



“Well, they are saying it might hit 54 by the day after. I’ll be taking the night flight out that day so maybe I should wait.”

The man had said nothing, she noticed. There was this look of irritation that he had tried to hide with a half-smile. She had not even noticed him the first time. It was with this same vulnerable, touch-me-not look that he had sat at the huge round table in the dining-hall on the second floor that afternoon. She had dismissed him as one of those lost Japanese participants who could not seem to operate outside of their flock. But she had also noticed the slightly different slant of the eyes—rather un-Japanese eyes, she thought.

“That’s not exactly how one holds those sticks,” he remarked in English.

She was startled. This time she noticed that the man with the un-Japanese eyes was eating deftly with chopsticks from a plateful of some kind of glassy, noodly substance. She had been totally foxed by the bewildering range of Asian cuisine laid out on the huge centre table and the elaborate Thai s7(a)4(t)m4-4(ad)-4( bil.i)-2( (t)9b)-14(8 -(S)-8eT -3.8ed Tw

“But ...”

“Yes, I know. I don’t look Indian. Actually ... I come from a part of the country that is closer to this place in many ways.”

“But, really... you could very well pass off for a Thai woman, too!”

“That’s because my father’s ancestors came from somewhere near this country.”

This time he gave her a quizzical look and she could see a knot forming on his brow. Was she playing some sort of a game with him?

“You see ... in the thirteenth century a band of adventurous men had migrated to our land in the North-eastern part of India. It’s said that they had come from some place in or near Thailand. They went on to rule that part of India for six hundred long and glorious years. My father belongs to that race known as the Ahoms,” she explained.

He looked at her—she didn’t look Indian at all. Her shoulder-length hair was jet-black and straight and with her wheatish complexion and that Malaysian slant in her eyes she had no business being an Indian. And she was not wearing the Indian dress either.

“... and it is said that my mother’s ancestors came from Borneo. My mother belongs to an ethnic community called the Angami Nagas,” she continued, delighted at the confused look on his face.

“Well then, all I can say is that you must be a very interesting global specimen,” he said defensively, and concentrated on his noodles.

“What about you? You must be Japanese.”

“No, I’m an Ama-y-rican,” he replied with an exaggerated drawl. And, as they both broke into a relief of laughter, he said, “*Sawa-dee, kha!* Welcome to my land!”



She was relieved to see Prasit walking towards her from the third row. “*Sawa-dee!*” said she, before he could say hello. He was on one of the organising committees and asked her a quick hope you are comfortable remember the grand dinner tonight top floor 8pm.

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*Thailand!!? What's a woman like you going to do in a place like that? It's for men like us. Sandwich massages. Go-go girls. Peachwomen on Beaches. Little boys for the old boys. Whatta waste on you, no?*

The guests surrendered to the mellow ambience of the low chandeliers, the clink of champagne glasses and prawn dips. She sat with an unmarried Japanese couple who said they had just got in from Egypt and that they had no time to get married. Mikoko the woman sat demurely. Every now and then Mikoko would look admiringly at her



The sidewalk markets at Pratunam reverberated with dozens of local vendors,

*Thirawat walked to the 11<sup>th</sup> floor of the Silom Complex car park and leaped to his death*  
(Bangkok Post).

“These are poor people....

*Walk up to phone booth. Insert international phone card.*

*She:* Hello! Hello!?! Omang?

*He:* Maya !?

*She:* I'm calling from Bangkok. I'm fine. Don't worry.

What? No. The baht's nose-diving, so there's no  
problem. (*Prasit moves away to talk to the Japanese*)

How's Agam? Don't forget to visit Nisadeo tomorrow.

What? ... No, it's still early here. I'm with a few other  
visitors (*sideglance at him*). It's quite safe. Don't worry.

I can take care of myself. See you soon. Bye!

She told them that everything was fine. They walked on. Prasit pointed towards two Indian couples on the other side of the road. The men were carrying five shopping bags each, and the women were in salwar-kameez suits and strawy orange hair and sideburns. You don't look like them at all, strange. Why should I look like a *Panjoo*? What's that? Nothing, ha, ha. Just an old joke. She remembered the cosmopolitan university she had attended. She and her friends from the north-east were called "chinks" by Mrrutti-driving *Panjoos*:

*Easy lays. They don't study. Only buy sexy clothes. Easy lays. The chinks of India, Tibet, and Nepal. Smelly driedfish heaters. Stick to one another. Smoke. Maybe drink and dope too. No morals. Live on state support. No signs of being Indian. Half of their men militants, na? Wohi toh!*

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Prasit was apprehensive about going to Patpong. He said maybe it wasn't a good idea. He wasn't feeling too safe with the thought of having to escort two foreign women and a serious-looking Japanese scholar through rows of steaming alleys in the middle of the night. It was Maya who insisted, seconded by a giggling Mikoko.

“Okay,” said Prasit, “but you will stop only when I tell you to. And please don't speak to anyone.”

plastic, their bodies with no relation to their faces, moved to the music and the laser lights.

She saw Prasit staring at a waifly Thai-looking girl who was drinking beer with a pot-bellied white man at the counter.

“Do you know her?” she asked.

“No.”

“Then why are you looking at her?”

“Maya... these are *our* women ...,” Prasit said slowly.

She understood. Chinky Thai woman for pink American man.

“Where do they come from?” she asked.

“From upcountry. Then, when they grow old ... I mean old for the trade, they go back home and do farming. Or set up stalls here in the market. Some become mistresses of rich Filipino or Japanese businessmen. They are the comfort women. The men visit them while on short trips here or on transit trips. The comfort women take care of their needs while they are here in Thailand. Some even escort the men to parties and business deals.”

“*Comfort Women* ... where else did I come across that term?” said Maya, with a faraway look in her eyes.

“Yes,” said Prasit, “you must have read somewhere about the Korean women who were used as prostitutes by Japanese soldiers during the Second World War.”

Maya sighed. Big-fish-eat-small-fish. Perhaps it all boiled down to the human impulse to use others. For various reasons. Be it economic, intellectual, sexual, or little everyday triumphs like bargaining successfully with distressed vendors. Take this place,

for instance, she thought. Here at Patpong people from all over the world pumped their loneliness, happiness, emptiness, sadness, lustiness into it in some kind of orgiastic frenzy—and all for that bit of fleeting comfort.

She could not help thinking about her own land and the angst of her people....

On the way back to the hotel they took two taxis. Maya and Prasit. Mikoko and her partner. Maya looked at Prasit's pensive face and caught his eye. They fell silent, immersed in their own thoughts. Though both knew they could touch and feel each other's thoughts.

*A New York apartment. The camera zooms in on a bare-chested Keanu Reeves. He slowly begins to make love to his distraught wife. But it is the face of another woman he sees in his rather wild lovemaking today. He shakes his head in utter disbelief. But he finds himself sucking the toe of this new woman, his half-sister. Of course the cunning Devil has not yet told his advocate she is his half-sister.*

Maya asked the taxi-driver to roll down the window. She wanted some fresh air. Desperately. *Bangkok. Krungthep. The City of Angels. Paradise on Earth. The Thais are known for their simplicity and hospitality.* As the taxi took the final bend, she could see the lights of the hotel gleaming bewitchingly in the distance. Maya swallowed the lump in her throat and said:

“Prasit, I want you to leave me at the hotel gate. You might not get another taxi to go home.”