

LIZA DAS

Comfort Man

The red lights of The Amari gleamed through the windows of the hotel room on the seventeenth floor. Rising from the queen-sized bed she sat in the comfort of the easy chair by the window and tugged at the curtain strings—to take a final look at the city in all its nightglory. Far down below she could see the tiny toy-like cars on the fully-lit freeways of Bangkok. The city seemed to her like a street-smart woman in all the cockiness of youth—at least this hotelled part of the city where the nightlights vied with each other much like those downtown nightwomen in Patpong. It was early 1998 and much of south-east Asia lay crumbling even as the high-rises continued to stand imperiously against the dark skyline. From the television set in the rosewood cabinet came the smug voice of the American expert who could barely conceal the excitement in him. The somewhat gloomy Thai host of the programme was asking the pink American if the baht would hit a low of 55 to the dollar. Last night a few of the participants of the conference had speculated on when they should embark on their shopping spree.

“Better buy something every day. You never know what tomorrow holds baht-wise!”

“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 and Japanese labels only seemed to add to her confusion. *Kaeng Khiao Wan Nuea. Tom Yam Kung. Thot Man Pla.* She had only a passing acquaintance with Thai cuisine thanks to the name-dropping—*satay, nam phrik, khao phat*—in the insipid social circuit she was dragged into back home. But here was culinary opulence in regal splendour. And ultimately impersonal in its travelguide reproduction.

“It’s called ‘*wun sen*’ here in Thailand,” he said, pointing to the glassy noodles.

“You Malaysian?”

“Well, no. I’m from India,” she said with a hesitant look, almost anticipating his wide-eyed surprise.

“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!”

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The conference hall was filled to capacity with people from all over the world. Pink Americans, pale-white British, beach-red Australians, yellow Chinese and Japanese, brown Indians and Sinhalese, and of course wheatish south-eastern and eastern Thais, Malaysians, Indonesians and Singaporeans. She could not help distinguishing them by colour-coding, notwithstanding her academic training in political correctness. How else was one to distinguish this mass of humanity, she thought. Of course, there were the usual hyphenated-hybrids of Chinese-Americans, Indian-Americans (who were careful not to betray any cognition of their brother-of-the-race-Indian-Indian participants)—Dr. Sujata Menon-Walker, Mr. Harry Rao-Smith, Ms. Shirin Doodhwala-Philips. A retired-looking American scholar was reading from his paper. *Bagawaat-Geeta-Hindoo-Philosophy-Pooranas-Eliot-Emerson-Whitman-Thoreau*. The sessions went on-an-on-an-on in an endless procession of post-colonialism, post-post-colonialism, poco-pomo, pacificperspectives, culture, counterculture, postculture, multi-and-inter-culture, the end of culture. She caught the retired-looking American scholar nodding in sleep, his deliberations on the Hindoo element now over. The objective of the conference was to explore the proliferation (promotion) of American Studies in South-and-South-east Asia. Indians in sarees, Thais in silk, hybrids in skirts-and-blacktights, and numerous global clones incognito, discussed the past, present and future of AMERICAN STUDIES in their respective lands.

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 Lord. “She’s very shy,” He explained. Suddenly the lights grew dim and rainbow lights filtered into a raised platform in the far end of the huge top-floor banquet hall of the hotel. The tremulous soul-stirring opening notes of the Thai musicians made her sit upright. She craned her neck to see the graceful dancers perform the traditional *Khon* classical masked dance. There was no way one could miss the similarities. The costumes, limpid movements, the shrill, trepidating notes.... They reminded her of the folk music and dances of a few ethnic Indian groups in her land. The haunting tribal music she had listened to many evenings on the local AIR channel as the rain kept falling sadly outside her window. She fought back her tears as Mikoko’s dark eyes watched her quietly. *Ladies and gentlemen! We welcome you to Amazing Thailand and hope you have a very*

wonderful and comfortable stay here. She hadn't noticed that Prasit had quietly slipped on to the seat behind her. An uneasy feeling on her back—the cool burning feeling when you are being stared at from behind—made her turn around. He looked handsome in a charcoal-black suit and blue tie.

“Are you all right, Maya?”

“Yes ... just a bit homesick,” she said with a light smile.

“Maybe you should go to bed early. You look tired. If you want I could take you sightseeing tomorrow.”

“Well...” It must have been that terribly empty feeling in her that stopped her from saying no to him. It had this habit of welling up in her heart from time to time, leaving her distraught and frightfully lonely even in the midst of family and friends. She could not remember when it had started but she had learnt to live with this feeling of not-being-there-when-there.

“Actually, I've got friends here,” she said, pointing to the Japanese couple.

“Sure, they could come along. You all can have an unofficial but authentic Thai guide. No charge, lady.”

It must have been that imitation of an elaborate Japanese bow that did it. Mikoko and her Lord burst out laughing.

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“W-a-a hunded b-a-a-h-t! Ony w-a-a hunded b-a-a-h-t, Mad-a-a-m!”

The sidewalk markets at Pratunam reverberated with dozens of local vendors, mostly women. Fat women, old women, young women with old faces and babies hanging from mango breasts, Thai women, Chinese women, *mae, jay, paa* ... hawked clothesclothesclothes—fake Calvin Klein, Versace, fluorescent T-shirts, Union Jack T-shirts, sequinned swimwear, Bt20 ties (this time male Indian/Pakistani hawker says plees medam, take for near and dear ones), jackets, clothesclothesclothes. She saw dresses worn by her friends back home: Bt80 palazzo pants, Bt40 tight silver tubetops, Bt100 wraparounds.

“Want to buy something?” asked Prasit.

Mikoko was already showing her mate the long baakoo she wanted to buy.

“I heard one can really bargain here in Thailand?” asked Maya.

In the wake of unprecedented economic growth, Thailand has become one of Southeast Asia’s most popular shopping centres. As a final note on shopping, bear in mind that bargaining is not only acceptable, but also expected.... Patience and a broad smile will serve you well in enjoying shopping as an art.

“Maybe you could help me, Prasit ... I mean, since you know the language. They might con me, you know,” she continued sheepishly.

<Photograph>: A visitor to Wat Suan Kaew drops a banknote into a 100-kg safe deposit box to contribute to the “Thais help Thais” fund (Bangkok Post).

Thirawat Wattanajiamwong, 25, was put on part-time work at the stock market brokerage where he worked. His income was cut from 20,000 to 8,000 baht a month. He had to call off his wedding because of the financial difficulties. He was unable to make the mortgage payments on the dream home he had purchased for his married life. So

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

“These are poor people.... Anyway ... you could try,” Prasit replied, touch-me-not and vulnerable all over again.

The baakoo vendor asked him something in Thai (it must have been) and he frowned: “Mikoko, he is asking if you could pay him in dollars.”

After a late lunch the Japanese couple said they wanted to go watch *Seven Days in Tibet*. They hopped on to two tuk-tuks and Prasit told the drivers: “*Wol The!*” Blurred previews ran on the walls of the World Trade Centre as they stood in queue for tickets. Last two tickets for *Seven Days*. That’s okay, said Maya (“I am not particularly interested”). And two tickets for *The Devil’s Advocate*, please, said Prasit (“tickets available”). After the show they decided to take a walk along Ratchadamri Road. From there they decided they would go to Patpong night bazaar via the Rama IV Road.

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He: You really wanted to buy that expensive toy car?

She: For my son. Four years old.

He: Oh! So you have a child. (*touch-me-not look*)

She: What about you? Are you married?

He: Well ... yes. I have a daughter. She’s six years old.

She: I see.

SILENCE.

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.”

She wasn't going to miss an experience of a *real* Bangkok night. If men could go, why couldn't she? After all, she too needed to see LIFE. And she coaxed Prasit to guide them through the streets.

The pounding in her heart was matched only by the pounding of the techno-driven music she could hear from afar.

So God really made women for men—women in identical fluorescent-green spaghetti-strapped skin-tight mini-dresses in the alley meant for Japanese men. In sequined blood-red dresses in the alley meant for Arab men. Purple for Koreans, blue for Chinese. Women yelling out, gesturing, striking a come-hither pose, women yawning, bored, one strap hanging loose in sleep and fatigue. Fat male pimps in bermudas pestered Mikoko's friend with photographs and a whole list of 'what-they-can-do.' Exasperated with the stiff scholar, they barked: “Have you come here to look at the moon?” (*I told you, said Prasit*). On the way back they took a street flanked by bars on either side. The music was deafening. *Ooooh! Love to love you, b-a-e-e-y-b-e-e!* Go-go girls, their faces

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.”