

# *A n a k S a s t r a*

## Issue 23

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## Contributor Bios

**James Bennett** (Twitter: [@Souldotna](#)) teaches in remote Yup'ik villages in Alaska and travels during school holidays. He is a recent dropout of the MFA program for creative writing at the University of Alaska, Anchorage. He occasionally writes at [Life at Parallel 60 North](#).

**D.R.L. Heywood-Lonsdale** is a London-based writer and researcher who grew up on the west coast of the U.S. She studied writing and literary cultures at New York University and Pepperdine University, where she received the Douglas Award for Creative Writing. Her poems have appeared in *Dash*, *The Rectangle* and other journals in the U.S. and U.K.

**Wan Phing Lim** (Twitter: [@wanphing](#)) is a Malaysian writer currently based in Singapore. She was born in 1986 in Butterworth, Penang, and has had some of her poems and short stories published by Ethos Books, Math Paper Press and the British Council in Singapore. She loves to write Malaysian- and Southeast Asian-themed stories.

**Ista Kyra** fancies herself a poet, writer with radically alternative point of view. Self-stylised as the alphabet whore, a lotus-eating wandering spirit, with 30-years life experience and counting. Serial nudist and non-believer of underwear, who occasionally spits verse in glory of the sacrilege. Dabbles in journalism for money.

Born and raised in Houston, Texas, **Allison Thai** grew up on a steady diet of Bible stories, fairy tales, and comic books. She is an aspiring medical student, manga reader, art book collector, and dragon-fairy hybrid (according to the Vietnamese creation myth, anyway).

**Joan Annsfire** is a poet, writer and retired librarian. She and her partner, a retired teacher, have traveled quite a bit with packs on their backs, connecting with the people. Her poetry, creative nonfiction and short stories have been published in a variety of journals, both online and in print.

Irish writer [Perry McDaid](#) lives in Derry under the brooding brows of Donegal hills, which he occasionally hikes in search of druidic inspiration. His diverse creative writing appears internationally in the like of *Aurora Wolf*; *Quantum*; *Runtzine*; *Amsterdam Quarterly*; *Bunbury*; *Metverse Muse*; *Banksnotes*; *Phonenix New Life*; *Carillon* and others.

**Riya Sarna** is a young, aspiring poet. She founded a [website](#) when she was 16 so she could publish her poems anonymously.

**Vernon Daim** was born in Taiping and grew up in Kuching. In his mid-thirties, he currently works in Pahang. He started writing when he was an undergraduate at Edinburgh University. He writes both poetry and short stories.

**Matthew Jerome van Huizen** is a 22-year-old law student in Malacca, six feet tall, Dutch Eurasian who writes for the Editorial Squad and the Law Students Society of Multimedia University, Malacca.

**James Underwood** is an American poet and English teacher hailing from the Great Lake State of Michigan. After graduating from UMBC in 1995 with a BA in English Literature, he moved to Asia, where he has lived and traveled since.

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## "A Lao(sy) Love Story"

by James Bennett

The single aisle of the long and narrow teakwood-decked boat, about ready to leave Luang Prabang and motor up the Nam Ou River, was nearly fully loaded with bulging cardboard boxes, hand-made crates, and canvas sacks. Three goats and several cages full of chickens occupied the tiny back deck. Their bleats and squawks competed with the shouts and complaints of the crew as two young men loosened mooring lines and readied the push poles to move the boat into the current. The engine sputtered and then backfired, filling the air with black, gasoline-rich fumes until the carburetor choke was closed and the motor purred into a smooth idle. The last of the passengers, mostly locals, walked the skinny plank from the dock and stowed old rucksacks and over-stuffed burlap bags wherever they could find room on the crowded ferry. Climbing over and around the cargo, each sought an empty seat amid the dozen benches on either side of the covered center walkway. Rob sat alone toward the back. During these first two weeks in country he had come to accept that nobody would sit by an unshaven, longhaired *farang* if other seats were available. He eyed the last passenger, a rather lanky redhead, as she balanced her way across the gangway, stepped aboard and set her backpack in the bow. Almost immediately, one of the crew pulled in the plank. The boat pitched into the stream and began to motor upriver.

As the woman made her way down the aisle, she spied the empty space next to Rob. Fingering windy-wild hair away from her eyes, and in the custom of travelers not knowing which language might be understood, she inquired if the seat might be free by simply raising her eyebrows. Rob responded with a shrug and contorted his long legs to provide some additional room. Accepting the cramped condition with a quick curtsey, she nestled in.

He offered his hand and a simple introduction, “Rob.”

“Veronique,” she replied. She smiled and gave his fingertips a light squeeze.

*“Etes-vous Française?”*

*“Bien sûr,”* she said. *“Et vous, êtes-vous Canadian?”*

He shook his head *“Non, je suis Alaskan,”* and shifted languages. “My French is poor, maybe your English is better?”

“Oh, Alaska. I’d love to go visit one day. I want to see bears, the northern lights and glaciers.” She pronounced glaciers with three syllables, a short *a* sound and the *c* as an *s*. Her French accent had a pronounced and sophisticated British lilt.

“You’ll probably need two trips to see those. When it gets dark enough for the best northern lights, the bears are usually hibernating. Where in France do you live?”

“I don’t. I’m from Toulouse, but I now live near London because of my work. Going to Alaska twice, maybe is not a problem. Do you live in Anchorage?”

“No, in Seward, a small town on the coast, about a two-hour drive from the city. What do you do for work?”

“I write about art for a magazine. It suits me. And you, what is it you do?”

“I’m a taxi driver of sorts—a water taxi. I take people out on Resurrection Bay to remote cabins or to places where they can kayak. Sometimes I take people out to sightsee. What I do suits me, too.”

“What do they see in this bay?”

“Glaciers and bears.” He made her smile. “And fjords with whales, seals, sea otters, and puffins—lots of nature.”

“It must be wonderful to see that every day. When I come to Alaska, I will hire you.” She settled the plan with a gently enthusiastic slap on his thigh. Immediately, her focus was drawn to the near shore. A young boy, maybe ten years old, was riding a water buffalo while herding several others up onto the bank. Veronique reached in her shoulder bag for a camera while drawing Rob’s attention toward the youngster. The boy smiled and waved to no one in particular on the boat.

As she took a few photos, Rob pulled out his camera, an earlier version of the one Veronique was using. “Good cameras, don’t you think?” He paused for a moment to take some shots. “I like it when the lighting is just right, low, like it is now. And when there’s something interesting and authentic to take a picture of -- a boy riding a buffalo in the river qualifies.”

“Ah, a taxi driver with the soul of an artist.” Veronique leaned back on the bench seat and the two chitchatted for a while.

“Where are you going?” she eventually asked.

Now, to Nong Khiaw, and tomorrow I think I’ll take the road northwest and cross into Thailand sometime in a week or two. And you?”

“My plans are similar. Did you know about the courtship rituals that are going on in the nearby mountain villages this week?”

“I had no idea—courting rituals?”

“It’s very interesting. The unmarried young women, starting around 10 or 12 years old, dress up in their finest traditional clothes – colorful dresses, felt turbans or these outrageous lampshade-like hats. They also wear intricately beaded necklaces and sashes. The boys wear fancy embroidered shirts and silken baggy pants called *pha hang*. I was in this region fifteen years ago when I was a university student. I remembered watching one game the young men and women would play. They’d line up about two meters apart and toss a small leather ball back and forth. They would have a conversation with whomever

they tossed the ball to. Sometimes, especially with the older boys and girls, there would be flirting going on. Maybe you can join in and find a wife. Well, if you don't already have one."

"Yeah, there's no wife. Maybe I'll do just that, play catch. And you, you were here before and are now back again. Looking for a husband?"

"I already have one of those. He's back in London with our three-year-old daughter."

Rob looked at the scenery for a while. "That's good that you can get away by yourself."

"He didn't have a choice, and he's not happy about it. Do you know where you're staying tonight?"

Rob shrugged. "There can't be too many choices in Nong Khiaw. Do you know some place?"

"The Manypoan Guest House, if it's still around. I stayed there before. If it's like I remember, it's very cool. They had a big black cauldron in a fireplace like wicked witches do. If you needed hot water, you just dipped a pail in. We should stay there."

"Sure. Sounds interesting."

A small barge floated downriver, and Rob nudged Veronique's attention toward it. The boat was made of six four-meter-long bundles of a dozen or so bamboo shafts lashed together, with two more bundles set up like gunnels. "That's the second one I've seen today. I'm guessing they cut the wood, fashion rafts like that and then drift downriver to sell it all."

"That's right. They then buy various goods in town and take these ferries back to the villages. I'd bet that most of the locals on this boat are woodcutters. But this could be the last year you'll be able to see this. The Chinese are putting a road in that parallels the river. This will all be done by truck next year."

"Whenever someone asks when the best time to travel is, my answer is always 'now'. I wonder how many more traditional activities will be gone the next time I go somewhere?"

Maybe that courting ritual is already dead. Maybe the kids use the Lao version of Tinder to hook up these days.”

“No, I think we’ll see that the rituals are alive and well.” Veronique continued. “Most remote places in Lao are off the Internet grid and many of the smaller villages have no electrical power yet. Change does come in this region, but it’s never in a hurry. I’ve lined up a trek next week to three villages that are a couple of day’s walk from the closest drivable road. You should join me. I think you would like it – it should be a very authentic experience.”

The boat slipped into the shade of steep limestone canyon walls and into a headwind. The temperature immediately dropped a few degrees and Veronique gave a quick shiver. Rob reached for a jacket he had folded on the backrest and draped it over his companion. She huddled to his side, and he eased his arm over her shoulders. As the boat rocked in the current, their bodies and legs grazed delicately and kinetically, both now warmed by more than proximity. And then, just like that, Veronique stood. “I can’t,” was all she said.

She turned abruptly and made her way to the bow. Rob watched as she pulled a jacket and scarf from her pack, sat on her bag and looked upstream. With another shrug, he turned his attention back to the traffic on the river. Here and there were flat-bottomed, canoe-like skiffs, most barely a meter wide and maybe only five times as long, each manned by a standing fisherman. Rob watched as they would spin-toss a net into the water, let it set for a few moments and then gather it up by pulling a center cord. More times than not, it was just a water haul. But every now and again, some fingerlings and a forearm-sized fish or two would be caught and tossed in the back of the boats. Rob imagined himself making the spiral net-casting flip and decided he might try his luck if he could find a local who would let him have a go at it. He took out his camera and tried to time the shutter to capture the moment when the net was released.

Some twenty minutes later, Veronique returned. “May I sit back down? And if it’s all right, I’d rather not talk about it.”

“We’ve just met,” Rob replied. “You don’t owe me any explanation.”



The boat slowed as it approached a hamlet. There was no dock, and the bow eased up on the muddy bank. Rob caught the eye of the captain who waved his hand and shook his head indicating that this was not Nong Khiaw. Some half-dozen passengers tossed their bags ashore and disembarked. The crew pushed off with the poles, and the ferry slipped back against the current and continued upstream. The stop took no more than five minutes.

“My job isn’t much different than this,” Rob said. “I don’t have a crew though. And I don’t have a set schedule or a specific route. I go where my clients want to go and when it’s more-or-less convenient for them. No two days are alike. I love it.”

Veronique let a few moments pass before responding. “I love to write about art -- no two artists are alike. But most of my day is about schedules, deadlines, routines and expectations. Not only because of my career, but more and more so because of my family. Now I’m here, and my husband is discovering just how much effort it is to take care of a child and a house while trying to work.”

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The village of Nong Khiaw was big enough to have a planked dock. The crew tied off on partially rotted pilings, and passengers started to toss their baggage up onto the landing. Rob and Veronique waited until most of the other passengers got off and nearly all of the cargo, including the chickens and goats, were unloaded. Veronique stepped up to the dock and Rob hoisted up their two backpacks. Together they walked up a steep, wet and slippery trail to a path that continued uphill. It intersected with the main road and a concrete bridge, still pockmarked from the strafing and bombings of the war a generation ago. The village extended some twenty meters on each side of the bridge, with a small shop, and a restaurant on the dockside and several other building and homes, including the Manypoan Guesthouse across the river.

“Ah, it’s still here,” said Veronique. She knocked on the door and pushed it open. The small lobby doubled as a common room for guests. Over in the corner, a not-quite middle-aged traveler was reading the *Lonely Planet* guide for Lao. She looked over the top of her glasses and greeted Rob and Veronique.

“Oh, hello. The owner has just stepped out and his wife, who is in the back, doesn’t speak any English. If you are looking for a room, I’m afraid I’ve taken the last available one.” Her accent was distinctly Australian.

“Do you know if there is another guesthouse? My name is Rob, by the way.” He set his backpack on the floor and offered his hand.

“I’m Julia. You’re from the States? And yes there is another guesthouse, but it’s also full – there are festivals going on around here now, I was just reading about them, and there are several other travelers here to see those.”

“Bad luck for us. Yes, I’m from Alaska. This is Veronique, now living in the UK, but from France. We just met on the boat coming here. Veronique was just telling me about some courtship rituals happening, maybe part of the festivals?”

“It’s a pleasure, Julia” Veronique also set her bag down. “Yes, the courting rituals are part of the festivals happening now. You sound like you’re from Oz, Julia, no?”

“I am, a school teacher from Darwin, here on holiday. Look, my room has two beds and I’m just staying for one night, maybe we can make some sort of arrangement?”

At that moment, the owner returned. ‘Cheers,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry, we are full.’

“If it wouldn’t be a problem, may they share my room?”

“Yes, of course. I charge more, 35,000 kip each, but no problem.”

“Do you know of another place to stay?” Veronique lifted her pack and slung one strap over her shoulder.

“No, the other guesthouse is owned by my wife’s brother. It is full as well. I was just there.” And then gesturing toward Rob, “He is not your husband?”

Rob answered. “No, we just met on the boat today. Veronique, why don’t you stay with Julia? I’ll figure something out.”

“One of the guests at the other house is a young man from Holland,” the owner stated. “His room is with two beds also. Maybe he would share. I saw him at the restaurant across the bridge. Will you go ask?”

“Sure,” Rob said, and then turned to Veroniqué. “I’m hungry. If you would like, give me a chance to talk to talk to the Dutch guy and then meet me over there in a few minutes, and we can get something to eat.” He looked at the Australian woman. “Please do join us, Julia.”

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Rob was sitting alone drinking a Beer Lao when Veroniqué walked into the thatched-roofed open-air restaurant and pulled up a chair opposite him.

“Wasn’t the man from Holland here?”

“He was. His name is Peter. He just left for a walk with some other travelers he met. I offered to pay for the entire room if he would let me stay there, and he agreed. Problem solved. Is Julia coming?”

“Oh, do you like her?”

“Does it matter to you?”

“So, you do. She is quite attractive. Julia has already had something to eat, but she said she would come over for a beer in a little while.”

A young Lao woman, maybe in her mid-teens, came out of the kitchen with two laminated picture menus. She waited as Veroniqué and Rob looked over the choices. She smiled and left as soon as they pointed out their selections.

“I would still like to travel with you. The invitation to go with me on the trek to those very remote villages is still good. What do you think?”

“Veroniqué, I seem to make you uncomfortable. I get that you’re married. I have no desire for things to be awkward. What exactly do you want from me?”

“Do I have to spell it out? My life back home is a mess. I don’t know what I want. Maybe all I want is to be distracted.”

“You don’t know me. Maybe I’m not so nice.”

“Nice? I already have nice: a nice job, a nice family, a nice house, a nice life. I’m bored of nice.”

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Darkness came quickly after sunset. The teenage girl lit candles at their table as Rob and Veronique finished dinner. Rob was ordering his second beer when Julia walked out of the night and over to where they sat.

“May I join you?”

“Yes, please. Of course.” Rob half-stood up to welcome Julia. “May I buy you a beer? Veronique, another for you too?”

“Thank you. I will have one. I hope I’m not intruding on the two of you. It’s nice to have someone near my age to chat with. I’m thirty-seven, and I don’t think of that being old, but I’m afraid I’ve crossed a certain threshold. All of the other backpackers seem to be uni students in their early 20s.”

“And most of us in our 30s or 40s are becoming parents or devoted to our careers, so there aren’t too many travelers our age out and about.” Veronique pushed back her chair, crossed her legs and continued speaking. “So one either meets students or recent pensioners. The youngsters ignore you, and the older people are mostly clueless, helpless or worse.”

“I don’t know if I’ve noticed,” said Rob. “I tend to be a bit of a loner, not really anti-social. I’d rather connect with locals than other travelers. Well...” and he smiled at his companions. “I’m certainly not opposed to connecting with travelers who share similar attitudes about getting out and about.”

“Good save, Rob. Veronique tells me that you have your own boat and take tourists out to see nature and wildlife up in Alaska. Maybe you have your fill of tourists, and that’s why you avoid them when you travel?”

“There are exceptions, of course, but I tend to like my clients. Most are interesting, fit and they’re doing some cool things. They’re on that bay in Alaska for a reason. And that reason has everything to do with being in a spectacular place. The best part is because they want to be there, I have a great job in a place I love. And I have winters off to play in the snow or to travel.” Rob took a long pull on his tall Beer Lao. “So, I am curious about the festivals here. Where should one go?”

“There’s a local bus, well it’s really a small covered truck that is loading around 7:30 in the morning tomorrow. It’ll leave once they have enough passengers. My plan is to get a seat and take it to Luang Namtha and then maybe do day trips from there to nearby villages to see the different festivals.”

“I was going to head in that direction anyway, so that works for me,” Rob said. What do you think, Veronique?”

“It’s a lovely plan. It’s settled then. Cheers.” She raised her bottle and the three toasted to their adventure.

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Rob was at the crossroads a few minutes after seven, joining a handful of locals who were waiting for the truck. Almost immediately, Julia, schlepping a backpack nearly half her size, joined him in the queue.

“G’morning, Julia. I’m really looking forward to this. Is Veronique about ready?”

Julia set her backpack down against a tree along the side of the road. “She’s not coming. She boarded the ferry earlier this morning and took it upriver. She said she might join us in Luang Namtha in a few days if we were still there. Sorry.”

“Oh, I’m not surprised. I hope it’s still all right that I tag along with you.”

“Of course. I welcome the company. I had no idea she was going to take off on her own until she left. Do you think she’s upset that I was to be joining you both?”

“That would be my guess. She’s married, you know, and she has a small child at home. But I don’t think she’s particularly happy. We had started making some loose plans on the boat ride here, but from the get go, I think she was having some mixed feelings about hanging out with me.”

“I didn’t mean to interfere with those plans. Do you suppose we’ll see her again?”

“I’m not going to worry about it. Look, here comes our ride.”

A small Chinese-manufactured pickup truck pulled up to the side of the road. A raised sheet metal roof rack covered the bed and two bench seats ran along the inside rails of the truck. Rob hoisted their backpacks to the attendant who was up top securing the cargo. They told the driver their destination, paid their fare and sat side-by-side on a bench. In ten minutes, the bed of the pickup was jammed with sixteen passengers and assorted sacks and boxes that couldn’t fit on top. There was a shout from inside the cab and the truck lurched forward, swerving around potholes. Three of the passengers were small children, and the youngsters stared at the two foreigners. Julia smiled back and took some photos. For the next hour and a half, they bounced and jostled their way to the next village. When the truck stopped, a passenger released the tailgate and everyone piled out. Young teenage girls decked in embroidered dresses, beaded sashes and purple felt hats strolled about the dusty streets in pairs, sharing parasols. Julia and Rob both snapped a few pictures, but stayed next to the truck. They both climbed back in when it became obvious it was time to go.

“I don’t suppose it’s much different back in the States—young girls getting all dressed up to catch the eye of some guy. That happens in Alaska, of course, but it’s mostly different. In my crowd, there’s an outdoor chic, fashionable, yet functional clothes to hike or kayak or whatever in.”

“Australians surf and swim, especially on the eastern Gold Coast, and it’s a hot country elsewhere. Looking good in skimpy clothes is an obsession. But in Darwin, maybe it’s more like a tropical version of Alaska. We have just two seasons, the wet and the dry. Practical clothes are a must.”

It was another 45 minutes of narrow and bumpy dirt roads before the truck slowed for the next town. Thatched houses gave way to cinderblock homes, and jungle trees

became two- and three-story buildings. There was a bus depot, a police outpost and several shops.

“I think this is where we get off.” Rob grabbed a roof support to keep from bumping his neighbor to his left. Julia, on his right, lurched off the bench seat as the truck bounced over a pothole. She braced, placing her hand on Rob’s leg.

“Sorry. It’s all part of the adventure, isn’t it?” Julia left her hand in place for the few seconds it took for the passengers to unload.

An attendant began lowering cargo from the roof rack, and Rob reached up to grab the backpacks.

“Time to find a place to stay. Looks like there’s a hotel just down that road.” Rob lifted his pack and slung it over his right shoulder. Julia nodded as she secured the waist and sternum straps of her pack. As they walked, they noticed other travelers wandering about. “And then let’s rent a motorbike and get out to the villages as quickly as possible—too many tourists here. Ah, here’s the hotel. It looks fine from the outside.”

Julia pushed open the door, and Rob followed her inside. The place seemed new. The lobby had several wicker chairs set in a semi-circle off to the side. A clerk stood behind a counter that was adorned with several tourist brochures.

“G’day. Do you have rooms available, and if so, may we see them?” Rob adjusted the strap of his pack on his shoulder.

“Yes, certainly. Come with me.” The clerk led them up two flights of stairs to a stone-tiled landing. “We have two rooms left. The first has two single beds and the other a big single bed.” He mentioned the price for each room and opened the door on the far right. Everything was very basic and very clean. “Both rooms are en suite,” he said as he pushed open a swinging door to a bathroom. The clerk waited as the two looked the room over. “Come with me to the other room.” He left the door to the first opened and unlocked the other, nearly its clone, but with two single beds.

“I’ll take this one with the two beds. Rob, that other with the bigger bed is perfect for you, don’t you think?”

In fifteen minutes, they met in the lobby. Rob made arrangements with the clerk about renting a motor scooter for the rest of the day. The clerk drew them a map of villages they might want to visit. “This village is where I’m from.” He circled it on the paper. “You

will find all interesting ceremonies to observe. Very beautiful village too, maybe one hour from here on the motorbike. Come, let's get your moto." The three left the lobby and stepped outside. "This one is mine, Japan made. You will like it."

Rob straddled the motorbike, and the man gave the American a quick operational once-over. Rob pushed down the passenger foot pedals and nodded his readiness to Julia. She sat behind and snuggled her arms around his waist. Rob twisted the throttle, and off they rode.

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The two sat in an open-air restaurant across from the bus depot. Most of the others at the tables were travelers. "I think I got a few good shots," Rob said as he examined the photos of the day on the LED screen of his camera. "Check this one. I've caught the ball this girl was throwing in mid air. And what a hat!" He handed the camera to Julia.

"Cool. Me too. I've some terrific shots. I took lot of the girls' shoes -- heels with all of those colorful dangling beads. It was a fun day. Maybe we should head out to another village or two tomorrow?"

"I'd like that. According to Thidavanh, the clerk at the hotel, there are also some Buddhist ruins near one of the villages we should visit. Let's get an early start if you don't mind. I'm also going to talk to Thidavanh about something Veronique and I chatted about doing before she took off. There's a 3- or 4-day trek to visit some of the mountain tribe villages of the Laen Taen and the Lao Huay people. There are no roads to these, only footpaths. Could be a worthwhile experience."

"That sounds great. I'd like that."

\* \* \*

"Yes, I can make a reservation for you to go on this trek. They leave just once a week, and it is tomorrow. It will be for three nights, and you will have to share a small room in the guest lodge of each village. There are two other couples going and just three rooms in the lodges. Only six tourists are allowed each trip. We'll all meet here in the lobby in the morning, OK? When you return, it will be late, and you will need a place to stay. Because of the festivals, we only have one room left for that night. Should I reserve it for you?"

"I'm game if you are, Rob."



“Sure. We can go visit the ruins and check out the festivals in the other nearby villages when we get back. I’m going to take a stroll about town and maybe pick up something for a nightcap if you care to come join me.”

“Go for your walk. I’m going to run a hot bath. Maybe I’ll stop by your room for a drink after that – 9ish maybe?”

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Julia knocked gently on Rob’s slightly ajar door and let herself in. Veronique, with a drink in hand, was sitting on the edge of Rob’s bed. Rob sat on the chair by the desk. “Look who I found wandering about,” he said. “She arrived on the last bus from the southeast.”

“And, of course, there are no rooms left in town, someone got the last two this morning,” Veronique added. “Lucky me that you’re both still here. Rob says that there are two beds in your room, Julia.”

“Once again, I do have two beds. Yes, lucky you.”

“I found some tiger whiskey, some sort of local hooch. I’ve mixed it with some fresh passion fruit juice I bought at a stand – not bad. Can I make one for you Julia?”

Veronique motioned for Julia to come sit on the bed. Rob fixed the drink and handed it to the Australian. “Cheers,” she said.

“Rob also says that the two of you are trekking to the mountain tribe villages in the morning. Me too. I had made reservations for two last week while in Luang Prabang. I had asked Rob to join me just after we had met on the boat to Nong Khiaw.”

“I see. Rob and I are one of the couples going, and you and Rob are one of the other couples. Funny, you made a reservation for two before you knew you had a companion?”

“One always meets interesting people while traveling. But even if not, I’d rather have the room for two to myself than to leave it to chance.”

“And now we’re one big happy family.” Julia drained her drink. “I’m tired, and I think I’ll go off to bed. Why don’t you bring your things over now, Veronique. I’ll give you the key, and you can let yourself back in when you’re done catching up with Rob.”

A few minutes later, Veronique tapped on Rob’s door and entered the room. “I hope you have enough for another drink.” She sat back down on Rob’s bed, kicked off her shoes and then stretched out with her back propped up on two pillows. He brought her refilled

glass over to the bed. "Get your drink and come sit by me," she said as she patted her hand on the blanket.

"Well, it is good to see you again," Rob said as he slid across the bed and sidled up next to her.

"I thought we had it settled that we were going to do the trek together. Just you and I."

"Veroniqué, I had no idea you were going to show up again. You took off without a word. It's been fun to hang out with Julia these last few days. What did you expect?"

"Are you lovers?"

"We have separate rooms."

"Do you want to become her lover?"

"Veroniqué, what do you want?"

"What do you think I want?" She spun to face him, straddling his hips between her knees. She started unbuttoning her blouse. "I want you to fuck me." Veroniqué leaned in to kiss him. "Will you do that?"

\* \* \*

Rob checked his watch; he had slept for about an hour. Veroniqué was curled under the blankets, and he listened as she breathed slowly and rhythmically. Quietly, he slipped out of the covers, found his clothes and put them back on. After retrieving his toothbrush and kit from the bathroom, he grabbed his pack off the bedroom floor and took the key to Julia's room off the nightstand.

"So now, you're going to sleep with Julia?" Veroniqué sat up and turned on a flashlight. She let the blankets fall to her waist and expose her naked chest.

Rob set his backpack on the bed. "She was expecting you back in her room. I don't know, maybe she was expecting this. I'd still like her to go on the trek.

"So, you have your little romp and then just toss me aside?"

"You got what you were after – you'll go back to your husband with the proper revenge for him taking you for granted. Is there something else that you wanted? When do you fly back home, in ten days? We would have been saying goodbye forever then, if not before. Maybe you'll work things out with him, maybe you won't. I like Julia. I've been

thinking I'd like to visit Australia next year, and it would be good to have a connection there."

"So you're not very nice after all. Go to Julia then. She's perfect for you."

"And what about you? Are you still going on the trek?"

"I guess you'll find out in the morning what I'll do."

\* \* \*

The click of the door lock, magnified by the silence of the night and the concrete walls of the room, startled Julia. "Veroniqué, is that you?"

"It's Rob, Julia. Veroniqué fell asleep on my bed, and I was feeling a bit awkward. I thought it best to come sleep in the extra bed here rather than wake her. Is that OK?"

"Um, sure. What time is it?"

"It's just before 1. I think I'll go put Veroniqué's pack back in the other room. I'll be right back." When he returned, Rob set his bag on the floor and turned down the covers of the bed. He took off his clothes and slid under the blankets. "Thanks, Julia. G'night." Almost immediately, he drifted off to sleep.

Rob could hear Julia stir as the morning light began to add some muted color to the room. He checked his watch, 6:30 – still early. The room had chilled during the night, and the thin blankets didn't quite provide enough warmth. Julia pulled hers tightly around her neck.

"Are you awake?" she asked. "It's cold."

"Yes to both questions." He rolled to his side to look at her. "You do know that body heat is the best way to avoid hypothermia. Trust me on this – I know about cold, I'm from Alaska, after all."

"Oh, is it now? I think getting dressed and moving about will also warm me up. Maybe we can find some hot tea someplace. Coffee for you, I suppose. We do have a few hours before we have to meet to begin the trek. Should we see if Veroniqué is awake yet? Rob, I'm not thrilled that she is coming along. And what are we going to do about sleeping later tonight? Are we sharing a room or are the two of you? If you stay with her, I think I'll find something else to do."

"Another option would be to have the two of you bunk together, but I'd rather stay with you, if that's all right." Rob sat up. "I'm going to check in the lobby and see if I can find

something hot to drink to bring back to the room. We can leave the door propped open so if Veronique gets up, she can tell we're up and about." Rob quickly got dressed and went downstairs. He returned some twenty minutes later with a thermos, three cups and some croissants. Veronique was sitting on the bed he had slept in.

"There you are, Veronique. Good morning. I have some tea for us all and was even able to find a bit of breakfast. The French colonial influence is still evident here. There's a bakery down the street, and these croissants are fresh."

"I'm famished, thank you. Rob, you're such a gentleman—letting me sleep in your bed last night and now bringing some breakfast. I thought American men were chauvinistic."

"Chauvinistic? Whatever gave you that idea? Women in Alaska are tough and self-reliant. Well, the ones I know are. Guys who are chauvinistic are sad and lonely."

"But you're not sad or lonely? How come you travel by yourself then?" Julia began repacking her backpack as she took bites of her pastry and sips of tea.

"Why did any of us come here alone? Our friends have different vacation schedules or don't like to travel. Or maybe their idea of a holiday is to sit on a resort beach somewhere away from the people who actually live where they are visiting. There's no one special in my life right now. But my life is good. And look, I'm not alone. I'm hanging out with two very cute women. What could be better?"

"It's every man's fantasy, *n'est pas*? A *manáge a trois*?" Veronique poured some more tea into her cup. "Maybe you are chauvinistic."

"I think I'm digging a hole for myself. I have trouble enough with one woman, let alone two."

"Rob, I believe you're blushing - how sweet. But I think I've changed my mind. I'm not going on the trek. You and Veronique had already planned to go. I'm interfering."

"Nonsense, Julia. I'm married." Veronique said. "You are not interfering. All of this is my fault anyway. I was jealous of you, Julia. That's why I left on the ferry the other day. You're free, and I'm trapped. Rob's all yours. He's not such a bad fuck, either." Veronique shouldered her pack, walked out the door and slammed it shut.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"Beautiful, Beautiful"**

by D.R.L. Heywood-Lonsdale

Their eyes are flies, and she is light. She leans against the wall with one hand always on the suitcase as she fans herself with her crumpled boarding pass. She's been warned too many times about the thieves, how they'll smile and nod as they cut your bag strap. He should have been here by now. His flight was scheduled to land twenty minutes after hers. It's been an hour since five luggage boys squirmed over each other like fish to guide her out of the baggage claim. I have no pesos yet, she'd lied in English, the only language she knows. She'd shaken an empty hand for emphasis, but they didn't care, grinned at her and bobbed their heads. She panics and wonders if he's already come and left her. Perhaps they hadn't recognized each other. It's been all of fifteen years.

Her hair sticks to the perspiration on her neck, and she can't locate the hair band in her pocket when, out of the hullabaloo, he emerges from over the incline. He's one of them but not. A head taller, a shade lighter, graceful in his playful sway. He sees her instantly and smiles. He's both comforting and intriguing like warm milk and rum. He is the perfect distraction.

"You look the same!" He's embracing her, a mix of sweat and day-old laundry. He was surprised when he received her email, is still uncertain of why she has come to Manila. There had been a long justification for her trip—paragraphs and paragraphs above the flight itinerary. She deleted it just before pressing send, worried that even he might not understand. He holds her a little too long, and her suitcase is alone in the dust, forgotten as she smushes into him.

"You look the same too," she says. She notices he only has one backpack and no other baggage. It's stuffed to the seams, but still. The boxes of towels? Toothpaste? Powdered coffee creamer, conditioner, pancake mix for his family?

Quickly, her hand is in his, and they're plowing through the barrage of lost travelers to the street. He's home and knows how to handle it here. She's ushered into the cab, her belongings are locked in the trunk, and he's beside her again. Moist cologne, too sharp to be expensive, on his neck and chest is thwarted by the AC, cool seatbelts and broken leather. They're no longer touching but the sweat from his hand dries in hers.

It's barely 8 P.M. It's dark out but there are enough streetlights to illuminate the interior. His hands don't match the rest of him. Dry and gruff, they are calloused from loading pallets and building boxes, and a shiny, flawless ring stands out on his fourth finger. But other than having a man's jawbone, his face is the same. His dimples are misplaced when he laughs—below his eyes instead of at the corners of his mouth. His smirk is more inclusive than elitist. The poor girls who grew up around him, poor women who entered his life later. Trap.

Tic-Toc. She had laughed when she first learned his name.

"It's not a normal nickname in the States," she had explained.

"What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing's *wrong* with it. It's more of a sound than a name. Don't you think?"

In the end, it became normal. Surrounded by Ou-Ous and Po-Pos and Tuk-Tuks, who was she to judge? She was the weird one.

"It is a sound," he had told her. "It's a countdown. Like a bomb, waiting to go off."

POOM! His hands had exploded close to her face.

"What's *Karmen* counting down to?" he had asked then. "You're not as dangerous as me."

"I thought my mom said you were having surgery for this. Laser or something?" Her fingertips rest on his cheek, trace a large dark splotch on his skin. The birthmark spans over his whole cheekbone as if the point of a leaking calligraphy pen was forgotten there. It looks the same as when they were ten, the last time they saw each other.

He raises his own hand to touch the familiar stain, fingertips crossing fingertips. Her hand has lingered too long, and they both know it.

"I was going to," he grins, "but the ladies love it."

She laughs, returns her hand to her lap—a rosy electricity cut off, the excess spilling onto his face and her jeans. Even she is a victim of his charm, his own cousin.

"Do you want food?" He asks. I want food. He leans forward and speaks in Tagalog to the driver. She hears the name of a popular fast food restaurant but understands nothing else. "We'll get it to go," he winks at her. "Long drive ahead." She eats it up—the grins, the winks, the touches. She gets lost in each one, drifts farther away from home where these intimates are not.

They pull up to Jollibee's. A long zigzag of customers trails into the parking lot. Their stares are almost palpable as the two glom onto the line. She's too clean and smells too fresh despite fifteen hours in the cabin of a plane. *Maganda, maganda* is murmured, muffled by stagnant car pollutants and dirt in the thick air. Even beautiful, beautiful cannot cleanse or cut through the grime. If she stays long enough, it will slowly deteriorate her as well, a new dress nibbled by moths.

At the counter, she wants a cheeseburger and root beer, but they only have Coke and Sprite. "Coke is fine," she tells them, but the worker at the register—Jonah, his name tag reads—shakes his head, motions with his hands to hold on a minute. Another worker removes his paper cap and hastens to the supermarket next door.

"She's just come from the United States," Tic-Toc explains. Jonah responds in Tagalog, and there is laughter from the fry cooker behind the counter. "*Maganda, eh? 'Ganda, 'ganda.*" A girl at the next register rolls her eyes. By the time they are finished ordering, the worker has returned with a four-pack of root beers. He smiles and presents it to her with a shy bow.

Embarrassed, she says, "*Salamat po,*" with emphasis on all the wrong syllables and tells her cousin she will wait in the cab. Before she leaves, she stuffs five-hundred pesos in his hands. His pause is brief before taking the bills. He knows she has more money than he does, and he won't turn it away. He really is one of them. When he emerges from the restaurant with greasy white bags and change, she is eager to eat. The root beer bottles clink against one another as he slides into the backseat. She twists a cap, hears the fizz and smells the syrup—sweet wintergreen and sassafras, takes a sip that's not as fizzy as Mug or Barq's at home, yet still familiar like the notion of getting her way. The drink is satisfying, and she is ashamed.

They reach his family's house away from billboards and running showers. She pays the cab fare with a generous tip. The driver is halfway down the street before they've

reached the front gate. The house is a sloppy glue job of plaster, steel and cement. A rusting iron gate stands permanently open and everything is gritty, outlined in browns, crimson and faded turquoise. It smells like stale fish and chicken droppings. A sagging line of laundry hangs from the corner of the gate to the roof. Water stains dot the floor.

She is excited to go in. He hesitates behind her.

The door is unlocked so they tap the frame softly and enter. At first, no one sees them—too occupied in a card game with a pile of change in a sardine tin. There's clanking in the kitchen, which gives off an aroma of sour soup and burnt coconut oil. It's just one room with a squat TV in the corner and a coffee table balancing on three legs. A soap opera is on, a pregnant woman crying as her lover hauls a chair through the window and shatters a platter of eggrolls. Two kids mess around with a Gameboy that flashes black and white on a broken screen. Someone from the card game looks up.

"Tic-Toc!" Jabbering in Tagalog, the woman tackles her son, shakes his head in her hands and goes on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek.

"Ah, Karmen! *Maganda, eh? Maganda!*" She knows what this means by now, remembering her mom tell her how important looks are in the Philippines. They pull them further into the house, many hands on two bodies. On the right is a large opening to the kitchen and straight back are what must be bedrooms, the light softer behind partially cracked doorways. From these rooms, bodies begin to emerge.

"How was your flight?" It's one of her cousins who speaks English.

"Long. Thankfully, I was able to sleep half the time." She cannot remember this cousin's name—Natta, Nina, Nita?

"Are you hungry?" N asks.

"Oh no, no," she says, resists nameless relatives who slowly inch her to the kitchen. "We stopped by Jollibee's on our way from the airport." She instantly regrets this indulgence. She should have brought twenty burgers with her. Fries, at least. Or Coke. They love Coke. An unopened bottle of root beer is rolling around the back of a taxi somewhere on the highway.

"Thirsty, then?"

Nil. It's Nil. "No, thank you, Nil."



"Mmm! Karmen!" A squishy old woman hobbles out of the kitchen—the matriarch, the queen bee. She wears cotton capris and an old tank top that accentuates braless breasts, heavy and low over a belly that housed eight babies.

*Lola.*

It's one warm and forceful hug with an affectionate grunt as the old woman presses her cheek against her American granddaughter and kisses the air. They are strangers to each other but not. On this second meeting, the language barrier is more helpful than confusing, a welcome distraction. They are bound by blood, and that is enough to justify the solace she seeks in this house. Then *Lola* is pulling in her grandson who never calls. "Calling from Abu Dabi is expensive," he says. He'd rather include that money in the envelope for them to use. It's been half a year since the last envelope, but now is not the time.

At least not from her. A bedroom door opens wider, and a gaunt woman emerges with a child on her hip. She must have been lovely once. Her nose is petite, and her eyebrows arch at distinguished points. Her little girl is a product of modelesque genes.

A path clears.

"Ay!" Tic-Toc's arms are welcoming, but his eyes are tired. The sight of his wife and daughter is a physical weight.

Manuella kisses her husband on the cheek as her free arm wraps loosely around his waist.

"*Tatay*, Ella," she coaxes the child. "Your daddy. You remember your *tatay*?"

The baby watches this man—exposed in his weariness and shortcomings. He smiles weakly, hesitates before offering up his hand for a high-five. Her face contorts as she writhes in her mother's arms and begins to wail. Her mother shushes her, bounces her up and down. The child shakes her head and refuses to look at the stranger.

"*Tulog*," says the mother. Sleep time. She tilts her face toward her husband in an awkward pause. He bends to give her a quick, dry kiss on the lips. She barely glances at Karmen before leaving the room.

\* \* \*

At 3 A.M., Karmen sits in bed with half a bottle of wine, a victim of jetlag.

I've brought wine, she had told them. They'd huddled around her suitcase waiting for presents and other foreign goodies. It was a last minute trip, a spontaneous ticket

purchased in her bath towel; her wet hair had dripped between the keys of her laptop. She hadn't had the time to fill boxes with canned peaches and Snickers bars from Walmart. But wine? A nice gift for a dinner party. Here, they drink Tanduay Rhum and San Miguel beer. Straight from the jug, straight from the can.

The lamp on the bureau flickers every now and then. She takes swigs of leftover sauvignon straight from the bottle, alone in her grandmother's room. *Lola* is sleeping on the couch in the foyer. She insists her granddaughter take the bed and have privacy. Do they know the word privacy? Her suitcase was upended before it reached the bedroom. The rest sleep on the floor.

She imagines Tic-Toc on the other side of the wall. The child had cried again when he entered the bedroom. Nothing now. What is she listening for? His breathing. A dry swallow as he watches his child sleep. The creak of the bed in a clumsy rhythm after almost two years apart from his wife. For Manuella, it is her husband come home to complete their family. For Tic-Toc, sex is just another shackle.

She is picturing this family reunion when there's a tap on the door. It opens slowly before she can respond.

Tic-Toc slips through the opening, secures the lock. *Lola's* room becomes a haven, a private sanctuary. His boxers are grey and red.

"How did you know I was awake?" She passes him the wine bottle. He sits on the bed opposite her.

Jetlag. Me too.

"How is she?"

"She cried for half an hour and barely looked at me before falling asleep."

"I mean your wife."

"I know." His hand slides down the wine bottle, thumb trailing.

"Must be nice to be home, though," she says.

"Had to renew my work visa. I didn't have much of a choice." He leans against the bedpost. "Hey, remember last time you were here? *Kuya Po Po's* funeral?"

Strange shadows cross her face as she grins. "Yeah, I do. It was so hot. I was sweating under the sheets."

"There was a storm. And *Kuya* Lester came into our rooms with *Lola's* only shampoo bottle."

"Ha! I forgot that was her last one. She was so mad the next morning when she couldn't wash her hair."

"Yeah, but it was worth it."

"All eight of us, wasn't it? Showering in the rain."

"You were scared of the lightning."

"I wasn't scared of the lightning. I half expected Po Po to jump out of the clouds and pinch my nose. You guys and all your superstitions had me freaked out."

He stares beyond her and through the walls. "Remember at the funeral? They opened the casket, and everyone reached out to touch him one more time. And behind everyone's backs we saw each other. Everyone was crying so loud, and when we looked at each other, we laughed. We actually laughed."

She shakes her head. "I still wonder about that. I didn't feel guilty either. I still don't."

"We were the only two not crying."

"Well, I know why I wasn't crying. I'd never met him. My mom packed a suitcase, said her older sister needed her because her son died. I'm not sure why she brought me along. Maybe adding a body makes up for the loss."

"I didn't cry because I was happy for Po Po," he says. "We were supposed to start working at the rice stand that summer."

He still hasn't touched the wine. He stares at the mirror on the wall where his family sleeps on the other side. His eyes are glazed over, and she knows he doesn't see himself.

"How do you keep your wedding ring so shiny when you lift boxes all day?" she asks.

There is no sarcasm in her voice, only an intense understanding of something that is supposed to be reproached rather than accepted.

"I remembered to put it on when we landed."

"How did she find out?" She has to ask.

"She found out when she called the warehouse and the secretary told her I was out at lunch with my wife."

Fun conversation.

"She never brought it up, actually."

"I think it's harder to do than you'd think."

He pulls at a loose thread on the bedsheet. "I could sense a difference straight away though," he says. "She started calling more often, saying how much she missed me, and how Ella was growing up without a *tatay*. Then one day, she said it was possible to move to Abu Dhabi with me. She was desperate. The baby was old enough to travel, and it would only take a few months to get passports since I already worked there. She said she'd been careful with the money I'd sent and had been saving up."

"So you stopped sending money."

"There were cutbacks at work, so it wasn't that unbelievable."

"Are you going to drink any of that?" There is the slightest edge to her voice now.

He downs a quarter of what's left of the bottle and passes it back, admits, "I stopped answering most of her calls at that point too."

"It doesn't justify it, you know. Living in another country."

"I'm not claiming innocence here."

"I'm not saying it's easy. When Jake is on the West Coast for business, it's hard."

"How long is he away for?"

"A week or two, a month. Doesn't sound like much compared to years—"

"I don't think the timespan matters as much as the fact that it's consistent—"

"I haven't built up enough hours at work to ever fly out with him—"

"But New York must be so cool—"

"You get into a routine—"

"Still tough—"

"Tough as fuck."

His hands rest on his thighs, and he stares at the faded sheet. "Staying faithful is," he says. "Tough, I mean."

"Can I just ask," she says, "do you *ever* feel guilty?"

He looks surprised.

"Sorry, that sounds really judgmental, and I don't mean it to sound that way. But you just seem to accept what you've done—"

"I feel guilty every time."

"—and I was wondering if it makes you the tiniest bit of a better person for at least feeling guilty."

He says nothing.

"Because you feel guilty, but not guilty enough to stop doing it."

He breathes slowly.

"Some people don't feel guilty."

"Karmen—"

"Isn't guilt part of being human?" she asks. "Did it ever get to the point where you lied so much to her that it was easier to lie than tell the truth, even if what you were really doing was completely innocent?"

He listens.

"Do you think a person who does that feels guilty?" She rubs her eyes, so tired.

He moves closer to her on the bed.

"Did you ever imagine her at home with your daughter?" she asks. "Waiting for the postman each week. Being disappointed each week. And the times you did answer your phone, did you sound tired so she'd let you sleep? Blame it on the time difference. That's a new one. Is that what they call it these days? Time difference?"

"Karmen, it's okay—"

"How many were there, Tic-Toc?"

"Karmen."

"How many women have you fucked as a married man?"

Someone stops snoring out in the foyer.

They face each other, the illusion of their solitude collapsing like soft paper. The wine is set beside the lamp, and his forehead is pressed against hers.

"I know you don't think much of me," he says quietly, "but I never wanted to get married. Manuella got pregnant. Divorce isn't really accepted here. As much as everyone wishes it, children don't guarantee fidelity."

She doesn't move. Just watches the twitch of his lips and lets his birthmark blur into the rest of his face. "Neither does beauty," she says.

Then he whispers, "I'm sorry that Jake cheated on you."

At this moment, she is more jealous of him than ever before. Because Manuella will always be there. There is no such stability for her.

She does not correct his assumption. Let him think better of her. Let herself remain beautiful and mark-less. Let his fondest image of her be naked in the rain, illuminated in flashes of a tropical storm with shampoo suds running down her cheeks and ears. Not dripping in the living room of her condo staring at the open front door where her own husband staggered out to his car, his soaking body drenching the boxer briefs and T-shirt so shakily put on. The shower is still running. A bar of soap foams and lathers the tile in bubbles where it fell by the drain. She was soaping his back when she told him. The most inopportune and selfish time, in retrospect, like laughing at a funeral. Gathering up her towel, she fetches her wallet and searches for tickets to the Philippines the same day she hears her cousin is going home. Because as always, she gravitates toward her own kind. The door remains ajar, and crisp winter air undulates into the hall as she listens for a car crash that never comes.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"The Cashew Tree"**

by Wan Phing Lim

In her double-storey bungalow in Bukit Tunku, Rosalind Lim sat on the upstairs balcony with her legs crossed. Wearing denim shorts and a black singlet, she put her journal down and watched as a white car drove up to the gates.

Behind the wheel of the Daihatsu Charade, Joseph Lim rolled down the car window and shouted at the security guard. For a good ten minutes, they argued with hands flailing until the woman of the house recognised Joseph and spoke from the intercom inside. The cast iron gates opened like mechanical butterfly wings.

He stepped out of the car into the heat of the midday sun onto the manicured driveway, where a fountain crowded with cherubs looked sadly at him. The weather in Sydney had made him forget the balmy heat of the tropics. The denim pants stuck to his skin like wet leaves refusing to let go.

At the sight of Marion's small face poking out of the large oak doors, Joseph felt the scar on his left hand start to itch. He removed his shades and smiled at her, remembering to put on the charm that had attracted her when they first met in university.

"I'm so sorry, Joe," she said. "Aunty Rita told us the news yesterday."

She had uttered that exact same first sentence over ten years ago when she packed her bags with little Rosie in tow. She headed back to Kuala Lumpur for good, filing the divorce papers from outside Australia and leaving him behind. Now she came closer to touch his arm, but he held up his hand quickly in defense.

"I'm fine."

Marion had aged, but, with her shoulder length-hair swept over her blue blouse, she looked as young as their teenage daughter. Rosie came sauntering down to the foyer, limbs swinging like a gazelle to meet her father's gaunt figure. Her eyes glazed over, studying him from the top of his greying ponytail to the bottom of his torn jeans.

“Pa’s funeral is tomorrow,” he announced to Marion. “You don’t have to come, but I’m taking Rosie with me.”

Now was a good time to kidnap their daughter – *his* daughter, as he had long imagined doing in revenge for the pain Marion had caused him. He had been prevented from keeping in touch with Rosie after primary school, when his ex-wife had remarried the American man who owned the Bukit Tunku house.

From behind her mother, Rosie came up to give him a hug. Joseph was surprised but embraced her tightly. The lump on the inside of his left wrist rubbed against her neck. The sweat from the heat had aggravated the scar, and it was starting to itch again. He let her go. He got the scar when he had tried to erase a tattoo with a cashew nut from Aunty Rita’s backyard. The yellow sap from the nut had burned him, eroding his flesh and creating a keloid scar that protruded like a shiny wart.

And where had he learnt to do that? His father, of course, whom the local press had dubbed “The Chemical Man”. PENANG’S “CHEMICAL MAN” DIES FROM ACID SPLASH, ROBBER LEAVES WITH RM3,000. The headlines were splashed all across the major newspapers, and he had read them all online even before touching down on Malaysian soil. TRAGIC END TO CHEMICAL MOGUL’S BUSINESS, another report concluded.

It was his Aunty Rita that rang him in the early hours of Tuesday morning as he was closing up at The Blue Monkey, the bar he opened twenty years ago with an ex-college mate. He had packed quickly and took the next flight out of Sydney, stopping by Kuala Lumpur to pick up his daughter. Over the phone, Aunty Rita had mentioned that there was a letter addressed to her grandniece.

“It’s a will,” she said. “For Rosie.”

Stooped with a hunchback and white cotton-candy hair atop her head, old Aunty Rita was a loyal sibling and confidante to his father. She was like a fairy godmother to Joseph when he was growing up. But now, he found himself being sidestepped as the rightful heir of his father’s chemical empire, for the riches of Chemtec Sdn Bhd were now being given to his daughter.

\* \* \*



“Go pack your bags, honey,” Marion said.

Joseph felt awkward standing at the front door at such an occasion as his own father’s murder. He didn’t know where to put his hands, and switched from trouser pocket to the door frame and back again.

“Thank you, Marion,” he said.

He waited by his car outside, an old vehicle he rented from Kuala Lumpur’s airport. But his mind was fixated on the woman by the door, who had accused him all those years ago of not being capable of providing for the kind of life she wanted. Was this the kind of life she wanted? Rich, bored and lonely in a huge house?

POLICE HAVE ARRESTED VELA KRISHNAN, AN UNEMPLOYED 32-YEAR-OLD IN CONNECTION WITH THE ROBBERY-CUM-MURDER OF LIM TIONG SENG, 70, IN GEORGE TOWN, PENANG TODAY. SUSPECT IS BELIEVED TO HAVE BEEN ON DRUGS.

What was he to do in Penang? Aunty Rita had already arranged for the funeral. Joseph switched off his Blackberry as Rosie came out with a gym bag in her arms. Her small face was like her mother’s, but her pointed, almond-shaped eyes were undoubtedly his.

“All set?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Goodbye Tunku,” he murmured.

Her mother watched from the wooden doors as they got in the car. He reversed quickly out of the driveway and, from his rearview mirror, caught a glimpse of her figure getting smaller as he drove further along. He kept his eyes on the winding boulevard ahead.

\* \* \*

The scar on his left wrist was still itchy. Joseph turned up the air-conditioning, but the car cranked a little as the accelerator pedal slowed.

To his left, Rosie sat with her legs up against the dashboard. That was when he noticed her tattoo. The calligraphic letters T+R were written in Gothic font on her left wrist, but the motifs were surrounded by red marks around the edges as though someone had been trying to scratch it out.

Joseph accelerated as a sudden idea came to his mind.

“What’s the matter, Dad?”

Rosie noticed the change in speed and fastened her seatbelt. He turned the corner of Jalan Dutamas as they exited onto the North-South Highway, which would take them to his hometown in George Town where the cashew nut tree at the back of Aunty Rita’s house stood.

“Who’s this T?” he asked. “Terence? Tommy? Timmy?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your tattoo.”

“Oh shush.” She made a tutting sound with her tongue.

Joseph remembered the distinct smell of burnt flesh and the way the anacardic acid sizzled his skin. The memory was burned into his mind, and he could almost taste the eroding flesh as he erased the tattoo repeatedly, rubbing multiple seeds onto his hand and squeezing the sap onto his skin. It had happened in the back kitchen on a late afternoon when he was sure that Aunty Rita had gone out of the house.

Joseph turned the air-conditioning up another level, but the humidity remained.

Rosie’s face was soft but worried, and she looked sideways at him through her Ray-Bans. Her lips pursed in a sympathetic smile as though looking at an ailing dad who needed more guidance in life than her. Their roles could have been reversed in a dramatic twist of father-daughter relationship.

“So what happened between you and T?”

“We broke up.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s got this other girl now.”

“What an asshole. Are you gonna tell me his name?”

“It’s Tim.”

“I’m sorry, honey. How long ago was this?”

“Last week.”

“And what were you trying to do? Scratch out your tatt?”

He couldn’t help being sarcastic and chuckled to himself. Rosie looked out the window and kept silent.

“How long were you guys seeing each other?”

“Two years.”

Joseph let out a whistle. “It’s gonna burn, honey. And you will first feel the heat, it’s like a sting. But you keep rubbing because you know that’s the only way it’ll go.”

“What will go?”

“Your memories. It’ll scar you for life, but that’s the only way to do it. The natural way to do it.”

“Do what?”

They had passed the toll at Sungai Buloh and were now driving along the North-South Highway. She wrinkled her forehead at her father and straightened herself on the passenger seat. Maintaining 140km/h and assuming the Daihatsu could manage, the pair would be at the Penang Bridge in just three hours.

“Set yourself free.”

He gripped the steering wheel and laughed suddenly, throwing his head back. Joseph decided to roll down the windows in order to sacrifice air-conditioning for speed. Both their hairs flapped violently in the car, one black with youth and the other greying with age.

“You’ll see, my darling,” he said. “You’ll see.”

\* \* \*

Pretending to have kidnapped his daughter, Joseph felt like there was excitement again in his life. He imagined that they were both running away from a mad ex-wife and her evil new husband. He would not return her to Bukit Tunku ever, and when Marion called he would simply say that Rosie was already on the plane with him to Sydney. Besides, she was 16 years old, only two years from being a legal adult in Australia. He would enroll her to finish Year 12 at the neighbourhood school and put her in any university she wanted to attend in New South Wales.

“Did you pack enough clothes, Rosie?”

Her head was slumped against the car window, and he could not see if her eyes were opened or closed behind her Ray-Bans. Rosie did not answer.

His two-bedroom apartment along Clarence Street was big enough for the both of them and the occasional girlfriend he would bring home. For Rosie, he had a spare room

ready for her any day. She could work part-time at The Blue Monkey, and surely that would be more exciting than any of the monkeys at her international school in KL.

“Rosie, come live with Daddy in Sydney,” he said. “There’ll be better opportunities for you. But first, let’s get you to Aunty Rita’s house.”

\* \* \*

The slam of the car door woke Rosie up. They were parked on the grassy edge of the road and the car was slightly sloped towards a huge drain. Rosie opened her side of the door and let herself out. Her father was already at the front gate, letting himself into the house without ringing the doorbell. She rubbed her eyes and followed suit into the compound as the neighbour’s dog let out a bark.

The brick home was of a 1960s style, huge and solid with a rusty swing by the garage and mosaic tiles throughout its inside flooring. She walked around the outside of the house, and there in the backyard was her father standing underneath a large tree.

“Is that a *jambu air* tree?” she asked.

“It’s not a *jambu* tree!” He snapped. “It’s a cashew tree.”

He rushed into the back kitchen and came out brandishing a small knife and a towel, which he slung over his left arm.

“Look at the cashew tree. Its fruit can be fermented to make alcoholic drinks, the nuts roasted for oil and its leaves used to make *nasi ulam*. Isn’t that wonderful?”

Rosie wrinkled her forehead and nodded. She had never seen her father so animated, and she certainly never knew of his interest in botany. This was her bartender father after all, the one who dropped out of university to open a bar with a college mate.

She watched curiously as he placed a short ladder by the tree trunk, climbed up a few steps and came down with a handful of cashew apples, which still looked like *jambu air* to her. With the knife he cut the drupe nut, which was shaped like an umbrella hook and attached to the bottom of the fruit. Joseph punctured the nut and yellow sap oozed out. He removed his hand quickly, as though he had burned himself on a hot pan.

“This is the *anacardium occidentale*,” he said. “Your mother taught me to use it in our cocktails at The Blue Monkey. Here, give me your hand.”

But before Rosie could protest, he grabbed her left wrist and rubbed the yellow sap over her tattoo, as though the nut was an eraser and her hand a sheet of homework. She felt the sting and screamed.

“Let go, Daddy. It burns. Let go of my hand!”

Joseph laughed and held on tighter. “I learnt this from your grandpa, Rosie.”

He cut another drupe nut and squeezed the sap out onto her hand. She squirmed, but he continued rubbing.

“You know, Rosie,” he said. “Everything in your grandpa’s store is synthetic, but this is the natural stuff.”

From the bedroom window upstairs, Aunty Rita peered out from behind the curtains, having been disrupted from her afternoon nap. Slowly she walked down to the back of the kitchen.

“What are you doing there, Joe?”

“Aunty Rita, stop him.”

“Rosie, is that you?”

But her father did not hear them. The neighbours came out to watch by the fence as the two figures grappled underneath the shade of the cashew tree.

“It’s your grandpa’s recipe from the war era. The Chinese rubbed themselves with the sap, because the Japanese would execute anyone with a tattoo,” he continued. “Rub it ten times over, until a layer of your skin comes off. It will scar, but it will be alright. Consider this an initiation rite as my true daughter, and before you inherit your grandpa’s money.”

Rosie started to cry. “No, Daddy, please.”

“Look here, Rosie. Do you want to move on? Do you want to forget this person who hurt you so much?”

He shook her shoulders, as though waking her up from a bad dream. She continued to sob, and he took her silence as consensus.

“Then you need to erase him from your life.”

He stuck forth his left arm to make his final case. Using the knife, he pointed to the keloid scar on his left wrist.

“You see, this is where I erased your mother’s name from my wrist.”

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"Marriage Is the Most Potent Solution"**

by Ista Kyra

"Marriage is the most potent solution ... in curbing this social ill.

"Society, especially parents, must encourage and facilitate the marriage of their children.

"While the Government must help provide incentives to lessen the burden of couples planning to get married," droned the man in a skullcap.

Camera shutters clicked away as a film of sweat and oil glistened on his face by the intermittent light of flashes. He folded his hands on his lap in front of him, maintaining a serious expression for the reporters.

Two men sat alongside him, looking pleased with themselves. One bent toward Din to whisper something in his ear. When he finished, both leaned back in their seats with a wide-grinned smile.

Delighted in their private joke, they didn't mind that the public could see their open reaction but could not possibly know their secret exchange. They were accustomed to being in the public eye.

Suddenly, a large shadow blocked the stream of light shining on them. Din looked up and saw a voluptuous woman standing close, her ample bosom hovering over him, straining to be free from tight confinements.

Before he could take in her entire figure, a loud clap exploded next to his ears and a sharp sting crept up the side of his face.

The room murmured in surprise. Some men standing around rushed to restrain the woman as Din's friends turned to steady him from falling off his seat, abruptly getting out of their chairs and letting the plastic legs screech loudly against the floor.

"Eh damn woman, what the hell is your problem?"

The lady was now standing a little farther off from where Din was seated, a table with microphones and phones stacked on it acting as a barrier between them.

Two bodyguards were attempting to pull her back and hold her down. But standing almost a head shorter, they were clearly no match for her.

She was at least 6'2" without high heels, and there she stood in bright, red stilettos, firmly planted on the floor in a wide-legged stance. Her hands coolly rested on hips shapely--girth that can only be described as formidable. She was not one to be uprooted.

"Oh Din, I'm sorry. I couldn't control my anger earlier. But don't you worry. Your dignity will remain intact even though I slapped you silly in front of everyone present here. Let's make it right. I will adopt you as my son, and you can call me mother," she said in a deep but distinct, womanly voice, affecting an apologetic lilt in her tone.

"Crazy woman! Get her out of here!," Din shouted.

It had just dawned on him that he had been unceremoniously slapped by a strange, fat lady with striking blonde curls ala *Legally Blonde* at his own press conference. He was livid and could not help but regurgitate the boiling anger in his gut into a spewing of intimidating shouts.

"Who do you think you are? Do you realize who I am? Get her out of here," he growled, raising his volume with each word.

"Din, I am proposing an amicable solution, a win-win for both of us, don't you see?," she said, her tone gentler but still mocking.

"What?! Are you mad?" Din scoffed.

He could not gauge her intentions and felt bewildered in front of the crowd, with cameras still rolling.

"You just attacked me, and what are you thinking? That I should make you my family? My mother?" he asked incredulously.

"Yes Din. I am only following your train of thought. After all, you just told this press conference that underage rape victims should be married off to their attackers."

"I didn't say that! You misunderstand! *Saya kata ini satu gejala, budak-budak suka sama suka, tak boleh kita biarkan je macam tu!*" he screamed, reverting to his mother tongue in confused anger.

"What statistics did you just read out Din?" she calmly asked him.

"You don't understand. 90% of half of the cases is mutual consent," he replied insistently.

"How old are you, Din?"

"What? What has that got to do with anything?"

"Just answer the question."

"I'm ... I'm 43," he replied, scrunching his eyebrows in a dazed, puzzled expression.

"Ok, I'm 45. So we're about the same age, *lah*. 30 years ago, I was 15 and you were 13. Now, say we were friends, and then we had a fight. We both punched each other in anger, but later we regretted it. You think it's fair to leave your parents and come and live with me? I'll be your new mother instead?"

Din wanted to appear in control of the situation and was carefully listening, trying to get her point but could not quite follow what she was getting at. He concluded that she was mentally unsound and probably escaped from a facility nearby. He was hoping to politely rebut her, but the first words that rolled off his tongue were curses.

"Your mother's cunt *lah*. You don't know what you're talking about. How can you say it is the same thing?"

"That is what *you* said. What is marriage? It's starting a new family right? That is your logic what. After making a mistake, it can be righted by making it a family affair. Then outsiders don't need to interfere in family matters, right?"

"You can't equate slapping and punching with rape," he said calmly this time.

It was the woman's turn to scoff now.

"No, you *can't*? Why not? It's still an assault," she said.

"Yes, but it's sex..."



"Stop right there. Stop! It's not sex. It's violence. It is a sexual crime," she said, cutting off his reply.

"What's the difference?" he asked, vexed.

"Now people, do you see why we need sex education?" the woman said, turning to look at the audience.

"But sex education, the Western style teaches about sex life and that promotes social ills," he started, talking louder to drown her voice.

"Do you have a sex life?" she asked him point blank.

"What?! What are you..?"

"You are a married man with offspring right? It's safe to say you have a sex life, yes?"

"What are you getting at?" he replied, exasperated.

"That you don't know what is, nor can you tell the difference between sex, rape, statutory rape, sex life, marriage, mutual consent, sex education and social ills."

"Basically, you're pulling a Mat Maslan. Looks like we need to push forward with adoption papers. No son of mine should be as ignorant as you," she said, reaching out to grab his ear and drag him away.

Din could only squeal in pain as her vice-like fingers pinched his entire ear and twisted. He was appalled that nobody seemed to move to rescue him, and the cameras were clicking away in frenzy, flashing lights blurring his vision into a blinding white.

Suddenly, Din was back in his chair at the start of the press conference. His friend seated on his right tugged at him, bending to mutter in his ear.

"Eh, see that fat lady in front with the reporters. So fat but still wearing legging, make-up, and overly styled hair. From the back, would be just like a good cow to plow, no?" the friend joked.

Just as he was about to giggle back at the remark, a shadow appeared in front of him...

Note:

On December 30, 2015, Malaysian politician Datuk Dr. Mohd Khairuddin Aman Razali, the member of parliament for Kuala Nerus, Terengganu from Islamist party PAS, released a statement on rape statistics as recorded by the Malaysian police headquarters, Bukit Aman's crime department.

According to the statement published on his Facebook account as well as several Malaysian news portals, there were 6,910 rape cases reported from 2013 to 2015. Out of these, a total 1,424 cases in 2013, 1,243 in 2014 and 920 between January and October 2015 involved underage girls. Khairuddin said 90% of the cases involving minors were "consensual". He suggested marriage as the solution. The above story is fiction inspired from true events.

\* \* \* \* \*

## "March of the Elephants"

by Allison Thai

A flash of wet red—blood in her eyes.

Mai dabbed it away with her sleeve. In the heat of combat, when even a split second counted, she could have been killed. No need to worry; she was safe now. Mai smeared off the blood to get a good, long look at the miracle before her. The backs of the enemy. The Chinese retreating. This had to be a dream.

La, her elephant, lifted his trunk and trumpeted—almost shouted, as his name implied—to prove otherwise. Soldiers joined in the cry of triumph, and Mai could not help laughing. Another elephant lumbered into view, carrying on his back her elder sister, the commander.

Mai waved at her. "We did it, Hiễn. We chased them off."

The older woman, still and serenely poised on her steed, did not smile. "They'll be back," Hiễn replied.

Mai was no fool; she already knew that. Her side may have won the battle, but not the war. They should expect more men, better tactics. After all, their enemy was an empire spanning nearly half the world, a great, greedy dragon that tightened its coils over anything within reach. Mai looked down at the men she had led into battle, at how tired they were. The very spears some had waved aloft to celebrate now kept the soldiers upright, as they panted and bled and sweltered in their armor. Just how much longer and harder could they fight for freedom, the right to call their land Vietnam? Mai could not say for certain, but she would keep fighting all the same.

Hiễn eyed her sibling with disapproval. "You broke formation. That nearly cost you your life."

Mai's wide grin faltered. "I saved them, didn't I?"

Hiển's lips pressed into a hard line. "I'm worried because you could have been hurt, that's all." Then she swayed on her perch and sighed, as if fatigue from battle finally sank in, as if too tired to fight her sister. "We've done well this time," she admitted, "though we should change formation. No wing should be singled out and overwhelmed by the enemy. That oversight is my fault."

"Don't be so hard on yourself, Hiển. Everyone is fine," Mai assured her. "Our men deserve good food and rest tonight."

No one in his or her right mind opposed that motion. By sunset, steam and spices filled the air as bowls of *phở* were served all around for supper. Mai wasted no time squeezing lime and heaping basil into her bowl, though she passed the chili sauce. Enough blood had been shed today; she'd skip on its lookalike tonight. Once the noodle soup sated her hunger, she looked up only to find Hiển missing. She rose to look for her older sister.

Away from company, at the foot of her tent, Hiển stood before a man Mai did not recognize. She did recognize the robe he wore, how its trim differed from hers, and knew that bow he made—right fist in left palm—to show that he bore no arms.

A Chinese envoy?

Hiển acknowledged him the Vietnamese way, with hands folded over her chest and a tip of the waist—an angle not as sharp as his, to indicate her position over him. He had only come to deliver a message and did not stay to watch her read it. Mai could not see her sister's reaction, only that she ducked out of sight into the tent.

Hugging the shadows, Mai stole after her. She found Hiển where the elephants were kept.

Sư-Tử, a sight to fear in battle, now stood as a silent sentinel. Hiển stroked his trunk with one hand while she gripped the scroll with the other.

Mai came in slowly, as if stumbling upon her sister by accident. "There you are. I didn't think you'd finished eating that fast. Certainly not before me." Her greeting rang hollow. Hiển did not respond.

"What does it say?" Mai prompted.

Hiển only shook her head.

"No secrets," Mai said softly. "We're sisters."

More silence. Finally, Hiễn gave up the scroll. Mai opened up to impeccable penmanship, its beauty belied by the terrible message it bore. White-hot anger engulfed her first. “Still calling us Jiao Province? What nerve.” Cold horror washed over next. “And Cường...It can’t be. They *killed* him?”

“I had known all along,” Hiễn murmured.

“How? We just got the news—“

“It’s a lie,” Hiễn snapped. “The Chinese keep no prisoners. My husband had been dead long before that scroll ever reached this camp.”

“But why send this now?”

“To shake my resolve. To put the blame on me. To make it as if Cường was punished and killed for my choice to fight.” Hiễn’s gaze hardened, devoid of guilt and doubt. “My husband had fought and died to free Vietnam. I love him still. I will not dishonor his name by giving up.”

“I won’t give up, either,” Mai said. “Our father, our brothers, and Cường...they’re all gone now. We only have each other. We started this war together, and that is how we will finish it too.”

Hiễn looked up to give her a rare, grateful smile, which faded as her gaze flitted down to the scroll. She beckoned for it—a small, gentle gesture, returned in kind by Mai as she handed it back. Hiễn crushed it in her fist—a sharp, sudden snap that made Mai flinch. “This changes nothing. We keep fighting.”

True to her word, they pressed on. Not only did the rebels stand up to more waves of the enemy, but pushed them back, reclaiming more and more of their territory.

Sư-Tử lived up to his name. He may be Hiễn’s elephant, but he roared like an untamed lion, sending tremors of fear even through Mai. Sư-Tử was a living, roaring battering ram. Not even a wall of men and horses could stop him. Only Hiễn could rein in a beast like that. Together they paved the way to a string of victories.

Hiễn, however, was careful not to get drunk on winning. “Our elephants have gotten us this far, but we can’t rely on them too much,” she said soberly one day. “In time, the enemy will see through our strategy. They are probing for weaknesses as we speak, I reckon. They will outarm and outwit us—that is, if we let them.”

Words of caution failed to dampen Mai's high spirits. "Sip your tea and enjoy the view, Hiển. You worry too much."

Mai strayed back to the garrison balcony. She peered down, where men still toiled to make camp, and then looked up, where mountains cloaked in green and purple haze reached for the sky. Born and raised in the south, Mai could not get enough of the cool, crisp air here. Centuries of subjugation made most people on both sides forget that the Chinese-Vietnamese border had ever existed. Here it stood before Mai now, no longer an old story, but just a good stone's throw over the Cao Bằng range. Take Cao Bằng, and Vietnam wins.

"We've pushed them back this far," Mai murmured. "Even better, the hill tribes here have sworn to support us. We are so close, Hiển. What could stop us now?"

Weeks later, when all seemed well, the answer to her question came in a letter. Color drained from Hiển's face as she read it. "General Yong is coming," she breathed.

Mai's gut tightened with dread. She had heard all the stories, of how that man subdued the Mongol tribes to the north, the Tanguts to the west, and recently the Korean peninsula to the east. Now he was heading south for Vietnam, to flatten it under his foot and reclaim it for China.

Enemy forces had pulled back, so that Hiển and Mai could do nothing else but await General Yong's arrival. He came to them under a truce, sauntering with great, unhurried strides. As expected, he towered over the two women, with hands said to have crushed a tiger in a test to prove his strength.

Hiển kept her back straight, hands folded, and eyes forward. Mai struggled to do the same. She envied her sister's ease with upholding that quiet strength.

Yong's voice boomed, even with no intent to shout. "The Mandate of Heaven (may he live ten thousand years) graciously implores you to surrender. Should you comply, he gives you his word that you and your forces will be spared."

Hiển's smile was tight, mirthless. "We would rather die with honor in battle than live in disgrace as slaves."

Yong reacted differently from most men. Instead of bristling at her impudence, his eyes lit up with glee. "The war will go on, then."

“Before you leave, I’d like you to hear *my* terms.” Without flinching, Hiễn met his eyes. “I challenge you to a duel. A fight to the death. The first to fall will have his or her forces submit in complete surrender.”

He laughed hard, doubling over and wheezing. Finally, he collected himself and managed to say, “You...you’re a bold one. A fool, too. I accept!”

Back in the Cao Bằng camp hours later, Mai still reeled from the shock. Never surrender—she had expected that much. But a duel?

Hiễn did not seem to regret her daring proposal. “I knew he would accept,” she said. “The emperor may have called for a peaceful surrender, but Yong loves nothing more than bloodshed.” Hiễn cracked a smirk. “Besides, he could never turn down fighting a woman. Imagine the blow to his pride if he refused.”

Mai shook her head. “But the price of defeat is just too high. How could he agree to that?”

“Because he thinks he can win. He is strong, but arrogant.”

Had Hiễn not been her sister, Mai would have thought the same of her. Hiễn was *confident*, not arrogant. Mai fought better on an elephant, but Hiễn far surpassed her in skill with a blade. Still, Mai had her doubts. Could Hiễn be skilled enough to defeat even Yong? His campaigns on horseback may have dulled his hand at sword fighting. Mai spent the next few days torn between worry and belief in her sister.

The night before the decisive battle, Mai did not find Hiễn practicing on the field, but sitting inside drinking tea and gazing into the mountains. Or rather, at the opposing army camped there.

Mai frowned. “It’s a little late for this, don’t you think?” She expected Hiễn to be more active, if not nervous. “Are you still sure about this? No regrets?”

Hiễn did not reply “yes” or “no,” but with this: “War is the fence between defeat and freedom.” She turned to face Mai. “Do you remember what our father used to tell us about elephants?”

“They can’t jump.”

“That’s right.” Hiễn set her jaw. “What other choice do we have but to charge right through?”

The two forces met along the Descending Dragon Bay as agreed. Soldiers gathered around a makeshift arena. Hiển and the general faced each other, swords drawn and gazes unflinching. Mai stood with her men, feeling helpless with La back in camp.

The two bowed low, one in the Chinese way, and one adhering to the Vietnamese way. Yong cut formalities short with a war cry and a lunge. Hiển parried the downward slash with an uppercut. The clash of swords rang a violent song throughout the shoreline. Mai watched, fighting back the urge to chew on her nails. Yong had Hiển outmatched in strength, but she had the upper hand in speed. Again and again, she dodged what could have been fatal blows, almost dancing through the rain of blurred silver. Obviously he aimed for her head or neck, bent to kill, while she went for her cracks in his armor. Yong staggered back snarling, bleeding from cuts she had inflicted. Hiển held on well, but she would not last forever. The sun climbed higher through the sky, bathing the duelists in heat.

“That letter told the truth,” Yong grunted between pants. “The one about your husband. He was sent to Korea, where he had to work under me.”

Their blades met again, hilts locked. “He was tall, strong, could have been a good worker. But he wouldn’t listen, wouldn’t do a thing I tell him. Then word came to me that you started a rebellion.” He leered at her. “For that, I cut off his head.”

“You’re lying.” Hiển swung at him, eyes alight. “You’re lying!” She had been so graceful and careful before. Now she started to slip. Yong began to block her blows with more ease. Kicking sand into her face slowed her down even more. Panting and seething, Hiển bared her teeth and did not relent. Seeing her sister this angry, this primal, frightened Mai.

And somehow, as her heart wrenched, Mai felt that Yong had told the truth. A strange flash caught her eye. Her imagination, perhaps? No—from the other side, cleverly concealed even under broad daylight, a Chinese archer stretched back his bow, arrow aimed straight for Hiển.

How could no one see him? Mai was not supposed to interfere. No one could. That was the rule, only one of many reserved for duels. Mai had never been good at following such things. She threw herself in the arrow’s path, hearing it fly loose. It punched into her back, lodged between plates of her armor. She crumpled into the sand. Hiển screamed her



name. The Vietnamese moved first, breaking the loop with a surge of vengeance. Her world was spinning, fading, then went black.

\* \* \*

Mai woke up to her body weighed down by bed sheets and the semblance of a woman framed by the sun behind her. Hiển stood over Mai, her face was etched with worry. Then that worry gave way to relief, and Mai blinked in surprise as Hiển pulled her into a tight hug.

“I...I’m alive?”

“Yes, thank goodness,” Hiển said.

“What happened?”

Hiển sat back, drawing in a deep breath, as she always did when she had something important to explain. “Well, first and foremost, the Chinese have retreated.”

“And General Yong?”

“I spared him. I couldn’t give him the honor and glory of dying in battle. He left in disgrace.”

Mai’s eyes widened. “So...so that means...”

“Yes. We won.”

Mai’s heart soared, then her shoulders fell. “Oh, I missed it all.”

“Don’t be so disappointed. Be glad that you’re alive.” Hiển’s voice grew hushed. “I thought I had lost you. I never would be able to repay you for saving us.”

“Us?”

Suddenly a peculiar expression took over Hiển’s face—something between gratitude and nervousness. “Yes, our lives. Mine, and ...” Her hand flitted down to her belly.

Silent, Mai sat dumbstruck. Then it hit her. “Hiển—you...you’re *pregnant?*” Mai gawked at her sister, her mouth opening up then snapping shut, working like that of a carp sold still alive at the river market. “I...I’m happy, so happy for you, but I...oh, I’m just so *mad.*” It took much effort to fight down her sputtering. “What did I say about keeping secrets, Hiển? No secrets, remember? How long now?”

Hiển looked meek—very unusual for her. “Four months.”

“Four months, and you didn’t tell me. And you fought General Yong like that?”

"I had no choice. We both know that I am the better swordswoman. If you had known I was pregnant, you never would have let me challenge him."

"Well, of course," Mai retorted. "Because putting your child's life in danger was so stupid and reckless."

Hiển flinched. "You jumped out to take that arrow. Now you can never walk again."

Mai's heart skipped a beat. For the first time, she stared down at her legs and tried to move them. Nothing. She clamped both hands over her knees, fisting the bed sheets. Still nothing. She could not feel a thing. Mai slumped back, head spinning.

"I'm so sorry, Mai," Hiển murmured. "The doctors did everything they could, and your wound will heal, but..."

"I-It's fine." Mai mustered a smile. "Even if I had known that would happen, and if it meant saving you and your baby, I'd do it again." She looked up, surprised to see her sister on the verge of tears.

"You're right," Hiển said. "I have been stupid and reckless."

"Me too," Mai replied. "You said so yourself."

"We are so foolish, you and I," Hiển said with a sigh. "We could have been killed."

"But we're alive, aren't we? And Vietnam is free."

"You're right about that, too."

Together they had broken the chain of a centuries-long reign. The magnitude of it subdued the sisters into a long silence.

"There will be a parade," Hiển finally said.

"I'm not surprised."

"All the way from the north to the south, through every city, before throngs of celebrants, we will march with our army."

"March," Mai said with a snort. "Impossible. Look at us, the heroes who freed Vietnam: a pregnant woman and a cripple."

Hiển smiled. "Well, that's why we have our elephants."

\* \* \* \* \*

## "Dharma Drama"

by Joan Annsfire

As the indigenous villages of the hill tribes grew farther apart, they were replaced by miles and miles of green, mountainous countryside. We were climbing upward in a rickety, old covered flatbed truck called a songthaew, (literally, "two rows" in Thai) which contained two benches for passengers running down either side. The rules were simple. Women sat inside the truck, the men held onto the back. As Deborah sat down on one bench, the tiny tribal women scooted over to make room for me on the other. It was a tiny space, not nearly big enough for my full-sized, American derriere. I laughed and shook my head, but they insisted. So I sat anyway, crushing them a bit. The photo Deborah took shows an auburn-haired, pink-faced American woman perched among the petite, dark Lisu and Akha of northern Thailand.

On the bench facing me, a mother and her daughter were impeccably dressed in tribal costume. The daughter, about 3 or 4 years old, sat on her mother's lap. They were probably coming back from either a village ceremonial gathering or a type of photo op where tourists pay them to pose for photographs. Most of the other women wore partial tribal attire somewhat interrupted by a western t-shirt or jeans.

Our truck sputtered and shook as it took the hairpin turns. I worried that the guys hanging from the back would spin off every time we hit a rock, but their practiced hands held tight.

The air was growing cooler as the altitude increased. But summer, even in northern Thailand, is damp and humid. By the time we reached Tha Ton it was nearly 4:30 in the afternoon. The town was much smaller than we'd imagined, divided in two by the swift, brown, Mae Kok River. Up on a hill on the other bank, we could see evidence of our destination, the *wat* (temple). Its huge, smooth, white Buddha gently smiled down on us from high above the river. An ornately tiled spire was also visible in the distance.

As it was late afternoon, we decided to get a room before attempting to do a preliminary check-out of the *wat*. By following a dirt road that ran parallel to the river, we came upon a small group of guesthouses that had received good reviews in our guidebook. After a full day of bus travel, we must have looked like strange, frayed-edged, middle-aged female backpackers.

In spite of our worse-for-wear appearance, a gracious Thai woman led us to a beautiful teak cabin with air conditioning, hot water and a huge porch overlooking the river. It was 800 baht a night (about \$20). The huge, white Buddha looked down lovingly as we gave her the money and threw our packs on the beds.

After hot showers, a change of clothing, and some curry noodles in town, we were ready to scope out the *wat*. It was beginning to get dark, but the humidity had dissipated. After traveling so far, we wanted to see what we were up against. It wasn't difficult to find the road that led in an uphill spiral circling the mountain. Climbing a while in the cool evening air, we were forced to admit that we wouldn't be able to make this journey in the heat of day with 30-pound packs on. A yapping, three-legged dog had joined us in our endeavor. "Look at our sad guide dog," Deborah mused, referring to his disability.

"He's doing a lot better than I am," I panted in response. The dog was limping along at a good clip. On the first flat level of the *wat* grounds, we found an area where some monks were seated in a meditation hall. Facing away from town, there was a huge, painted statue of Kuan Im (Quan Yin) surrounded by her *daikinis*. On the other side of the hill was a fierce, gold *naga* (dragon) winding up a pole. The overall effect was a bit like a theme park: kind of Disney World meets the Dalai Lama. I remembered the guide books describing Wat Tha Ton as "a bit over the top." A real accomplishment when you consider the ostentatious nature of *wats* in general. A poster-sized map in Thai indicated that the bulk of the facilities were farther up. We wound upward one more level to the alabaster-colored Buddha and decided to call it a night, hoping that we might find bus, motorcycle or taxi service to help us in the morning. Back on our deck we listened to the river and the wind as we charted our morning trajectory.

The following day after breakfast we began our journey up the mountain. The weather was overcast, punctuated by brief intervals of summer rain. Almost immediately, we were rejoined by our three-legged canine friend. Although there were what looked to be

bus stops along the route, the sole vehicle that made an appearance was one motor scooter that sailed past us.

The only way up to the *wat* was on foot. The web site had featured restaurants and spas and a teeming Buddhist village full of people, clearly an imaginary projection of a much sought-after future. But this place was too far off the beaten path to become a mega-hotspot for mass enlightenment.

Our climb was full of interesting surprises. Around almost every turn we found another statue or garden. Above the level of the white Buddha, we passed a big-bellied laughing Buddha. On the next level up was a mess hall of sorts, filled with orange-robed monks who were eating. Now we finally had concrete evidence of actual inhabitants. As we turned a corner, a huge golden Buddha with *nagas* protruding from his head in a fan-like shape peered down at us from a majestic, lotus-leaf throne. Below the figure was a boxy office-type structure with large windows. Inside we could see some orange-robed monks sitting on the rug eating from their rice bowls. With them was a young woman whose brown hair was tied back from her face, probably an American judging by her loose yet direct eye contact and open smile utilizing all the muscles in her face--a wide toothy smile, so unlike the European one performed daintily with closed lips.

Although the rain had increased in intensity, we hesitated at the door, unable to interpret the curly, Thai letters painted on it. Then two monks in orange robes motioned for us to enter.

The monks and the American were conversing in English while finishing their pre-noon meal, the last one of the day by Buddhist strictures. The group greeted us, and we sat down. I felt like a pilgrim in an exotic land very far from home. This illusion dissipated completely when the younger of the two monks got a call on his cell phone. The American woman took this opportunity to extend her hand.

"Hi, I'm Bonnie. I've been studying here for the past three weeks, but I'm leaving today. I'm the only foreign student here right now. Where are you from?"

"The Bay Area," I replied. "I live in Berkeley and Deborah lives in Oakland."

"Well, I'm from San Francisco," she said laughing, and we might have guessed as much. The irony of California homies meeting on the other side of the world wasn't lost on any of us. It happened on virtually all of our journeys. We then proceeded to babble about

Chinatown, Coit Tower and the Berkeley Campanile. It's funny how people you'd probably never speak to at home become instant friends abroad. Our tongues proceeded so quickly that you'd think we were the last living Americans in the world.

"We must be a little homesick," Deborah concluded.

The monks asked us how we found out about their *wat*, and we explained about the website. The younger monk's English was fluent; he said that he was the liaison for international relations, the person responsible for its creation and maintenance.

"Is there really a restaurant and spa up here?"

"No, well, not yet," International Relations Monk explained. "We're waiting for the place to catch on first." I was trying to visualize bus loads of tourists riding for hours through the hills of northern Thailand when Bonnie said that she was going to the bus station.

International Relations left to drop her off while the older monk stayed with us to give us our first meditation lesson in their specific practice.

Our newfound guru began with the Buddhist basics of the eightfold path, the four noble truths and the nature of impermanence. Neither of us were newcomers to Buddhist philosophy; so much of what he said was review. He interspersed his talk with anecdotal stories about his childhood.

"I grow up poor in small village. Every day I wake up early to milk cows and feed buffaloes."

Cows? I hadn't seen a cow since I'd been in Thailand. I had yet to see any cattle besides water buffalo in the various Thai venues we'd visited. I was beginning to wonder about this monk's biographical sketch.

"Then one day, my uncle come by to visit. He was now monk, ordained at local monastery. Then I want to know everything about life of monk. I visit monastery every day, at four in morning before my work. Soon I visit in evening too, after hauling water. I bring food and flowers to show my respect to the Buddha."

Guru Monk was a personable guy. I couldn't help but notice that, as a group, monks are quite talkative. When he asked if we had any questions, I chimed in with, "Why aren't monks allowed to eat after noon?"

"Because this was the Buddha's way," was his only response. I pondered whether his way still held relevance and maybe deserved a second look, but I remained silent.

He began teaching us the very specific meditation style of the Wat Tha Ton monks. "Women must sit with the left leg in front when legs are crossed, men with the right." We learned soon after that women also were supposed to start the meditation hand movements with the left hand, and men with the right. It was a yin-yang issue, he explained. Women were yin and men were yang. "But we're from California," I countered. "We're a little of both." That was as close to the lesbian issue as I wanted to venture.

"It's not important. You can do it any way you want," he relented. Clearly, he'd met up with our ilk before. The meditation hand movements made me feel like Diana Ross singing "Stop in the Name of Love." You had to raise your left hand to the side, lift it up, bring it to your stomach, raise your right hand, lift it, cover the left, lift the left to your heart, open it to the side, drop it down and then do the same with the right. When both hands were back at your sides, you'd begin again. It was kind of fun. I couldn't fathom doing it for hours, though.

After some practice with meditative hand dancing, we moved on to walking meditation. For that we went to the other room where there were footprints on the floor like those in a dance class. The monk showed us how to do walking meditation by following those footprints. The hardest part was the turn, which had to be done on the ball of the turning foot while bringing the other foot up in a perpendicular pose like a ballerina. I never realized that being Buddhist required this level of agility. After the initial instruction, our monk left us to practice walking the foot patterns on our own.

We had been doing it for nearly an hour when a bunch of novitiates--all boys, some children of only eight or nine years old--came over bringing two glasses of water and placed them on the carpet at our feet. It's a serious violation for male monastics to touch a woman, even if it's just brushing against her hand as he gives her a glass of water--a rule that applies even when she's old enough to be his grandmother.

It might not have been spiritually correct, but I was getting a bit bored with the walking meditation drill and wanted to do more actual walking. We still wanted to see what they called the *kutis*, the huts where lay visitors slept, the other meditation halls, and just explore the grounds. So we set off up the hill. It was now midday and a light rain was

falling. The place seemed quite deserted for such a large piece of land. Only our three-legged dog companion and a squadron of mosquitoes came out to greet us.

There were rows and rows of *kutis* lining the hill. We knew that one of these would serve as our habitation. Some were occupied by monks, but it was clear that almost all of them were empty. They were small houses, rustic and plain. Each one had a polished, wood floor and a palate of bedding to be spread upon it. Without fans or air conditioning to discourage mosquitoes, they would need to have screens that fit perfectly because neither of us had continued taking the toxic malaria meds we carried. We had just assumed that we could start them before we reached the Laotian border. And these screens looked a bit haphazard. *Maybe they had huts with real screens for visitors?*

Above the *kuti* level was another area with group facilities. A house that looked like an old Swiss chalet was locked up tight, but some of the accommodations over the river had been left unlocked. We wandered through a large hotel-like structure with a dining room that was open on all sides and full of tables and chairs. We peered into the windows of rooms that looked remarkably upscale with en suite bathrooms. Every one was deserted. A skinny cat came up and rubbed against my ankles. Huge carpeted meditation halls bore no signs of occupation. We kept walking uphill to the crest where construction workers were on a scaffolding building a meditation hall for visitors with a huge, tiled spire that we'd seen from the ground. *Was winter the high season here?* It was mid-July.

On the way back down we revisited the rooms beneath the serpentine Buddha to see if our monks had returned. International Relations was back. We told him that we were thinking of staying over but would need a ride to get our stuff up the hill. He said that after evening meditation he would drive us back to our hotel to get our packs. Then we could either stay over or walk up the hill unencumbered the next day. It sounded like a plan. We put some *dana* in the donation box and went back to our guesthouse to prepare for our return.

The hot showers felt especially luxurious that evening and the river view more peaceful than ever. We sat on the deck and mulled over the events of the day.

"It's a shame they have so few students," Deborah mused.

"I never expected it to be a whole world without women."

"Yeah, they really believe this yin-yang dichotomy."



"I can't imagine doing that meditation dance for hours on end."

"If we need to eat after noon, we'll have to go all the way down into town and walk back up again."

"I think I'm most afraid of the malaria risk."

"It's no coincidence that all their students seem to be in their early twenties."

"We should leave now if we want to make the six o'clock meditation," Deborah pronounced definitively.

"Yes we should," I confirmed. But neither of us moved a muscle. And as the sun began to set, the realization slowly dawned on us that our visit to Wat Tha Ton was coming to a close. "Let's go get some noodles at that restaurant on the river," I suggested.

Deborah agreed, and we headed off into town with a sense of renewed vigor and purpose. The white Buddha looked down on us with his knowing smile of radiant compassion, which remained unchanged in spite of our decision not to search here for enlightenment. You are but living evidence of earthly imperfection, it seemed to say. Our teacher had said that inside each of us is a core of eternal radiant goodness, an embodiment of our true "Buddha nature." I looked up at the huge, white Buddha on the hill, and I swear I saw him wink. I knew then that our imminent departure was something that even the Dalai Lama would understand.

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## "Cagayancillo"

by Perry McDaid

Seaweed and fish from a sickly sea  
burdened by bravura of 'superpowers'  
whose egos and motives  
impact upon my family's survival.

Survival.

I wonder if those aboard warships  
in peacetime  
really understand that word  
as we do  
as they worship  
at the altar of war  
long after their sunbursts  
and creeping death  
ended the Japanese madness.

They waste resources on games  
and posturing  
while cyanide kills coral  
and the WWF makes pretty speeches  
about Tubbataha.

From the old fort you can see  
the yellow- and orange-streaked dusk

but it offers no protection  
against piratical pollution.

The Sula Sea is a microcosm  
for the turmoil beyond:  
soothsayer of the liquid Earth

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## **"To My Unfinished Poems"**

by Riya Sarna

To my unfinished poems,  
the ones that will never see the light of day.  
The ones that sit and pray  
To be more than just a fantasy.

I need you to know that I'm sorry.  
Sorry for not being brave enough to show you off to the world,  
Sorry for not having enough strength to sew you up and make you perfect,  
Sorry for not being able to give you enough so you could be just right,  
Sorry that I didn't have the strength to write.

To my unfinished poems,  
The smell of coffee and stains of tears  
Will always remain on your tattered pages.  
The wails in the middle of the night  
Of all the strife and plight  
That I had to witness with my innocent little eyes.

To my unfinished poems,  
Dry up your little eyes,  
I know it's hard to only see the night sky,  
To never know the glimmer of light,  
To be an incomplete work of art,  
But darlings,

Don't you see,  
How even when you're incomplete,  
You're still so very special to me.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"Where Is the Family Who Lived Here Once?"**

by Vernon Daim

Where is the family who lived here once?  
What happened to the sacred ancestral altar,  
or the wall stained by the burning of incense?  
The façade remains but the interior has changed,  
spruced up and the old life hollowed out,  
replaced by a fancy Nyonya menu on the table,  
fanciful stories and backstories  
on the wall, eager to please travelers  
hungry for nostalgia and vintage trinkets.

Where is the family who lived here once?  
What happened to the sacred ancestral altar,  
or the wall stained by the burning of incense?  
A backpacker anticipating a surge of 'likes'  
on her Instagram, striking selfie poses next to  
an ancient couplet and warrior gods  
guarding the heavy main door, trying hard  
to imagine a lifestyle she doesn't comprehend or lead,  
a life nowadays people could no longer lead.

Where is the family who lived here once?  
What happened to the sacred ancestral altar,  
or the wall stained by the burning of incense?  
Colorful murals with neither heart nor soul

gentrify the back lanes. No longer choking,  
Sungai Melaka flows freely now, rippled gently  
by river cruises full of wide-eyed tourists, ripped off  
unawares by reproductions sold as heirlooms.

\* \* \* \* \*

## "A Kampung Scene on Raya Day--2015"

by Matthew Jerome van Huizen

A sudden stillness grips the land,  
The morning beckons, as twilight ends;  
In the air now hangs the *azan* call,  
In procession, the *kampung*, both big and small.  
*Songket, sampings, kebayas* made of silk,  
Not a dull colour among these ilk;  
The children excited in outfits new!  
*Ibu dan ayah pun baju baru.*

Morning's *raakats* and *takbirs* complete,  
Satanic temptations, a month defeat;  
From elders a pardon, the progeny ask,  
To God give glory, the end of the fast!  
Amidst joyful hearts, return the familiar,  
Return to the *kampung*, home most dear;  
By streams idle, on rickety wooden floors,  
Bring out the *rendang*, fling open the doors;

Old friends close, come hither and thither,  
While youths play *bunga api* down by the river;  
Flickering lights on oil lamps delight,  
Adds to the gaiety of this festive night;  
As the night quietens and the feasting now ends,  
*Selamat Hari Raya*, to all my dear friends!



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## "Mekong Delta Prison"

by James Underwood

It's painted like forever, the sunlight's shimmy to the  
bottom of your empty glass as the plane taxis to the runway  
between departure and betrayal, your head feint to the steward  
near the door, my fingers reaching for the bag that isn't there, a  
song list on the table for the jukebox they got rid of in the early '90s –  
a roomful of intangibles that tell me I've been borrowing from a  
script that's already been forgotten by a man who  
passed through yesterday to an early unmarked grave.

I kill the lights and speed up closer to the airstrip, the  
sticky syrup of the jungle hanging from my skin, crouching  
low until I'm breastbone to the handlebars, careering beneath the  
breezy tips of sugar cane beyond the sunken northern tower,  
when I land full bore bouncing on the sandy berm and skid across  
the chassis of that burnt up tractor I never could anticipate  
or figure, where the engine dies and I lay her down between the  
soggy monsoon slither and croak of paddy rats and frogs.

They say the taste for things illicit is strongest when you're young,  
yet here I am huffing across the weedy tarmac, snapping together with  
shaking hands the metal pieces of a field shovel, my mouth so full  
of heart's hot desire there's blood across my chin, and strike  
through dirt, not two feet down, a zippered bag of unmarked bills,  
a dated moldy passport – a rusted .45 – ice pick machinations I

know you never rued even lurching gagged and handcuffed  
between the back rows of that padded windowless van.

I've always had a way of dodging bullets, of standing straight up in a  
shit storm and walking out with limbs and life intact, maybe it's the  
dumb blessed luck of a wayward stumbling Buddhist,  
and yeah I'll make the trip to the rundown local temple to light a  
yellow candle for the frowning chubby Buddha, drop those C notes in  
the collection plate, smiling darkly to myself that I know you'll  
get your own back selling your few gold crowns in that  
crummy bricked up stench of Mekong Delta prison.