

**Excerpt from *A GOOD TRUE THAI* by Sunisa Manning
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Though he wills it, she will not rise. Up from the box they put her in. Det is too old to think she will sit up now that the mourners are gathered, the fires banked to burn her, but still he eyes the edges of the wooden planks.

His mother, resting in such confines.

It's the seventh night of the funeral. The monks in golden robes sit shoulder to shoulder, arranged oldest to youngest on a wooden dais. Det faces them in a plastic chair that presses against his hips. The chants have gone for more than an hour. Does lengthening prayers fling her spirit away from him like a kite caught by wind? Imagine the string snapped, the kite slipped free, lost to an empty sky.

Det shifts, knees and back stiff. He's thirsty. He closes his eyes. One question unwinds another: Is the top nailed shut? Is she on her back? Did they fold her hands on her chest, is she wearing white or black, is she wound in cloth? Did they bathe her first, are her eyes closed? And why didn't Father let Det see her body at the end?

She died taking too few bites. That was how it seemed, with her small appetite and complaints of fatigue. The weight dropped but she hid the pain until it was clear that all that

merit-making wasn't going to cleanse her body of the disease flooding it. Then the doctors came, but it was too late to send her overseas to operate. Suddenly what had been in her stomach was in the liver, and the rest of her life slid out in days.

Father touches Det's elbow. His skin is dull, as if it's lost the will to animate; mighty Father, diminished in grief.

"She should have been cremated on Sanam Luang," Father says.

The words drop into Det's ear. An admission, plucked from apologetic lips. Father's regret makes Det swallow and his eyes fill.

Behind Det an uncle makes excuses. He says it wasn't like Kongkwan to leave us in a royal cremation, with pages and officials bowing, sprinkling holy water. She was entitled to it, but she didn't want an elaborate paper temple built to burn with her body. Kongkwan was connected to the people. She married Father, after all, a commoner. She decided to be cremated in this city temple frequented by office workers cramming merit-making into the lunch hour, who buy birds encased in spindly cages. Let fly and earn karmic redemption for the mosquitoes you can't help but slap.

Here is the simmering anger that she's left him, that Det is alone. With her gone he's caught between classes. He doesn't know where he belongs.

Mother wasn't the type people called pretty. Her skin was too dark, her front teeth stuck out, her nose, which Det inherited, too wide, and she had a loud, hiccuping laugh that caused people to start. If her ancestry wasn't so illustrious people would have assumed her to be common, but people clustered around her. Such was his mother: she commanded esteem.

Det strains to hear the creak of the coffin. Mother could do it: rise, live, make things simple again. "Father!" she would croak in mock outrage. "How could you leave me here?" Det

would spring. He'd be at the box, arm ready.

He needs the tears to stop coming.

There is no sound from the coffin.

The chants might cover his sobs.

Father is the only one beside him.

Their small family leaves many chairs empty in this aching first row.

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Det's eyes fly open. Chang's knocked into him.

"Your mother. You should be there. Better hurry."

His best friend's serious face is wearing an expression of such creased worry that Det gets nervous when he realises that the concern is for him.

Father is gone, the box gone.

Monks are gone, the dais gone.

Mourners stream from the tent in the direction of the temple. Sunset light pierces the mirrored mosaics and stings his eyes. Det turns to Chang, who brushes his hands out from his chest like he's starting a wind.

Det springs away. The mourners congregate in a back courtyard. Banyans sway at the level of spires. Det vaults the stairs. He's on a platform. His father, two uncles and the abbot gather around the box. The box, his mother.

Det approaches his father. Their shoulders touch. They're pressed together, the men that surround his mother. One uncle is shaking. Det closes his eyes. She was the youngest. It must be hard to bury the baby. Det catches his uncle's tremor in his own body.

The abbot's at the foot of the coffin, praying so loud it cuts across the roaring in Det's

ears. He suspects, he knows what's about to happen, he pushes it away.

There are two novices. They step to the head of the box, where the concrete kiln swells over a metal door. The abbot grunts as he tugs the top of the coffin open.

Hands fly to mouths, the men huff their breaths, and Det recoils but he's shouldered in place. The abbot pulls again. What's inside is revealed.

Det can't resist the view. Skin stretches to cover the body, but glints of bone peep here and there. Seven days in tropical heat releases wet from the body, separates the casing from what it is meant to hold. Fluttering shapes of decomposition invite—

Someone screams.

The stuff is warm, slick on his fingers. He's sorry to distress Father but Det has to see that she is definitely not here. He's dipped his fingers into that slight opening. Between ribs, where her heart should be. If he could poke through and press it to beating—

The lid crashes into his wrist.

His uncles have pulled Det's arms back.

They're shouting. He's pinned to their bodies. The abbot throws his weight against the box, slamming the lid.

Goodbye to her, goodbye to his mother—

The box budes, slides. The novices gleam with new sweat as they guide it.

Det wants to say it's okay. The flames lick the box, the heat licks their skin, it feels like they're dissolving in the blast of the furnace but it's okay. She isn't there.

His right hand drips. Everyone is turned to the little window of flames that devours the coffin. One side crackles and caves. A novice uses a rod to slide the window shut and the enormous heat relents.

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Chang catches Det at the bottom of the steps. “Was it bad? Was it okay?”

It works, Det wants to tell Chang. Seeing the body severs the link to Mother. That’s the point of this tradition. To cut the earthly tie. She’s dead, she’s gone, she’s no longer here. He could never expect that mass of yellow with smudges of green and flaring red to be her.

Det swallows. The knowledge lives in him: what it’s like to leave the body. Anticipating it has no bite now, no power to stir fear. He tilts his head. “Look.”

Det forgets how bad Chang’s eyesight is, that Chang won’t be able to see the ash already shooting into the sky.

Events long anticipated still happen before you're ready. It's time to tell the boy who plunged his hand into his mother's body, testing the temperature of her demise.

The evening after Kongkwan's cremation, Udom is in the bedroom they shared for twenty years. He shudders, recalling the intimacy of loss that urged Det to that violation. Will this news he must now impart ruin Det completely? Drive Det from Udom forever? But Kongkwan knew the boy best, and she said Udom must tell Det right after she died. That's when Det would be most eager to hold to her and her status.

Udom sighs. Child-rearing was never his strength. For this particular task he communes with her spirit in the dusty air and filtered light, stroking the red and white sprigged bedcover she sewed. On the ledge by the window are her wooden bird carvings, those tokens she whittled and arranged.

Kongkwan. Gift. Her nickname had made him smile that first time he spoke with her. He'd finally found the courage to sneak into the glass pavilion, standing near the door in case he needed to dart back into the anonymous night that enfolded the only park in the middle of the city. Cool air blew on the backs of his knees. His clothes carefully matched the people's inside. A

whole month's salary, but worth it, because the girl whirled his way just as the hands on a clock face must come toward him. Her partner said something; she laughed. Udom would miss her laugh! A river's bright burble, none of the city girl's polite tittering behind a hand, as if flashing teeth and tongue and lips were things to hide.

In the bedroom Udom goes to the top right drawer of her dresser. He slides it out, finds the naga bracelet. "I'm not ready," he whispers. "Do I have to tell him now?"

He pauses but can't feel his wife's reply. Udom lifts the beads, emerald and violet, sky blue, indigo, amber, pink, holding them to the light so each one catches a glow. Kongkwan had become a believer towards the end of her life, saying that each stone was a jewel from the dwelling place of the serpent king. She'd gone to the naga caves on her temple travels, adopting the superstitions of the countryside along with any healing those far-flung monks could bestow.

She and Det would return from a rural journey, a plastic bag bulging with grey rocks rattling in the trunk. Once the servants produced a hammer they were dismissed; just the family gathered on the concrete driveway. Udom and Det knelt, hands together as she prayed from a chair above them. They'd take turns tapping a rock with the hammer. If they "deserved" it, the rock fell open and out dropped one of those glossy baubles. Suspiciously uniform, they looked closer to glass beads, hardly stone at all. Udom hadn't believed in the legend then, but holding the bracelet, remembering how many rocks they'd tapped to attain all twelve colours, he wants to believe.

He shuffles in his slippers to the bed and lies down on the mattress, hands clutched to his chest. He never prayed when his wife was alive. No temples or shrine rooms for him; Udom had risen from the son of a bank teller and seamstress by his own diligence. He wasn't going to bow to some statue in thanks. He became the Minister of Education because of his own hard work.

But maybe as you age...maybe as you get closer to death...humility sets in. You can admit what's been here all along: that you might have been the smartest in the room, but the reason you got anywhere was because of your wife's connections.

Udom had refused to go on those upcountry travels. He said he had too much work—and work was always there—but what really pegged him home was the pain of watching her kneel and groan, pant to breathe.

“I don't know how to tell him,” Udom says.

His chest throbs. Is this her answer?

I know. This will hurt. I'm sorry.

There's the dip of her weight on the mattress. She sits, she squeezes his hand.

Det is a nickname. Akarand is his real name, but when people address Udom's son formally it's with the title staked in front, the words his guardian deities: M. L. Akarand.

This is what Udom needs to say: titles pass through the father. Mom Luang Akarand is M. L. only by convention. Det's birth is so high, through his mother, that the highest circles are willing to count him as one of them, but really, the Mom Luang is a politeness. It's a concession to Kongkwan's family and the rank Det would have held if his mother married someone worthy.

This is obvious to anyone who cares to think about it. Udom suspects the servants know, fastidious as they are about rank and title, because they bask in the reflected glow of the family's prestige. Udom is sure that Det doesn't realise. He's a smart-enough boy, but Det has never questioned his status. It's the way a child, unaware it's adopted, will not think to ask if his parents are his birth ones. What is unfathomable lies beyond curiosity.

Det inherits from Udom's side, which means his inheritance is nothing. And here is the crux: if Det in turn marries a commoner, he will lose the ability to move among his people; he'll

lose the comforts of his youth, and the protections he doesn't know encircle him. Life will cease to tip in his favour, his ability to rise in a job will be curtailed, and the ease with which Det speaks will have to be checked according to what the censors currently allow.

Det needs to marry someone titled. Add to his blood, so though his children will be without title, their bloodline will be noble. That will allow them to cling to the narrow rungs of high society.

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In the living room Det runs his hand along the low platform of their coffee table. It was once the bed of Det's ancestor, Kongkwan's grandfather, the illustrious king.

His son has the full lips and dark skin of Kongkwan's side. Det's face at rest settles into a determined expression. Despite the Palace School's mandated bowl cut, Det's hair parts to the side, and thick black strands erupt over his forehead. He looks distinct from his classmates for it, but the school has never written about this unkempt appearance, another sign that it's Det's birth that is protecting him from a petty complaint, since the school is strict. Det is short like his great-grandfather was, strongly built. The guarded, hurt expression in Det's eyes are all his own. Who wounded his son, Udom wonders—who dealt a blow in the womb?

“Tell me about him,” Det whispers.

Him. Udom presses his lips together. Kongkwan's grandfather had been a great king, the one everyone still talks about, but this boy, like all others, has been raised on a diet of overblown mythology.

He tries to comply. “You know how he freed the slaves?”

“By freeing his own, so everyone with lesser status had to follow.”

“How he kept the country free, when our neighbours fell to foreign powers?”

“By playing the English, French and Dutch off each other. Whoever claimed Siam would commit an act of aggression against the rest.”

These are history lessons Det is taught to recite at his school within Palace grounds.

“Tell me something real,” Det whispers, “something about the person.”

But the person must not exist. He was effaced when he took the throne—maybe, even, when he was born a crown prince—the man replaced by a demigod. But the Kingdom’s laws are strict. They forbid insult, and even saying that the King was a man, that the man was human...

Udom chooses his words carefully. Servants are always listening. “Your mother said he was enormously kind. He loved children and delighted in his own.” Udom pauses.

“He had us stop spitting in the streets,” Det says.

“That’s right.” Udom smiles back. A feeling rises—is this connection?

“We learnt to be siwilai,” Det says. He rubs his hand on the table—the bed—the talisman from the King.

“If Siam was seen as civilised, if the King was acknowledged as a monarch alongside other monarchs, then the West couldn’t conquer us in the name of civilising the natives.” Udom can’t help tipping into a history lesson. He, too, has recited these things.

“My great-grandfather was a smart man.”

These lines are like bedtime stories for his son. Assurances of Det’s place in the world. Kongkwan was right. Telling Det now would make him determined to belong with her class, but she’s only just gone. Can Udom really tear Det’s conception of himself apart?

The room’s deep red walls remind Udom of his wife—of her spirit, of the blood that drained from her body by the time Det put his hand in. The sides of the living room stand too close. He has the impulse to tear past the paint. Why are women allowed to rend their garments

while men must stand unmoved in the face of loss? To grieve would be seen as lesser, swayed by worldly attachment.

Some men don't love their wives, not as he loved Kongkwan. They have minor wives and mistresses, other children in other houses. All he has is the one precious boy. His family is dwindled, precarious. Uncertain without the force of the mother.

Udom sees the faces of the many Buddhas in their shrine room. Kongkwan practically polished the wood herself with her feet and knees when she knelt, crawled in, and sat there, hour after hour. He would sit with his back against the door waiting for his wife to unwind from her pose. He had time to study the downturned eyes, the long fingers reaching to touch the earth in witness. Those faces were not impassive. Their smiles were not unattached. They were transcendent. Elated with inner wisdom. Flooded with kindness, as if their heart would break before they could harm you. Udom is seized with the idea of putting his son in their care. If he nestled Det into those statues, into the spirits Kongkwan was sure hovered in the air—this boy who's begun drawing in a sketchpad, waiting quietly for his father to come back to him—what would the Buddhas decide?

Udom cannot sunder their child from her. It would break Det, and breaking their son isn't how Kongkwan would have wanted.

He springs up. Going against her wishes. Has Udom ever done that?

Det waves the sketchpad. "Good likeness?"

The boy has drawn the arts building at Chulalongkorn University. Fluted roof, crowded with trees. Named for his ancestor. It's where Kongkwan went, and where Det will go.

"I didn't get to be in that building," Udom says. "You tell me about it next week. Are you nervous?"

“I’ll be okay with Chang there,” Det says in his easy way.

Det doesn’t know that Udom, as Minister of Education, made sure his son got a place at the best school in the country. It’s not that the boy isn’t intelligent. He just doesn’t bother himself to try, assuming, rightly, that these things will arrange themselves.

“You’ll do well.” Udom delivers the lines from a corner of the room. He’s edging toward the hallway. He’s almost out the door when there’s a soft, “Father?”

Stay the retreat.

Det is looking up with that open expression. That, too, came from Kongkwan.

“Will anything change?” Det grimaces. “I mean our house, the land. It came from Mother’s family. I don’t mean to suggest—you’re married—but I wondered, with her gone, does anything change for us?”

Now is the time to tell him. Det asked! Just tell him.

Udom hears *you’re okay, you’ll both be okay*, but he can’t help it, he’s overtaken. He manages to get out of the room. In the bedroom he slings the bracelet against a wall, then is on his knees feeling for each bead like a blind supplicant.

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Later, when the sun gives up some of its heat, Udom creeps to their gardens. He makes for the shaded walkway where he and Kongkwan would linger in the evenings. The gardeners know to leave him alone. Udom lifts a hand to a spray of purple-speckled orchids that clings to a tree. *We live in the realm of devas*, she used to say, *whose feet don’t touch the floor*.

It’s true. The long driveway and extensive grounds situate their home like a lily on a wide, green pad. Wasn’t that what he’d wanted, marrying her? To be cocooned in impenetrable tranquility. That’s what Det hasn’t been raised to understand: how risky life is, how exposed.

Your work, your family, your life can be snatched. Other gods get angry. When they turn their fury on you, they tear you down.

Udom arrives at the four-car garage where their driver Preechai is polishing the Mercedes as dogs are shuffling at his feet.

“Keep an eye on the boy.” It erupts more brusquely than Udom intended.

Preechai, startled, assures Udom that he will.

Udom nods. Of course Preechai will look after Det. He always has. It’s his role to attend to the only son.

The servants are protective of Det and will draw even closer with Kongkwan’s death. The household rises and sinks together, they know that.

Udom turns to make a last lap of the garden.

The news can wait. The news will have to. Det’s just starting university. He’s too young to think of marriage and matches, his rank, the family line.

Udom flicks a nail against the beads clinking in his pocket. He’ll have them re-set in platinum, a metal strong enough to last generations.

Two years before Kongkwan's cremation, Chang's ma and aunt were home with him on a Sunday, when the leather handbag factory where they worked was shut. The sleeping mats had been rolled away, the floor swept, breakfast dispensed with. The women were hunched near the corrugated tin door that was propped open for the light they needed to thread leather back and forth into a tight weave for extra income. Another dazzling box of sunshine was created on the far side of the hut by their window, which was a hole cut in the wavy metal with a screen stapled over it. If they stood they had a view of the klong, where longtail boats split the brown of the canal with white foam. Ladies paddled up and down the water, calling their wares. Ma always said it was a good thing their screen didn't open so they weren't tempted to buy. Chang lay belly-down near that window, reading brochures his neighbours had passed him. These were, predictably, from missionaries, promising rewards or doom depending on whether you listened to the farang telling you how to live. Relinquish your autonomy and you were sure to be saved.

Someone leaned in. Somchai, the old man who'd lived next door for Chang's whole life, waved a large envelope like a fan. "Another one!" he cried gaily. "What're they going to offer this time, a palanquin?"

Chang's aunt jumped before Ma could get to Somchai. "Have you crinkled it? Old rascal, stop going through our mail."

"What's the use of privacy when you're going to come rushing over to tell me the news anyway?" Somchai protested.

"The dignity of finding out for ourselves first!"

His aunt wasn't really mad. She drew outrage to cover her anticipation of good news. Unlike her older sister, who didn't believe in "such superstitions", Chang's aunt was forever making spiritual bargains to keep them safe: a dour expression so rewards wouldn't be snatched away; a cranky demeanour because she couldn't bear to express what was actually a sweet nature. She was smaller and rounder than his mother, but they otherwise looked the same: betel-coloured skin, large wet eyes. Both had the habit of walking too quickly in the heat, which made them sweat, but gave them a vigorous air.

His aunt turned to Chang. "Why haven't you offered Somchai something? How we raised you."

Chang found the betel tin and one last chew, rolling the leaf around the nub and plonking it in front of Somchai, who popped the thing in his mouth.

Chang squeezed his aunt's arm; she put her hand over his. Chang's ma reached for the envelope and slit it, glancing in before passing it to Chang.

"Try," Chang said.

"We don't have time," she said. Ma spread her hands over her worn brown pahtung.

"It's not going anywhere," Chang said.

"I'll do it." Somchai made a grab but Ma swept the envelope out of his reach. "As if you could read either," she muttered, mouth forming letters. Short moments later she said, "You're

in!” and thrust the letter into his lap.

Chang glanced, then grinned. He’d even got a travel stipend for bus fare.

His aunt took the letter. Her fingers pressed the indent of the school crest, wandered over the wide margin, rubbed the thick card stock.

Chang wished the women could comprehend the squiggles and dots making their way across the page. In their neighbourhood of Klong Toei Chang had hopped from scholarship to scholarship, unafraid to approach the spongy American ladies whose socks pooled at their ankles as they bounced children during recess at the church-funded orphanage. Chang nudged them into another collection for this boy’s education, but his unabashed efforts landed him far from his family. On balance, was it worth it?

What the letter did say was much the same as the other envelopes that had come since the national exam results were posted, and Chang’s landed him in the top ten in the Kingdom. He was excited to spend two years finishing high school at Triam Udom Suksa, though. It was the school where the other politicals were going.

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His mother decided she had to see him safely to his first day of school. She’d be late to the factory but the foreman wouldn’t fire her. Ma did so much of his job, managing the other women, resolving disputes, that the rest of the women would quit if anything happened to her. It’s not that Chang needed the company. He’d been navigating the city on his own since he turned ten.

Klong Toei wound out from the canal in the centre of the city; it hugged other, more important districts. He walked down to the business district of Silom, where people bustled in suits in the heat. Or up to the wealthy district of Sukhumvit, where large homes were tucked

behind high gates. If you jumped you could glimpse the gardens within. Chang had been quick to use his wandering to learn the place he'd been born and the places he might go. Ma always said to navigate his own path in life. She was, he understood, bursting to see him take the next step. So she used the excuse—how would he find Triam Udom? They had to establish a safe commute—to accompany him that first day.

Ma walked up to the lane to the school, unaware that Chang fixated on the black flip flops that clung like sewage to her feet. She turned to the principal waiting at the gates, but before Ma could open her mouth Chang whispered that he'd rather go through alone.

It wasn't that he minded being a scholarship student. But the sound of ignorance would come tumbling out of her mouth. It would be obvious she hadn't finished high school.

She nodded and turned away with her only handbag clasped in both hands, the proud look still fixed to her face. Chang greeted the principal, and stepped away from his mother.

This meant Ma wasn't so late to work after all, where strangely, Ma's sister still hadn't arrived.

His aunt's motorsai had been clipped by a bus cutting across two lanes to make a turn. Her bike landed on her. They couldn't salvage the vehicle, which meant their only mode of transport was gone. Ma would have been driving her younger sister if she hadn't taken the morning off, and if Chang had known what was happening elsewhere, he wouldn't have dismissed his mother so quickly, would have kept her by his side, and been nicer.

Later, when he should have been grieving for his aunt, all Chang could think about was how he'd tried to shuffle Ma out of sight.

How did shame leak in, Chang wondered. He couldn't reconcile that feeling with the embrace of the two women who'd raised him.

Chang volunteered to change their household registration from three to two. At the local district office Chang drew a number from the ticket machine in the windowless warren, settling into a chair outside the office of a clerk. An official swept through the door with a stack of papers that struck the clerk's desk with a whack.

"Lose these on your way to the post office," the official said.

He hadn't even bothered to close the door. Chang regarded the desks down the hall.

"Quotas from Sukhumvit side?" The clerk asked.

"If you don't mail them, Klong Toei will make up the numbers."

Chang leaned in. The clerk gathered the papers.

"This comes from the top," the official added.

"One of the three?"

"Yes."

Chang faced forward as the official swept out. The steady click of the official's shoes sounded down the hallway. By the time Chang turned back, the papers were gone from the desk.

He'd heard something important. If he could slow his pulse. "The Three" were Thanom, his deputy Prapas, and Narong, who was son of one and son-in-law of the other. They were known as the Three Tyrants because their grip on power was absolute.

Quotas between Klong Toei and Sukhumvit. Chang bit his lip. Klong Toei and Sukhumvit were in the same district. That had to be it. Quotas for the district.

If you don't mail them, Klong Toei will make up the numbers.

Chang sat up in his chair. Numbers and quotas for the district—they were speaking of the national lottery for army service. Every boy aged eighteen had to draw a card.

With the war in Vietnam coming so near the country's borders, the government enforced

conscription with special diligence. If you volunteered to go, you got less time. If you didn't and gambled on the lottery, you could escape if you pulled a black card. But if you drew red, you served two years, and you didn't get the desk job of a volunteer, but were trained to be a real soldier fighting insurgents in the North and Northeast, where the government wanted to stamp out any possibility of the politics of Vietnam spilling into the Kingdom. Each family with a boy aged eighteen hoped for black, schemed for black, thought of nothing but black in the days leading up to the lottery.

The government determined the army quota for each district based on population. If Chang's district was required to send a hundred and fifty boys to the army, and only fifty volunteered, that left one hundred seats to be drawn in the lottery. And if somehow the officials on the Sukhumvit side didn't get their quota numbers, then the whole district's share would be drawn by Klong Toei.

Chang's number was called. He stood, walked, then realised he forgot his bag. He couldn't find the desk until a man pointed him in the right direction. It was a young female clerk, which muddled Chang further. She asked for his paperwork.

Chang fished in his bag for the certificate of death and found it wedged between his Chemistry textbook and a Physics exercise book. He smoothed the crumpled paper with its black border on his pants leg, blinking rapidly to drain his eyes.

The clerk waited without hurrying him. She took the certificate in both hands, and looked down for a moment before saying she was sorry about his—was it his aunt?

His eyes swum. Chang shouted at himself to be an adult—it was just him and his ma now. And he understood what losing the papers meant. What was he going to do about it?

She finished the paperwork and pronounced the record amended.

He nodded and gathered his things.

They had open sewers and no garbage collection; those with electricity hooked their own cables into the city grid. The pattern was poverty, he thought.

Living in Klong Toei increased your chances of a red card. Living in Sukhumvit guaranteed you wouldn't draw one. His side went to fight more than any other neighbourhood.

Chang walked out to the main road.

The boys who drew red cards trained in the army to come back and pour their wages into golden glugs of Mekhong whisky.

He dropped coins into the telephone slot, called three papers, but he couldn't get transferred to the news desk. He implored receptionists that he wasn't some kid—it wasn't a prank, he had evidence—but he was always cut off.

After the last receptionist hung up he slammed the glass panes of the booth. They didn't even shatter. The shaking rage of weak hands and small fists. The smell of stale piss opened up a despair he'd remember.

At home Ma said she wasn't surprised, but her Chang wasn't going to draw a ticket with the rest of them. Leave it to Ma—she'd find a way.

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Ma had seen the owner bring his mistress to the factory one night when Ma was working late. He'd let the young lady pick anything from the rows of handbags marshalled like soldiers waiting for orders. The girl looped bag after bag through the crook of her arm. It wasn't like Ma threatened to tell the owner's wife. One mistress was common—it was the expense of many that could draw ire—but Ma mentioned the visit, and how accommodating the owner had been. It warmed the heart to see love in this cynical era. The owner would understand a mother's love for

her son, then. She'd do anything to spare Chang army service. With her sister gone, Chang was all Ma had left. Could the owner do anything for Ma's bright boy? Maybe move Chang's household registration to the Sukhumvit side of the road where the owner lived?

The owner coughed and said that his son by this mistress was already registered in the house deed that the owner shared with his wife and their four legitimate children. He couldn't add any more, but if Ma could gather a certain sum together, the owner knew an official who might make accommodations for a promising young man. Chang could serve as an officer in the army. High societies didn't bother with the vagaries of the lottery, even if they did live where quotas could be disappeared. They enrolled instead in officer training camp. The networking was beneficial, and the boys were corralled out of trouble.

Chang had been stunned at the amount Ma and his aunt managed to save. Crumpled bills floated out of a small dirt hole, and Ma sighed, saying it was amazing what they could scrape between two women who worked and didn't drink. Coins and paper were rendered into crisp new bills. The official leant forward, palmed the envelope from Ma's hand and glanced inside.

The record was a lined maths notebook, the ordinary glued-together kind. His mother showed a silent glee when the lottery official erased Chang's name from one column and wrote it in another.

Chang would be trained as an officer. Much safer, should the war come.

Chang stood in the white-washed classroom of officer training camp to make his way outside. At the door he stared at the high-born boys who remained sitting, knees jammed to desks. They knew not to rise, understanding by some hidden signal that if it came to war, they were too important to fight.

Outside the cracked soil of paddy fields lay open, waiting for rain. Wind kicked dust, creating a brown haze that hung in the air. They were hours outside the city.

An officer yelled from across the field. Sun stung Chang's eyes. The assembled commoners lined up and ran at a high, sloped wooden wall, scrabbling to pull themselves up and over. On the other side tyres swayed and swung. Chang couldn't cling and jump across. He was knocked around instead by fuzzy figures and spent the rest of the day cursing his shitty eyesight.

*

After dinner and bunk assignments Chang headed back out to the tyre challenge. He wasn't going to spend Sunday doing the task all alone. Chang held back? It never happened.

An hour later, Chang was no more successful. The dim nighttime fields didn't help. Even in daylight, Chang could barely see. What did he expect to do—fly across by intuition?

Abandoning efforts, he walked to the little rounded hut of thatched straw in the middle of a different field, where rainwater urns provided relief from the heat.

Someone inside was shrieking in the half-hushed way of a person trying to hide their presence. Chang wound through the maze, built to give some privacy. What a vision. A stocky kid, naked, hopping foot to foot as he threw water.

“Save some for me.” Chang dropped his clothes. The guy whirled around. “You’re missing yourself and flooding the ground.”

Chang got a small bucket and dipped it into the tank, resisting the temptation to climb right in. He poured the first scoopful. The water dissipated heat’s fingers from his scalp.

“Unused to cold water?” Chang asked. This one was thin-skinned and spoilt.

“Does your clan get a fat load of money to be born with your name?”

That produced a sputter.

“No—only prostitutes, Friday nights,” the guy said.

Chang laughed. The hesitation gave away the lie, but it wasn’t bad. “You high societies aren’t supposed to be funny.”

The guy threw something that Chang swiped at, missed.

He picked it up and handed it to Chang.

A sliding bar of soap. “Thanks.”

“There’s much you don’t know about us.” The water hit the guy and he yelled, undercutting his own bravado.

“I can’t begin to tell you how much you don’t understand about us, but I know you don’t care.” Chang finished soaping up.

“It’s like you have a speech prepared! What’re you doing out so late?” The guy said.

Chang doused himself again. “Trying to figure out a challenge.”

“Sharp Eyes!” The guy laughed.

“So I’m famous.”

The other guy had thought to bring a towel, or someone packed it for him. Chang’s one cloth was still at home. He turned his clothes inside out to dry himself, then he flipped them back, easing himself into the sweaty garments.

They walked outside. “You play cards?” Chang asked.

The guy shook his head.

“Smoke?”

“I have cigarettes.”

“Let’s go.” Did they have better dorms, Chang wanted to know. “I’m Chang,” he said.

“M—call me Det.”

That was endearing. The guy was clearly titled. He’d started to say “m—”, which was “mom luang” or “mom rajawongse”. An M. R. would make Det the son of a prince; M. L. a grandson. Yet Det cut himself off, gave his nickname.

Though the high borns were bunked apart from the commoners, their dorm held the same simple cots. That eased Chang. The group in Det’s dorm was clustered at the end of the long room over a game of cards. They waved but didn’t invite Chang or Det to join them. Det didn’t seem to mind.

In the light Chang could study Det, who set his foot down like it could shake mountains. Chang’s mind went to Muay Thai—the shuffle, the dance—and how to win you had to move in a liquid way.

Det went through his things before unearthing a pack of cigarettes still in plastic. He put

the pack in Chang's hands.

Chang inhaled the dank sweat emanating from his shirt. "Lend me a set of your greens." Chang had guessed correctly—Det had multiple sets. He hopped into Det's freshly pressed fatigues.

Chang plopped onto Det's cot and lit up. "Want one?"

"Don't smoke."

"I'll keep them then." Chang inhaled.

Det shook his head. "Sharp Eyes? That's what they call me?" Det smiled. It was a shy curl.

Chang smiled back.
