

Thai *Vignettes*

Phuket and Beyond

By Steve Rosse

Asia
Inside-Out!

THAI VIGNETTES - PHUKET AND BEYOND

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For Mom, Andy and Mandy

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For the record, Doctor Klemperer, Tristan Jones, T.D. Morin and Alex MacDonald were all real people, as are Neung, Odt, Noi and O. Mem is so real I was married to her for 10 years. I have tried to describe them and their lives as accurately as possible in this book. All other characters are fictitious, and any resemblance to any person, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Steve Rosse

Iowa City, February 14, 2005

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WAIT UNTIL DARK

It is almost six o'clock when the two Japanese girls come into the Phuket Yacht Club's Quarterdeck Restaurant. Thamanoon is standing by a potted palm, his hands elegantly folded around a menu, staring out at the boats on the bay. This time of year, just after the King's Cup Regatta, the bay is full of boats and the hotel is nearly empty of guests. Thamanoon loves to watch the boats. He resents the intrusion of the two Japanese girls, though a thousand years of Asian culture and four years of training in the hotel make it impossible for him to show it.

Six o'clock is the slowest time of day in the restaurant; most of the guests will wait for the evening to cool down before eating their final meal. Kamol is on his break and Wiwat is in an English class, so Thamanoon is alone on the floor. He leaves the shadow of the potted palm and glides forward to meet the Japanese girls.

"Good eefaning, Miss Mikosan, Miss Miyagisan. How are you?" Thamanoon knows the girls from their last stay in the hotel, and he gives them his number four smile with the greeting. They've just come from

the pool, and their hair is wet where it hangs down over their white terrycloth robes. He sneaks a look over Miss Mikosan's shoulder at the boats on the bay. Miss Miyagisan has the best English and she always speaks for the pair.

“We are fine, shank you. And you?” Her words carry the same rehearsed quality that Thamanoon's do.

“I am fine, dank you. Would dis tabuhn be awright?”

“Yes, shank you.”

He holds their chairs and opens the menus before presenting them, all the time smiling and making warm eye contact. Thamanoon makes the best tips of any of the waiters; he has his eye on a new motorcycle and his parents want him to marry Ying, the village headman's daughter. He could have one or the other on his salary, but not both. As he pours their water and gently lays their napkins across their laps, his gaze flits over the heads of the Japanese girls to the bay, to the shadows of almost a hundred masts rapidly lengthening across the flat water as the sun goes down.

Miss Miyagisan orders spaghetti with meat sauce for them both, and some sweet drinks from the bar. Thamanoon takes the order into the kitchen as quickly

as he can and still maintain decorum. He doesn't like to leave the dining room this time of day; he's afraid it will happen and he'll miss it. He stands by the bar and waits for their drinks and watches the sky turning red over the ocean. He can see hundreds of cars and buses lined up on the lookout point at Phrom Thep Cape, and streaks of crimson run down the masts of the windmills at the government power station.

When he brings them their drinks the Japanese girls are each staring into a compact mirror and applying snowy white powder to their faces. He arrives at the table, places the tall glasses topped with fruit and paper umbrellas onto the starched linen tablecloth, smiles at each of them and retreats. At no point does he make any sound. The girls each take out slim cigarettes, light them, toss their hair once, and taste their drinks. They judge the drinks acceptable and begin to talk in rapid giggles.

Thamanoon is watching anxiously now. He's afraid that the girls' order will be ready while it's happening and he'll miss it. The sunset is magnificent, and the tourists on the lookout point are taking pictures; in the dimming light Thamanoon can see the flashes of their cameras. The eastern sky is darkening and a stillness has fallen, the sea is dead calm now without a breath of wind, and despite the vaulted ceilings and open walls on three sides it seems stuffy in the restaurant.

Thamanoon hears the bell from the kitchen and fairly jumps to get the orders. He brings the girls their spaghetti as fast as he dares, lays the food on the table with a grace and economy of motion that would give a bullfighter a long and healthy career, supplies the condiments and cheese and says, “Willderebeanyt’ing else?”

“No, shank you,” says Miss Miyagisan, and Thamanoon is away to his potted palm.

He positions himself so that it appears as though he’s looking in the direction of where Miss Miyagisan is trying to teach Miss Mikosan how to twirl the spaghetti around the fork in the bowl of her spoon, but in fact his attention is completely at sea. He has no thoughts of the new motorcycle now, no thoughts of marriage or his job or the boxing match that he will watch on TV later. His whole world, for this moment, is the bay and the boats.

And as the sun disappears below the horizon, and the long lines of buses and cars begin to creep down the mountain from Phrom Thep Cape, the wind picks up again. But now the wind is from offshore, and the windmills and then all the boats turn to face it, the lighter boats first and then the larger ones, swinging around 180 degrees on their anchor chains like a flock of birds wheeling in the sky. And Thamanoon is rooted to the spot, oblivious to the Japanese girls calling for

more drinks, as in the bloody glow of the dying sun all the beautiful boats are dancing just for him.

THE THREE FACES OF EVE

A man walked into a small tavern on Soi Bangla on the afternoon of an especially hot day in the dry season. He stood in the door a moment and allowed his eyes to grow accustomed to the dim light, wiping sweat off his face with the tail of his Tintin On Phuket T-shirt. When he could make out shapes in the gloom he felt his way across the room and sank gratefully onto a stool at the bar.

“Would you like something to drink?” These words came from a woman of middle age, who had been asleep on the counter behind the bar, waking up at the sound of the creaking wicker stool and the man’s grunt. She looked red-eyed and frazzle-haired, but she was wide awake in a moment and making motions at straightening her clothes. Her name was Noi, and she was 45 years old. Ten years before, Noi had been a fairly well known actress in Bangkok, starting out playing the ingenue on TV dramas. But when they started to cast her as the older sister, then as the scorned wife, and finally as the mother, she turned her energies to producing.

She had some success putting together

commercials for some of the larger ad agencies, then one day disaster struck. She had paid for the production of a deodorant spot with post-dated checks, as is not uncommon in the industry. But the client hated the spot, and refused to pay Noi, leaving her holding the bag on a million baht in bad paper. She left Bangkok, changed her name, and purchased a 50% share in the bar on Soi Bangla. She was drinking herself quickly into bankruptcy and the grave, and she knew it but didn't give a damn.

“I'll have a beer, sweetheart,” said the man. Noi called out to Neung, who was reading a comic book in a chair on the sidewalk in front of the bar. Neung put down her book, in no great hurry, and sauntered inside. She was a teenager, wearing jeans and a Body Glove T-shirt, with fresh skin and a page-boy hair cut. It was a glimpse of Neung, splayed lazily in front of the bar with one leg thrown over an arm of the chair, twirling a lock of her bangs around one finger and moving her lips slightly as she read her book, that had drawn the man to this bar.

Neung was what is known around Phuket as the “Designated Virgin.” Usually this will be somebody's niece or little sister, cute and perky and just “helping out” around the bar since they're too young to work legally. They wash glasses and tend the bar, but they are really just honey to attract flies, which the older girls will then snap up like hungry lizards.

In point of fact, Neung was not a virgin. She had given up that title to a young Englishman named Spencer. He was a sound engineer for a punk band in Manchester, and had come to Phuket when he cut his hand on a broken beer bottle and couldn't twirl knobs any more. In two months Spencer had spent all of his money and a lot of his father's, given himself alcohol poisoning on two occasions, and swept Neung off her feet by claiming to know Axl Rose. He disappeared leaving behind 40,000 baht in unpaid bar bills and a sadder but wiser Neung. The other girls all told her that she was crazy for having given away something so valuable, and she knew they were right, but still and all, she loved Spencer and wished he would come back.

“Make sure it's a cold one, sweetheart. And say, what's your name?” asked the man. Neung pulled the first bottle she could see out of the ice, put it in a foam sleeve and slid it along the bar to the man without answering. She wrote out his bill, looking at him for a moment to take note of some distinguishing feature to write on the top of the bill. She wrote “torn shirt” in Thai on the slip of paper and put it in a bamboo cup in front of the man, and after that he ceased to exist in Neung's universe. She picked up a nail file and leaned against the bar, knowing that Noi wouldn't allow her to go back outside as long as the man was drinking, but she put her back towards him and gave her complete attention to her nails.

“Hey, sexy man, where you come from?” Out of the gloom at the back of the bar another woman glided up to the man and perched herself on the stool next to his. She was painfully thin, except for a pair of obviously augmented breasts. The whites of her eyes were stained brown by years of opium abuse, and she had some smeary tattoos on her arms. She leaned over to the man, pushing her enormous breasts at him and giving him a smile that showed a lot of enthusiasm and some really bad teeth. Over the waistband of her cut-off shorts he could see the top of a C-Section scar. She began to run her hand up and down his thigh, keeping up a patter of pidgin English liberally peppered with the phrase “Gottverdammit!”

Her name was Odt, she was 34 years old, and she came from the Northeast of Thailand. Her first job, other than scrabbling for a living in the fields with her family, was in a “crib” brothel in Bangkok. When she’d worked for two years, and paid off the amount of money her father had received by selling her there, she left the brothel and took a bus for Pattaya. She’d been in business for herself since then, and had never returned home.

A year after arriving in Pattaya, Odt met a young boy from Amsterdam, who was on vacation with his parents. Odt was the boy’s first sexual partner; he fell in love with her, and ran away from his parents, taking

a big stack of traveler's checks with him. His father found them, but the boy refused to leave without Odt, and because his family wanted him back at school, Odt got to see Holland.

She and the boy were married, lived in an apartment off campus, and Odt quickly had two kids. But Father and Mother weren't happy with her, and one day the police busted the boy with some heroin and it was Odt who took the rap. She was sent back to Bangkok without money, clothes or babies; all she carried out of Europe was the word "Gottverdammit!"

It had been 15 years, and try as she might there was no way to go back, not for a girl with a prior drug conviction. In all that time she had not received a single card or letter from her husband. The only address she had was her in-laws', and she knew what happened to her letters there. She had not seen so much as a photograph of her babies in all that time, but a day never went by that she didn't think of them.

The man grew tired of Odt's flirting and refused to buy her a drink or play dominoes. He spotted a friend walking past on the sidewalk, put some money on the bar and rushed out. As he walked up Soi Bangla with his friend, he was asked, "So how is that place you were in? I've never been there."

"It's nothing, really dead," the man replied. "Not

a soul in the place.”