"Clear-eyed and compassionate, and written with real flair."

—**Jeremy Tiang,** Singapore Literature Prize-winning
author of *State of Emergency*

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A GOOD TRUE THAI

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A
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SUNISA MANNING

A
GOOD
TRUE
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EPIGRAM
SINGAPORE · LONDON

For everyone who stood up,
and everyone who made room for them

“Democracy in Thailand must be different than democracy in the West, because Thais eat rice, not wheat.” –King Chulalongkorn

“The Thai people of today are fully awake. They have been able to identify clearly the enemies who plunder them and skin them alive and suck the very marrow from their bones.” –Chit Phumisak

BANGKOK, 1973

I

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 on 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 for an operation. 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.

Det's eyes fly open. Chang has 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.

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 onto 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 budges, 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 where flames are devouring the coffin. One side crackles and caves. A novice uses a rod to slide the window shut and the enormous heat relents.

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.

2

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 towards 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 he'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.

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.

Udom's son has the full lips and dark skin of Kongkwan's side. Det's face at rest settles into a determined expression. Despite the Chitralada 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. 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 hearts 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 what 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 towards 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.

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.

3

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 inside 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.

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 about 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 was 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 only he could slow his pulse. "The Three" were Thanom, his deputy Praphas, 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 swam. Chang shouted at himself to be an adult—it was just him and his ma now. 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.

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.

4

CHANG STOOD IN the whitewashed 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 kid 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 kid said.

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

The kid 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 him 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?" he said.

Chang doused himself again. "Trying to figure out a challenge."

"Sharp Eyes!" The kid laughed.

"So I'm famous."

The other kid 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.

He 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 kid 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's mind. 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. He shook his head. "Sharp Eyes? That's what they call me?"

Det smiled. It was a shy curl. Chang smiled back.

5

THAT NIGHT IN the bunks, Det pulled a sheet over his chest and turned, wishing there was a wall to lean into. He was unused to sleeping near people. Their rattling snores, the dense tart smell, ripples of jokes back and forth.

When did they think? Det closed his eyes. Didn't they get tired of company?

The next day Det stood with the regular recruits. He ducked behind Chang, who had gone back to practise the obstacle course at night. Det had been scared to try it, and relieved when he didn't have to. Not this time. A hot twisting in his stomach carried him over the threshold into blazing sun.

They were going to shoot. Det burrowed into the middle of the pack. He wouldn't miss this too. He had to make himself learn. Det blinked away the sweat. The kings of old could act as well as lead.

The training officer didn't even notice Det was in the wrong group

until the other boys spilled out of the classroom.

"Hey! Get yourself—!"

"Officer, excuse me." Det was careful to keep the question out of his voice. "Just a thought on your plan for today," he said, dropping his voice lower when the officer came to Det's side. If he said it too loudly the officer would lose face. "Wouldn't it be useful for all of us to learn to shoot?"

"But when would you need to?"

Det smelled the chilli garlic on his breath. "Some of us said we mean to learn, and given the makeup of the group, if you don't allow someone… Their parents, a general, a minister, could make your life…" Det shrugged.

The officer was frowning solidly. "You want to shoot? Fine. I won't answer for it if you get injured."

Det allowed himself a small smile as he turned back. They were congregated at the end of the fields aiming for a target the size of a fist painted onto old rice sacks. Without enough guns, they had to practise in teams. The ones who had been training showed the ones from the classroom how to make the correct stance, how to brace against the body, how to pull. For the first time Det's classmates mixed with Chang's set, and the edge of confrontation wore off in the excitement.

Det, paired with Chang, surveyed the gun. It was called an M1 Garand. Chang made some snorting comment about how it came from the Yanks who were losing in Vietnam, but Det didn't care. Now that he was here he was rapt with the weapon itself. The metal was encased in a rich brown wood that shone from years of use. It had a leather strap that Chang slung across his shoulders, and buckles that matched the dark metal.

Chang winced before he even pulled the trigger, curling his right shoulder in. The kick seemed enormous, the sound a roar. The point of the weapon jumped and swung, and Det wasn't surprised when the bullet, long seconds later, barely clipped the edge of the sack.

Chang swore, kneading his shoulder. He didn't pay attention to the gun was which hung loosely in his arm. The whole performance was incongruous with what the weapon deserved.

"Give it to me," Det said, holding out both hands.

The gun was unslung and came in his direction. Det felt he knew the angular form before his hands closed around it. The weapon was heavy, warm from Chang's shot. The tart smell of diesel fumes hung in the air.

Det breathed in. Lining up the front sight post, Det thought of his mother's certainty in him. He exhaled and pulled, letting the gun kick. His shoulder throbbed. His body absorbed the blow as he held the gun softly so it could stay trained ahead. For one kill, one backwards blow.

The bullet arced, then dropped. There was a calm, easy stillness. Det wasn't surprised that his shot met the beating middle of the target.

6

WHILE THE FIRST years of Chulalongkorn University are rushed, the upperclassmen give Det a wide berth. "Join us!" Chang yells as he's led away, but Det only smiles. Important people are never part of the fray. A senior sweeps his hand across a driftwood log before indicating Det should sit. "You don't want to get dirty with them," the guy says, before he is whisked away to torture the incoming class. One student after another is grabbed, blindfolded and marched down the beach.

Det perches on the log. The world tries to protect him. In officer camp he'd been ensconced with the high borns in the classroom, watching commoners like Chang run drills. But then Det had insisted on going outside. King Chulalongkorn was wily, capable. The thought bounces Det off his warped seat. He sinks to his ankles in the sand and churns his way down the beach. You have to act, in order to lead.

He catches up with Chang as his friend's being blindfolded.

"Do me too," Det says, placing himself next in line.

The senior holds his hand out for the next blindfold then hesitates, fingering the cloth instead of whipping it around Det's face.

Chang is spun around; he grins and sways as he swears he isn't dizzy.

Det puts his arms out. No rope binds his wrists. Det waits, knowing how hard it is to resist the permission to treat a high born as commoner.

Chang is pushed into a group. "Now find your way to the ocean! Everyone's feet have to touch the water!"

There are shouts as the first years are shoved in different directions. They are knocked over like bowling pins before Chang begins to corral them. Typical Chang to get the hang of it, calling which way from the middle of the pack.

"Oh, he won't want to get involved with this."

The guy has wide-set amber eyes that flash in dark skin. He wears a ratty T-shirt, loose navy pants and mismatched flip-flops. The set of his shoulders betrays easy authority.

"You are…?" Det says.

"Singh." The guy surveys Det from toe to crown as if he were a museum specimen that he would be pleased to put into a glass case. "What if something should happen to you," Singh says, "then we'd really be on the line."

From the way Singh's accent weighs down his words, Det guesses Singh is from the South. Det presses his lips together. The guy seems to be one of those who resent the power people like Det have. Det's in for teasing, maybe a harsher initiation, but Singh spins away and runs, kicking sand as he goes towards a different group of first years.

Det's arms drop.

More students arrive, giggling and glancing around. They're quickly blindfolded, bound and spun in circles.

Det doesn't recognise anyone. Have the other noble kids not bothered to get on the buses? Don't they want to meet the rest of their class?

The first senior he talked to jutted his chin out. "Want me to bring you back up the beach?"

Det scoffed.

Chang's group has made it to the water, where they're pushed over, then released as they roll in the waves, sputtering.

Just ahead is a crowd of girls. One tall girl shrieks as she rolls a peeled longan in her outstretched hands. Thick strands of black hair cascade down her back and flow over her shoulders, reaching her ribcage. "Don't make me eat it!" she cries.

Look at her hands, slim and tapered. That upward turn at their tips, perfect for Thai dancing. Det watches the seniors push the "eyeball" towards her. She chews it at the front of her mouth, lips pursed until she recognises the taste.

Laughing, the seniors pull the blindfold from her face. Det starts. She's Chinese. He can tell by the way they flock around her that they find her attractive too. She's brushing her hair out of her face, and turns her attention from person to person as she congratulates them on the trick. Their eyes meet; Det flicks his gaze up the beach.

He climbs a low dune, brushes sand off a different log, straightens the crease of his pants. As he turns to sit, the girl appears. She presses her perfect hands together in a greeting and seats herself, tilting back with a sigh. The wind whips her hair into a small hurricane. She lets it fly, closing her eyes. Everything about her is long: long hair, long face that ends in a pointed chin, long limbs that seem to go on forever.

"What did they make you do?" she asks. Her eyes are deep black half-moons in a startlingly pale face. Though she speaks seriously, her cheeks create triangles that frame and lead his eyes to the peaked indent of her full top lip.

"Me?"

"I'm Lek," she says, dipping her head. She speaks in flawless Thai with no twist of a Chinese accent. And she looks—she has the look of the lantom tree, the way it stands in the wind, sways and is not broken. The arched branches, the oblong leaves, the spray of milky flowers with a deep gold drop.

"I'm Det." He manages to sound unsure of his own name. He clears his throat, wondering if he should have snapped open his full name and title like an umbrella giving shade. Mom Luang Akarand, pleased to meet you, but call me Det.

Lek nods. "Did you eat an eyeball too?"

"No," he says. "I'm sitting," he adds, then winces.

Just as he's about to ask what faculty she's entering, someone appears to escort "Ms Lek" to another challenge. "Do you need anything, Khun Det?" the guy says. "I'd be happy to tutor you, if you like. I'll be applying to the ministry this year. I'd love to administer the teaching requirements in the Northeast, where I'm from."

Det bobs his head and he studies his knees. He wanted to have a few months before everyone found out his father is the minister of education. People used to be less forward about their favours; Chula will be tiring, if Det is so directly assailed.

He glances up in time to see Lek regard him as she goes over the rise of the bluff, led away by both arms. She raises her eyebrows and widens her eyes in alarm. Det answers her with a smile, and hopes the warmth spreading through his face isn't too earnest. Unable to help himself, Det stands in time to watch her lie down. The seniors jostle to be the one to tie her ankles together as she becomes a "log" in a row of freshmen for them to roll over. Det rubs his neck, turning away, tightening at the thought of lying next to her.

7

WHEN LEK WAS sixteen she was sitting in class, imagining swatting the nun's white headpiece off her head. She'd dreamed this so many times that when she actually did it—flicked the beak of starched fabric as if it were a repulsive beetle and she was saving the woman—both Lek and the nun gaped, equally surprised to see the wimple sail across the classroom.

"What are you doing without a fastener!" Lek cried, making the class of high school girls, who had been tittering, howl.

Normally the girls knelt to approach a teacher, grinding their kneecaps into the floor, but Sister Agnes had been bent over Lek's desk admiring her essay on *Madame Bovary*. It was an untraditional choice, but the principal, Sister Marie, said great literature superseded considerations of propriety.

Two peaks of crisp fabric rose across Lek's vision, snow-capped mountains crept near. The sour smell of Sister Agnes wrapped around Lek, addling her thinking. Lek reached out and flicked, hitting the heaviest part of the headpiece with a satisfying thwack.

Without the tented folds, the tight elastic cloth swaddling the sister's head and her broody sway as she lurched for the headpiece reinforced the image of a well-fed hen. It was fascinating, their foreign costumery. And in the heat. The rush of circulation to her scalp would do Sister good.

Laughter was still echoing down the hallway as Lek slid towards the principal's office, skipping to keep up with Sister Agnes. They didn't speak, but when Sister thrust Lek into the hard chair in front of Sister Marie's desk, it occurred to Lek that she was going to be expelled. She gaped at what she had done: she who was usually so careful, she whose mask never slipped!

Lek caught a glimpse of the Sister Agnes' eyes as she raised them from her hands to Lek and finally, to the principal. Poor Agnes was going to cry; her shiny eyes collapsed as her doughy face fought a brave battle, wavering before capitulating.

In the book Emma got excited about gowns and velvet ribbons; she measured the worth of her husband, Charles, by the number of invitations to aristocratic parties he received. Emma was a silly creature, and Sister a silly creature for enumerating the woman's heroic characteristics. Lek knew Emma was being held up by Monsieur Gustave, who wrote the novel, to be laughed at, and all this school, run by the Sisters of the Ursuline Order, taught the girls was how to be similarly silly.

Yet despite the certainties blaring through her mind, when Sister Agnes started crying, Lek cried too. It wasn't to plead to stay in the school, and it wasn't a show for forgiveness, but because Lek had pierced the armour of another adult too easily. She was confused by her ability, and a little scared by it.

The principal told Sister Agnes to leave. "Collect yourself," Sister Marie added to Lek, with a warmer look than her words suggested.

Lek told Sister Marie that she was sincerely repentant. She didn't know why she stretched out her hand and took that action.

It was hard to read Sister Marie's expression. The principal was the only foreign nun who spoke Thai, which won her the respect of her students, since they couldn't mutter about her under her gaze. She allowed them to do the customary practices on Teacher's Day, bringing bouquets of needle flowers to each instructor even though some of them, like Sister Agnes, called it "a pagan ritual" and would cross herself in the direction of the Jesus on the cross. This made Lek's blood thrum.

Behind her desk, Sister Marie sighed. The room was bare but for a portrait of Saint Ursula and Jesus cast in iron. Sister Marie tapped her pen against her desk, then looking up, said in English: "Speak to me about the book. Sister Agnes says you are brilliant at literature. Can you show me this talent?"

Lek took a few deep breaths, her mind skittering over the French novel, turning the words into English. Underneath in Thai she wondered if she even wanted to stay here. The worst teacher taught her favourite subject; what of that? She pushed the question away. Lek gazed at the chipping pandanus-coloured paint on the ceiling as Monsieur Gustave's words rose to the surface of her mind:

"Love, she thought, must come suddenly, with great outbursts and lightnings—a hurricane of the skies, which falls upon life, revolutionises it, roots up the will like a leaf, and sweeps the whole heart into the abyss. She did not know that on the terrace of houses it makes lakes when the pipes are choked, and she would thus have remained in her security when suddenly she discovered a rent in the wall of it."

Lek paused, enjoying the rich metaphor of a house besieged by storm. She forgot the danger she was in as she collected herself, and in the style of the school began her analysis.

"Emma has a naive idea of love. Kierkegaard would call this romantic love—she wants the rush, the passion, but her concept can't be a lasting attachment because it doesn't encompass fidelity, which is love bound by something larger than oneself. Love as a force of nature can lead one astray; it leads Emma into the arms of Rodolphe, an unsuitable lover.

"For myself, I want a considered love between two people who bring strengths to the union. I don't believe love is a passion that can force itself upon us secretly, like Monsieur Gustave's drainpipes.

"Everyone knows that streets flood in the monsoon, but the waters always recede. If we understand this, we understand that the onslaught of romantic love can be resisted in favour of a dutiful one. To borrow the author's metaphor, I argue instead: a well-built roof will hold."

From the doorway to the classroom Lek regarded the girls' belled white tunics and long navy skirts, braided hair gathered in two bows that drooped submissively. Row upon row, the excess material matched their full faces and vacuous eyes. Sister Agnes didn't pause the lesson. They were discussing Emma's downfall, which her classmates mischaracterised as judgement meted out by Monsieur Gustave. They thought because Emma was unfaithful, she had to be punished. Lek knew better. Emma created her own undoing; Monsieur only followed along to chronicle what happened. But she kept her mouth shut.

"You will study literature and politics," Sister Marie said at the end of their meeting. "I will phone the headmaster myself."

Lek played the penitent as she collected her books from her desk, and took down the essay taped to the wall where she had demonstrated structure to the rest of the class. She tried to bring Sister Marie's brimming expression to her eyes, and didn't let it slip even when she caught the murmurs. They were the usual things about her squinty eyes and stick-straight hair, her ghostly skin and long features. "Those Chinks, what do we expect of them but disrespect and inappropriate behaviour."

Lek was sorry she'd leave Mei to be the only Chinese in class. Mei should change her nickname to a Thai one. It might help. Lek caught Mei's eye, then tucked her chin into her chest as she headed out the door.

It was going to look like Lek was expelled, but really she'd be going to Triam Udom Suksa. Sister said Lek would have passed Triam Udom's entrance exam if she'd been allowed to take it. Instead, Mater Dei would sponsor Lek to go. There would be other students from China there. Admission was based on test scores, and didn't rely as much on connections. Most importantly, Sister said, there'd be no more praying, and no more pretending to pray. Sister gave Lek a significant look at that and Lek flushed.

The girls had petitioned to be allowed to sing "Mater Dei" in Thai. The hymn was sung in the morning when Sister Marie was already in her office, so when the girls were granted permission they lifted their voices, sitting in rows under the stained glass of the chapel, to belt phony lyrics in sweet harmonies, smiling as though with devotion. Lek was most proud—and now a little ashamed—of how she'd made "tie Aunt Mary with a rope" fit the notes of the hymn. It would appear Sister Marie knew it was Lek who had made up the lyrics.

The fountain in the courtyard made a high, plashing sound. Lek looked around, taking in the plants dotting the edges of the white-painted buildings, the clipped hedge unfailingly neat, as if God's hand guided every branch into symmetric formation. Lek had felt the campus was too withdrawn, tucked away from what mattered, but this morning as she walked to the front gates Lek wondered if someday she'd grow to like the stillness, the shade, that measured, "civilised" life the nuns kept talking about.

The guards at the gate waved her out. The soi wasn't busy at this hour. Just a few motorsai raced by. The school was in the middle of the metropolis, because the sisters had been granted land by a king trying to lure Western missionaries in to educate locals. Well-born women needed to speak French and English, King Chulalongkorn decided. Women swapped simple skirts and a cloth top in the reign of that king for imported lace, puffed pantaloons and self-consciousness. Lek had seen the photographs—how they looked at the camera from out of those folds of material, wondering if the foreign costumes made them civilised enough to be spared colonisation.

It took her almost an hour to get home. This was not just the only place her family could afford—the same king had decreed that Chinese couldn't live in the centre of the city. He didn't want immigrants mixing in the parts reserved for real Thais.

Lek ambled up the soi, going slow in the sun. She remembered Sister Marie's long glance. The Sister had turned to her and asked: "What is the city's feeling outside our gates?"

It was a strange last question to an interrogation that went beyond Lek's understanding. Her books got heavier as she neared the top of the street. Lek waited in line for the bus, moving foot to foot to ease the ache in her arches. This was how she knew the answer. Her two bus rides gave her ample time to absorb the temperament of the metropolis.

There were no open seats but a young man jumped out of his. She sank down. See—he didn't recoil from her smile. Lek pushed the thought away. The insults didn't need to sting. There was good fortune on her horizon.

The bus chugged, and hot exhaust filled her nostrils.

Lek had answered Sister Marie easily. Thanom, a military man, inherited the mantle of dictator in '63. His hospitality might endear him to the Yankees losing a war against barely armed people, but Thais weren't fooled. She could feel the trembling anger shared by commuters. They didn't believe anything they were told by Thanom. His smile masked too much. Lek put this to Sister Marie, becoming animated without meaning to, then hoping it wasn't unseemly to show political inclinations.

Sister had turned to the portrait. She'd seemed to confer with Saint Ursula, the blonde lady with the dazed expression. By the time Sister Marie turned back to Lek, she was at ease. Something had been smoothed out and settled; another mystery, Lek thought, of faith.

Sister Marie announced Lek would study literature and politics at Triam Udom as if that's what they had talked about. "Your eyes are fixed beyond the gates already," Sister had said. "Even though you memorise Flaubert, you know what happens outside too."

Lek hopped off the first bus and waited for the second. She hugged the mystery of what had happened to herself. She wasn't sure what she'd said to bring leniency. Not even leniency, it was grace—what the school taught, and always promised—an unexpected gift, as if Sister Marie reached into the recesses of Lek's mind and intuited what Lek really wanted.

Lek's mind went to Madame Bovary's house in the rain. She started to imagine a well-built roof, one that would route the onslaught of water safely into the ground, leaving Lek to her books, dry, inside. Then she realised she didn't know what houses looked like in Emma's Yonville: were they wood, stone or mud plaster? Because Lek didn't want a teak house, the kind they built in the Kingdom. People didn't know anything about anything here. They were silly, this country, swinging between democracy and dictatorship in a needless argument. The same person stayed above them, still in power, and nothing ever changed.

Her parents had fled here from China. Though she understood why Mao had seemed threatening to her parents, as peasants, they didn't have anything to fear. Her parents should have stayed in the larger country, where Mao, the son of a farmer, could rise to lead a nation. But it was too late; they'd made their home in the Kingdom. Lek gathered herself to succeed in this society. She knew how her family depended on it.

Author's Note

As someone writing in English about events relatively unknown outside Thailand, I feel compelled to point out that this is a work of fiction, where the imagination works on history, digesting it for its own narrative purposes.

Worth noting:

- In 1973 the King and Queen didn't appear at the palace. They had a representative tell the students to disband, and the students agreed to do it. The King did declare the Tyrants expelled, and he is credited with getting involved.
- There was no Chula–Thammasat football match in 1975. All such standoffs were cancelled between '73 and '76 because of student political activity. The idea of the Maiden is made up, but it is based loosely on a woman chosen to represent the school during Loy Kratong.
- Most students fled to the jungle after the massacre of 1976, not before.
- The system of military conscription is more simplified in the book than in real life. The amount of time you serve is actually based on education; if you don't have a high school diploma, as was common in the 1970s, and you drew a red card, you served more time. In

this way the lottery was already skewed against the poor. I felt that this would take too much exposition, and instead invented an instance of believable corruption to indicate the other truth—that the bureaucracy has ways of ensuring that wealthy sons aren't served red cards.

- I compressed and rearranged part of the timeline in '76. Two students were hung on 25 September, and the mock hanging at Thammasat didn't happen until 5 October. Six student leaders turned themselves in that day, so Chang in real life would not have seen the tanks firing on the gates on the morning of 6 October.
- Lek's character is inspired by Cholthira Kladyu's arc of radicalisation, though Lek is younger. I borrowed Cholthira's work on Chit Phumisak.
- The speech attributed to Chang on VOPT radio at the end of the book is a direct quote from the 31 October 1976 VOPT broadcast by prominent student leaders, including Seksan Prasertkul.

How the struggle ends depends on when you stop telling the story. After the events in the novel, the rise of the Khmer Rouge became a cautionary tale for rural revolution. When Vietnam invaded Cambodia, China invaded Vietnam in turn, setting up a clash between Chinese-allied Communists and Vietnamese-allied ones. This split the CPT. In Bangkok, successive coups installed savvy centrist dictators who offered amnesty to Communist defectors. By the early 1980s the revolution in the hills wound down, and former activists returned to Bangkok to assimilate into middle-class life.

The translation of *Madame Bovary* is by Eleanor Marx-Aveling for Project Gutenberg. Caravan's *Songs for Life*, which were protest songs of the '70s movements, was my soundtrack when writing. It helped the book pour out.

I'm indebted to the following works: David Morell and Chai-

anan Samudavanija's *Political Conflict in Thailand: Reform, Reaction, Revolution;* Chris Baker and Pasuk Pongpaichit's *A History of Thailand*; Craig J. Reynolds' *Thai Radical Discourse: The Real Face of Thai Feudalism* Today; Thongchai Winichakul's "Remembering/Silencing the Traumatic Past: The Ambivalent Memories of the October 1976 Massacre in Bangkok"; Benedict Anderson's "Studies of the Thai State: The State of Thai Studies" and "Withdrawal Symptoms: Social and Cultural Aspects of the October 6 Coup"; Puey Ungphakorn's "Violence and the Military Coup in Thailand"; Ji Giles Ungpakorn's "From the city, via the jungle, to defeat: the 6th Oct 1976 bloodbath and the CPT".

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wai

About the Author

Sunisa Manning was born and raised in Bangkok by Thai and American parents. She graduated from Brown University and now lives in California. Her work has appeared in *Prairie Schooner, Mekong Review, The Rumpus* and other places. *A Good True Thai* is her first novel.

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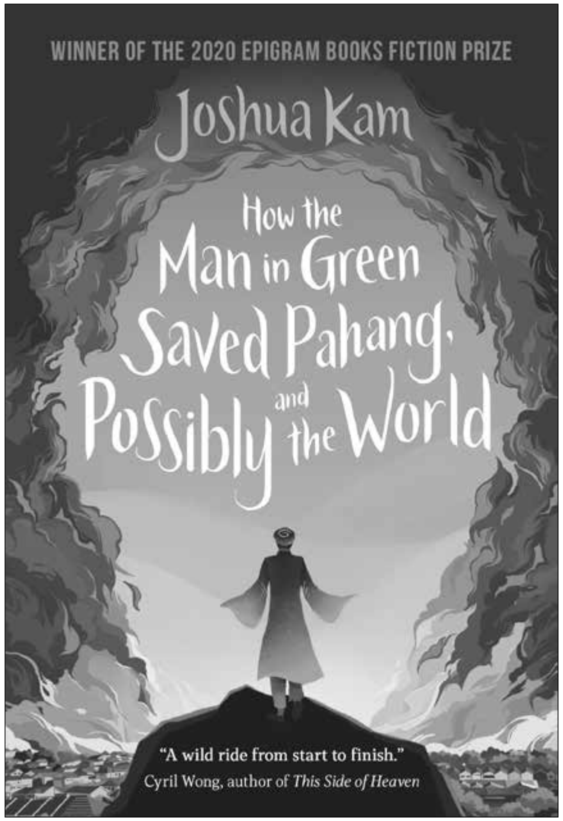
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Enter a shadowy mythology of serpents, Sufi saints and plainclothes gods…

A renegade prophet press-gangs chorister and first witness Gabriel into a wild road trip down the Malaysian coast to fight the Mouth, an existential threat to Malaysia and beyond. Meanwhile, in a sleepy town by the sea, Lydia traces the links between her late grandaunt's eccentric lover and her involvement in the Communist Emergency. As all parties converge on Pahang, Lydia and Gabriel must grapple with the theologies and histories they once trusted, in a country more perilously punk than they'd ever conceived of.

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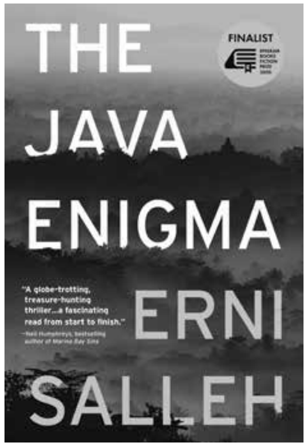
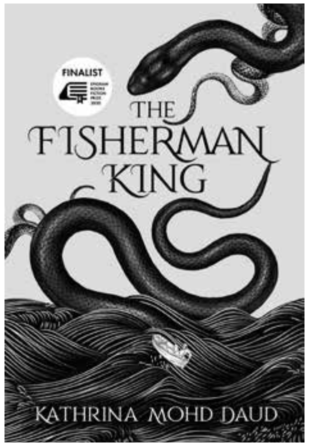

THE JAVA ENIGMA
FINALIST
"A globe-trotting, treasure-hunting thriller...a fascinating read from start to finish."
ERNI SALLEH

THE JAVA ENIGMA

BY ERNI SALLEH

An orderly librarian's life with the Borobudur restoration project is turned upside down after her father dies.

Irin Omar inherits a mysterious combination lock that sends her on a thrilling journey across Asia to locate pieces of an ancient map. With the help of her father's old captain and a dashing salvage diver, Irin finds past and present colliding as she uncovers some of the archipelago's biggest hidden secrets, while discovering a few familial skeletons of her own.


FINALIST
THE FISHERMAN KING
KATHRINA MOHD DAUD

THE FISHERMAN KING

BY KATHRINA MOHD DAUD

Lisan the fisherman has always believed he was descended from Bruneian royalty, and now he says he can prove it.

Returning to the Water Village after eight years, Lisan reconnects with his estranged wife Bathia to recover an underwater treasure that will establish his royal birthright. As the story of Lisan's true intentions unravels, including what he was really doing in those years away, it becomes intertwined with the ancient history of two doomed royal siblings and a fearsome serpent god called the Nabau.

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"Sunisa Manning understands deeply and innately that politics is woven through the strongest and most ambitious fiction, just as it is through life itself."

–**Rachel Kushner,** Booker-shortlisted author of *The Mars Room*

Three young Thais meet during the eventful 1970s: Det, who has some royal blood, has just lost his mother; Chang, a boy from the slums, is his best friend; and Lek, a Chinese immigrant agitating for revolution, meets both boys in college and they immediately fall for her.

The trio's intense relationship heads to a fateful crescendo during the now iconic pro-democracy student protests, when the line between the personal and the political disappears.

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–**Kirstin Chen,** author of *Bury What We Cannot Take*

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