

Hell Cats and Beach Rats

A Fete Upon the Dunes

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I AWOKE TO THE LOW, GUTTURAL MOANS AND HIGH FREQUENCY HISSING of another pheromone-induced catfight upon our corrugated tin roof. It was a murderous. The thud and clatter of an undersized body being mauled and flailed upon on the thin sheet metal was the soundtrack to this calamitous love scene. There was a day when I first saw them that I thought the feral cats inhabiting our spirit house to be quaint, bucolic manifestations of Thai country living. Now, I know better. These were hellcats.

I lay there hating them for waking me. *I should pity them*, I thought. I tried to for a second or two, but it was an impossible task without a cup of coffee so to hell with them. They raped and wrestled above where I slept. They bit and scratched, ripping and tearing with inhuman claws and fangs. Theirs was a life of constant battle, and when their unnerving, yellow eyes met mine they saw straight through me.

“Suzie’s ready to go!” My wife’s cheerful calls could be heard out the front door, around the house, and through the bedroom window over the clatter of the air conditioner. She’s rarely quiet and often loud.

At least she’s tame; I lied to myself and rose grateful for the distraction from my brooding. We were going to the beach today.

Performing a few morning rituals: I scratched here and there, washed the gunk from my eyes, and mixed a potent, turd-stirring brew of instant coffee and milk. In a moment of inspiration I erected an effigy in the uncanny likeness of Don Austin (my ex-boss) in the bowl of my crapper and eventually slid into position astride the seat of our trusty Suzuki *Viva*. Jum jumped on, and we rode.

Suzie took us along the beach roads, easily weaving through traffic, dodging dogs, and skirting potholes. We took a scenic detour opting for the chirping song of cicadas in the tall grass over the filthy snarls of the baht buses. There were some young Thais playing a version of volleyball with their feet in the dirt of a vacant lot. The air of this back road was damp and fresh. The asphalt smelled of rain. It was nice while it lasted, but eventually we were forced to return to the main thoroughfare and be absorbed into the noxious, sputtering swarm of motorbikes that jockeyed for position at the red lights.

The benzene burners rode in packs. In following the path of least resistance we tended to clump together like schools of fish, nimbly threading the gaps, avoiding and out-running the colossal, lumbering leviathans of the road. There was no benefit to our grouping together nor was there power in our numbers. Even though motorbikes outnumbered cars practically three to one, the sudden breach from a smoke belching tourist bus could wipe out the lot of us without the day-trippers aboard even spilling their tea. Always at the ready were my right finger and toe poised upon the brakes awaiting the unforeseeable emergency full stop: a heart-seizing thrill that perpetually looms along these congested arteries.

Four distinguishable lanes of traffic flowed upon this two-lane road though there were probably more. The outer lanes were slower moving rivulets of motorbikes—too lazy (or scared) to cross at the last intersection—moving in the opposite direction of the main surge. Street markings were for the most part disregarded entirely until something menacing forced adherence to the road's meridians. A lethargic, yellow light flashed above a sinister intersection. *Just try it*, it seemed to say.

Black-armed motorcycle-taxi boys wearing red and green vests whizzed past. They approached this crossroads with what seemed aloof abandon, never hesitating. In contrast, I cautiously downshifted Suzie into a lurching, sticky-throttled crawl as my brain went into overdrive and attempted to process the eight-point cluster-fuck that was soon upon us. As a wafting cloud of chili-laden smoke rendered me temporarily blind, we entered the maelstrom. There was a tiny gasp from behind me; Jum had firmed up her grip on my eternal love handles; and I blinked at the spicy tears in my eyes.

Time slowed down in that instant as if within the surreal, omniscient clarity of a lucid dream. All went eerily quiet. I thought I heard the voice of Master Yoda say, "There is no try—only do." There was no sound of crushing plastic or the metallic scraping of foot pegs upon the blacktop. Nor was there the sandy, burning sensation of tender flesh leaving my kneecaps. My vision returned with the *whoosh* of our emergence from what seemed a certain collision. Remarkably, we'd emerged unscathed and in a moment's time arrived at our destination no worse for wear—save the film of road grit upon our faces and the taste of diesel in our mouths.

"*Viva la Suzie!*" I cheered. We had run the gauntlet and lived to die another day. And not once on this perilous expedition had I bellowed that timeless shibboleth of my father—self-proclaimed master of the highway—*You son of a bitch!*

Jom Tien wasn't just a beach but a fête atop the dunes. A sea of shadow formed under a sprawling canopy of beach umbrellas that spanned the sands beside the murky, emerald waters of the gulf. The coastline was a playground where Jet Ski touts never ceased to buzz the cresting waves just off shore beckoning their potential clientele with their rooster tails spraying high into the air. Bodies dangled doll-like and helpless from Parasails as speedboat captains sadistically towed and plunged their fares from high altitudes, dunking them like human tea bags. The screams of exhilaration carried from the surf as banana-shaped pontoons were intentionally capsized on their rope tows, roughly pitching their riders into the white wash. It was fun in the sun at Jom Tien.

We watched all this from the canopy where trod the endless procession of a third world, mobile bazaar. Its sellers hauled wares of unrivaled variety upon their shoulders and navigated the sandy shadows at a slow, shuffling gait. Their burden was the beach-goer's bounty: barbequed shrimp, crab, and squid; fresh papaya, pineapple and *durian*; hard-boiled goose eggs, and medicinal drinks to assist one's libido. Any Thai dish could be acquired—runners were sent to the restaurants across the beach road. There was ice cream; toys, and kites for the kids. There were palm and tarot readings, two-week tattoos, massages, Thai silk, and lottery tickets for the rest of us. A sharply dressed teen in a freshly starched shirt and red silk tie was peddling a mediocre cutlery set. One could spend the entire day here shopping from the everlasting caravan in the shade. If I were to wait long enough—I came to believe—everything would eventually pass before my eyes and be announced with the *toot, toot, toot* of the hawker's horn.

A flick of my wife's wrist and a short burst of Thai monkey chatter caused a stir in the distance and two icy Singha beers stuffed into Styrofoam cozies appeared almost magically. One can't be afraid to say no in this environment, as these beach vendors were a tenacious lot; but I did say yes to the shrimp because it seemed safest and smelled the least offensive. When the shrimp woman smiled, I saw that she was missing two of her top front teeth. This gave her a certain childlike character, and her eyes twinkled from beneath the brim of her coolie hat as she knelt beside our table and stoked the coals on her portable, pot-bellied hibachi. At fifty baht—a buck and change U.S.—it was a real meal deal: I ate the tails, and Jum sucked their little brains out.

I'd fallen into observing a man with a metal detector as he walked the meandering scum line waving his sonic wand like a blind man. His oversized, black sunglasses were the kind that went over one's regular

eyewear. He tottered side-to-side pausing whenever something caught his ear. I couldn't imagine what he could possibly find of material value amidst the piles of flotsam that littered the shore, and this compelled me to follow him on his search for buried treasure. Tracing his footprints in the hard packed sand of the foreshore, I noted that several sea creatures had met their demise this day. A chubby, white jellyfish had washed aground. Children jabbed at its alien shape with sticks, leaping and shrieking with fear and delight. A spider like starfish lay inert beside a lifeless moonfish the size of my big toe. Hopping, winged insects and tittering birds foraged through the fetid remains of the low tide. There were tree trunks adorned with tufts of green seaweed and clustered with clinging mussels. I watched as the metal hunter excitedly unearthed a spent lighter. Around his feet was a worthless cache of man-made debris. Countless cigarette butts, a Popsicle stick, a kaleidoscope of sea-worn plastic bits, an instant noodle flavor packet, and a light bulb all littered his claim to the riches he knew were destined for him. He'd not soon find his wealth along this tainted water's edge.

With my curiosity fading and my ankles starting to itch, I turned my attention back towards the shade dwellers of the canopy. It was Sunday, and the beach was filled with families. Some were down from Bangkok for a little weekend sea air and a brief respite from city life. These you could tell, as they looked a bit more stylish sitting in their fashionable city wear, dripping wet. Thais dressed up to go to the beach, and they swam in their clothes—all of them: long pants, long sleeves, underwear, bras, and even hats (I'd seen this). The only bathing suits were worn by *farang*, Europeans mostly in Speedos with flat, wrinkly asses and over-hanging bellies. I snickered derisively at the sign denoting the recent ban on freelance elephant entertainment and scratched at the two-days of stubble on my beer-fed chins.

Also inhabiting the canopy were hellcats of another nature. Bargirls and their day-old clientele sought asylum here. They burnt time in this refuge waiting for the bars to open. The patrons looked tired and mainly napped in recuperation from their nocturnal indulgences. Occasionally they would awake to order another "hair of the dog that bit them" or to shamelessly grab at their *pussy du jour*. The hellcats parried this drunken canoodling with disaffected precision.

They cunningly scanned their surroundings from behind cat-eyed sunglasses, as they lay safely hidden within the dappled camouflage of the parasol's latticework. They wore blue jeans and platform heels that created provocative angles from their well-formed legs. They ate with long-nailed fingers keeping a pinky deftly curled away from the food—

poised in an ancient Thai dance—in case they needed to scratch a delicate itch or brush a sea-blown lock of raven hair off a shrewdly penciled eyebrow. They grazed on toasted insects, wood-skewered BBQ chicken organs, and green papaya *pok-pok* salad that had the definitive, pungent tang of fresh baby shit. I watched as a chicken foot rose from a bowl of soup noodles and clawed at the air as if in final act of angry rebellion against that fragrant fare. And, oh how the hellcats drank! Bottles of Thai whiskey, brandy, and rum vanished alongside cases of Coke and soda water. Many Thais were self-appointed mix-masters having brought their own ice chests, bucket glasses, tongs and swizzle sticks. It was obvious that they were well practiced in the art of alcoholism. They drank and ate and talked and laughed through the afternoon ‘til dusk.

The sun had worked its way closer to the islands dotting the horizon, and vendors collected their empty beach chairs and folded their umbrellas. The canopy was dismantled piecemeal, and the shore scene subtly shifted from the raucous water play to the tranquility of handholding strollers winding along the gold-toned sands of the twilight. A wealthy, eccentric Thai (I later saw him drive off in a BMW) had brought his pink-tinted poodle down to view the sunset. He had the manner of someone who obviously loved his dog with more passion than he had ever loved his boyfriend. He smiled and nodded as he sat beside us, acknowledging our presence in an amicable Asian way. The poodle was dressed in a tidy, pink dress with white polka dots and politely lay in the beach chair beside its master. The man wore a light blue denim shirt and poured himself a single malt Scotch (neat). He took a sip and savored it then lit a cheroot in his cupped hands while his hair—dyed the same color as his fluffy companion—fluttered in the breeze.

We people of the beach shared the final moments of the day in a state of subdued wonder as the sky painted itself in a watercolor of pastel blues and vivid pinks. I thought of the poodle and the delicate man with the tinted hair and smiled. The sun dove into the darkened sea; The night had begun; The hellcats could go to work now.