

PROLOGUE

How would they get rid of him, the Prime Minister wondered. A bullet in the brain? One of those contrived car accidents at which the Army was reportedly adept? Or would he just disappear? There were precedents for violent and more subtle removal scenarios, but the current political volatility meant no-one could predict exactly how his departure would be effected. To his irritation, his wife's soothsayer began to wail. He could neither relax nor think clearly amidst this racket and considered taking refuge in his study. This would offend his wife, but he was annoyed with her too.

He looked across their sumptuous living room to where she perched on a luxurious teak settee, wishing she'd catch his eye and sense his mood as she used to. But she was transfixed by a sacred dance the old fool was performing. She gazed admiringly while his wiry, silken-clad frame span in harmony with celestial powers (or some such mumbo-jumbo) and smiled indulgently as he knocked a priceless porcelain vase, causing it to wobble perilously. Gritting his teeth, the PM steadied it while the half-wit pranced and shrieked, oblivious to his own clumsiness.

How could she be so insensitive to his political travails? The more precarious his position became with growing rumours of military *coups*, the more she retreated into her coiffeured elevation as First Lady. If this absurd performance was her idea of support, they'd drifted further apart than ever.

As he pondered unhappily on his isolation, the dancing and chanting ceased and the soothsayer, in a feeble, quavering voice the PM found affected and unconvincing, demanded their birth dates. Before he could object, she rattled off biodata while the charlatan poured over antique astrological charts on their layered mahogany table. If only he could pay the idiot off and take solace in his private suite at Bangkok's most exclusive sauna-cum-karaoke complex, pleading urgent business.... But this couldn't be.

"Must turn in soon, dear," he murmured.

She knew about his early flight the next morning for the northern capital, where his supporters were gathering, but her pursed lips and frozen smile betrayed not the slightest

sympathy. Instead, she gazed admiringly while the imbecile made numerological calculations with wooden beads on an antediluvian Chinese abacus, muttering unintelligibly as rivulets of spittle trickled from his toothless mouth. The PM sighed inwardly; he'd retire whether this nonsense finished or not.

With an unexpected rapidity belying his vaunted decrepitude, the soothsayer bounded over and seized the PM's hand. Assuming he wanted money - as these fraudsters always did - the PM reached for his wallet. But the old man intercepted his hand, turning his palm upwards. After scrutinising manual lifelines, he scurried back to his musty cosmic scrolls and emitted an eldritch yell, startling his hosts.

“Yes, Venerable Master?”

His wife's tone conveyed awe and triumph. The mountebank rolled his eyes, as though entering a trance, before addressing them in ringing, portentous tones.

“In the Year of the Ram,” he warbled, hissing and dribbling. “The cherry tree shall sprout.” He sighed and spat. “Its blossom is red; those of the Five Lakes shall perish.”

His eyes opened, fixing the PM with a steely, unwavering stare. “Mishaps lurk on your journey,” he trilled. “The shield will lessen the axe's blow but your foes are incessant; discord shall prevail.”

Fearing the capital his enemies would make if such a character's presence became known, the PM smuggled his unwelcome guest out under cover of darkness. To his surprise, the old man refused payment, instead gripping his hand tightly and repeating “Don't go!”

The PM slept badly; when he awoke, his wife was already dressed. She stared, hands clasped behind her back.

“What?” he demanded, in no mood for a domestic confrontation.

She approached, wide-eyed.

“Would you...?” she faltered, producing a necklace of protective wooden amulets for him to don beneath his shirt.

Did she care after all or was she just scared of losing privileges if he were ousted? You couldn't tell. Silently he acceded, fastening his shirt collar over the necklace, cold band against his skin. He picked at rice congee, calculating feverishly. If he reached the north unscathed, he'd bring the Army to heel. But Bangkok's airport was an hour's drive; anything could happen en route. So many buildings a sniper could hide in....

Sighing, he opened their front door. There stood his beloved Porsche, purchased with family funds without a single Baht of public monies but cited by his enemies as irrefutable proof of his corruption. How could a state salaried-public servant afford such luxuries, they asked knowingly. Should he use the Porsche today, to show contempt for their jibes? No: this would be unwisely provocative. Far more prudent to take the official limousine - a staid, dull vehicle - and revert to the Porsche once this crisis was over. For now, *realpolitik* must temper his natural flamboyance.

His wife watched him get inside. Would he ever see her again? His driver, an ancient family retainer, opened the iron gates to the tree-lined *soi* outside. There stood his military escort: a phalanx of uniforms on motorcycles topped with long, trailing radio antennae resembling enormous tentacles. Garden lights flashed across soldiers' tired, sombre faces. His protectors? Or his captors? His executioners, even? Nothing was impossible, and none'd lift a finger in his defence if the generals moved against him. They'd shrug and follow orders: everyone knew how military culture worked.

The cavalcade lumbered along the *soi* into the highway, navigating each bend like an ungainly giant centipede. The capital was eerily quiet, unlike its old bustling self: the political crisis overshadowed everything. Dawn broke as they sped along near-deserted streets; a few food vendors dismantled chicken carcasses, but Bangkok's normal vivacity was absent. Then came a burst of jaunty music from the car radio, flicked on unbidden by his chauffeur.

“Turn that row down, will you?” the PM snapped.

No sooner had he uttered these words than he instantly regretted them. In the mirror, he glimpsed a frisson of hurt cross the driver's gnarled features. The volume was promptly reduced but this brought the PM no peace of mind: he'd make amends later. Nothing was as it should be. Politics was making him short and irascible, which was out of character. At heart, he was a kindly soul: was it time to quit? Let others take the risks, enjoy the glory, rake in the spoils and sort out the mess? It was a nasty, savage game; winning conferred substantial advantages, but retaining these meant sacrificing equanimity. Life became a prolonged exercise in conniving, conspiring and second-guessing what friends and adversaries were up to with no repose to enjoy the supposed rewards.

Did he even want to stay atop what the English called the greasy pole? In Thailand, it was more akin to riding a tiger. One false move, and the beast would toss its master, ripping him to shreds with eager fangs and claws while rivals gloated. Sighing, he asked the offended chauffeur to reinstate the radio programme, guiltily realising the poor fellow was only trying to help him relax. It was no secret his burden had become inordinately severe.

Suddenly the motorcade slowed. Now what? An ambush? He peered anxiously at red traffic lights ahead. A gaggle of policemen waved him through. None bothered to salute; some stared curiously, as though he were some exotic species nearing extinction. It wasn't just the Army that hated him: he'd lost support from all uniformed forces.

They'd no inkling how hard his job was. To them he was a playboy who hatched deals, enriched himself and occasionally tossed a few placatory crumbs to keep vested interests quiet. They didn't understand the skill required to craft, forge and sustain a workable majority in a parliament torn between viciously squabbling factions concerned solely with their share of lucrative government contracts and the patronage and corruption conferred by political power. He'd worked tirelessly to hold this ramshackle coalition of avaricious plutocrats together so laws passed and the operation of government could proceed. Conciliating the host of greedy, grasping, importunate interests financing his country's political parties was no mean feat.

Endemic in this were disunity and squabbling, exposing him to Army allegations of weakness. He drew on the stub of his trademark cigar – a large, ostentatious Havana he

favoured to annoy the American Ambassador, who in his view spent too long golfing with the military brass behind his back. The subdued radio music gave way to a familiar voice.

“The Army,” it growled menacingly. “Will brook no civilian interference in the defence of the realm. Protecting the country is a soldier’s sacred duty: we *won’t* tolerate parliamentary dictatorship.”

The Commander-in-Chief, his nominal subordinate but perhaps his nemesis and successor, was rattling his sabre again. Defiantly, the PM conjured new deals and compromises; the old self-confidence returned. His deft horse-trading talents would ride this storm. He’d juggle, balance, tempt, cajole, dazzle, cut and trim: all’d be fine. His substantial family fortune would buy favours, ensuring his and the country’s salvation. *Happy is he who can place gold Rolaxes on all hands in his pocket*, as the saying went.

The stumbling block was the Army. One minute generals made clarion calls against corruption; then they behaved in viciously selfish ways to secure their business interests, which were usually illicit, surreptitious and highly profitable. It was obvious what lay behind their current truculence: his resolve to terminate their unholy alliance on the Cambodian border with the Khmer Rouge.

Politics had admittedly made him cynical: he understood the exigencies of power sometimes required unpleasant deeds. But slaying a million compatriots in the name of some bizarre ideology of rustic communism, as the KR’d done, was beyond the pale. As was the alacrity with which his own Army had become best friends with these unsavoury doctrinaires and their legions of fanatical teenaged murderers, now Vietnamese invaders had ousted them from state power.

Together these unlikely allies, through controlling lucrative logging and gems concessions, had become multi-billionaires. So fabulously wealthy were both sides that they’d long forgotten ideological differences. Who was more repellant: his own military, railing incessantly about the red menace yet now rushing to befriend Asia’s bloodiest communists as business partners, or the latter themselves? He wasn’t sure....

When Vietnamese soldiers had invaded Cambodia twelve years earlier, they'd unearthed thousands of broken skulls in shallow graves near hastily abandoned KR prisons equipped with torture instruments hideous beyond belief. Pincers, whips, iron bars and ghastly little engines with tubes for pumping soapy water into victims' gullets to force treason confessions.... He shivered, leading the ever-attentive driver to moderate the air-conditioning. A loud rattling made him jump, but it was only loose stones ricocheting inside the car's bodywork. He really must calm down.

He would definitely terminate the shenanigans between his Army and the KR. So blatant had these become that photos of drunken Thai officers celebrating with their Cambodian friends at border camp parties were appearing in the press: he'd ringingly denounced those involved. To divert attention from this scandal, the Army was launching broadsides against his government: their allegations of corruption and *coups* were crude intimidation. He wouldn't submit and watch his achievements destroyed by tanks on the streets.

First he must garner support. He'd keep a low profile at the airport, where they now arrived, getting *wais* and garlands over quickly. Suddenly the motorcade slowed; soldiers carrying walkie-talkies fanned across the road, blocking his car. What was this? His pulse quickened; instinctively, he clutched the amulets beneath his shirt.

An officer approached, motioning him to roll down his window. What did he want? Would he draw a sidearm and shoot? The officer saluted respectfully.

"Apologies, sir: your aircraft's got technical problems. The airport management's ordered us to take you directly to the hangar. To avoid delaying your flight. Please follow our jeep."

This sounded plausible. He bade his driver comply while his escort remained stationary: obviously there'd be no room in the hangar for the convoy. But on reflection if there were mechanical problems, surely he'd have to wait longer inside the VIP lounge rather than bypassing it completely. And since when did the Army accept orders from civilian managers? He peered nervously as they followed the jeep past deserted cargo depots to rows of open hangars at the airport's periphery. Was a sharpshooter perched in some hidden recess, waiting to gun him down?

There stood his 'plane, wings extended like an enormous wasp inside its nest. Overalled mechanics hammered, twisted, screwed and plied at its exposed innards. Everything seemed routine, but uneasiness gripped him as the limousine ground to a halt. Heels clicked as he stepped out: at least protocol was being observed.

Clenching his briefcase, he climbed the staircase. They were probably just being ultra-attentive in rectifying some minor hitch. Chuckling at his over-sensitivity, he boarded the passenger cabin. The captain was nowhere to be seen; a female cabin attendant unsmilingly *wai-ed*. What bleak times: he must lift his people's spirits! His natural exuberance rekindled; he felt a tremor of optimism. His mouth was parched; a scotch'd steady his nerves. He'd made it to the 'plane: a triumph in itself. Suddenly the compartment was empty. Where was the attendant? He pressed the service button; no-one came. Annoyed, he unbuckled his safety belt, half-rising.

A deafening clatter sounded from the ramp. Numb with rapid fear, he froze. Dozens of metal-tipped boots were ascending; in poured a line of grim-looking men wearing blue khaki and peaked berets: elite paratroopers reserved for special operations. Still half-standing, he stared blankly as they swarmed down the vacant aisle, surrounding him. What the...? Dazed, he reached for his mobile, but a forest of machine guns pointed at different parts of his anatomy.

He grabbed his 'phone, but a young trooper, releasing the safety catch on his gun, pointed it threateningly at the PM's head. An officer elbowed through. He shouted at the trooper, pushing his barrel away while simultaneously smashing his own pistol handle into the PM's face. The blow struck the bridge of his nose, forcing him down into his seat. Blinding pain flashed; he dropped the 'phone and saw, heard and felt nothing. He covered his face, lowering his head in his lap. When his senses returned, his vision was blurred; his forehead seethed and blood trickled from his nostrils. The officer thrust papers at him.

“Sir, you're under arrest. We've orders to take you to Army HQ.”

He made no protest: what could he do? This was it. The long dreaded *coup d'etat* – the blow against the state - had just occurred, with violent force against his person as well as his authority. But his head span with confusion as well as hurt. Had the officer just saved his life or sealed his fate? His achievements flashed briefly before his eyes and then vanished, like

dead leaves blown away by the wind. Everything he'd held dear now seemed meaningless; he felt curiously light-hearted. As they bundled him outside, down the steps and into a darkened-windowed car, his main sensation was, to his surprise, not fear, sadness, regret or even the throbbing soreness around his brow but rather one of overwhelming relief.

Paul felt a curious trepidation while knotting his scarf, shivering, in readiness for exchanging the relative if barely palpable warmth of the dingy Lecture Halls for the dazzling cold of Oxford's High. A distant echo of some primeval fear of leaving the womb, perhaps? He joined a bottleneck of students exiting via the ornate nineteenth century doorway; absorbed in thought, he failed to notice a large figure striding across the tiled floor.

"Ah, Paul!" it exclaimed. "Daydreaming, are we?"

Paul smiled as Bunter's looming presence arrived.

"Lost in rapture over Joy, I s'pose!" Bunter continued in his customary stentorian tones, winking conspiratorially and causing several adjacent heads bearing the lineaments of amused hilarity to turn in their direction.

Paul, who'd been contemplating how best to finish his relationship with Joy, looked guiltily away. But end it must. It was going nowhere; a busy Finalist couldn't spare time on non-academic pursuits and – somewhat inconsistently but most pressingly – a new candidate for his affections had emerged.

He wasn't, however, inclined to disclose these thoughts to Bunter, combining as the latter did the roles of Joy's housemate-cum-confidant and sparring partner to Paul's fellow Orientalist, Dominic. It was a challenging conundrum set in a complex imbroglio of relationships requiring detailed tactical planning. And there were moral and philosophical dimensions... Having all this exposed via Bunter to Dominic's merciless teasing made Paul wince.

Before he could respond, Bunter propelled him through the ill-lit exit. The mid-morning sun, gleaming brightly on snow adorning pavement edges, temporarily blinded him. Shielding his eyes, he remembered the sunglasses bought for his sortie to Thailand post-Finals. The coolness of wearing these in the Oxford winter definitely appealed; he smiled while fending off the combined onslaught of freezing cold and dazzling sunshine.

“OK?” boomed Bunter anxiously, vapour pouring from his mouth and nostrils. He placed an avuncular arm around Paul’s shoulder, steadying him against the howling wind erupting in eddying squalls. “You look frazzled. Must be luv. Spring coming, and Joy...”

Paul blew on his hands. What would Bunter say when the truth emerged?

“Not that there’s much evidence of spring,” Bunter continued. “Oxford’s coldest February in forty-four years. Worst since ‘47.”

Paul shook his head blankly while his brain rotated between freezing cold, fulgent sunlight, ditching Joy, Bunter’s interrogation and his immediate peregrinations.

“Where’re you heading?”

Paul pointed opposite.

“Ah! I’m homeward bound,” nodded Bunter. “Lots to prepare for tonight’s get-together. You *are* coming, dear boy? Mustn’t disappoint the spirits of the departed, must we? Sure you’re OK?”

He gave Paul a parting pat, as if to ensure no deterioration in his welfare or mnemonic faculties. Paul nodded weakly in response to all three questions as Bunter set off. He couldn’t now feign forgetfulness over the evening’s appointment – a *séance* at Joy’s. Being thus reminded just hours beforehand meant a vaunted memory lapse wouldn’t wash.

Might other excuses work? He could, as a Finalist in his penultimate term, legitimately plead revision; Joy wouldn’t protest. But she never *did*: she was understanding to a fault, thus compounding his wretchedness over her imminent ejection. Had she been nasty and harridan-like, separation’d be far easier. His now unavoidable attendance would just have to expedite a painless rupture.

The bitter cold forced these thoughts to the periphery of Paul’s consciousness as he pulled collar around ears. An icy blizzard swept down the High, wherein all peregrinations were reduced to slow motion. Pedestrians trudged, cars ground, buses crawled and intrepid cyclists

doggedly ploughed forward in common resistance to black ice, exhaust-darkened snow and buffeting winds.

As he crossed, meandering between traffic, unease returned. He reached midway, craning for gaps he could safely occupy while the wind whipped his features with an icy flail. To his consternation, traffic and elemental sounds were suddenly eclipsed by a deep, hollow ululation, as though disembodied voices were raised in choral unison. He peered for the source of this peculiar noise echoing up and down the High, reverberating from its eighteenth-century walls, spires and crenellated tops. Last week's guest lecture, *Animism: a primitive religion*, had mooted angry gods whose displeasure with human frailties and fickleness made them roar invisibly from the heavens, prompting terrified mortals to placate them with sacrifices. He wondered to what errant terrestrial behaviour this extraordinary clamour would be attributed were contemporary beliefs so ordered. To the deplorable Gulf War, perhaps, or unsavoury machinations in Thai politics now capturing headlines?

He reached the far kerb, numb fingers gripping notebooks, and turned briskly into Queen's Lane amid snow-topped walls, turrets and animal-shaped corbels. Hot grit smouldered, its leftovers scattered haphazardly over adjoining pavements, rendering some parts navigable but others treacherous.

As he followed the Lane's zigzag with hopscotch-style jumps, passing snow-flecked college, chapel and library walls adorned with gargoyles and ivy, his thoughts turned to Bangkok. There it was so hot that one layer of clothing induced perspiration. Such a contrast seemed unimaginable; his mental powers were consumed anyway by the practicalities of forward movement. Extreme weather conditions neutralised flights of imagination, keeping them earthbound like overladen cargo 'planes.

He glimpsed the King's Head; soon he was inside, ordering a mocha. In the lounge opposite sat Dominic and Fon, Dom's voice booming distinctively over a hubbub of chattering students, gurgling percolators and tinkling teaspoons. Clearly, Dom's public school had excelled in imparting the art of confident self-expression. Beside him was the unknowing catalyst of Paul's forthcoming split with Joy.

"So it's definitely Thai?" Dominic bellowed.

They were engrossed over a large photograph measuring around twelve by sixteen inches. Dom's left hand pointed animatedly at some detail in this while his right flicked strands of raven-coloured fringe from his eyes. Fon's response was inaudible, typically for a Thai. Unlike Dominic, she came from a culture that placed a premium on soft-spokenness, Paul reflected approvingly, and a reluctance to draw attention.

"Pair of moggies taking a dip?" Dominic continued.

"Otters," she replied softly.

He paused, admiring her petite, elfin features cocooned inside a jerkin bonnet framed with white fur. Transfixed by this vision and with hands full, he unwisely tried to shunt a stool towards their table with his foot. Glancing up, Fon smiled and edged sideways, looking mildly perturbed. He remembered an injunction in the Thailand guidebook he'd been avidly devouring: *Thais consider feet the body's lowest part and never use them to move objects or point, which are considered rude and vulgar behaviour.*

Self-conscious, he froze, resolving never to move anything other than himself with his feet once in Bangkok. Dominic, noticing, looked up and gave a welcoming whoop.

"Talk of the Devil," he yelled, administering a friendly punch to Paul's leg.

The blow made Paul tumble backwards, spilling scalding coffee over the table. Dominic seized the photograph just in time, clutching it to his breast as the brown deluge spread. Flustered, Paul steadied himself as a landlady appeared, brandishing cloths, and then sat, embarrassed.

"Well, Paul: was that a typical English greeting?" enquired Fon, dark eyes sparkling impishly.

How she'd changed! When she'd arrived, she'd been nicknamed *the China doll* after the timid, fragile impression she'd made. Now she was boldly lampooning Paul's clumsiness.

“Only ‘twixt close friends,” volunteered Dominic. “With ties so strong they even survive one almost *wrecking* the other’s ticket to fame’n’ fortune!”

He pronounced ‘wrecking’ with heavy emphasis, as though it were the punch line in a stage performance.

“What are you on about?” grunted Paul.

“Dom’s received a photo of a tapestry,” Fon explained soothingly. “From his dad. Could be valuable.”

“Pater’s latest acquisition,” announced Dominic portentously. “Lots more where this came from, and loadsamazoomas all round if properly authenticated. Sort of thing Fon’ll be doing when she becomes a secret policewoman!”

Fon smiled bashfully. She’d be taking up a position at the Thai Department of Fine Art after completing her Master’s.

“Pater doesn’t write for months; lo and behold: chunky envelope arrives yesterday with this photo.”

“Lemme see,” said Paul, head cocked sideways.

The photograph was restored.

“Hoping you’d identify it,” said Dominic, patting Paul’s knee and conspicuously resting his hand there, causing Paul’s entire body to stiffen with embarrassment.

Fon gave an amused smile. Dominic knew his hand was unwelcome; he wouldn’t have acted thus had they been alone and was deliberately teasing Paul in front of Fon. Had Paul brushed the hand off – as he’d a good mind to – this’d be an uncool overreaction. Letting it remain could be misinterpreted. Either way, he lost.

“We were just complimenting your knowledge of oriental art when – hey presto! - you appeared and doused us with coffee.”

“The tapestry’s come via Bangkok,” explained Fon, as Paul glared. “But we don’t know where from originally. Some artefacts come to the West via Thailand through channels which aren’t always... legitimate.”

Paul peered at the photo, subtly jerking his knee away. The rectangular tapestry it depicted contained four forest scenes with recognisably Indo-Chinese flora and fauna. Its top left-hand square showed a blue-coloured flow before stylised trees. A river, Paul concluded, squinting at two bobbing, bewhiskered otters whose respective jaws held opposite ends of a writhing fish. The scene beneath showed the two predators in confrontation on the riverbank, the now motionless fish lying between them. In the corner trotted another beast, sandy-coloured with elongated ears, protruding nose and long, bushy tail.

“A jackal, we reckon,” suggested Dominic helpfully.

In the third tableau, the jackal occupied centre stage, staring ponderously down at the now supplicant otters and beadily eyeing the fish. The final scene showed the jackal demurely exiting, a large, juicy chunk of fish crammed in its mouth. The otters now appeared to be communicating with an adjacent tree, its interior illuminated by a mysterious glow and crowned with a golden palanquin. Their features conveyed surprised indignation; before them lay the fish’s bony head and tail following the jackal’s evident removal of its fleshy middle.

“Definitely Southeast Asian,” remarked Paul authoritatively, buoyed by an encouraging smile from Fon. “Um, are there jackals in Thailand?”

“Apart from the ones in uniform, that is,” interposed Dominic. “Selfishly hogging the news with their *coup* and distracting us from our holy mission to civilise Iraq by bombing it to smithereens.”

Fon seemed unsure how to respond.

“What gives in Bangkok?” Paul asked.

“Army’s in charge. You guys probably think any military takeover’s bad, but many Thais see greedy politicians as the real jackals and hope the Army brings honesty and discipline back to government.”

“Where does that leave you?”

“None the wiser,” she replied, a little distantly. “Can’t get through to my family; all lines to our Embassy in London are permanently engaged. So I’m relying on media, like everyone.”

Paul found her winsome smile intriguing. *Thais smile when conveying bad news to avoid offending the latter’s recipients.* His mind’s eye projected a Thai TV presenter blithely announcing a nuclear Armageddon, politely *wai*-ing her audience as she dissolved into radioactive dust.

“Some Thai art’s based on Indian themes. So even without indigenous jackals...” Fon tripped over the penultimate word, giggling gamely. Her English was reasonably fluent though occasionally punctuated by the odd slip or malapropism, which Paul found quaint and endearing. “...It wouldn’t mean the tapestry wasn’t from my country.”

Dominic was fixated on the photo.

“Pater wants the tapestry provenanced. CoA-ed, so he can sell it. Certificate of Authority,” he explained in response to quizzical looks.

“Dom’s dad’s an art thief,” explained Paul, retaliating for the intrusion to his knee.

“He’s an antiques dealer, actually, dears, but in some countries – not mentioning any names, Fon - those are virtually the same thing.”

As Fon’s smile diminished, Paul willed Dominic to curb his compulsive ribbing. *Thais are patriotic, viewing themselves as an extended family. Consequently, they resent perceived slights to compatriots.*

“Can’t whoever sent this have it certified?” he asked.

“Not how the antiques business works,” replied Dominic loftily, as though explaining some complex truth to a simpleton. “Lots of excellent stuff reaches antiques houses but can’t be auctioned till its authenticity’s validated.”

Paul frowned.

“Paul’s *so* naïve, isn’t he?” Dominic continued. “Like that fish out of water in the tapestry. We’ll have to take good care of him in Thailand, won’t we, and see he’s not waylaid by jackals?”

“*We?*” queried Paul, deliberately sounding horrified.

Fon had undertaken to mentor him in Thailand; his imagination had already invoked blissful scenes of them together against exotic backgrounds. These visions were not improved by the prospect of Dominic’s presence.

“Pater’s offered to subsidise a trip there for me to delve into this,” explained Dominic. “Says there’s massive fortunes – plural – to be made, with good contacts and intelligence on the ground. Which he’ll supply.”

But Dominic’s words were eclipsed by a cacophony of loudspeaker-laden shouts from outside. All eyes turned to the window, through which lines of police appeared.

“Methinks there’s been a *coup* in Oxford,” squealed Dominic delightedly. “Just look! All those men in uniform. Mmmm! Wouldn’t mind being captured by them! Come on,” he yelled at Paul, hurriedly rolling up the photograph. “Let’s check ‘em out en route to Kipling’s.”

Paul just managed an apologetic parting smile at Fon as Dominic bundled him outside into the cold brilliance. Then he realised what was causing the bizarre noise he’d heard earlier.

Something unusual's in the air, rousing Jo from somnolence. So far the day's been humdrum. Stirring, he scans the vicinity for the cause of this change in atmosphere. The baking mid-afternoon sun beats down on the sheltered motorcycle taxi rank where he and other bikers await passengers. He lounges on a flimsy, three-legged plastic chair sustained by an artificial wooden limb at the corner of a *soi* leading off Bangkok's fashionable Sukhumvit Road.

The exertion drains him; he's no energy these days and sinks against the chair's broken back, which sags even under his slight weight. But whatever's happening won't be ignored, signalling a change for the worse. Jo's senses – though dulled – detect a dark sense of foreboding, hovering like an evil spirit.

Without shifting his body, which feels as weighty as the colossal condominium down the *soi* where the Boss lives, he checks again. On the surface, all seems unexceptional. The unremitting radiance and sultriness are normal. The annual monsoon that wafts cold air down from central Asia's begun to dissipate, exposing Thailand to the incipient heat February always brings. True: soaring temperatures mean discomfort; soon they'll become oppressive, but this always happens. And actually, the endless rotation of meteorological cycles is reassuring. Like most Thais - including the urban sophisticates who furnish his passengers - Jo draws comfort from the predictable weather these recurrent sequences bring.

But – he quickly reminds himself – he's *not* like most Thais; others'd shun him if they knew how degenerate he's become. A disturbing possibility strikes him: could this change of ambiance simply be his own body registering a shift in temper through his shameful habits? The displacement may not have an external cause after all but result instead from one of the violent mood swings Jo suffers these days. Yes: this must be it. The menacing feeling comes from within Jo and has nothing to do with seasonal patterns.

For has Jo's life not acquired its own patterns, which are anything but reassuring? There's a distinct sequence of moods, which begin with eager expectation, progress to soaring ecstasy, descend to deflated ennui and then dwindle into prolonged, lethargic indolence mitigated only by the prospect of future stimulation when the succession recommences anew.... Isn't

this a pattern of sorts? This unease results from Jo's own sins: a karmic reaping of the poisonous fruits of his indulgence.

The imprudent man is consumed by his own deeds, like one burnt by fire. This fragment from a sermon broadcast from the temple opposite has lodged in Jo's brain. The ineluctable chain of his humours and the suffering they bring must come from his blackest misdeed: an insatiable recourse to *yaabaa*. Realising this, he shudders.

Better not to think about how this unhappy situation began or where it's leading. Better to stay, as Thais generally do, in the eternal present, where the here and now reign supreme. Endlessly ruminating on the past or speculating about the future are what stupid *farang* do; the price they pay in anxiety, stress and discomfort is obvious and clearly to be avoided.

But the dark current of disquiet is definitely here now and must be some new symptom of the lethargic stage in Jo's mood cycle. If so, this marks a worrying turn for the worse. But no: this can't be. As Jo's eyes flit around, he sees it's even silenced Mon, who's been holding volubly forth on how life, income, food and girls here in the capital compare with their counterparts in his northeastern home village. Bored, Jo's been willing Mon to shut up and – sure enough – he's quiet.

Clearly, it would take more than a subtle shift in Jo's body chemistry to accomplish this feat; in his eagerness to find the catalyst, his roving eyes alight on a tiny television propped against the tree to which the bikers' sheltering canvas is hooked. Mon installed this several weeks earlier to alleviate the tedium of inactivity between passenger runs; it's now the focus of general attention. A crowd of passersby huddles round the set watching an emergency newsflash.

Jo's relief that something external's triggered the sea-change soon gives way to nervousness over the broadcast's import; again, he gapes round, seeking clues from the crowd's anxious rumblings. Stretching sideways, he watches the tiny screen. On this, a craggy military face falteringly proclaims the armed forces have seized power. The Prime Minister's under arrest; parliament's dissolved; a new Security Council will safeguard the nation.

This is greeted with an awed hush. Jo closes his eyes; if only the outside world would go away and leave him alone. He's too many private woes to take any interest in politics; he resents the latter's intrusion, wishing that – like Mon's – the military voice could be stilled.

But on it blusters, insisting firm action was necessary to protect the kingdom from the greed, selfishness and corruption of civilian politicians. Its owner's evidently not used to justifying himself in public and lacks polished phraseology, tripping over long words and regurgitating clichés. A smartly dressed girl comments pointedly on this; other bystanders nod in agreement. She catches Jo's eye and smiles. She's the same height and build as his younger sister, whom he's not seen for over a year.

An earnest young man observes wryly that Army officers are better off barking out commands on parade grounds than making public announcements on television; this is met with general concurrence. The bikers say nothing, shy of exposing their rustic northeastern simplicity before these confident Bangkokians who – unlike most Thais – freely make scathing comments about authority figures.

To Jo, the news might just as well concern the descent of a meteor on the far side of Rahu. His thoughts leap around: this happens when his mental peace is disturbed. His parents' faces swim into his mind, eclipsing surrounding scenes. Pa's suffering from stomach cramps and needs Chinese medicine. An elderly Teochiu apothecary at a nearby shophouse is renowned for his mélange of tree bark, ground figs and grass which, boiled together, will banish the most persistent abdominal pains: Jo keeps meaning to buy this concoction for Pa.

But fulfilling this noble intention always eludes him. *Yaabaa* have sapped his energy; during short-lived peaks of animation that punctuate long, dry spells of listlessness, he can't focus on mundane concerns. When he thinks about this, which he tries not to, it disconcerts him; he knows such dependence is unhealthy, but during bouts of inertia the effort of thought itself's mostly beyond him. The crowd shudders collectively with mirth at some fresh verbal *faux pas* from the Army spokesman.

“Can't even speak Thai,” scoffs the young man.

Overwhelmed by the effort of taking this in, Jo closes his eyes. Simply existing without thinking has its consolations. It protects him from guilt over his parents, who expect great things from him. They think he co-owns a motorcycle repair business; they've no idea he's just a humble taxi biker with no ambitions or prospects; their shame would be infinitely worse if they knew how he supplements his income from derisory fares infrequent passengers pay. This he also pushes to his consciousness' periphery.

It's weeks since Jo visited his parents; he sees them less and less, unable to bear their well-meant enquiries about his business. Most intolerable are the unspoken but galling comparisons with his sister, who's academically successful and will shortly join the civil service with security, status and prospects.

Watching the girl, he remembers her again. For sure, his sister'd also make some pithy riposte to the wavering military announcement suspending democracy. And, no doubt, this'd win their parents' misty-eyed approval. Jo sighs: nothing compares with the humiliation of being so effortlessly outpaced by a girl to whom an elder brother should be a model, guardian and mentor rather than an obvious loser and embarrassment. But he's resigned to these roles, taking solace in *yaabaa*.

The temple reminds him of the conventional solution: enter the monkhood and make merit for his parents, as all young Thai males are supposed to do. Ma's tears of pride and joy would be copious; she and Pa would reap spiritual benefits from his ordination; they'd boast to friends about their son as well as their daughter. But nowadays such a commitment seems unlikelier than ever.

Ma won't raise this subject openly to avoid embarrassing him, but it's always there, hanging in the background. She'll merely urge him to 'think about his options'. But even this is too much. Why, Jo wonders, has his sister always excelled, while her brother's just a *dek liang kwai*, too stupid to rise above his station? He shakes his head violently, as though his hair needs drying: this usually banishes painful thoughts. Bystanders glance curiously, assuming this gesture conveys disapproval at the military spokesman's inarticulate intonings. Self-conscious, he turns away.

Upsetting images linger. He pictures his sister in university robes, clutching an academic scroll Pa proudly hangs in his study. All Jo can show's a taxi biker's jacket and the entitlement this confers to collect passengers needing shortcuts through Bangkok's endless traffic jams, perched on his pillion at the peril of their comfort, dignity and safety. Most just want a ride along the *soi*: a backstreet which doubles as the source of his livelihood and the backdrop to his broody boredom. At its far end tower luxurious condominiums where the Boss and other rich folk live. The latter's lifestyles are so far removed from Jo's that they might as well reside on a different planet; he wastes no energy envying the comfort they must enjoy in stark contrast to his own near-destitution.

A commotion erupts. A caravan of jeeps pulls up; armed soldiers spring out and occupy the intersection's corners, leering. Passersby gape; bikers mutter darkly about how this *coup* will deter movement around Bangkok, threatening their livelihoods.

But Jo couldn't care less. He's almost grateful for the dearth of passengers, whose arrivals invariably jolt him into an unwelcome consciousness. His emotional wounds resemble insect bites which only itch when scratched. Talk, thought, action – all animation, mental or physical – are akin to worrying the incision left by a mosquito's proboscis: an unpleasant coming to life of dormant sores. And as he looks down, an early mosquito perches on his left shoulder, almost stationary save for the occasional twitch, demurely biding its time. He can't be bothered to brush it away.

Fares do bring money, which, like everyone, Jo needs to eat and survive, but these days even basic necessities no longer seem important. He's little appetite for food and few ambitions which involve spending. Apart, that is, from buying *yaabaa* from Ek. The drug and its supplier are now the mainstays of Jo's existence. A glimmer of hope shines as he remembers Ek, to whom he owes everything. It was Ek who found him this job on the taxi rank, Ek who secured his deeply reprehensible but nonetheless helpful supplementary employment and Ek who introduced him to *yaabaa*. Jo's deeply grateful that Ek's his supplier, generously catering to his *yaabaa* needs by charging him a special low price. He's truly blessed to be Ek's friend.

Occasionally Jo sleeps at Ek's apartment; most nights are spent in nooks and crannies of building sites interspersing Sukhumvit Road's shops, residences and hotels. Jo welcomes the

solitude and tranquility these bring. He finds them infinitely preferable to other venues his second job requires him to sleep at from time to time in circumstances he'd rather not recall.

This is why he's estranged from his family. He'd dearly love to gain their respect but knows this can't be; its impossibility adds to his general sense of failure and shame. His parents would, of course, be mortified to learn the awful truth. And sometimes he's convinced they *do* know and no longer ask to spare his feelings. The suspicion gnaws, and – for a brief, painful moment - his imagination stumbles out of control again, throwing up scenes in which Pa and Ma look sadly and silently on while he performs the demeaning acts his second job entails.

Sometimes he can't envision even Ma's kindly smile without wondering whether this masks horrified disgust at what her son's become. Sometimes her voice joins a condemnatory chorus inside his head, at first gently reproofing, then hideously irate and finally lamenting in anguish over his dishonour. He starts to shake his head even more vigorously to banish these notions when a familiar newcomer appears on the *soi's* opposite kerb. Ek ambles past the soldiers towards Jo's taxi rank.

His arrival raises Jo's mood to excitement. He jumps up and waves furiously, unable to bear the possibility that Ek might miss him among the burgeoning crowd around the television. The military announcer blunders on, provoking hilarity, sarcasm and outrage. Not to worry: Ek sees him, nods and approaches, deliberately choosing a route through the crowd, his appetite for attention unaffected by political turmoil. Jo sits up in blissful anticipation of an imminent turning of the wheel of emotions in which his current inactivity will soon give way to renewed vitality: shortly he'll feel alive, albeit briefly, once again.

Paul realised as he shoved Dominic away across ice, triggering a carom of collisions with bystanders, that he was overreacting. But Dom's tugging of his lapels in mock-parental coercion of a truculent child as they'd stumbled outside had been the last straw, and he'd had enough. Undeterred, Dominic wagged a reproving finger, shouting "Naughty!".

The words were lost as the booming chorus' source now became clear. The entire length of Parks Road was crammed with chanting demonstrators heading as purposefully northwards as furious winds allowed. Pavements were lined with police wearing yellow glow covers over blue uniforms while their colleagues patiently redirected traffic, provoking indignant horn beeps and occasional expletives from frustrated drivers.

The demonstration was led by a diminutive, woolly-scarved lady sporting several knitted jumpers, wire-rimmed glasses and a megaphone. Through the latter, she called questions to which those behind duly intoned collective replies, as though reciting some secular catechism:

"What do we want?"

"Hands off Iraq!"

"When do we want it?"

"NOW!"

The mood seemed good-humoured. Around seventy demonstrators marched in ranks; a few stragglers kept their own pace. Around a dozen pushed heavily swaddled infants on wheels; others held aloft home-made banners declaiming *Bush Out Of Iraq!*, *UK=US Lackey!* and other similarly truncated exhortations, accusations and denunciations.

"God," groaned Dominic in mock despair. "The lentil pie brigade trying to scare the Pentagon into not biffing Saddam. Bush'll be quaking in his socks."

"That's not the point," replied Paul, who was beginning to find Dominic distinctly insufferable. "People are entitled to express their views in a democracy. Dunno why you have

to be so cynical, and you should be more careful with Fon. You upset her just now. She's... sensitive."

Dominic smirked.

"Don't worry, dear boy – shan't cramp your style this summer. You and Fon can make doe eyes at each other across rice fields till water buffaloes come home, for all I care. I c'n see how you look at each other. Shan't get in your way. And knowing you, Paul: you'll never get beyond misty-eyed staring anyway, whether I'm around or not. Maybe I should train you in striking while the iron's hot – if yours ever warms up in the first place, that is, dear. *I* don't mess around. If I haven't scored five minutes after clamping eyes, I just move onto the next target."

Paul smiled faintly as they followed the demonstration, keeping their distance from its raucous rear. Dominic's sexual conquests were legendary for being initiated, consummated and dissolved in less time than most people took to pluck up the courage to introduce themselves. And, from what he gathered, the liaisons to which they led also ended - with no hard feeling on either side – in no time at all, although their sheer rapidity and rumoured volume made this hard to verify.

"Don't think I'd be suited to multiple partners whose names I can't remember the morning afterwards," rejoined Paul. "And – if you're really coming to Thailand – you'd better be careful. You know... health risks...."

Dominic looked at him pityingly.

"For Chrissake, Paul – s'bad enough having the pater using me as a commercial agent without a friend nagging like a surrogate mother."

"Just trying to put you off coming, that's all."

Dominic ignored this.

"You were out of bounds too. Calling my pater an art thief!"

“You’ve said the same enough times,” rejoined Paul. “And it’s hardly unreasonable to expect someone surrounded by Buddhist antiques to imbibe... something of the *spirit* of Buddhism.”

Dominic cringed, but Paul was now roused to missionary mode.

“Surely it’s contradictory to make money from Buddhist art teaching people not to get attached to material possessions. Not that I’ve anything against your dad,” he added hurriedly.

Paul actually found the notion of Dominic’s father clutching a pocket calculator amidst priceless oriental antiques depicting Buddhist renunciation distinctly incongruous.

“You’re so *didactic*, Paul,” groaned Dominic wearily. “Is this what Buddhism’s about – teaching us the error of our ways?”

“Well, the Buddha was a teacher rather than a god,” replied Paul, a little earnestly.

“In that case, God save us from Buddhism.” Dominic’s repartee skills appeared undimmed by cold weather and chanting. “Which explains how easily a Buddhist country can become a concentration camp. Like Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge. Its leaders were all teachers, you know, before going into politics. Most teachers are dictators *manqués* at the best of times, but the KR had all Cambodia as their classroom. So they put the whole country into detention, with specially nasty punishments for prefects who broke ranks. Hence that gruesome little torture chamber the Vietnamese found when they kicked the KR out, which – and this *really* proves my point....”

Dominic, whose undergraduate thesis was on twentieth-century Cambodian history, was clearly in gleeful good form. The volume of his diction – never *sotto voce* at the best of times – had been raised to achieve audibility over the nearby megaphone; several marchers stared as he screeched at Paul.

“...Used to be a *school* back in pre-communist days. And its chief executioner was an ex-*Biology teacher!*”

“That’s monstrously unfair,” retorted Paul. “You can’t blame Buddhism for the KR’s crimes. They virtually wiped religion out!”

“Paul, dear: you’re always saying Christianity gets Western people into habits of thought whether they’re overtly religious or not.” Dominic had a tiresome habit of remembering such remarks when they were least wanted. “Surely the same applies to Buddhism. It must have created the groundwork for all that *vileness* in Cambodia.”

“Come off it! It was American carpet bombing that brutalised the Khmers. Their B52s dropped more tonnage on pre-KR Cambodia than the Allies used during the *whole* Second World War. Including Hiroshima and Nagasaki!”

Dominic’s attention drifted to the lady leading the procession, who was now egging her followers onwards with a series of particularly strident megaphone exhortations.

“Strewth! Someone’s been knocking back extra veggie wedges and carrot juice to have the energy to caterwaul *this* early,” he mused absently.

A clock struck quarter to twelve.

“It’s not that early,” replied Paul. “We’ll just make it to the Orifice if we hurry. Be thankful they’ve cleared us a path.”

The Orifice, or Oriental Faculty as it was more conventionally styled, was about ten minutes’ walk.

“So conscience-stricken lesbians do serve a useful purpose after all,” muttered Dominic misanthropically.

Paul decided to hone his conflict shunning skills in preparation for Thailand. *Thais consciously avoid arguments in case these attract the attention of malign spiritual entities, whose influence over human affairs is greatly feared.*

“I should be marching alongside them. I’m representing the Buddhist Society at tonight’s Unity Against the War meeting.”

Dominic looked at him witheringly.

“Yes, Fon said they volunteered you as Secretary – while you’d popped to the loo. Doesn’t sound terribly *ethical*. For a *religious* society.”

Dominic pronounced the word *religious* with theatrically heightened distaste, as though scrutinising some repulsive object between thumb and forefinger.

“Be honest, Paul. Religions just cloak hypocrisy. Including Buddhism. And as for *teachers*, the religious ones are the worst! When I think what our chaplain used to get up to with choirboys at St Swithin’s. ‘Nuff to put anyone off religion for life. Can’t you get out of it?”

“What?”

“Your silly meeting with bearded weirdies. You’re a Finalist denied life outside revision.”

“Kipling says it’s OK as long as I do at least eight hours’ revision daily,” Paul replied, as though this were nothing exceptional. “Besides – it’s in a good cause. Something you wouldn’t understand,” he added, as Dominic’s nose rose to disgorge a disparaging snort.

The subject of religion generally brought out a particularly disparaging vein in Dominic, who had no truck with or illusions over its eastern or western varieties. Paul watched the marchers stagger northwards past ice-flecked Parks towards the mock-mansion Rhodes Building, which, as a US endowment, no doubt bore vicarious blame for the Bush Administration’s alleged bellicosity.

He followed Dominic leftwards, glancing upwards at a snow-bedecked chapel spire. Noticing this, Dominic’s voice resumed mocking tones.

“You know this neo-gothic triumph rests on a foundation of manure?”

“What are you rabbiting about?”

“Dung. Guano. Shit. Family that sponsored this chapel’s construction were prosperous nineteenth-century merchants. Made their fortune from importing tonnes of bird crap from Peruvian islets. Never rained there, apparently, and seagull droppings yards deep used to mount on the rocks. In they went with buckets...“ Dominic’s hands simulated scooping motions. “To ship it back to merrie England, where farmers lapped it up. As fertiliser,” he added, as Paul grimaced.

“You’re joking!”

“Nope. Priceless excrement, like I said. English farmers spread the whatever over crops to make ‘em stick their little shoots up faster.”

Dominic licked his lips, eying Paul mock-salaciously.

“Couldn’t get enough of it. Family made loadsamoney and showed their piety by sponsoring religious buildings. Like Keble Chapel. *Praise be to God!*” he chanted loudly at a crocodile of schoolchildren being anxiously shepherded across the road by two harassed-looking minders.

A grinning boy yelled “You’re crazy!”

Dominic blew a raspberry.

“So sturdy English yeomen owed their rippling frames to South American birdshit. And this building wouldn’t exist without shitty businessmen. Not that they got their own hands dirty....”

“Pipe down, Dom; I get the picture. We’re doing Asian nationalism with Kipling today. Your scatological musings aren’t relevant, quite apart from being totally disgusting.”

“Actually, dear boy, religion underpinned Asian nationalist resistance to European colonialism. And I was making a serious point. All religion’s based on shit when you scratch its surface.”

Paul quickened his pace to avoid the onset of a pair of pincer-like hands aping scratching motions, and Dominic fell silent as his energy went into keeping up. Dr Kipling, generally an indulgent soul, strictly forbade a small number of uncountenanceable sins which included lateness for tutorials. They traversed the road - gingerly avoiding chunks of slippery snow - and headed into Pusey Lane’s cobbled corridor. Leaping up the Orifice’s steps, they entered and knocked on the door to Kipling’s study as the clock finished announcing midday: they were *just* - judging from the tone of his “Come” from inside - within the margins of acceptable lateness.

“Have I got a surprise for the good doctor today!” whispered Dominic excitedly, as they hurriedly crossed the threshold.