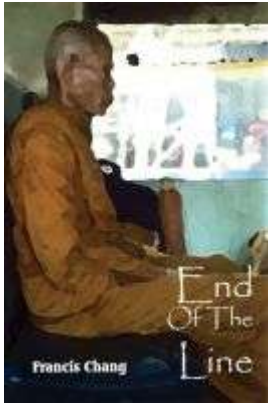


Anthology of Thai Short Stories

End of the Line By Francis Chang



STATIONS	RAP	EXP.	EXP.	RAP.		EXP.	RAP.	EXP.	EXP.	RAP.	RAP.	
	101	3	9	103		1	105	11	13	107	109	
CLASS	2-3	2	2	2-3		1-2	2-3	2	1-2	2-3	2-3	
BANGKOK	dep.	0610	0730	0825	1500		1800	1810	1825	1940	2030	2208
DONMUANG	dep.	0731	0820	0916	1500		1850	1859	2011	2032	2048	2253
AYUTTHAYA	dep.	0811	"	"	1634		1930	1950	"	2112	2128	2337
BANPHACHI JN.	dep.	0833	"	"	1659		"	2010	"	"	"	0001
LOPBURI	dep.	0912	"	1036	1751		"	2057	2133	2208	2225	0446
BANTAKHLI	dep.	1003	"	"	1846		"	2145	"	"	"	"
NAKORNSAWAN	dep.	1049	1110	1150	1952		2158	2222	2252	2337	0034	0238
TAPHANHIN	dep.	1132	1210	1238	2056		"	2316	"	"	0110	0355
PHICHIT	dep.	1217	1230	1256	2119		"	2349	"	0102	0208	0417
PHITSANULOK	arr.	1251	1305	1324	2200		"	0029	0056	0140	0253	0452
	dep.	1252	1315	1329	2202		"	0030	0100	0142	0255	0500
SAWANKHALOK	arr.	↓	1500	↓	↓		↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓
UTTARADIT	arr.	1422		1433	2343		"	0232	0212	0256	0414	0629
SILAA	arr.	1430		"	2350		0134	0240	"	0302	0420	0635
	dep.	1415		"	2358		0144		"	0305	0422	0645
DENCHAI	arr.	1548		1525	0102		0235		0310	0352	0515	0738
	dep.	1530		1527	0105		0236		0313	0400		0740
NAKORN Lampang	arr.	1800		1725	0320		0435		0513	0605		0952
KHUNTAN	arr.	1911		"	0424		0535		"	0713		1054
LAMPHUN	arr.	2004		1857	0510		0626		0647	0804		1136
CHIANGMAI	arr.	2030		1920	0536		0650		0710	0833		1200

The taxi pulled up in front of Hua Lamphong Railway Station in Bangkok and the two Westerners climbed out. Percy looked up with glee at the front of the building and the domed gable and giant clock.

“Look Sarah... its true – just like the Central Station Frankfurt, no statues but the large clock and the domed gable are exactly the same!”

Sarah looked at Percy and rolled her eyes. “You know Percy – you are becoming a real *Anorak!*”

Percy and Sarah were travelling up to Chiang Mai. They could have easily flown but Percy had always been a railway enthusiast and had talked Sarah into making the journey on the overnight train. Although Sarah was not so keen she had agreed to keep the peace and make Percy happy. They had already purchased their second-class sleeper tickets from a travel agency a few days earlier. This was the second week of their holiday, they had spent the previous week on the beach at Koh Samui and now wanted to see Chiang Mai and all that the surrounding country side and mountains had to offer.

They entered the railway station and turned left towards the ticketing booths. Above there was an electronic display of all of the departing and arriving trains, times and platform numbers. Their departing platform was to be number 8.

“Do you know Sarah, trains leave here for all parts of Thailand – Yala in the far south and both North and North-East Thailand, Central... everywhere. Guess how many platforms there are?”

“Percy – I haven’t got a clue.”

“There are 14 platforms!”

“Listen Sarah, I have an idea. I spotted a KFC by the entrance. Why don’t you have a cup of coffee and stock us up on snacks to eat on board the train. I want to have a look around.”

Sarah was only too happy to oblige. She had a thick holiday book to read and the last thing that she wanted to do was to trudge all over the station. Percy walked with Sarah to the restaurant and parked her and their back-packs there as well as the mini-suitcase that Sarah had insisted on bringing, full of their valuables, her ‘war-paint’ and lady things.

First of all he climbed the steps to the mezzanine and looked into all of the fast food vendors and travel shops. Then, back downstairs to find Platform 8. He walked through the gates of the platform and stood facing a portrait of the King which was lit with radiant light from the windows high on the ceiling of the station.

The train was actually waiting at the platform. At the rear of the train was a General Electric diesel electric locomotive. Percy seemed to recall that these engines packed a punch of 2860 horsepower. He started to walk to the front of the train and count the carriages. Third Class, Second Class and then First Class. Percy lost count half way down the train and decided to board to find their carriage and seats. He passed a restaurant car. (Hmm... perhaps better than cold KFC chicken!) and opened the door to the toilet in the second class cabin.

Ummm, he thought ... Perhaps better to direct her to the ones in the first class compartment!

He looked at his watch 17:45 - fifteen minutes to go before departure. Just enough time to go and collect Sarah and their luggage.

The seats on board the train were arranged with two single seats on each side of the aisle. Later, the two facing seats would be made up into upper and lower sleeping berths. Percy settled back into the seat facing the direction of travel with Sarah opposite. Their bags were in the space between theirs and the two seats behind. Suddenly the train gave a lurch and started forward. Percy jumped to his feet, pulled aside the mosquito screen and

looked out of the window. He could see the station guard on the platform with his flag at the end of the train. Looking forward he could see the twisting line of the carriages as the train made its way on its journey out of Hua Lamphong station.

“Do you know Sarah - Thai Railways uses narrow-gauge tracks?”

Sarah looked up from her book. “That’s nice dear.” She looked across the aisle and saw a Thai man sitting adjacent to her and opposite him a Buddhist Monk in yellow robes.

The Thai man caught her looking and said “Hello... are you going to Chiang Mai?”

Sarah nodded and quickly returned her attention to her book.

Percy was sitting with his nose glued to the window. Outside many Thais were walking alongside the railway track.

‘No doubt workers returning home from the fields thought Percy. Now what’s the first stop....hmmm... Don Muang Airport ... then on to Ayutthaya’.

At Don Muang - Percy stepped off from the train. The carriages prevented him from seeing across the road to the terminal buildings but he could see the pedestrian bridge which went from the station to the airport. He bought a couple of bottles of drinking water from the platform kiosk and then returned to the train.

On board Sarah was reading a plastic menu and there was a steward standing next to her.

“Percy.. come have a look at the menu and tell this man what you would like to eat. He’ll bring it to our seats as there is no restaurant car on the train.”

Percy took the menu from Sarah’s hands and gave it back to the steward. “No Thank You”

After the steward left Sarah asked Percy what that was all about. “Sarah - many of the stewards get commission on the meals that they serve direct to your seat.. Of course there is a restaurant car on this train – I saw it earlier.”

The man sitting across the aisle leant over and said “Your husband is very correct. Many of the worker are crook. My name is Jo. Your wife tell me that you go to Chiang Mai. I can help you... with hotel and tour – wherever you want to go.”

The Monk sat watching and listening to this exchange.

“Ermm – no thanks, we have everything booked already.”

Jo looked at their luggage. “How long in Chiang Mai?”

Percy continued “Not sure yet. Thank you anyway.” and turned around to look at Sarah. She looked over at Jo and then back at Percy and made a face.

Percy shrugged.

Unfortunately Jo saw this and understood the meaning.

Ayutthaya came and went along with many unscheduled stops at sidings to allow trains to pass in the other direction on the single track railway. A ticket inspector made his way through the carriage checking and clipping the passenger’s tickets. At eight o’clock stewards appeared with armfuls of pillows and sheets. It was time to make up the berths. Percy and Sarah collected their luggage and Percy led the way down to the restaurant car.

Apart from one table it was nearly full with some “Farangs”- *Westerners* and many Thais.

The Buddhist Monk from their carriage was sitting at the one table, which had seats, drinking a cup of coffee. Percy strode over, indicated the available seats and pointed to Sarah and himself.

“Certainly... please sit down.”

“You speak English!”

The Monk nodded and smiled. “Yes, there is a school at my Temple and an excellent English teacher.”

“Where is your Temple and school?”

“Chiang Mai of course, the same place that you are going to.”

Sarah was surprised, but then remembered the brief conversation with Jo. The Monk must have overheard. Percy, ignorant of restrictions on when a Monk can eat, asked “Would you like to join us in our meal?”

The Monk smiled and ruefully shook his head “Thai Buddhist Monks cannot eat after twelve noon until the following morning.”

As the Monk got up to leave he said “When you are in Chiang Mai – you must come and visit us at the Wat Padherth Phra Sing, my Temple – it is very beautiful.”

Percy and Sarah smiled and expressed their thanks and the monk made his way back to the sleeping carriage.

“What a nice old man!” Sarah said and started to read the menu.

Both Sarah and Percy were totally lost as they were only used to the ‘westernized’ menu at their local Thai restaurant back in England and even on Koh Samui did not stray far from western food. Eventually they made their order and Percy told the waiter “No Spicy.”

After their meal of fried rice and chicken, they made their way back through the swaying carriages to their own sleeping car.

The curtains were pulled on the berths opposite of Jo and the Monk. Sarah opened her case and took out the toiletry bag.

“Just going to the loo love.”

“Hang on a minute Sarah... don’t use the one in this carriage... go on down the train and use the one in the first class car.”

Sarah gave Percy a look but went off to find the first class carriage.

Percy heaved one of the back-packs up into the smaller top berth and placed the other one in the lower berth that he intended to sleep in. He switched on the small reading light and then retrieved a long piece of string from his back-pack. He tied one end to the handle of the small suitcase which he left in the small space between the rows of seats. Even in the lower berth, which was larger, it would have been uncomfortable trying to sleep with both the back-pack and the case inside.

Sarah returned and he helped her up the step-ladder to the upper berth. She was quite impressed with the clean sheets and pillow.

“Looks cosy Percy!”

Percy lay back in his berth and tied the piece of string to his wrist. ‘Can’t be too careful’ he thought. They both closed their curtains and bid each other goodnight.

The train continued its journey on through the night to Phitsanulok and onward to Lamphun.

Both Percy and Sarah were awoken by the carriage attendant who had come to dismantle the bunks. Percy looked out of the window and saw the dawn over Doi Khun Than National Park at Lampang. He raised his hand to scratch his head and found the piece of string dangling.....

He leapt up only to find that the small case was missing. In a panic he called to Sarah

“Do you have the mini-case?”

“No...why?”

“It’s not here!”

Sarah rapidly leapt down from the upper berth.

“What do you mean – not here?”

Percy showed her the length of string tied to his wrist.

“Someone cut the string and stole the case!”

Sarah started to panic. “Have you looked everywhere?”

“Sarah... it’s not here... it’s been stolen.”

They both looked around. Opposite them both of the seats, where Jo and the Monk had sat, were empty.

“Thank goodness we had the money, tickets and passports in a ruck-sack.”

Percy looked distraught. She asked -

“You did put them in your ruck-sack before we went to sleep?”

Sarah stared at Percy “Oh no Percy...please don’t tell me that you left them in the mini-case?”

Percy shook his head and started running to the back of the train. “I’m going to get the conductor.”

Sarah sat down and put her head in her hands.

Percy quickly returned with the conductor following him. Although the conductor could speak little English and Percy and Sarah no Thai language at all, they managed to explain that their case had been stolen and the description of the case and that the colour was black.

The conductor wrote down the number 60 on a piece of paper and showed it to them. He said “Chiang Mai – Police” and pointed to the number 60.

Percy said “I think that he is trying to tell us that we will be in Chiang Mai in 60 minutes and that the Railway Police would be waiting for us.”

The conductor disappeared to his rear cabin, presumably to call ahead to Chiang Mai.

“I bet it was that shifty character Jo! Funny that there is no sign of him.”

“Don’t know” said Percy. There was no sign of the Monk either.

As the train pulled into Chiang Mai Station the conductor returned and indicated that Percy and Sarah should stay on the train when stopped.

He said “Police.....”.

The train clattered over the many points on the rails leading through the various sidings and on into the main station finally making an abrupt halt.

The police must have been alerted to which carriage they were travelling in as within a minute the conductor returned with a Thai Railways Police Officer.

Percy was curious and inspected the policeman’s appearance. The shirt and pants looked as if they had been sprayed on as they fit so tight. In addition to the usual collection of medals, badges and service ribbons the policeman wore braid around his shoulder.

“Good morning. The conductor tells me that you have had a bag stolen.”

“You speak English. Fantastic!” Percy replied.

“Can you please describe the bag, where you kept it and when was the last time that you saw it.” He pulled a small notebook and pen from his pocket and started writing as Percy answered.

“Who was sitting around you?”

Percy described Jo and the Monk from the teaching Temple.

“Did they see you tie the bag to your wrist?”

“No, it was very late when we returned from the dining car and both of their curtains were closed. There was no one else around.” replied Percy.

The officer returned the notebook and pen to his pocket and explained that he would take them to the police office at the railways station to complete a form and report of loss.

“I am sorry to have to tell you that this does happen sometimes. Thieves wait until all of the passengers are asleep and then take and steal what they can find and throw it out of the window, of the moving train to their friends.”

Sarah became agitated. “Oh no – you don’t understand all of our money, credit cards and tickets were in that bag!”

“You did not keep these close to you?”

Sarah gave Percy a look which could kill. “No there was a mistake.”

“Well there is a British Consulate in Chiang Mai and I am sure that they will be able to help you.” He turned to lead them off from the train and down the platform.

Half way down the platform Percy and Sarah suddenly stopped. They pulled the arm of the policeman to get his attention and pointed to a bench on the platform. Sitting there in shock was Jo with the black mini-case in front of him.

“That’s the case and that is the man that was sitting by us!”

The policeman rushed over to him, “Hey you... what’s going on? Is this your case?”

Jo slowly looked at the policeman. His eyes were glazed and he could barely mumble. On the side of his face was a bruise. The policeman turned to Percy and Sarah.

“Please to look at the bag and make sure that it is yours. Then check to see if anything is missing.”

Sarah started to open the bag and a small amulet fell onto the floor. On one side was an engraving of The Buddha and on the other one of the Wat Phra Sing. She turned to the policeman.

“The Monk – he said that he came from a beautiful Temple where there was a school. He spoke excellent English.”

The policeman inspected the amulet. “Yes, this is a very famous and beautiful Temple with many student Monks. The teaching Monks are all very kind, good teacher . I think that The Monk that you described is Samer Jaipinter – The Buddhist Monk with a cowboy heart.”

"Before he became a Monk he was a very famous Muai Thai Boxer. Now he only teaches... or perhaps not..." and looked at the dazed Thai.

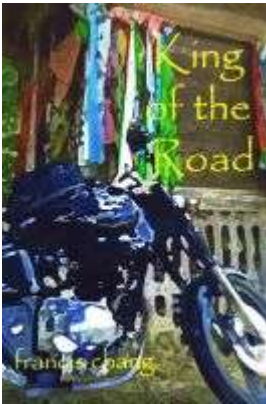
All of the valuables were still in the case.

Percy and Sarah looked at each other.

For sure the Wat Pradhert Phra Sing would be the first place that they would visit in Chiang Mai.

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King Of The Road By Francis Chang



Sombat awoke to the shrill alarm of his mobile. He grappled for the phone still in the fog of sleep. Whatever time had he got home?

He recalled racing around the Ring-Road the previous night with his pack of biker friends, pushing his bike to the limit and gleefully taking the money that they had all bet on who was to be the first to complete the circuit.

Sombat had saved long and hard for his Honda Phantom and although it was not new he worshipped it.

Unlike the previous models, the Phantom that Sombat owned was a 200 cc 4-stroke and Sombat washed and waxed it every day, lovingly applying polish to the chrome, cleaning the saddle and blackening the bike's tyres.

Now he himself had to pay.

Even now long before sunrise Sombat had to hasten to the vegetable market to start the fires that heated the stock on the family noodle stall.

He squeezed into the space behind the corrugated iron on the balcony where the family had fixed a shower nozzle at the end of some plastic tubing and let the cold water run over him and wake him fully.

The motorbike started on first press of the electric starter button and Sombat sped to the market. On the way he stopped at another vendors stall to buy a slab of fried pork, some sticky rice and chilies in green vegetable mash.

As he arrived at the family noodle stall he stopped to look around – there were a couple of "Farangs", western foreigners, with cameras hung around their necks gawping at the hustle of the market vendors preparing for the days selling, a few Monks clutching their bowls on their Binthabat , a traditional Buddhist alms giving and a group of Chinese, perhaps heading for Thapai Gate and their early morning Chi Gung exercise.

Sombat had seen it all before and started adding the meat bones, coriander and knorr stock powder to the soup water in the large cauldron above the gas heater. Sombat looked up. The market was beginning to bustle with early morning traders loading fruit and vegetable into their pick-up trucks.

There was a call of hello from the next stall. It was Noi who made Thai crepes and fritters.

“Sombat – there was a Policeman here earlier looking for you. Something to do with racing motorbikes around...”

Noi was interrupted by the sound of many large motorbikes.

Sombat looked up the street and saw a group of Farang bikers coming towards him. He was fascinated.

There were many types of big bikes and one Farang rode the same model of Honda Phantom that Sombat owned. He watched them slowly cruise by and then called out to Noi.

“Noi, please look after the stall for five minutes. I’ll be right back.”

Sombat ran along the road by the canal, right up to and around the corner and reached the ancient wall just in time to see the bikers pull into the car park of the Lanna hotel. Sombat rushed into the car park and approached the bikers.

“Hello...Welcome!”

The bikers all turned to look at him.

Sombat started to feel foolish as he had exhausted all of his vocabulary in English.

He saw a young man standing by the Honda Phantom. Sombat pointed to the bike and then to himself and grinned.

The bikers all looked at each other and raised their eyebrows. Who was this idiot?

Sombat persevered. He pointed to himself and said “Sombat” Then he pointed at the man next to the Phantom. The man looked puzzled and looked at the other bikers for assistance.

Sombat repeated the gesture several times until at last one of the other bikers said "I think that he wants to know your name. Maybe he's in love with you - you can still pull 'em Steve!"

Steve's face reddened but there was something about Sombat that seemed genuine. Steve pointed a finger at himself and said

"Steve".

Sombat looked across at the hotel. The girls from the tours desk were watching the events with interest.

He smiled ruefully and realized that he could do no more at this time. He waved and walked back to the noodle stall.

The bikers all ribbed Steve about his new boyfriend and entered the hotel reception to check-in.

By this time the market had become quite busy and there was a queue of customers waiting for Noi to serve them.

Sombat quickly went behind the stall, thanked Noi and took over.

He rapidly got into the routine of filling the mesh basket ladle with glass noodles, submerging them in the stock water, filling a plastic bag with pork balls and vegetables and finally the noodles and stock and then deftly twisting a rubber band around the bag to seal it.

Soon he had cleared the queue and sat down to await the arrival of his Mum, who would take over from him.

Sombat considered what his options were. He was eager to talk to 'Steve' and see if they could go riding together and perhaps have a race.

Of all of his friends there was only one whose English may be good enough to translate, it was Boy, who worked in an IT shop at Computer Plaza. As soon as his Mum showed he would ride over to the plaza.

Nok, Sombat's Mum and Noi were sitting behind their stalls chatting.

"Nok... I shouldn't be telling you this.. as you know I am the last one to gossip, but there was a policeman here earlier looking for Sombat."

Nok's eyes narrowed as she looked at Noi – 'last one to gossip! Mai Chow Woeiii.... Noi's tongue was as sharp as a razor and as sour as vinegar.

"Did he say what he wanted?"

"Something about racing around the ring-road on his motorbike, racing with his friends."

“Nok... Sombat is a good boy... he doesn't drink or gamble and if that is the worst thing that can be said of him, I am a proud Mother!”

Nok turned away from Noi and made herself busy cleaning the noodle stall – still, she would have a word with Sombat when he came home.

Sombat weaved in and out of the cars, motorbikes and tuk-tuks. When he was on his bike he felt master of the world.

Ahead of him he saw a police road block. They were checking for riders without helmets and had seemed to have made a good catch this morning as there were many motorbikes with riders digging in their pockets to find a few hundred baht to pay the police their 'tea-money'.

He managed to turn off into a side soi long before he reached the block.

The computer plaza is a labyrinth of dark corridors stretching over two levels. All types of electrical and computer shops and stalls were to be found in the bazaar.

Sombat soon found the shop that Boy worked in. Boy was sitting, with electrical screwdriver in hand, gazing into the mysteries of a computer hard disc, with various wires, relay boards and components all around him.

“Hi Boy...How's it going?”

Boy looked up.

“Hi Sombat...fine...what's new?”

“We missed you last night. There must have been ten of the boys all on their Yamaha and Honda scooters. They didn't stand a chance. I could have won, with my Phantom, even if I had carried you on the back”

“Sure.. that will be the day! Sombat how come you like to ride so much?”

“Well its hard to explain. Somehow it makes me free! Do you remember when we used to go to the karaoke bar and listened to the western music? There was one song called 'King of the Road' – that's how I feel when I ride my bike, especially when going fast.”

Boy nodded.

“Listen Sombat, I have to get back to work, the old boy who owns this place is a real pig.”

Sombat got up to go. “Boy are you free for a little while this evening? I need some help in interpreting.”

“Really... what's it all about?”

“I'll tell you later. Meet me at the Lanna Hotel at six o'clock.”

Sombat sat on a bench by the canal waiting for six o'clock and watching the front entrance to the Lanna hotel. He had made a few jokes with girls on the tours desk and made sure that the bikers were still in the hotel.

Now he was considering what he was going to say and ask Boy to translate to Steve.

Sombat looked down the road to the bridge across the Klong where some young boys were diving into the water and remembered doing the same not so long ago.

There was a tap on his shoulder, it was Boy.

"Hi... thanks for coming. You know that I can't speak English, well today I saw a group of Farang bikers arrive and one of them has a Honda Phantom, same model as me. I tried to speak to him earlier but it was impossible. When they come out do you think that you could translate for me?"

Boy looked somewhat puzzled but said "Okay, but whatever do you want to say to Farangs?"

"Boy I know this sounds crazy but I have to find out who is fastest and best. I know that there are riders on bigger bikes than mine who can easily beat me around the ring-road, but it is somehow important to me that on my Honda Phantom – that I remain King."

Boy just shrugged.

Sometime later they saw the bikers leave the hotel and walk to their motorbikes. Sombat and Boy ran across the road. Sombat pointed out Steve and his Phantom to Boy.

Boy was a little nervous but with Sombat in tow approached Steve.

"Hello I am Boy.... You are Steve?"

The other bikers were both amused by this and curious. They gathered around.

"Hey Steve...looks like he has brought his boyfriend along!"

Boy angrily said "I am not his boyfriend, I am Boy." and turned to go.

"Boy what's wrong... what did they say?"

"They say that I am your boyfriend."

"Please stay Boy... this means a lot to me and I think that they are only joking."

Reluctantly Boy stopped. Again he asked the biker standing next to the Phantom, "You are Steve?"

Steve nodded.

“This is Sombat. He wants to tell you that he has a Phantom bike also. Sombat says that only great men ride Phantom bikes.”

All of the other bikers broke out laughing. Steve turned to them.

“And what’s wrong with that? You lot and your over-powered piddling machines!”

Boy added “Sombat would like to have a ...” he struggled for the correct word – “Competition with you and wants to know if you would like a race around the ring-road to see who is most fast.”

Now he had not just Steve’s but all of the biker’s rapt attention. Steve considered for a second or two.

“Sure... how and when... we are new to town and not sure where everything is.”

Boy translated for Sombat who thought for a moment and then asked Boy to translate for him.

“Sombat says that if you have time now – he will take you on his bike and show you where the ring-road goes. Then he will meet you at 12 o’clock, after police disappear, where - he show you.”

Steve looked at the other bikers and they all nodded and told Steve it sounded like a great idea and lots of fun.

Steve said “Okay – where is Sombat’s bike?”

Sombat went out into the road with Boy following him.

“Sombat.. I’m so not sure about all of this. I know that you race around the ring-road every evening with your ‘cowboy’ friends –but you know the road here and how we drive. This Farang may only have been in Thailand for a week or so. Maybe is even riding a rented bike. This could be very dangerous”

“Boy you are starting to sound like an old woman. Don’t worry everything will be fine!”

Sombat wheeled his bike back into the car park. Steve climbed on.

“Okay lads... I’ll see you later at that bar that we saw across the road.”

Steve climbed onto the back of the Phantom and Sombat drove off heading towards the super-highway.

After showing Steve the circuit that they were to race around and their starting position, he returned home. His Mum was waiting for him.

“Sombat – where have you been all afternoon? I have been all alone at the noodle stall with just Noi’s gossip to keep me company.”

“Oh Mum – sorry but I had a few things to do with my motorbike and met some farang bikers.”

“Sombat - Noi tells me that a policeman was looking for you – something about riding around the ring-road late at night.”

“Don’t worry Mum, just a little fun.”

“Well lets hope that ‘your little fun’ doesn’t lead to ‘The Monkey House’ in the old city. The police in that jail don’t have my sense of humour!”

Sombat laughed. “Don’t worry Mum – I’ll be fine.”

When Steve returned the bikers were waiting for him in the bar.

“Hey Steve want a beer?... how did it go?”

Steve shook his head. “Nah, I’m fine. That Sombats not a bad lad. I’m going to tighten the chain on the Phantom and check a few things so I’ll see you all down here at eleven thirty. Okay?”

“Sure – we’ll be here!”

Sombat and a few of his friends with their bikes were waiting at five minutes to twelve at the junction that the airport road made with the super highway.

This was the starting point that all of the local bikers used for their race. He heard motorbikes in the distance and saw the biker group approaching with Steve leading the way.

They stopped in front of Sombat and he waved his hand and smiled.

Sombat and Steve moved their bikes forward several metres in front of the other Bikers and looked at each other. Steve raised his thumb.

Sombat nodded – he could remember the English numbers to count down from 5. Both of them put their bikes in first gear as Sombat counted down “Five, Four. Three, Two, One....”

Steve was first away with a roar from the exhaust of his bike and Sombat in close pursuit and the Farang and Thai bikers following some way behind.

Both Steve and Sombat raced up though the six gears as they rode down the road towards the airport. There was little traffic and they were both soon pushing their bikes to a top speed of 135 KPH.

The road junction at Airport Plaza came and went and they both ‘jumped’ the consecutive red lights to turn right onto the Klong Road past the Old City. They were forced to slow as the

songtieow and tuk-tuk traffic became more dense at Suandork junction where many of the teaching hospitals were.

At the hospital they both again jumped the red light and turned left to go back up to the super highway – the final stretch and about 10 kilometres of excellent dual carriageway.

Throttles wide open they neck to neck. No traffic lights – just a series of underpasses.

Sombat looked across at Steve, in the inside track. His face was pulled back into a hideous grin by the force of the wind, but he looked over and nodded.

Sombat turned his attention back to the road and saw that a large articulated truck, with two trailers, was pulling onto the highway ahead of them.

If you had tried to explain the concept of braking and stopping distance vs speed to Sombat he would simply have not understood the formula.

Although Sombat had no comprehension of braking and stopping distances – he did realize that an accident was in the making and that a collision was inevitable. He considered his options – if he immediately veered right he might just clear the cab of the truck.

Maybe, but that would leave Steve on the inside to take the full impact.

Boys's last comments about the danger and Farang's lack of experience of driving in Thai conditions came back to him.

He made a decision.

He lifted his left leg, connected with the petrol tank of Steve's Phantom and kicked.

Steve and the bike went tumbling off of the road, skidded but came to dusty heap well short of the truck's trailers.

Sombat applied the brakes but to no avail. He was holding the Buddha image on the chain around his neck when he slammed into the trailer of the articulated truck.

Surprisingly, the petrol tank did not rupture or the fuel ignite.

His Thai friends drove up and gathered around the tangle of body and bike. Blood seeped onto the road tarmac.

One of the Thais checked for Sombat's pulse. There were a few beats then nothing.

The Farang bikers rushed to the spot where Steve and his bike had finished up. The bike was completely wrecked but Steve, apart from cuts and bruises and an apparent broken arm was still conscious.

They helped him to his feet and hurried on to the truck and Sombat.

There were tears in the Thai's eyes when he told them that Sombat was dead. Everyone looked at Steve.

Much much later, Num one of the Thai bikers and friend to Sombat broke the news to Boy. Boy was devastated and thought back to Sombat's and his conversation earlier that afternoon. He recalled one of his English lessons in which the topic of Kings and royalty was discussed. What was that peculiar expression that was sometimes used after a sovereign died? 'The King is dead – long live the King'.

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The Revenge Of The Scorpion **By Francis Chang**



Lek had been on duty for several hours manning a traffic police road block on the super highway. The super highway stretched all of the way to Bangkok and the road blocks were placed at many locations along its length. Their position was ideal as they could not be seen by motorists until the last minute and they had the shade from the airport overpass to keep away the glare of the sun. Lek's wallet was full as there had been no shortage of motorbike riders without helmets or Farangs to intimidate with threatened prosecution for alleged speeding offences. Still, his pistol holster was new and rubbed sorely against his hip.

Gope, one of his friends in the traffic police, called out to him –

“Hey Lek – how much money have you made today?”

“Not enough Gope!”

Gope knew that Lek led a high life with many debts, a wife and child to pay for every week and a fondness for gambling. Police officers were paid low salaries and had to pay for many items of their police apparel and equipment, including their motorbikes, themselves.

“What time are you going to eat?”

“Listen Gope... I have a few jobs to do, as well as eat, can you cover for me for a few hours?”

“Sure, but don’t make it too late. That new captain will be making his rounds at some time to collect – okay?”

“Sure Gope... just tell him that I had the ‘runs’. Too much rotten food from the Som Tam vendor next to the police station.”

Lek climbed on to his motorbike, kick-started it and headed off down the super highway. The hot saddle of his motorbike burned his upper thighs. It seems that he always forgot to cover it when not riding the bike.

The afternoon was blistering hot without even a light breeze to move the leaves of the bamboo and banana trees. It was the middle of the hot season and the earth was baked to a hard crust deprived of rain for many months. All of the inhabitants of the yard were either sleeping or sheltering in their burrows in the ground to avoid the fierce glare of the sun – all except one. The scorpion was hungry and sun or no sun it needed sustenance and it had to feed. Slowly its feelers removed the hidden door to its lair and it left its home to find food.

The card game started late that day. It was played hidden from watching eyes at the back of the house in a rice barn sala. The wooden table was laid with a full ice bucket, bottles of lao kaow moonshine, Singha beer, glasses and of course the cards. A revolving fan was plugged in to an extension cable and aimed at the table. Gradually the family and friends took their seats around the place of battle. A radio in the back ground played North Thai music from a local radio station

Lek turned his motorbike into the yard and parked under a palm tree. The group at the table called out to him.

“Lek you bad boy! How many poor people have you shot today?”

Lek, loved his Colt .45 Revolver and was still paying installments through the Police Cooperative but he had never aimed the gun at anyone – let alone shot someone. Still his day would come. He walked over to the table and placed his 2-way radio on the table next to him. He was still on duty and it was possible that a call could come through at any time. In addition he if the new Captain showed up – Gope would give him a call.

Kek poured himself a Singha, put some ice in the glass and sat back.

“So whats new Somchai? Is it going to be a good crop of rice this season?”

Somchai shook his head. “That will be the day.” Somchai was a betel nut chewer with red teeth. He spat some of the juice onto the ground.

“Well Lads...what’s the game to be? I hope that you have brought lots of money for me to take from you – no doubt stolen from your wife’s hiding place in the empty fish sauce bottle !”

By this time the others all had glasses in front of them. They grinned at each other. Somchai an old rice worker from the fields and owner of the house said –

“Come on Cowboy Lek. What are you going to do if you lose? Shoot us?”

The rest of the group laughed uproariously. Somchai called out to his wife to bring some crispy rice kanom for the table. One of the younger men who worked with Somchai in the fields pointed to the house at the other end of the garden.

“How is your son – the Westerner Farang?”

This brought new laughter as they all knew that the Farang was well into his seventies.

“Farang Bah...he’s crazy. All day long he rides his bicycle, some say all the way to Laos and back. And in the night time when I want to sleep he plays his music or television at full volume”

Not that they had a way of knowing but the Farang in question was an ex-Buddhist Monk and nearly totally deaf. He was cared for by his Thai-Japanese wife and son-in-law.

“Well... you know what they say Somchai” said Lek “Farang-Kee-Nok” A very insulting expression which meant Western Bird Shit.

“Now, what’s the game to be?”

The group all replied unanimously –

Bpauk-Daeng – Red Tree Bpauk-Daeng – similar in play to the Western Baccarat - one of the most the most vicious of all Thai card games, where no prisoners are taken, small fortunes won and lost and sometimes lives also. Lek leaned forward brushed a small fly from his face, slowly looked into each face at the table and slyly asked if they were sure. All of them nodded their heads. Disagreement ensued as to who would be dealer. The dealer holds a small edge of just over one per cent to the other players.

Ultimately Lek picked up the deck, shuffled and started dealing counter-clockwise for high card to be dealer.

Nok, one of the rice field workers and Somchai's friend received an ace and the deck and became 'The King' - Dealer. He waited until the other players had laid their bets on the table. In a public place these would just be spoken but the sala was located in a concealed spot in the garden. The bets ranged from 20 Baht to 100 Baht laid by Lek. Nok rifled the cards in a horizontal shuffle and again dealt counterclockwise – two cards to each player, face down, one at a time.

Lek surreptitiously looked at his cards – a glorious 4 and a five, Bpauk-Gao, and turned them over. Nok stared at Lek's cards in amazement.

“Lek...are you cheating?”

“No need when I play cards with you!” Lek sneered.

Nok shook his head and went around the table asking the other players if they wanted a further card. Two of them nodded their assent and Nok dealt the extra cards. As for himself he held an ace and a two obliging him to draw another card as points lower than three require a further draw. A ten! A useless card, which did nothing to increase his total points. One by one the other players turned their cards up.

The players with three cards had a flush and a set awarding them three times the amount of their bet. The other players all had points above 4 and Nok grudgingly paid all of their winnings. Lek told Nok that he would replace him as dealer as for sure Nok would not have enough money for the bank. Lek poured himself another glass of Singha. Nok got up from the table and walked over to the rickety old spirit house in the yard. The deal had cleaned him out. So much for the Spirits of the house and garden bringing him good luck.

“I don't suppose anyone will lend me a hundred Baht?”

He called back to the table. They all shook their heads and grinned. Nok stormed out of the yard.

All though the afternoon the game continued with Lek dealing and winning. Somchai was the first one to see the scorpion.

“Hey... that's a big beast!”

All of the group at the table turned around to see what he was looking at. Somchai pointed to the middle of the yard where the scorpion was scuttling across with a small Gecko lizard held by the front claws – eager to take the Gecko home to its lair and devour it.

“Lets have some fun” Lek said while removing a small plastic magnifying lens from his wallet. Lek had trouble enough understanding English – let alone reading the small letters on a foreigner’s driving license.

Lek found an old half inflated and patched inner tube underneath the sala and ran across to the scorpion. Carefully he dropped it over the scorpion so that it was trapped. He called the rest of the men over –

“Hey watch this... you think that its hot today? This will make the bastard squirm!”

He focused the lens between the sun and the scorpion, which dropped the gecko and tried to move away from the dreadful pain of the beam. Lek laughed and quickly made the beam follow the scorpion, which writhed in agony.

A commotion and shouting came from the other side of the yard. The Farang, who had long straggly hair tied with string, had been hanging wet washing up shouted:

“What are you bloody lot up to tormenting that poor creature?”

Lek turned to Nattapong who was student at the local college and spoke a little English.

“What’s the old goat saying?”

“He’s telling you to leave the scorpion alone.”

“Tell him to fuck off!”

After a few minutes more of the cruel game Somchai said –

“Hey Lek...come on... that’s enough! Either kill the wretched thing or let it go on its way.” I have enough trouble with the Monks at the Temple as it is.”

Lek reluctantly pocketed the lens and kicked the inner tube away. They all drifted back to the table in the sala to re-start the game.

Lek won yet another game. As tempting as it was to accuse him of being a cheat – that was dangerous territory as he was Police.

Joe and Nok had lost all of their money to Lek and the others were all short of cash.

“You know Lek – you think that you know it all.”

Lek had undone his belt and the top of his trousers, lowered his underwear to gain access and be able to scratch his hip which had become irritated by the rubbing of the pistol holster. Just then his two-way radio crackled with his call-sign and a message.

“Sorry Lads...got to go. There has been a multi car and motorbike accident at Rincombe junction.”

He gathered in all of the baht notes and coins and started to find his wallet.

Now Scorpions are physically unable to jump but can move at lightening speed.
Lek screamed.

Apparently one thing that Lek did not know was that the scorpion had made its lair underneath the sala.

The scorpion tumbled to the ground. Lek jumped up desperately trying to keep his trousers around his waist and jumped onto the scorpion, kicking it with his black police boots and grinding it into the ground until he was sure that it was dead.

Somchai, who had much experience in dealing with scorpion stings from his time in the rice paddies, helped Lek to sit back in his seat.

“Don’t worry Lek – the sting is poisonous but it won’t kill you! Just take it easy for ten minutes”

He took a handful of ice and made a compress with some of the paper tissues from the table.

“Lek – sit still for a while and keep this ice pressed down onto the bite. It will soon stop stinging.”

Lek, feeling sorry for himself, sat back down. “Bloody scorpion.” He should have killed it when he had the chance with the plastic magnifying card. He looked at the site of the sting – just to the right of his groin. Already it had become inflamed and a deep red colour.

Some of the other men at the table, who had lost their money, were thinking Som Nam Nah – ‘Serves Him Right’.

Lek pulled his mobile telephone out from his shirt pocket. Did he have Gope’s number? He looked at the directory – yes – and then Lek called him. Without going into details about the card game he explained that he had been bitten by a scorpion and was going home. Had the Captain turned up? No – he was safe then.

Lek thanked Somchai and carefully climbed onto his motorbike. The bite was causing him grief but nothing that he couldn’t handle. He carefully drove home.
When he arrived at his small house he called out to his wife –

“Teerak – are you here?”

His wife replied that she was cooking on the gas hob at the back of the house. Lek grunted and told her that he was going to have a shower. Lek undressed and left his clothes in an untidy heap on the floor and placed his gun and holster on a table by the bed. He left the cold water on for many minutes and directed the spray at his groin. The throbbing of the bite had subsided but the inflammation still made the bite look angry. He grabbed the towel and drying himself left the bathroom to find his wife standing there with a steaming bowl of hot noodles.

She looked at glanced at him and then looked more carefully. Her gaze took in the large red inflammation by his groin.

“You cheating bastard! You dare to come back into the house with love bites from your whore all over you!”

She threw the boiling noodles onto the bite and Lek’s groin.

In the midst of Lek’s torment and agony he thought that he heard the strange sound of a scorpion laughing.

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