not so much. So she went upstairs and cooked

 some rice.

“What are you doing, Laem?” Manope asked.

“Cooking rice,” Laem said.

“You’re always hungry. Do you have tapeworms?”

“I’m not hungry. I’m making paste.”

“What for?”

“To make bags for my bananas.”

“Uhnn,” replied Manope.

“Can I have a few baht for sweet potatoes? I’ll pay you back,” Laem says. Sweet potatoes aren’t as abundant as bananas around the farm.

“OK,” Manope says and gives Laem a few baht.

“Kap kuhn mak, ka,” Laem says.

“Mai pen rai,” Manope answers.

**Chapter:**

**Outdoor Movies**

 “COME ONE, COME ALL!! MOVIES!! MOVIES!! MOVIES!! Loudspeakers mounted on pickup trucks informed Laem (and everyone else in Ba Na), about upcoming movies. Not that Laem minded. Laem loved the movies, likay, Songkran, weddings, Buddhist graduations, as well as most celebrations. Her oldest brother Noi would probably become a Buddhist, most young men did. Doing so brings honor to the family, especially the mother. So Laem looked forward to Noi becoming a Buddhist; she looked forward to his graduation party even more. Maybe her sister would help out with costs. In the meantime, movies meant a relished escape.

 It wasn’t just a movie though; it was a production. First, the aforementioned hype. Men in pickup trucks cruised the village, enthusiastically feeding their words into megaphones to be garbled incomprehensibly, but loudly, which implausibly achieved the desired effect: stirring up excitement. Colorful billboards affixed to same pickup trucks gave visual clues to upcoming attractions. They could expect a few more megaphoned visits in the days leading up to the movie. Eventually, the day of the movie would arrive; so then you have to wait all day with anticipation. Meanwhile, the megaphone men are busy setting up a big screen in the middle of the designated field (if you see them doing this you are treated to additional anticipation).

 Anticipation gets the better of you so you wander over to where they are setting up even though you know the movies won’t start until after dusk. A huge screen, big enough to be seen clearly from three or four houses away, is set up. Speakers are set up high in trees.

 Slowly at first, on the periphery, people not associated with movie preparation start setting up their own wares. Food! Pho’s aroma elicits a rumble from your stomach. Looking around you see other offerings, fried foods mostly, some more appealing than others, and shaved ice. Your stomach in concert with your subconscious put you in a happy place.

 Laem finds a spot amongst the other food purveyors and sets up shop. She sets up her propane tank, sets the pan on top and lights it. When the oil is hot, when it spits back a water droplet, she batters the banana slowly lowers it into the oil. It is tricky work, painful if not done just right. She sells to order, so the bananas are immediately set onto a banana leaf and put into a pretty bag.

Finally dusk approaches. You are ready to watch a movie! But the megaphone men have things to show you first. You are annoyed at first with the delay, but then what they have on display for you is fascinating! There’s something floating in the jars, but the light has gone down and its kind of hard to see. You move closer. “THIS!” He thrusts the jar out in front of him just as Laem and others crowd in around. “THIS DISGUSTING THING COULD BE GROWING INSIDE OF YOU!” It sloshes around in the formaldehyde-filled jar seemingly of its own accord. It is a medium-sized hookworm (most likely plucked from a fish), pale, grotesque and sinister.

He retires the first deftly and with a flourish produces a larger specimen, maybe a tapeworm this time, folding about every which way to fill the jar, “LEFT UNTREATED, IT COULD GROW INTO THIS!” (Incredibly it would have been the very first case of a hookworm transforming into a tapeworm. Artistic license.) “THIS MONSTER KILLED A GROWN MAN IN THE PRIME OF HIS LIFE! IT COULD HAPPEN TO YOU TOO!” He pauses a few beats, shifts to reasonable businessman voice as if reading from a prospectus, “But, scientists in Bangkok have developed a cutting edge cure that someday will be sold in pharmacies.” Then a final vocal downshift to confidential, “I have managed to procure the very first batch of these pills which won’t be available to the public for years!” Then he floors it, “THESE PILLS WILL SLAY THE FOUL MONSTER GROWNING IN YOUR STOMACH! But this miracle treatment is only available tonight.”

Laem considers relating the sales pitch to her father, but figures Sook probably knows all about miracle pills. The jar-bound parasites disgust her, so she banishes them from thought. Instead her mind is attracted to the idea that people can make a living traveling from place to place, even if it is to hawk medicine by brandishing pickled tapeworms at ignorant farmers. But she banishes the thought harder. It occurs to her that likay performers travel too. Hmmm.

Then twilight. Finally, evening! The screen is a white glowing square. Neighbors (everybody is a neighbor) quickly start settling in, spreading straw mats out, and wait for the projectionist. It doesn’t take long. ACTION! Chinese characters flash onto the screen, presumably naming the title of the movie. This surprises nobody; nearly all of the movies shown are in Chinese. It is subtitled. Laem, although she doesn’t understand Chinese, enjoys the sound of their language. It is a tonal language, just like her language, but to her ears it sounds higher pitched and kind of like the phonemes are ricocheting off of different metals.

For the next 15 minutes or so the village sits in rapt attention. With little warning a bright white screen assaults viewers’ retinas. It’s like an alarm clock. Then the salesmen are back at it. A few families sell snacks, others have already packed up for the evening. Quickly enough the reel is changed and the movie resumes. The scene repeats for two or three more reel changes as food offerings and sales pitches dwindle and lose steam. Finally the credits roll and everybody goes their separate ways.

**Chapter:**

**No Dancing Around the Facts**

“You don’t have a dancer’s build,” the teacher said as she rooted through costumes for something to fit Laem.

“Ka,” Laem replied, well aware the comment was more about how her unpleasing asymmetrical height would disrupt the line of dancers, but also that if Laem was just smaller she’d attract suitors; her peers were beginning to. In Thailand, looks were everything. Laem knew she was too big to be more than friend material. In fact, in just a year or two later, all of Laem’s friends would have boyfriends, or at least admirers. Noomb, an older boy and probable pot smoker, gave her rides when she was late for school, but other than that he was going nowhere, so he wasn’t a consideration. Laem was resigned to being single, but it didn’t bother her too much. She figured it was society’s problem, not hers. She actually enjoyed playing her expected role - laugh elicitor.

Nevertheless, Laem enjoyed dancing. She practiced diligently and learned to perform gracefully. Like the other girls, she loved dressing in the classical costumes with ornate golden crowns and reenacting historical tales. *Oou Tawn*, the boy that lived in the temple, was her partner. *Ahjarn Mi* knew his parents, so he was allowed to live at the school as their home was too far away. He was a very intelligent kid. They got along well, but sparks kept to themselves so life went on.

Dancing, as well as music, were taken in the ninth grade only. Too bad.

**Chapter:**

**Running Around**

“Come over here Laem,” Manope said. Laem did as she was told – her mother held a chicken in one hand and her favorite knife in the other. *This will be interesting,* she thought. “People are coming to pay respect to your father’s teacher,” Manope explained, gesturing towards the window with her knife. *Guests will need to be fed,* didn’t need to be said. Laem knew the occasion; reverential men would come to pay homage to the sepia-colored photo that presided over their sleeping area. Actually, the sepia photo was probably her father’s teacher’s teacher. They would probably pay respects to all of them.

 “Hold it like this,” Manope said with the chicken tucked under her arm. “Get the bowl ready,” to catch the blood for cooking *something* later. “Quick, deep,” Manope said as blood gushed neatly into the bowl. “Your turn.” Looked easy enough. Her cousins had done it many times.

Laem tucked a chicken under her arm, looked at her mother, got a nod *and* an *unnh.* Soin one quick motion she bent the bird’s neck back just like Manope had, leaned it over the bowl, and when Laem’s knife sliced the chicken’s throat the bird flapped explosively and leapt away spewing blood everywhere (but into the bowl). Flapping furiously, it ran around the yard it’s head lolling off to the side. Mortified, Laem sprinted towards the chicken. She risked a glance towards her mother: Manope couldn’t contain herself - she erupted, she cackled, she doubled over. The dead, but highly animated fowl was shameless as it beat the dust with its wings consequently hitting each of Manope’s funny bones.

Unabashed, uncontrollable hysteria was the last reaction Laem expected from her mother. Theoretically, she suspected it was possible; her parents married, after all. The uproarious, highly infective contagion slammed into Laem causing her to bend over violently and join her mother in laughter. Tears streamed mother and daughters’ faces until the nearly headless chicken’s synapses finally stopped signaling motor functions.

**Chapter:**

**Family Life and Taxi Drivers**

*They looked like logs kind of, but she recognized their snouts immediately. Potentially, they could be dangerous, but she never had a problem out-swimming them. Their presence, though, prevented her from sinking to the bottom and relaxing. Annoying creatures. On cue, they slowly swam toward her, menacingly (in their minds, no doubt). So she stroked lazily to the bank and in one motion pulled herself up into a standing position.*

*Then she ran. Running felt good, so she ran all out impressed at how fast she could go. She filled her lungs to capacity, hyperoxygenated her bloodstream, pistoned her legs into the soft ground, and expected to explode ahead. Instead, she slowed almost to half speed. Something was gaining on her. She wasn’t concerned, but it kept closing the distance. Her speed was evaporating rapidly. She lengthened her stride, the only adjustment she could think of, but like previous adjustments, it only slowed her further. She was barely moving. Ahead was the pond - safe haven. She would just make it. Tucking her head between thrust out arms, she leapt from land in a graceful arc toward the water. Algae exploded, and then morphed into the pink jowls, yellowish teeth of a monstrous crocodile. Adrenaline over-rode complacency as she twisted violently out of her dive…*

“Laem, wake up,” Ah Pba said shaking Laem’s shoulder. “Laem!”

She looked up, confused in the transition from violent dream into violent awakening.

Ah Pba waking Laem to help beat Ah Chone…

**Chapter**

**Hanging out w/Smokers**

 By the time the conversation reached Laem various walls had dampened it to the point that all she could discern was a mischievous quality. It emanated from down the corridor behind the respective bathrooms: it was where smokers congregated. It was the waning minutes of the lunch hour and Laem had a few minutes to kill, she’d go say hello.

The police captain’s son was a dead-ringer (albeit somewhat darker) for the movie star/producer that would become famous decades later: Quintin Tarantino. Standing beside the movie star look-a-like was the professor’s son. A few other classmates Laem recognized were there as well. Most were friends of hers and their conversations were usually interesting, so she joined their circle.

Subtle nods were exchanged, cigarettes offered and declined as banter continued seamlessly.

Suddenly, “Put those out! Right now!” yelled the switch-wielding agricultural teacher. Startled, those smoking fumbled their cigarettes to the dirt and ground them out. A few students on the periphery slipped away in the initial confusion. “Garbage,” he said pointing to the trashcans, even as some had already retrieved their butts for that purpose.

He wrote down names, announcing each as he went. “Laem,” he said as he wrote.

“She wasn’t smoking!” someone protested.

“Then she knows better than to be here,” he said. Everyone else accepted their fates stoically; rules were rules, arbitrary or not, and consequences were to be expected when broken. The ringing bell dispersed the offenders.“Back to class!” the Ag teacher said.

“This is tangled like a pubic hair,” one of them quipped beneath his breath, ersatz-Quintin, or the professor’s son probably. A plosive sound burst from Laem’s lips as finally understood the idiom completely.

People bestow dubious gifts in their eagerness to curry favor. So Laem wasn’t surprised by the looks she received walking home. Laem’s adventures and missteps were the most chronicled in their village, for a kid anyway. Schadenfreude; (learning this word, years later, pleased her). Sook received news, regardless of its nature, evenly. Learning that Laem got caught smoking at school was no different, at least until Laem got home.

“What happened today?” Sook demanded.

“Nothing,” Laem said.

“People told me you were smoking.”

“I wasn’t!”

“People claim you were.”

“*Mr. blank* caught some smokers I was talking with.”

“You shouldn’t have been there.”

“I didn’t do anything wrong!”

“You’re getting old enough to know better.”

“I didn’t break any rules!”

They held each others’ eyes as one forced silence into the other’s calm. The standoff lasted long past the point of being unbearably uncomfortable for most people.“Damaging your reputation won’t help your prospects.”

“Prospects! I’m not marrying a farmer!”

“You’re going to school then?”

“Why? Maybe I’ll go to Bangkok and find a job.”

“Without an education?”

“I’m not going to be a farmer!”

Impenetrable silence forced them away from conciliation, and each other.

The next day began like previous days. Teachers would rotate through classrooms as students stayed put. It was a public school and even though Laem took an exam to qualify, she was there primarily as the daughter of a war-hero; public schools were the more prestigious in Thailand. First though, they would line up in formation for the national anthem. WHERE RAINY DAYS? Next, they would stand for inspection as hygiene, uniform, and appearance were scrutinized. Like many other students, Laem’s blue and white uniform (black and white for private schools) was clean, pressed, but next to threadbare.

“Laem Punnark,” the principal called (headmaster? Who?) Laem broke formation and joined ersatz Quentin in front of the rest of their classmates. The professor’s kid and the remaining scofflaws filled in spaces alongside Quentin, Laem, and Professor, Jr. They stood out – that was the point. Fully assembled, the agricultural teacher dispensed consequences with his green bamboo switch. *Whoof-Thwack!* It’s music was ugly.The switch struck Laem three times on her calf. When the last offender was switched they were dismissed with the rest of the students to their homeroom classes.

 Laem arrived home that day to find Punya, Joe, and *Luk Kai* (Fragile Egg, because Joe held her for the duration of their visit; her birth certificate read Lorene). The newly-weds and newly-born were enjoying their deserved attention. They had been there for a few days, so they were undoubtedly aware of Laem’s troubles. Punya probably noticed the three angry red welts just below the hem of Laem’s skirt and wondered what she had done this time. Joe, on the other hand saw child abuse.

 “Laem!” Joe called after Laem. Joe’s crimson-red face frightened Laem. “Come over here,” he said.

 “Joe honey, let it be,” Punya said.

 “Let it be?! Look at her legs! Who did this to you Laem?” Joe handed Luk Kai over to Punya. He began to walk towards the car.

 “Joe,”

 “I don’t care what she did, you don’t hit children!”

 “Don’t interfere Joe, It won’t change anything. Let it be.” *You’ll just embarrass the family*, she was tempted to add.

 Joe defused over time. Cerebrally he knew there would be cultural situations that would clash with what he knew to be right; facing them was another matter. He was aware that every culture, including the one in which he was raised, has repugnant practices. He was an intelligent, well-informed man, not shy about acting on his convictions. Standing down was a rare instance.

**Chapter:**

**Christmas in Kulot**

Gleefully, Dang and Tape used their newfound knowledge of centrifugal force to crash into Laem. Laem rolled with their exaggerated motion for a few curves, gave as much as appropriate (for her mass), then shut them down with a glare when enough was enough. She was their big sister and thus responsible for their behavior, despite Manope’s presence.

Laem tried to absorb her country’s countryside, but honestly it all blurred together – green trees blended into other green trees then concrete structures morphed into other concrete shapes, accentuated by green, concrete and green, and then they arrived. **Chapter:**

**Punya, Joe, Lorene**

**Deer Park & the Offer**

Punya and Joe were welcomed back with stares until they were recognized. They were outsiders driving a unique vehicle through their neighborhood after all. But they were recognized, quickly, and bestowed warm welcoming glances. The road (dirt path) leading to Punya’s girlhood home was more suited to leading farm beasts single-file. Yet the driver navigated and parked the station wagon as if nudged by invisible tugboats.

Joe exited first, went around to the opposite side, and opened the door. He lifted an infant from its car-seat, namely Punya’s lap, then kept it from touching the ground for the duration of their visit. While Joe was busy with Laem’s niece, Joe’s driver retrieved their luggage. The families merged and became one.

 “Lorene,” Punya annunciated slowly so as to warn of the linguistic landmines.

“Roreen,” Manope repeated, smiling.

“Lor-ene,” Punya corrected.

“Ro-leen,” Manope said smiling into the eyes of the infant.

Close enough, Punya thought.

 Sook was pleased with the direction his eldest daughter’s life was headed. On the other hand, he was concerned where his youngest daughter’s life might take her. All of her friends had boyfriends, or at least admirerers hoping to be boyfriends. Laem had none – she was too big, friend material, good with jokes and a laugh. Laem was strong-headed and unafraid to clash with her father, which was happening more frequently the closer she grew to womanhood. Bangkok was alluring, but it would be a dangerous place for a headstrong, but naïve young woman.

Marrying her off to a local boy was a long-shot due to her disinclination to being subservient; Sook and Manope were not inclined to arrange marriage for her anyway. She was smart, that wasn’t the problem, or in a way it was. Noomb gave her rides to school sometimes, but he smoked pot and was going nowhere. She had a crush on the chunky kid living at the temple, and he was her partner when they danced for the school, but polite as he was, the chemistry (as they say in the west) wasn’t compelling enough. He smiled though, remembering how graceful she became despite not being “built like a dancer.”

 Punya and Joe would soon leave for the United States. Her departure for Bangkok a few years earlier had inoculated them emotionally against her impending emigration. Joe told them that he would be working on a big dam in Washington and they nodded, they had heard of Washington. “The state of Washington, not the city,” he clarified. They nodded. He told them it was cold there, that it snowed. It sounded very interesting. Punya was excited to go, but also apprehensive, as one would expect.

 Before Punya could learn to pronounce *Spokane County*, the three of them had moved in with Joe’s sister, Vera, in Deer Park, Washington. Deer Park was, and still is, a small rural town roughly a half hour north of Spokane (which, some Spokanites point out, is the largest city between Minneapolis and Seattle). Vera owned horses and land for them to run. Cattle grazed nearby pastures and wheat waved golden in the fall. In some ways it wasn’t a lot different than Ba Na. Not that Punya had much time to notice.

Overnight Punya’s native language disappeared. It was nowhere to be heard. Joe, now in the states, no longer had use for Thai. Lorene quickly learned to toddle about while soaking up words like a blank page. Punya struggled, like the adult she’d become, to keep ahead physically and linguistically.

 Vera and Joe were a lot alike in temperament. Teetotalers that they were, you would never have guessed their father was a hard-drinking, fun-loving man. Or, maybe you would. Joe’s father managed oilfields in Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana, California, and probably others as well. They moved frequently. Their father made good money, especially for an era that included the great depression. Little money, however, made it back to the Sanford household, the bulk being transferred to bartenders and other merrymakers. But their father made it right back; then drank it away. Their father’s regular lessons stuck with them for life: Joe and Vera grew to be fiscally responsible, but more importantly, sober in every sense.

 Time passed. Okay, it was a few years.

 “*Luk Kai* (fragile egg) is so big,” Manope exclaimed, deftly (in her mind) sidestepping her granddaughter’s name.

 “Lor-een,” Punya reminded gently.

 “*Ka, ka!* Ro-leen,” Manope said. Punya cut her losses like before. Like before, Joe didn’t let Lorene’s feet hit the ground, preferring instead to wrestle his growing toddler away from gravity’s grip. Joe knew about dirt and germs abiding on a third world farms, inside and out. Joe had standards for cleanliness.

 Laem was happy for her sister and to see her again. She observed, anthropologically (as in, *nobody around her does that*) how Joe doted on her sister. That he doted on *his* fragile egg, was somewhat familiar, some mothers acted that way, very few fathers. There would be no *mang moombing* Loreen. Familial/social obligation held Laem for awhile, but not long enough to overhear Punya tell her parents, “Laem should come live with us. She could go to school, be a teacher, or nurse.”

 After some consideration, Sook turned his gaze to Joe, “You have that kind of influence?” Joe looked at Punya for translation. She told him, “*Dad asked, ‘Will they take her?’”* In turn, he told Punya, “*Tell them our schools are merit-based, so if she is smart enough they will take her*.” He was simplifying the matter, Joe knew, but Punya had seemed to want companionship. No need to elaborate that Laem would need to get through high school first.

 “American nursing school is easier to get into,” Punya interpreted/rephrased/explained. Manope looked to Sook, Sook looked inward. He knew the Sanfords were unaware they were simplifying matters to him, to themselves. Finally, Sook nodded imperceptibly to his bride. They agreed. Preliminary logistics were discussed, and before Punya, Joe, & Loreen loaded their bags into their car Laem’s *fait* was *accompli*.

 Laem waved goodbye, she’d see her sister in a few years as seemed to be her pattern: Bangkok, United States, same difference – she’d reappear; she had little doubt. As Punya’s presence began to fade, Sook said, “Laem, come here.”

 “*Ka,”* Laem said.

 “Your sister wants you to live with her and go to school,” Sook told her.

Laem was dumbstruck. Manope still, Sook also, to a lesser extent. “When?” Laem asked when she regained her wits.

 “Not right away,” Sook soothed, “there’s paperwork, for school, the government.”

 “Ka,” Laem replied knowingly – as she *did* have an inkling as to how paperwork moved through the governmental digestive process. Precociously, she discounted her chances of an American education.

 More time passed, that’s what it does. Only a few months this time, it’s fickle.

 Meanwhile, Laem tended her garden. Two times a week she weeded, watered, and measured the little plot she started from seed. It was one of her favorite classes. She became adept at useful techniques such as grafting, cross-pollination, and the scientific method. For most of her classes, she sat in the middle rows, neither with the smart students in front, nor the less so in the rear. Seating wasn’t by choice, but assigned. She enjoyed agriculture though, and excelled.

 One of her favorite teachers happened to teach one of her favorite subjects, agriculture. (Which came first?) He was also a family friend, so when he occasionally offered her a ride home (he lived close by), she accepted. (She knew that not all adults in positions of authority/respect, were trustworthy, or even safe, but Mr. blank\_\_\_ hadn’t raised the hairs on her neck in the least over the years.) Rides home were a treat – there was so much walking in life, if Laem thought to dwell on it, which she didn’t.

So on one auspicious day her favorite ag teacher offered her a ride. “Are you excited to go to the US?” Laem hadn’t told many people about going to the US. She wasn’t surprised, however, that Mr. blank\_\_\_ knew about it because Sook had paid him to take her paperwork to Bangkok and ensure it got to the right people and places. Bangkok was a dangerous place in 1973. Students were protesting and the government communicated with tanks, tear gas, and bullets, ultimately killing 77 and wounding over 800. Mr. blank\_\_\_ knew his way around Bangkok, which was worth the price Sook paid him.

“It doesn’t seem real yet. Maybe it will when I’m on the airplane.”

“Ha, ha! I’m sure it will. Do you know much about where you’re going to live?”

“Punya says it’s cold. It snows there – I’m curious to see it.”

“I would like to see that too. You’ll see a lot, learn a lot. Very exciting.”

“Ka,” Laem said, then added “*Kap kuhn, mak*,” for the ride home.

Laem left Feb ‘74

**Chapter:**

**Tit Noi’s Buddhist Graduation Party**

 “Oooooooiii!” the performer wailed, satirizing the pain of motherhood. Manope beamed, this was her moment, her day. Nominally, it was a party celebrating Noi becoming a Buddhist. In reality, it was as much, or more, a party honoring her sacrifice in raising Noi. The fact that he became a Buddhist before finding a wife meant that all the merit of his accomplishment would accrue to Manope; additionally, without the distraction of a wife the merit bestowed upon Manope would be purer.

“Oooooooiii!” he cried out, clutching at his belly. Manope, along with every other party-goer, knew the tale to come. Each crooner, however, had their unique spin, making each performance so entertaining no matter the familiarity.

 “Ooooooiii!” the performer continued. “You can’t keep your elbows to yourself? And knees?” The performer thrust his stomach one way, then suddenly the other way. “What are you doing in there!? This is how you treat your mother? Out! Out!” At this, Laem laughed out loud, as did Dang and Tape, but mostly because of the performers’ outrageous facial contortions and everyone else’s laughter.

 “Oooooooiii!” performer replies. “That melon head of yours! There better be something in it, Oooooooiii! “It never ends with this one, Oooooooiii! Take, take, take – you’re draining me dry!”

 The party began the previous morning when Ba Na’s best cooks (the older ladies) showed up bearing two days worth of food and alcohol. Many had developed specialties over the years that they were known for. Manope, of course, had made her pra bla (fermented fish, served with rice or steamed vegetables) days before. Younger women and older girls then arrived to fill support roles. Eventually, young men and older boys occupied the periphery.

 A young man darted over to a younger woman and asked, “Can I carry that for you Mai?”

 “Oh, he’d love to get his hands on her bowl,” came a sotto voce comment from the kitchen.

 “He has eyes for plenty other bowls too,” another sotto voce comment chimed in.

“*Kap kuhn, ka*,” the younger woman said. Together they escorted the bowl of treats to the table outside. Emboldened, other younger men (and older boys) braved the social waters and made their own moves. Salty quips from the kitchen flavored most of the flirtatious advances.

In the adjacent field, the men folk busied themselves by supervising the erection of the movie screens (two) one for a Thai movie, and one a Chinese movie – both action flicks. The screens were full-sized, set opposite each other, the projectors in the middle. (Watching the film play across the bright lens and make an ever-widening path through the darkness fascinated Laem.) Speakers were hung high on poles.

A DJ from the temple arranged music paraphernalia as his associate hung speakers from mango trees. Colored fluorescent lights were then strapped to the trunks of the same trees, among others. Others stretched light strings about liberally. Mekong whiskey made an appearance (thank you, I’ll be here all night). There was much to supervise.

Not surprisingly, the temple’s support extended beyond the spiritual. Items donated to the temple were in turn loaned out for various celebrations, including parties celebrating becoming Buddhist. Pots, pans, music, lights, tables, chairs, etc. were rented or borrowed from the temple. And of course, Noi’s transition ceremony would be at the temple. Jong, his friend from school, would be celebrating his own transition alongside Noi.

Jong was already living at the temple when Noi moved in. They were required to live there for six months while studying to become Buddhists. Ajahn Mi took in Jong earlier as Jong’s journey from home to school was inconveniently long. As you might imagine, Ajahn Mi assigned Jong tasks in exchange for his keep. He was quite useful by the time Noi joined him.

So the ceremony was for Noi and Jong; the party in their honor was for everyone else. True, it started when the older ladies showed up to cook, but the party’s infrastructure – invitations, borrowed and rented items/services, planning – had been going on in the background for awhile and up until the older ladies kicked off the party. Manope, as was the practice, collected the cash as it came with the returned invitations and entered each name and amount in her ledger. After a short while she delegated this duty to someone else, perhaps Punya (she and Joe were the largest contributors, by far).

Noi and Jong appeared on the morning of day two in white robes. The abbot, in saffron robes, appeared shortly after. He was there to shave heads, so he did. Between then and the transition dinner merriment was made, but not by the newly shorn; contemplative airs needed projecting.

Conga-like drums signaled the next phase of the ceremony. Those about to become Buddhists couldn’t risk soiling their feet, so family and friends, aware of this prohibition, arranged a chestnut mare for Noi. The mare clopped (conga-aided) down the dirt road to the temple. At the temple the mare circled the bot (a temple fixture) three, or four, or seven times (an auspicious number, the exact value lost to memory). Manope presented Noi his saffron robes. He changed and Tit Noi emerged draped in saffron robes. It was time to party in earnest.

Get Togethers: Manope’s side of family

Weddings: Laem usually youngest to dance (naughty behavior) – usually marrying age 20s, late teens

Songkran 2 Likay and movies, 7 days, 7

nights, different temples. Pole in middle (tent?), get to know

Boyfriend: 15+/- His parents liked Laem’s parents, so…”I know that dance from anywhere” 1980

**Chapter :**

**Falling Off Momb**

 Laem didn’t see the explosions. They were miles away, invisible, and slammed into her at 300,000 kilometers a second. Bombardment had been constant since leaving the house. Her hat wasn’t enough protection.

 Lightheadedness affected her lyrics, and balance, so Laem sat. Just in time. Momb bolted, in her ungainly bovine fashion, leading her grown offspring in a small stampede. Adrenaline flooded Laem’s bloodstream as she squeezed her legs tightly and hung on for dear life. At thirteen, she was an experienced rider, but there’s no controlling a spooked beast of such magnitude. Falling could be deadly – two tons worth of hooves would leave her mangled, at best.

 She was very aware of the danger.

 Just as suddenly, and with the same absence of reason, Momb ended the stampede by stopping in her tracks. Laem abruptly dismounted, against her will. Hard-packed dirt cushioned Laem’s landing. Usually when she flung herself at the ground it was at her sleeping mat, from a much lower elevation. She never thought to practice from the back of her water buffalo.

 Laem rolled onto back, sat up, and caught her breath. “Ow!” She yelped, discovering a fresh cut among the dirt she was wiping from her face. “Thanks a lot, canejo!”

 Momb just masticated her greens – that’s what was expected of her when idle. Laem brushed herself off, walked over and roughly led Momb by the nose (or the rope attached to her nose-ring) the rest of the way to the klong. Stupid beasts. She was just taking them for a bath.

Momb’s bare back she had little to cling to on

Take to klong to wash.

probably prevented lasting brain damage.

WHEN? YOUNGER, OR TOWARDS LAST YEARS IN THAILAND? 13 years old

Next to klong (canal), hard-packed sand.

**Chapter:**

**“You Won’t Make It,” & Other Well-Wishes**

 When it became clear to everyone that Laem was indeed leaving Ah Pbe was first to offer well wishes, “You won’t make it, you’ll come back.” Laem laughed, because it was funny, the first time. Ah Pbe varied her theme little, but Laem continued smiling long after the “jokes” had become stale. She was family, lived across the alley, was hard to avoid, so Laem smiled.

 Laem came back, of course, and stayed – for a few weeks at a time (hope that wasn’t a spoiler – *please* continue reading). Truth was, Ah Pbe’s words helped to fortify Laem’s resolve. Ah Pbe, unfortunately (or fortunately), was only the first to discount Laem’s chances. But again, I’ve jumped ahead.

 Sincere well wishes were proffered, but for the most part her classmates (and teachers, for that matter) couldn’t imagine life beyond Ba Na, and certainly no further than Bangkok. They were farmers’ kids, like Laem, and pretty much knew their future.

 A car came for Laem, Sook, and Manope in the middle of the night. Laem put the blue and white vinyl *Pan Am* tote bag holding all her worldly possessions (and a change of clothing) in the rear and hopped in. At Don Muang airport in Bankok Sook pinned a note to Laem’s shirt that *Mr. Blank*\_\_\_\_ had written for her. It read, “Doesn’t speak English.”

 They stood and smiled at each other for a moment, then exchanged *“Laagorn, Laem.”*

 “*Laagorn, Laem.”*

 *“Laagorn, ka.”* Laem picked up her tote bag and went through the big glass doors.

 Laem kept her passport and other important papers safe, showed her tickets to airport personnel, smiled (pointed to the note when needed) and followed them or their pointed fingers through the airports of Japan, Hawaii, SeaTac, and eventually Spokane.

**AmericaChapter:**

**NorthTown Mall**

“Didn’t dad tell you it was cold here?” Punya asked Laem in Thai by way of a *Welcome to America* greeting. She didn’t expect Laem to be donning a goose down parka, but cotton shorts? What was she thinking? “We’ll take you to buy clothes,” Punya told her, forgetting that they had anticipated Laem’s need for appropriate clothing so planned on shopping all along.

“Kap kuhn ka, Pitchuik.”

“Mia pen rai, Laem.”

“Hello Laem. Welcome to America,” Joe said in English. After a beat, Punya translated for Laem. Laem smiled broadly in return. Punya asked about Laem’s luggage and Laem proudly proffered her blue vinyl *PanAm* tote Punya had gotten her. Together they boarded another plane for Laem’s final leg (air) of her journey. A short while later they landed on the dry side of Washington.

“OK,” Joe said, translating via body language as he led them out of Spokane International Airport to the parking garage and his Lincoln sedan with the suicide doors. It was an impressive machine and Laem didn’t immediately see the driver Joe had hired. Joe himself opened the trunk, deposited Laem’s *Pan Am* tote in the trunk, then slid in behind the steering wheel! When Punya got in beside Joe it dawned on Laem that things may be different in America.

 Cold was a relative notion prior to Laem’s leaving the protection of Spokane’s International Airport mezzanine. The necessity of wearing something other than safari shorts and a light shirt was immediately impressed upon her when the mucus in her nostrils fused to the inside of her nose. Shortly thereafter her arms, legs, and face lost feeling. Welcome to the Inland Northwest! In February! Expecting warmth, Laem plopped down onto the Lincoln’s cold, leather upholstery. Every goosebump Laem possessed raised up. “Fasten your seatbelt,” Punya said over the front seat. So Laem did, but it didn’t alleviate the extreme cold. But, thanks to the stoplights (on Division street) Joe’s Lincoln slowly warmed up to the point that nobody but Joe wanted to exit the car and step into the NorthTown Mall parking garage.

Walking inside an enormous building containing multiple varied shops was foreign to Laem. But, she would have felt the same in one of the Bangkok malls as well. She followed Punya and Joe into a store so large it was separated into departments. It was a department store. Joe asked the first Montgomery Ward employee within asking range where the women’s clothing department was and then Punya set about navigating the clothing department for adequate winter clothing for Laem.

“Try these on,” Punya said handing Laem a polyester pants and shirt ensemble. “Change in there,” she said pointing to the changing rooms.

“They fit perfectly,” Laem said a minute later modeling the apparel for her sister.

“OK” (or maybe “*ungh*”), Punya said. “Take them off.” Laem handed the clothes to Punya who returned them to their hangers then selected three sets of each one size larger. Punya sent Laem for a final trip to the changing room to don the larger outfit.

It was late in the day, foggy, and they still had to drive to Grand Coulee. But Laem still needed a winter coat. They steered their hasty shopping campaign to Sears for a winter coat. One was quickly selected and Laem left the mall under the heavy protection of a burgundy suede trench coat.

**Chapter:**

**Living Accommodations**

 Once again, Laem confronted the cold. This time she donned a protective burgundy trench coat. The cold found seams, channels, *uncovered flesh!* and quickly reintroduced itself to Laem. (The swank coloring was no deterrent.) Inside the Lincoln the leather upholstery was giving, but that was the only concession. It was dark, foggy, and cold was only a window pane away, but also very slow to leave the car.

 By the time the car was comfortably warm they got out again. Laem followed Joe and her sister to Vera’s front door. “So this is Laem,” Vera stated. “Welcome.”

 Laem smiled, looked to her sister for help, but that was end of the conversation. Lorene ran so Teresa ran to their parents.

 “They just ate and are ready to go,” Vera said.

 “Thank you,” Joe said.

 “Put you coat on,” Punya said to the girls.

 “We’ll visit the week after next,” Joe said. That was the usual interval between visits.

 “Ayuh,” Vera acknowledged. And back into the biting wind they went.

 At some point the gentle up and down swaying of the Lincoln supplanted Laem’s sensation of cold. (But the cold was always there, blatant usually, but sometimes hovering like a dread Laem couldn’t place.) The Lincoln gently rose and fell, rose and fell, alongside the amber waves of grain (wheat) and scablands (*Google Missoula Floods)* like a cruise ship fording troubled seas. Laem felt mildly nauseous. Eventually the Lincoln docked at a double-wide trailer in Electric City, Washington.

 Punya, with Lorene swerving into her from sneaking backward glances at her Aunt, escorted Laem down the shag-carpeted hallway. “Toilet, sink, and shower are in there,” Punya said on the way past. In the bedroom was a structure with two apparent sleeping berths: Lorene bounced onto the lower bed. “Lorene, no jump on bed,” Punya said switching to English.

“Yes Mom.”

“Go brush teeth.” Lorene scampered down the hall to comply.

 “You get the top,” Punya said, switching back to Thai. “Clothes go here,” she said pulling out a drawer.

 “Ka,” Laem said.

 “Well, goodnight then.”

**Chapter:**

**Acquired Tastes and Other Adjustments**

Sluggishness was the extent of Laem’s jetlag. Punya gestured toward a chair at the table. A minute later a plate of *Spam*, toast (*Wonderbread*), and fried eggs (chicken, not duck) was set in front of her. From a pitcher, Punya poured a milky-white liquid into a glass for Laem. “Kap kuhn, ka,” said Laem.

“Ka,” Punya said. Thirsty, Laem took a healthy pull from her glass. It was godawful! (Laem didn’t yet know this word that millions of people used to describe powdered milk.) Somehow Laem suppressed her gag reflex.

“What is this?” Laem asked holding up her glass.

“Powdered milk. It is good for you.” Laem wondered *why* anyone would intentionally remove the flavor from something wholesome until nothing remained but powder; and how could the resulting abomination be good for you.

 “Ughn,” she replied, unconsciously imitating their father. She put a forkful of egg into her mouth to cleanse her palate and mask her revulsion. Laem quickly learned to add an ice cube and chug the godawfullness; it was the only way to avoid gagging. The fried *Spam* wasn’t horrible, but her taste for it ended well before her portion did. Despite the crimes committed against the milk, Laem didn’t mind American breakfast. Fried eggs without rice and fish sauce were ok and she actually liked the toast.

“Come over here,” Punya told Laem later that day. When Laem did, Punya stood and pulled the back of Laem’s collar outwards and read the manufacturer’s label. She made some notes on a notepad. She did the same with Laem’s pants (the label not as awkwardly located as it might have been) and jotted some more. On the table next to the notepad was an enormous book titled, “Sears Fall and Winter 1974.” The index began on page 691 (out of 1560), but Punya just opened to the front of the catalog and was rewarded with pages and pages of polyester. After a cursory search, steadfastly sticking to synthetic materials, avoiding page 437 that featured elephant leg jeans, Punya settled on sensible pants and a matching top. She diligently copied all the appropriate numbers then handed her notepad to Joe. Punya’s English sounded halting to native ears and she didn’t want to repeat herself repeatedly over the phone.

Joe clearly, deliberately, annunciated the order to the Sears telephone operator. “Three pair pant, shirt” Punya reminded him. SAME COLOR? AMOUNT?

“Yes, I told them Chuik,” Joe retorted. At the conclusion of the order he read the relevant numbers from his Sears charge card (owning a Sears credit card in 1974 signified the apex of creditworthiness, financial wellbeing).

“Thank you.”

“Thank you,” Laem repeated.

“Yes, please.”

“Yes, please.”

“Where is the bathroom,” Punya’s asked. The impromptu survival English lesson made Laem realize how very little she knew and how unprepared she was. She recognized some words from her beginner English classes in Ba Na, but her sister sounded different than her teachers, and Joe sounded a lot different. The words sounded different, of course, but somehow felt different – less pleasing to the ear..

 “Where is the bathroom?”

“I don’t understand.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Come sit down Laem,” Joe said towards the end of Laem’s “settling in period.” Nobody called it a “settling in period,” but what else would you call the period between leaving one time-zone, one culture, one family, and plunging completely into something irreconcilably different? Laem read Joe and her sister’s intention from their body language and didn’t need her sister’s verbal translation. Reading body language would quickly become her forte.

“We have a few rules in our house,” Joe began. No useful body language accompanied the statement which meant that immediate action wasn’t expected of her. Punya translated:

“Get dressed first thing. Make your bed before you leave your room. Clean the bathrooms before breakfast. Breakfast is at six. If you miss the bus to school you have to walk. Do you understand?”

“Ka. Where do I catch the bus?”

“We will show you,” Punya said. “We’ll take you the first day, then you will ride the bus after that.”

“Ka.”

“After you start school you and your sister will only speak English to each other,” Joe said in conclusion.

“Ka,” Laem said.

**Chapter:**

**The Opposite of Tropical**

 The Grand Coulee area has a spectacularly mind-blowing cataclysmic history (and future). In short, near Missoula, Montana an enormous ice dam holding back an enormous lake has repeatedly burst sending *ten times the combined flow of all the world’s rivers across Washington State at roughly sixty-five miles an hour[[1]](#footnote-1)* In February of 1974 these events were hard to appreciate, especially for Laem.

 Looking out the Lincoln’s window on the way to Grand Coulee high school Laem saw only three colors: white, gray, and beige. Each color possessed only one hue (although gray did sport differing shades). Poking through the ubiquitous covering of white were beige bushes. Ball-like beige weeds often piled and stuck to gray barb-wire fences. Where the white had blown away, the underlying crop stubble was beige. And of course, the sky was gray. Grand Coulee wore the opposite of Ba Na’s vibrant colors. In Ba Na green alone boasted nearly every imaginable hue. But she wasn’t in Ba Na.

She was in Grand Coulee wrapped snuggly in her burgundy trench coat over her new polyester duds and snow boots. Being the dead of winter, Laem was as fashionable as anyone, so long as she kept her coat on. Like every other high school, there was a uniform code, and like any other school “without a uniform code,” it was unwritten, capricious, and enforced through ridicule by kids striving to be popular. Most tried to follow the code, some slavishly, because ridicule is painful and scarring. But in the dead of winter even the most popular kids dress for warmth.

Joe and Punya escorted Laem into Grand Coulee high school office. “Good morning,” Joe said. “We have an appointment to see the principal.”

“Good morning. You must be the Sanford’s,” the office secretary said, rising to her feet. “This way please, he’s expecting you.” She led them past the school nurse’s office to the principal’s office. “Mr. Colon, these are the Sanford’s,” the Grand Coulee office secretary said in introduction.

“Welcome to Grand Coulee,” Mr. Colon said coming around his desk to shake hands. “I understand you came all the way from Thailand,” he said when greeted Laem.

“Yes,” Laem said after Punya translated. She smiled wide, half from her cultural upbringing, the other half because Laem was a prodigious smiler and couldn’t (and didn’t want to) help herself.

“Well let’s go meet your homeroom teacher,” Mr. Colon said after Laem’s translators had left.

“Yes.”

**Chapter:**

**First Days of School**

She was beautiful, she was awkward; they were Indian, she was not; cliques loved them, she was shunned. High School. Retrospectively, it was obvious. Her smile flopped.

Inconceivable really: Land of Smiles, Proficient Practitioner – Fail? How?

While petroleum jelly applied liberally to the face does protect against sub-freezing temperatures, it does nothing to protect against the harsher realities of high school. Thankfully, she also donned a suit made entirely of polyester! Brown and green checkered double-knit at to boot! Remarkably, that failed as well.

*Seriously? Start over. Surely there’s been a misunderstanding; everywhere I look, everyone is the same complexion, same skin tone, same bone-structure! How am I different from you?*

*Life circumstances.*

*Oh, like growing up in a third world country!*

*No duh.*

*Ah, sorry. I don’t know a lot about that.*

 How lucky she was to find herself literally in just about the most desirable location on earth: the Grand Coulee! And at a time when geologists were finally buying into Harlan Bretz’s theory of repetitive cataclysmic floods! But she wasn’t a geologist. Yet geology was the reason she was there because it was the reason Joe was there, even if he didn’t see it that way.

You see, in barely the blink of an eye ago (on a geological scale) the Columbia river used to be the Mighty Columbia river. Treacherous; deadly, even. See (Google) Lewis & Clark; Oregon Trail. On top of that, the Columbia plateau was, and still is a vast desert. Yet, when water was liberally applied to the soil, marketable crops thrived. So close, yet so far.

So they (farmers) searched for a solution to their dilemma on the aforementioned Google. Nothing, it didn’t exist (it was Windows country, after all). Damn this place! more than a few farmers grumbled. A newspaperman/promoter-developer thought that was a grand idea: the Grand Coulee formed a natural basin, a *grand coulee*! All that was required was a dam to stop the water from going to waste.

If not for that guy the world would have had to wait until when? China built their grand dam. Where the hell was I?

Grand Coulee.

I know that! Where in the story, damn it!

Exactly.

No! I’m not playing Hoover’s on first!

Exactly.

Stop! Damn it!

I thought you weren’t playing?

I’m not!

But you said, “Dam it!”

No! I said, “Damn it!’

My mistake. Carry on.

Thank You! Now, where was I?

Grand Coulee.

Arrrggghhhh!!!

So they dammed the Columbia for irrigation and discovered a byproduct that was positively electric! Cheap power! So from 1933-1942, and beyond, the Grand Coulee Dam was a very big deal. It was the first domino in a chain reaction of reverse dominoes

. (Sideways note: speaking of chain reactions, no Columbia, no Hanford Project. Go cool your rods elsewhere. BOOM!)

Anyhoo, a third power plant was needed so Joe and Punya set up house in Electric City?

**Chapter:**

**Laem’s Decoder & the Damned Salmon**

Laem carried her Thai-English pocketbook dictionary everywhere she went and opened it, a lot. Her English vocabulary consisted of around twenty words which she deployed in one word responses. Nobody in the building spoke Thai, so Laem struggled without help to match spoken words to printed definitions. In class, she put it down only to write as she struggled to follow the teacher and grasp important concepts. It was a trick to hear the sounds correctly and find the appropriate meanings; often what she thought she heard didn’t make contextual sense to what the teacher was saying and she’d lose ground in the flow of the lecture. Certain words were more common and slowly began to stick in her memory.

The teachers were understanding, and gave as much individual attention as their lessons permitted, but naturally their priority was advancing the interests of the class as a whole. Unsurprisingly, Laem struggled in all her classes except for art, and math. Laem was adept at the universal language and while she still struggled to understand what the teacher said, she recognized much of what he wrote on the board. Thais have their own numerals, but often use English numerals as well, so Laem was already fluent in math.

Grand Coulee High School didn’t have ESL classes; they had Special Ed. Well, Laem did have difficulty learning. She received individual attention and worked on assignments from the other classes. It was an academic life-preserver and she appreciated it.

From the beginning, Laem felt a sense of acceptance that she hadn’t sensed from students in other classes. Her Special Ed classmates weren’t too concerned about fashion, or protecting their image; most of them just wanted to be liked. Laem liked them. They liked her too, and before long they came to her for help, especially in math.

 Navigating the hallways against the stream of high school humanity was where Laem noticed that Asians were the predominant ethnicity. She was Asian. When her eyes caught another student’s by chance, she smiled. Her risky overtures went unreciprocated. They weren’t Asian, it turned out; they were mostly *Nespelem*, or another one of the 12 bands of the *Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation.* (Of course, there were other Asians that weren’t Asians and they called themselves *Hispanic*.)

 Immigrants, on top of relegating the *Nespelem* to the reservation, damned their salmon and way of life. Laem was an immigrant and Joe worked on the dam. Her classmates probably intuited as much; why else would you relocate to Grand Coulee? (Well, farm work, because water brings life.)

Everybody knew the officially sanctioned history of the dam: the engineering marvel, cheap electricity, widespread irrigation, employment, etcetera. The *Nespelem* knew a different history. By the time Laem learned enough English to appreciate either telling of history she was near the end of her high school career. Within her first couple days of school, unabashed smiling went the way of the salmon.

**Chapter:**

**“Home” Life**

“How was school,” Joe asked.

Laem looked toward her sister.

“How school,” Punya asked in English. They were serious, Laem realized.

A few seconds passed while Laem reviewed the twenty or so words in her vocabulary for an appropriate answer to a question she was only guessing at based on context. “Good,” Laem said, mostly because “good” got more positive responses than any of the other words she had tried that day.

“That’s fine,” Joe said. Raising his head to include everybody in the trailer, he said “Wash up for dinner.” Laem watched her nieces run towards the bathroom, and before Punya nodded towards the bathroom Laem understood *wash up for dinner*.

“LLLLLLoRRRene,” Lorene corrected Laem one day while Laem was still in jetlag’s fogbank. LLLLLLoRRRene, Laem couldn’t help but notice, left a mess in her wake. Teresa was no match for her older sister.**Junk Pile,**

 **References, etc.**

Temperature

Landing Date/Time: Date/Time of Stepping on Moon: July 20th, 1969. 09:56 Bangkok.

Space in his house

Shutters open

Number of people 20+, almost all adults. Laem worked her way to the front.

Chapter:

Planting

Manope gives Laem the small fish & shrimp? From the nets to take home. Laem walks home in the dark, approx. a mile skirting AhBpha’s ghost-tree. At home she pinches the head, squeezes the poop. These little smelt-like fish are then put on rock salt, washed in the am, then dried in the sun. Dang falls asleep, Sook joins in. Shrimp pounded into shrimp paste.

What are her memories of the rain?

 How long did the rains usually last?

 What Did she do differently from her normal routines?

Love noise of frogs at night. Scorpions, all sorts of insects, snakes. Bamboo with rubberband drum sticks.

Minced, ground, pad kapow with chili, basil, garlic. No soup. snakes, eel, field mice huge, like rabbit - no sauce, dry stir fry. Can’t debone snakes, mice. Laem only ate frogs. Mice for drinking.

Same clothes, big hat like farmers. – you just get wet. Rain didn’t stop people from doing stuff. Taro leaf to go to school. No special shoes. Might carry shoes if especially muddy. Humid dried quickly. Waterbuffalos fed straw when raining.

Laem sometimes used her humor to gain acceptance by some of the cliques. She was bigger than her peers and did not fit the image of traditional Thai beauty.

Thorhea – stealing fruit from Ah Pba? Lightly disciplined because of nearly dying, older brother?

Laem prep cook. Cooked rice since able to lift pot, warmed leftovers when older. Shaved coconuts for milk – put somewhere else? An affront to her culinary sense – mashed bananas & rice

Shared Dream (delete after use):

 The sun eases itself onto the horizon. No respite, even in absence. Shadows merge, apprehension drowns. Darkness now dread. Nowhere, everywhere!

Malevolence in every living (living?) thing; seeds ripped in obscene casualness – animal, vegetable, mineral – all spit onto the ground, impotent.

Run!! Into the house! But there’s only ugliness; each surface contorts, magnifies! Unbearable, not tangible.!

Breath. Take stalk.

Staccato flashes of children, living and dead, each in throes of pain overwhelm; their horror, pain, abandonment fill every sense completely. Agony shared, in every sense. Sweet escape into madness withheld - awareness never greater.

Violent rending; living/dead, past/present. For all to know.

Ghosts! Feeble labels! Does “DEATH” come anywhere near adequately describing the experience? Doubt it. But then, labels, words, are shorthand for the living and all we have.

 Everybody in the house, especially adults, Sook. Laem’s eyes flew open, and what was once obvious to every sense was now very hard to quantify logically.

(Wakefulness) All four eyes’ flew open, scream at the ready, covered in sweat…Sook cross-legged, deeper in concentration than ever before. The logical entry point for the supernatural would be during sleep, when the brain is recharging, susceptible to new ideas, concepts. What is real in the dream state?

But the majestic rhino they were were the much lesser combatants, or practically speaking, any other phylum

 To be fair,

Somjai misconstrued “his” beetle’s communiqué as consent to do battle with a worthy opponent – eagerness even!

 “Huh? Oh yeah, sure. Let me get my beetle,” Laem said.

Most “residents,” or spirits making occasional visits to former selves, sadly knew too.

That was close, I tell you.

when I was spotted again by a stray dog.”

It was pretty dark, but his eyes glowed bright red.

It was a benign period of spiritual activity.

Laem and her friend were at the wat for an outdoor movie. Got spooked by red glowing animal eyes. Ran. Of course, some of the spirits also had red glowing eyes.

She realized too late all was not well. “Let’s go home Momb,” she thought she said. What came out was an unintelligible slur, so Momb kept plodding along. The command had taken an enormous amount concentration and she was relieved to let Momb take over. Laem closed her eyes briefly and let Momb’s rhythmic stride lull her away.

All three waterbuffalos halted as. Greenery at that particular spot was edible, which was good enough. Their gastronomical drive may have saved Laem from being trampled. They were docile beasts, but who knows if they would have bothered to traipse around Laem.

She neglected to neutralize gravity before passing out. Usually, it wasn’t much of a factor. In fact, most instances were performed on a sleeping mat or in the arms of family. She had no experience do it from atop 2,000 pounds of water buffalo.

NEED to develop:

Laem’s wanderlust;

 Tension with Sook;

 Plans to send off with Punya

 … Punya/Joe move to USA

4) Develop Punya/Joe “marriage montage” – visits to home, their home, inviting Laem for Christmas.

Laem Flirting w/”Boyfriend”(put elsewhere?)

One day at school Laem learned she couldn’t sing. She was hardly fazed by her teacher’s pronouncement; Laem knew better. Nevertheless, she was encouraged to try dancing; she hardly needed encouragement.

Dancing, in polite Thai society, isn’t undertaken solely because the music moves you. There are unspoken, but .

Traditional Thai dance was her option so she excelled at that

Details how it was taught, EXERCISES – HANDS ESPECIALLY, HOW LONG TO TRAIN FINGERS TO BEND, ETC

OPE, OPE frog in the downspout?

The axis mundi may exist in yet other forms. In Norse cosmology, for instance, there are nine different worlds that are connected by a massive ash tree called Yggdrasil.

The axis mundi may take on even more abstract forms as well. As an illustration in shamanistic belief, the axis mundi is perceived to be a sort of pathway that allows the shaman to travel across time and space. This form of travel allows a shaman to heal, obtain wisdom from other realms, and retrieve soul pieces.

Finally, in some belief systems, we, as human beings, are perceived to be the axis mundi, as we are situated between heaven and earth. According to the chakra system in Hinduism and Buddhism, the human body is treated as a pole or a pillar between heaven and earth. The body is believed to be a temple, and human beings are thought to be able to transcend their earthly existence through meditation and prayer. The idea of the human body as an axis mundi may also be seen in Leonardo da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man, as well as in the practices of Yoga and Tai Chi

 .

HYPERLINK "https://www.ancient-origins.net/myths-legends/axis-mundi-sacred-sites-where-heaven-meets-earth-009464"

https://www.ancient-origins.net/myths-legends/axis-mundi-sacred-sites-where-heaven-meets-earth-009464

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Axis\_Mundi"

https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Axis\_Mundi

The axis mundi (also cosmic axis, world axis, world pillar and center of the world) is a symbol representing the center of the world where the heaven (sky) connects with the earth. Different cultures represent the axis mundi by varied symbols such as a natural object (a mountain, a

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Tree" \o "Tree"

, a vine, a stalk, a column of smoke or

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Fire" \o "Fire"

) or of a product of human manufacture (a staff, a tower, a ladder, a staircase, a maypole, a

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Cross" \o "Cross"

, a steeple, a rope, a

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Totem\_pole" \o "Totem pole"

totem pole

, a pillar, a spire). Its proximity to heaven may carry implications that are chiefly religious (

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Pagoda" \o "Pagoda"

pagoda

, temple mount, church) or secular (obelisk, minaret, lighthouse,

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Rocket" \o "Rocket"

rocket

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Skyscraper" \o "Skyscraper"

skyscraper

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Axis\_Mundi" \l "cite\_note-0"

 Additionally, the axis mundi may be feminine (an umbilical providing nourishment), masculine (a phallus providing insemination into a uterus), or neither (e.g the omphalos (navel).

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Axis\_Mundi" \l "cite\_note-1"

The axis mundi features prominently in cultures utilizing shamanic practices or those with

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Animism" \o "Animism"

animist

 belief systems. Yet it also appears in the most technologically advanced cultures—wherever the impulse persists to link a tower with the idea of a "world center."

Etymology

The term axis mundi derives from the Latin words "axis"

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Axis\_Mundi" \l "cite\_note-2"

 and "mundi" or world, together meaning "pivot point, or line, connecting the earth and the sky/heavens."

Symbolism and mythology

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Mount\_Fuji" \o "Mount Fuji"

Mount Fuji

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Japan" \o "Japan"

Throughout history, most cultures have described their own homeland as "the center of the world" because it was the center of their known universe. For example, the name of

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/China" \o "China"

"Middle Kingdom"—expresses an ancient belief that the country stood at the center of the world. Within this central known universe a specific spot—often a mountain or other elevated place, where earth and sky come closest—gains status as center of the center, the axis mundi. High mountains are typically regarded as sacred by peoples living near them. Shrines are often erected at the summit or base.

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Japan" \o "Japan"

's highest mountain,

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Mount\_Fuji" \o "Mount Fuji"

Mount Fuji

, has long symbolized the world axis in Japanese culture. Mount Kun-Lun fills a similar role in China.

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Sioux" \o "Sioux"

 beliefs take the

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Black\_Hills" \o "Black Hills"

Black Hills

 as the axis mundi. Mount Kailash is holy to several religions in

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Tibet" \o "Tibet"

. In ancient Mesopotamia, the cultures of ancient

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Sumer" \o "Sumer"

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Babylon" \o "Babylon"

Babylon

 erected artificial mountains, or ziggurats, on the flat river plain. These supported staircases leading to temples at the top. The pre-Columbian residents of

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Teotihuac%C3%A1n" \o "Teotihuacán"

Teotihuacán

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Mexico" \o "Mexico"

Mexico

 erected huge pyramids featuring staircases leading to heaven.

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Axis\_Mundi" \l "cite\_note-3"

 The Middle Kingdom, China, had a central mountain, Kun-Lun, known in

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Taoism" \o "Taoism"

Taoist literature

 as "the mountain at the middle of the world." To "go into the mountains," meant to dedicate oneself to a spiritual life.

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Axis\_Mundi" \l "cite\_note-4"

Reconstruction of Etemenanki, an ancient Mesopotamian ziggurat (based on Schmid).

Because the axis mundi is an idea that unites a number of concrete images, no contradiction exists in regarding multiple spots as "the center of the world." The symbol can operate in a number of locales at once. The

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Ancient\_Greece" \o "Ancient Greece"

ancient Greeks

 regarded several sites as places of earth's omphalos (navel) stone, notably the oracle at

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Delphi" \o "Delphi"

Delphi

, while still maintaining a belief in a cosmic world tree and in Mount Olympus as the abode of the gods.

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Judaism" \o "Judaism"

Judaism

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Mount\_Sinai" \o "Mount Sinai"

Mount Sinai

 and Mount Zion, Christianity has the Mount of Olives and

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Calvary" \o "Calvary"

Calvary

, Islam has the Temple Mount (

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Dome\_of\_the\_Rock" \o "Dome of the Rock"

Dome of the Rock

) and

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Mecca" \o "Mecca"

. In addition to Kun-Lun, the ancient Chinese recognized four mountains as pillars of the world.

All sacred places constitute world centers (omphalos) with the altar or place of prayer as the axis. Altars, incense sticks, candles and torches form the axis by sending a column of smoke, and prayer, toward heaven. The architecture of sacred places often reflects this role. The stupa of

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Hinduism" \o "Hinduism"

Hinduism

, and later

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Buddhism" \o "Buddhism"

Buddhism

, reflects Mount Meru.

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Cathedral" \o "Cathedral"

Cathedrals

 are laid out in the form of a

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Cross" \o "Cross"

, with the vertical bar representing the union of earth and heaven as the horizontal bars represent union of people to one another, with the altar at the intersection.

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Pagoda" \o "Pagoda"

Pagoda

 structures in Asian temples take the form of a stairway linking earth and heaven. A steeple in a church or a minaret in a mosque also serve as connections of earth and heaven. Structures such as the maypole, derived from the Saxons' Irminsul, and the

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Totem\_pole" \o "Totem pole"

totem pole

 among indigenous peoples of the Americas also represent world axes. The calumet, or sacred pipe, represents a column of smoke (the soul) rising form a world center.

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Axis\_Mundi" \l "cite\_note-5"

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Yggdrasil" \o "Yggdrasil"

Yggdrasil

, the World Ash (Norse)

A plant can serve as the axis mundi. The tree provides an axis that unites three planes: Its branches reach for the sky, its trunk meets the earth, and it roots reach down into the underworld. In some Pacific island cultures, the banyan tree, of which the Bodhi tree is of the Sacred Fig variety, is the abode of ancestor spirits. The Bodhi Tree is also the name given to the tree under which Gautama Siddhartha, the historical

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Buddha" \o "Buddha"

Buddha

, sat on the night he attained

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Bodhi" \o "Bodhi"

enlightenment

. The

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Yggdrasil" \o "Yggdrasil"

Yggdrasil

, or World Ash, functions in much the same way in

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Norse\_mythology" \o "Norse mythology"

Norse mythology

; it is the site where

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Odin" \o "Odin"

 found enlightenment. Other examples include Jievaras in Lithuanian mythology and Thor's Oak in the myths of the pre-Christian Germanic peoples. The

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Tree\_of\_Life" \o "Tree of Life"

Tree of Life

 and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Genesis" \o "Genesis"

Genesis

 present two aspects of the same image. Each is said to stand at the center of the

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Garden\_of\_Eden" \o "Garden of Eden"

Paradise garden

 from which four rivers flow to nourish the whole world. Each tree confers a boon.

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Bamboo" \o "Bamboo"

Bamboo

, the plant from which Asian

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Calligraphy" \o "Calligraphy"

calligraphy

 pens are made, represents knowledge and is regularly found on Asian college campuses. The

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Christmas\_tree" \o "Christmas tree"

Christmas tree

, which can be traced in its origins back to pre-Christian European beliefs, represents an axis mundi.

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Axis\_Mundi" \l "cite\_note-6"

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Entheogen" \o "Entheogen"

Entheogens

 (psychoactive substances) are often regarded as world axes, such as the Fly Agaric mushroom among the Evenks of

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Russia" \o "Russia"

Russia

.

The human form can function as a world axis. Some of the more abstract

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Tree\_of\_Life" \o "Tree of Life"

Tree of Life

 representations, such as the Sefirot in

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Kabbalism" \o "Kabbalism"

Kabbalism

 and in the

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Chakra" \o "Chakra"

Chakra

 system recognized by

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Hinduism" \o "Hinduism"

Hinduism

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Buddhism" \o "Buddhism"

Buddhism

, merge with the concept of the human body as a pillar between heaven and earth. Disciplines such as

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Yoga" \o "Yoga"

 and Tai Chi begin from the premise of the human body as axis mundi.

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Astrology" \o "Astrology"

Astrology

 in all its forms assumes a connection between human health and affairs and the orientation of these with celestial bodies. World religions regard the body itself as a temple and prayer as a column uniting earth to heaven. The

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Renaissance" \o "Renaissance"

Renaissance

 image known as the Vitruvian Man represented a symbolic and mathematical exploration of the human form as world axis.

Houses also serve as world centers. The hearth participates in the symbolism of the altar and a central garden participates in the symbolism of primordial

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Garden\_of\_Eden" \o "Garden of Eden"

paradise

. In Asian cultures, houses were traditionally laid out in the form of a square oriented toward the four compass directions. A traditional Asian home was oriented toward the sky through

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Feng\_shui" \o "Feng shui"

Feng shui

, a system of geomancy, just as a palace would be. Traditional Arab houses are also laid out as a square surrounding a central fountain that evokes a primordial garden paradise. The nomadic peoples of

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Mongolia" \o "Mongolia"

Mongolia

 and the Americas more often lived in circular structures. The central pole of the tent still operated as an axis but a fixed reference to the four compass points was avoided.

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Axis\_Mundi" \l "cite\_note-7"

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Caduceus" \o "Caduceus"

Caduceus

A common shamanic concept, and a universally told story, is that of the healer traversing the axis mundi to bring back knowledge from the other world. It may be seen in the stories from

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Odin" \o "Odin"

 and the

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Yggdrasil" \o "Yggdrasil"

World Ash Tree

 to the Garden of Eden and Jacob's Ladder to Jack and the Beanstalk and

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Rapunzel" \o "Rapunzel"

Rapunzel

. It is the essence of the journey described in The Divine Comedy by

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Dante\_Alighieri" \o "Dante Alighieri"

Dante Alighieri

. The epic poem relates its hero's descent and ascent through a series of spiral structures that take him from through the core of the earth, from the depths of

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Hell" \o "Hell"

 to celestial Paradise.

Anyone or anything suspended on the axis between heaven and earth becomes a repository of potential knowledge. A special status accrues to the thing suspended: A

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Serpent" \o "Serpent"

serpent

, a victim of crucifixion or hanging, a rod, a fruit, mistletoe. Derivations of this idea find form in the Rod of Asclepius, an emblem of the medical profession, and in the

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Caduceus" \o "Caduceus"

caduceus

, an emblem of correspondence and commercial professions. The staff in these emblems represents the axis mundi while the serpents act as guardians of, or guides to, knowledge.

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Axis\_Mundi" \l "cite\_note-8"

Shamanism and Psychedelics: A biogenetic structuralist paradigm of ecopsychology. Michael Winkelman. Arizona State University, USA. >>>>>>find on phone, downloads 2/23/20

www2.palomar.edu Common Hallucinogens Used by Shamans Around the World

 Except when over-embellished as in Mr. Frey’s, A Million Little Pieces.

 Pi an honorific prefix, Chuuk a Knot of hair on an otherwise shaved head - since only children wear their hair this way it also means child.

 Sacred Tattoos: Inside the Thai Tradition of Sak Yant.

HYPERLINK "https://wanderlust.com"

https://wanderlust.com

 But you suspected as much from the subsequent teeth brushing episode.

 I’ve had the great honor of knowing both and can vouch that their smiles & gleams are identical.

 Woven by her grandmother from sweetgrass and bamboo to keep fish and other creatures.

 Sook tattooed sak yant protection tattoos. Not everybody who asked got one.

 FIND! References to fast-walking American Indians, or ANY! reference.

 Plenty of the mentally ill, probably, think about time’s pliability as well. That’s another subject, well beyond my scope and limited expertise.

 Translated to English as “never mind,” or in German, “macht nichts.” www.bbc.com/cindysuiannalacey.??????

 Essays on Thai Folklore, pages 203. “The khwan may therefor be described as something in the nature of a principle of life, vital to the welfare of man animals. Certain inanimate things have also khwan because such inanimate things have their particular spirit or genius residing in them. “ “…every big tree in a forest is supposed to be the residence of a tree spirit either male or female.”

 There were two types of leeches common to the area: the smaller pin-sized leech, and the waterbuffalo leech. The smaller are nuisances, to be sure, the larger are blood-sucking-nightmares.

 Siamese Mauser Style Rifle.

HYPERLINK "https://en.m.wikipedia.org"

https://en.m.wikipedia.org

. These were the main infantry weapons during the war, so good bet Sook was issued one.

 Shamans of the 20th Century. Heinze, Ruth-Inge

 Ah is the honorific for either aunt or uncle.

HYPERLINK "https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Axis\_Mundi"

https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Axis\_Mundi

 Dubs. I now claim copyright privileges.

 Sook gave Laem his Bronze WWII medal, highest awarded?

 Pun unfortunate, probably avoidable, but the point being made is smaller spirit houses are prevalent while “life-sized” spirit houses are not.

 Thai king funeral: The royal pyre built over a year. https://www.bbc.com

HYPERLINK "https://animalcorner.co.uk"

https://animalcorner.co.uk

 Odds are very high this wasn’t her name. If Laem ever knew her name it would have been fleetingly as the lady, however high her standing in the village may have been, was a family acquaintance.

 “Where dead people go.”

 Talk about a spoiler alert!

 Malaria? Dengue? Yellow fever?

 These girls were not close friends of Laem, so she has forgotten their names. The names above were picked to represent real people; the conversation represents a real conversation as well.

 Folk theater.

 Thai New Year celebration that features dousing anyone nearby with water.

 Asia

s deadly secret: The scourge of the betel nut.

HYPERLINK "https://www.bbc.com"

https://www.bbc.com

. The usual recipe is betel nut, slaked lime ( ), and flavorings such as cardamom, cinnamon, and tobacco.

 See how I avoided the sophomoric and avoided using titillating!

 Name long since forgotten, common Thai nickname inserted.

 Google it if you must.

 Supernatural phenomena, ghosts especially, are serious subject matter in Thailand.

 Again, name changed to protect the innocent (presumably).

 Again, NOT her real NAME! Pay attention!

 To be fair, at that time many other countries preferred their female employees to be attractive, beautiful if possible.

 Laem didn’t actually converse with insects (or any other non-humans, for that matter), but neurons were fired on both sides; who’s to say that none of them strayed from their intended receptors?

 Animal that brings bad luck.

 Slang for foreigner, white usually.

 “Anybody with enough money can buy their way into a private school.”

 “Tit” is an honorific earned after becoming a Buddhist. Except for this chapter, I have used Tit Noi throughout this story whether appropriate for that time period, or not.

 NASA.gov. She was ninety-three million (give or take fifty million) miles away from the explosion. Had she been in the States it would only have been at 186,000 miles a second – still difficult to dodge.

 Nationalgeographic.com

 She didn’t actually know this word at the time, or any other Spanish words ending in “jo.” But she probably resorted to some kind of name calling.

 Look for that damn Columbia River book!

 As of very late December 2017 there were 60 dams on the Columbia watershed – 14 of which are on the Columbia itself. And, like dominoes, they branched out willy-nilly.

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\*\*\*\* Punya/Joe/Sook/Manope decide to bring Laem to States, school classes – no big deal, might fall through, background for why Sook paid someone to go to Bangkok for passport, Laem, Dang, Tape? Visit Joe/Punya for Christmas. Joe/Vera father worked oilfields, moved a lot, made good money, spent quickly/frivolously drinking, etc Vera no-nonsense like Joe\*\*\*\*\*

Thai passport – Sook paid to have someone go to Bangkok for them – student protests (largest in history 200,000 Oct 14, ’73), 77 killed, 800+ wounded by tear gas and gunfire, tanks – Bangkok Post, NYT, BBC Marshal Thanom & 2 senior officers resigned, exiled temporarily. Dr. Sanya Dhammasak (rector of Thammasat University became new Prime Minister).

the fawning over the infant,

1. http://geology.isu.edu/Digital\_Geology\_Idaho/Module13/mod13.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-1)