

Blue Skies Over Bangkok

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AT TIMES IT SEEMS TO THIS *FARANG* THAT THAIS HAVE NO DESIRE FOR tranquility or peace in the neighborhood. As an example of this, one will not find any FCC regulations prohibiting the use of amplified broadcasts in public. This goes for megaphones of the mosques, the drive-by street vendors, the neighborhood karaoke enthusiasts, and the tinny tune of the ice-cream man who has just driven by our front gate for the seventh time this morning. His song is a well-enjoyed joke among the Thais that know him. Its lyrics are:

*“Suck, suck. Suck, suck.
La da da da da. Da dee doo doo.
Suck, suck. Suck, suck.
La da da da. Dee doo...”*

The song is by no means the same caliber of the illustrious, hot-potato tenor who warms the frozen Tokyo nights with his unabashed crooning of fire-roasted potato love, but it does hold it's own with its lyrical double entendre that makes Thai people smile and leaves me pondering the pedophilic lore of ice-cream men everywhere.

My neighbor kind of sucks too—or blows might be more apropos. It's not that he's a pedophile or anything, but he produces his own type of noise pollution that is almost as repugnant in my book. He's taken to the habit of vomiting with morning regularity in earshot of our outdoor kitchen. Being no stranger to regurgitation myself, I can sympathize to a point because I imagine his wife is poisoning him. But if I were his wife, I think I'd poison him too. His retching is so timely that I've learned to set my morning clock to it. *Ah, thar she blows: time for my morning constitutional.* And though this is somewhat helpful in the planning of my day, it's truly revolting while preparing one's morning scramble.

I whipped two fresh eggs into a foamy, congealing blob and tried not to fixate on my neighbor's vile crooning or my breakfast's slick consistency. There were familiar voices blaring from the house as Jum had the TV on louder than usual (which is usually pretty loud). Thais, when faced with external noise are in the habit of creating even more noise, surrounding themselves within a protective wall of sound while further adding to the overall sonic discord that I've learned is a part of living in Thailand.

Jum had erected her own barrier so as to repel “barf-man’s” invasions into her privacy. The voices I heard from where I stood were familiar. They belonged to an ostensibly very small group of voice-actors who over-dubbed the Chinese TV serials that my wife watches with religious dedication. Through constant bombardment, these voices have become familiar household inhabitants. At times, it’s comforting having so many people in the home; but at the moment I was being bombarded. I felt the need to get away.

“Sunshine?” I shouted through the window, mimicking voice of the show’s main character.

“What?” she said. It was Sunshine’s voice I heard over the wall of sound.

“Wanna go to Krung Thep?” I asked.

She said, “OK, Sir.”

And that was it. We were going to Bangkok.

Krung Thep: otherwise known as Bangkok. There is a longer much more elaborate moniker for this city of old Siam much like the City of Los Angeles has (*El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles de Porciúncula*); but I won’t pretend to be smart and rattle it off here, for even most Thais can’t remember the name in its entirety. Should I ever make the Big Mango my home, I just might try commit its flowery designation to memory, but for now I’m content to know that its abbreviation is—like Los Angeles—The City of Angels.

It was eleven in the morning, Bangkok was still two hours away, and the bus schedule was running on Thai time—about 30-minutes late. The only people who vocalized their dissatisfaction about this were the *farang*. After a good deal of traveling, I’ve come to observe that many foreigners seem to seek out the failures in their host society so that they can complain about them. I haven’t quite put my finger on their reasons quite yet, but perhaps it’s a method for self-validation or possibly it’s a perverted demonstration of national pride. Regardless, it is a loathsome habit at which Germans seem to excel. I’ve often wondered why some people travel at all when I hear them seething about how this or that and how “this would never happen in my country.”

One German in particular was making me cringe. With what little *Deutsche* I knew, I could tell the guy was being an asshole plus he was speaking English, which made it impossible for me to ignore him. He had a pained

look upon his complaint reddened face and spoke needlessly loud in the manner of someone impatiently trying to exact an answer from a retarded child:

“Vai dost it haff to be like zees! Tell me. I vant to unterstant!” he demanded from the young woman beside him—if not to everyone around him.

His tawny, delicate associate was obviously exasperated and merely rolled her eyes, as did just about everyone else who suffered from his pathetic attempt to succor a deeply rooted anal complex. I flicked another pistachio shell into the trashcan with my thumb and took a swig of tangerine juice as the bus bound for *Ekamai* Station in Bangkok trudged around the corner.

It was a Mercedes air-conditioned coach, though I was sure it wouldn't be up to the Nazi-esque standards of the German who'd be joining us on this tour. I smiled inwardly as I saw that his ticket sat him directly across from the bus's toilet. *“Schizen.”* I heard him mutter. He was right. So much for German karma, this bus was packed full.

As we rumbled through the outskirts of Pattaya the scenery became less familiar, and the congested city sprawl gave way to palm trees and open fields. Through the window I watched as a water buffalo placidly grazed knee-deep in a muddy pond aside the highway. A white crane eyed us as it perched one-legged atop the munificent beast's crusty haunches. I reached up and adjusted the vent on the A/C above me. A feeble wash of tepid air fell out and stopped short of providing any cooling effect. My eyes closed. It would be a long drive to Bangkok.

Sleep was elusive, and my sweat had slicked the surface of the plastic seat cover causing me to lose traction and slide about with every bump and jolt. A cell phone began to play Jingle Bells and forced my eyes open. It irked me to ponder the ever-growing collective of people attached with near umbilical devotion to their mobiles. With their “handy's” on perpetual stand-by, they were constantly bringing their private lives into the public and thus into everyone else's lives.

I said to Jum who was sound asleep, “You know, many of these girls can swap out and reprogram a SIM card faster than I can change my socks, but why can't they change that fucking song?”

She snorted and looked at me with a *why'd you wake me up for that* look.

The heat was getting to me; I was turning German. Quickly, I gathered myself, and with a soothing sip of juice I began a series of mindful breathing exercises. “*Nein bin ich nincompoop,*” was my mantra. It took about three minutes breathing in and out, but finally, I reasoned that hearing Jingle Bells in the heat of a Thailand March occurs for the same reason that some establishments here never take down their Christmas decorations: Thais are festive. However, truth be told, the Mexican Hat Dance—another cell phone favorite—was definitely a better tune for this sweltering little road-trip.

Out the window, six enormous apartment buildings stood as titans—arms akimbo—on the horizon. In the distance they had the look of miniature models from those campy Japanese monster movies, yet they dwarfed all that surrounded them. I tried to count the windows top to bottom and across, but there were too many. Their sheer immensity was threatening and the bleak, gray faces of these concrete colossi verged on depressing but for the flashing, red beacons that crowned them. These were mighty, daunting rulers of the smoky, otherwise featureless, urban skyline. I checked my watch. We were halfway there.

We pressed northward down the bouncing surface of the highway. The bus squished along upon a suspension system made from old mattresses. Due to the vehicle’s length it bobbed like a Chinese junk in choppy seas as we lurched over the crests and scurried down the troughs. There were a few times when we listed heavily to one side that I thought we might capsize and sink; but the sturdy craft persevered, always righting itself with a slow, painful grace.

I sat meditating on the possibility of getting nauseous and looked around the cabin to see if anyone else was suffering with similar malaise. A young boy of about nine stood upon his seat a few rows ahead, sharing the ticket price with his father who sat forward pressed against the armrest. The kid’s head wobbled like a dashboard toy. He had a familiar, far-off look that children get when succumbing to the uncontrollable calls of nature. I too acceded to the fact that there was no escaping vomit for me today and watched without surprise as he began to heave in projectile spouts that shot across his father’s back and pooled in the aisle. It was gruesome to behold, yet I was perversely captivated, unable to look away. I watched his suffering and somehow felt better.

In the aftermath, the boy stood weaving and slaving, but quiet. It was the smell gave him away—not that he seemed to care very much. The pained look had returned to the German’s face as he crinkled his nose and sought the source that vaguely familiar aroma. With sharp eyes he began a mental

passenger manifest until his piercing gaze fixed upon the drool stream that hung four inches off the culprit's chin and dangled toward the floor. He followed the slick thread of saliva down to the masterpiece that was slowly making its way down the aisle. The German convulsed as if jolted by an electric shock and crying, "*Ach!*" he shoved his face into the window curtain to suppress a gag of his own.

No one made a move to clean up the mess—not even the boy's father who sat red-eyed ignoring the stares from those who visually scorned him. Apparently, this foamy puddle of puke was going along for the ride. Most of the passengers pulled their shirts up over their noses or began breathing through their mouths while vigorously fanning themselves with whatever was near. I tossed in a pistachio shell to see if it would float and nipped at my juice. Two up-chucks later our bus pulled into *Ekamai* station and announced our arrival with the fanfare of an egregiously loud horn blast. We disembarked, leaving the sour scent of bile behind only to be embraced by the even more pungent perfumes of Bangkok. I hailed a cab for the American embassy. We had thirty minutes before it closed.

Traffic in Bangkok: It's best just not to look. Those prone to road-stress and feeling vulnerable with someone else behind the wheel are bound to be reduced to a trembling mass of nerves at the mercy of Bangkok's elite metered-taxi drivers. I busied myself by thumbing through the pages of my passport, which chronicled my travels over the past five years. There were several pairs of immigration stamps mostly from Japan and Thailand. I tried remembering each trip. I recalled the whirlwind day-trip to Laos in the back of a pick-up truck and the long, over-priced weekend in Cambodia tramping through ancient Khmer temples. A single stamp represented the blur of ten days in Costa Rica: somebody had forgotten something. The few recent stamps on the last page from Myanmar weren't cause for much reflection as I'd paid someone to go get those for me. The car pulled to the curb and stopped; it was three-o'clock; and I was out of visa pages. I hoped that the fine people at the embassy would be able to help me out with that.

The Citizen Services section of the American Embassy had the fluorescent feel of a schoolroom with uncomfortable plastic chairs to match; but it was air-conditioned and that made up for everything. I handed over my dog-eared passport and an application for more visa pages and was told to take a seat by a cheerful girl with a red, white, and blue necktie. I guessed her name to be Julie, or something like that. I walked around and read the notices on the wall. One informed me that now was not a good time for touring Iraq. *Uh, huh.*

A man in his early twenties occupied two chairs of the front row with a lazy hunch and an overstuffed backpack. I'd noticed his face was swollen along one eyebrow and his face was gnarled as if recently pummeled in a prizefight. I took a seat beside his backpack. It smelled like sweat.

"What happened to you?" I asked. It was a fairly bold introduction, but I was determined to invade his privacy for the sake of hearing a good story while I waited.

"I was... drugged." He said with a hesitance that hinted he was still rather traumatized—even a bit ashamed.

I've become increasingly suspicious of people who've claimed that they've had fallen prey to street troubles here in Thailand. It's not that I doubt this happens, but I'm more inclined to think that many of these people got into trouble by actively participating in less than chaste behavior rather than being the hapless victims they claimed to be.

"Incredible," I said. "Where'd this happen?"

"I was in *Banglampu* on Saturday, but I woke up in the hospital on Monday." He said. It was Tuesday.

"You lost two days on Kao San Road. You're lucky to be alive." I said.

"Yeah." He responded lamely.

Convinced he was hiding something, I just had to satisfy my curiosity and asked, "What were you trying to score?"

His eyes opened a little wider beneath his heavy forehead and he licked a healing cut on his fist-fattened lip. He was quiet for a moment before answering and seemed to be studying me. I just smiled politely.

"E." He said and revealed a puckish grin, then looked over his shoulder. He had the disheveled, paranoid quality of a Leonardo DiCaprio's character in the latter half of the movie "The Beach."

"Fucking A." I said. I could have been anyone. I could have been DEA agent for all he knew, but the he needed to talk to someone—anyone—I guess.

I shook my head and looked into his puffy eyes, searching behind mine for some helpful words for him. A voice crackled my name from the metal box

on the wall, saving me from this lack of anything nice to say. I rose, leaving him; and approached the window. A tidy young man behind the three inches of bulletproof glass beamed at me as he slid my passport back to me through a small dent on the counter. *Definitely gay*, I thought as I leafed through the twenty-four new visa pages numbered A through X.

“How much?” I asked.

“No charge, Sir.” He said, still beaming. “Have a great trip!”

“God bless America!” I said and thanked him.

Leonardo’s eyes met mine as Jum met me at the exit.

“Have a great trip!” was on the tip of my tongue, but I suppressed the urge and told him, “Stay out of trouble.” I winked, gave him a shot from my finger pistol, and walked out the door. *I’m such an asshole.*

It was a short ways down the Wireless Road to the overpass where on the other side we would catch a cab back to *Ekamai* and then the bus back home. As we walked I noticed there were wires everywhere and enjoyed the paradox. Atop the crossing, a soldier of unknown designation stood leaning against the railing. He wore Ray-Ban sunglasses. An automatic rifle was casually slung over his left shoulder, and he smiled broadly as we approached. *He must be Thai*, I thought to myself. He continued to eye us as we approached a suspicious looking stash about halfway across the overpass, but realizing it was the soldiers’ I downgraded my personal security alert level from red to orange. There was water, a magazine, and some dried snacks. It would be a long, boring day for him.

On an impulse I stopped, looked up, and noticed the sky for what seemed the first time in a very long time. It was a perfect cerulean blue, and it hung there with flawless majesty: a heavenly cloak of the Seraphim consoling our sins, vices, and fears; encouraging virtue in this place called Bangkok, the City of Angels.