

---

# THE CALCULATOR AND OTHER STORIES

---

By Mithran Somasundrum

These stories were published in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* between 2005 and 2011. In "On Soi Arab" a member of the US embassy in Bangkok tells Vijay about Ning, a Thai co-worker he likes, who has started behaving strangely. And has come into money. Surely she's not stealing embassy secrets? In "Under Sapparn Phut," Oot buys a valuable Buddha amulet for a low price in a night market. But since then, he tells Vijay, someone has been following him. In "The Farm in Ratchburi" a businessman called Nop wants to know why his company is failing. He doesn't have money to pay Vijay, but brings along a 10,000 baht fighting cock as deposit. Nop's life will turn out to be far more complicated than Vijay imagined. In "The Calculator" a human calculator from England goes missing in Bangkok, having drawn the attention of some powerful people.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

First published in a slightly different form in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, May 2005.

### **On Soi Arab**

Although the restaurant was surprisingly dark, it wasn't difficult for Vijay to spot Baines: he was the only customer. Sitting at the far end, by the wall, he wore his usual pained expression. If someone were to meet Baines and hear him talk, Vijay reflected, they'd put him down as a new arrival, still getting used to the heat and dust and traffic, still dazed and irritable from culture shock. But in fact he'd been in the country for four years. As far as Vijay could tell, they'd been four years of agitation for another posting. He didn't like Asia, didn't like the crowds or the smells, and was seldom found away from the environs of the US embassy on Wireless Road.

That's why it surprised Vijay he'd wanted to meet here, in a gloomy Indian restaurant on what the Thais called "soi Arab" – a small, noisy lane off Sukumvit Road that for some reason held most of Bangkok's Arab and African residents. Not that Vijay minded – apart from the beer, the only thing he missed about England were the Indian restaurants.

"Nice place Baines. Did you pick it for the food or the music?" (There was sitar noise whining out of a loudspeaker).

Baines rolled his eyes. "It's better than Chinatown. How does anyone live in Chinatown? Don't just stand there Vijay. Sit down, I'm buying you lunch."

He sat opposite. A candle flickered on the table between them, casting a glow on Baines's dark skin. In such a light he looked malevolent and powerful. He could have been an African dictator himself.

"Or is it a surveillance thing? Are you looking for Al Qa'ida members?"

"Very funny."

A waitress arrived with a stained cardboard menu and Vijay ordered fish masala and naan bread. "I'll have a Heineken as well, if this is on the US taxpayers."

Baines snorted and stared at his own beer.

"Have you seen that new skin whitening ad?" he asked.

"Which ad? The TV's full of them," Vijay replied, even though he had a fair idea of the one he meant.

"The Miss World thing. God."

Vijay thought, I was right about the one he meant. It showed a relatively light skinned African contestant being interviewed next to Miss Thailand. Then as Miss Thailand walks away, we see the African is actually very dark. It's just that Miss Thailand is so *white*, so amazingly *white*, she's actually been reflecting light onto the woman next to her.

"How do they get away with an ad like that?"

"It's because they've got the full range of colours here themselves. Some Thais are very dark. And they joke about it."

"Darkie toothpaste," said Baines. "With a black and white minstrel on the tube."

"They do call it Darlie now." Although, Vijay had to admit, the minstrel was still there.

Baines was moodily picking at his daal. Vijay knew he'd eventually get round to what he wanted, and since it would probably involve work, it was best to wait and hear him out. After all, the US embassy had enough translators to call on. Baines, working with an all-white staff, came to Vijay for the bitching sessions as much as anything else.

“So how's tricks?” he asked eventually.

“Pretty good.” Which was Vijay's standard reply, irrespective of how bad it got. You had to project success if you wanted business. “But we can always fit things in. What's the word count?”

“I'm not talking about translations, I mean the other stuff. Can you fit in investigating someone?” Seeing Vijay looking surprised, he said, “What? It's still 'Translations - Detective' isn't it?”

“Sure, of course. But don't you have your own people for that?”

Baines frowned, “I want to keep the spooks out of this. It's... something else.”

“Okay, fine.” Vijay sat back with his arms folded. Baines was looking down again, dragging a strip of naan through his dal. The candlelight reflected off his glasses. Vijay thought he knew what was coming. When someone had been swindled, they burst into the office and started talking. If the victim was a *farang* (a foreigner), often with a slightly accusatory tone, as though Vijay was one aspect of the country that had cheated them. But when the client looked down at the desk, stared out the window, frowned at the fridge, Vijay knew what was coming next: a variation on the saddest of all sentences, the one that begins, “I think my partner is seeing...”

So he waited and eventually Baines looked up. “There's this Thai woman in my section. Ging. One of the part-time secretaries. We had a restructuring a while back and I

started having to work with her. Most of our part-time Thai staff are middle-aged wives-of-somebody-important, but Ging's a lot younger, and she doesn't come from a rich family. And she's a looker. Her English is pretty okay too. Good enough for me to kid her around. Anyway, it got to be that we'd have lunch together in the canteen, and then we started going for noodles after work. Sometimes on the weekend we'd go to the pictures, one time we took a day trip to Ayutthaya. And you know what? She likes jazz. I mean, man can you believe that? A Thai girl in her twenties who's actually heard of John Coltrane. Who's got her own copy of *Ascension*." Baines sat back and drank some more beer.

"So the problem is?"

He shrugged. "I thought we had something going. I thought she liked me. I was even planning on introducing her to my folks. They're coming out here next month on holiday. But lately there's this whole wall going up. She'll only talk about work, she won't kid around." Baines rotated his beer glass on the table. "And hey, I know how people are supposed to behave out here. I know what's *suparp* and what isn't. I mean, when we were together I kept my hands to myself. Always. I keep wondering what it is I've done wrong. But she won't let me bring up the subject. She's not rude or angry, just polite and formal. It's almost as though she's scared of something."

"But you think there's someone else, right?" Vijay asked, having been through this enough times to know where it lead.

"That's the thing. If there is someone else, then he's some kind of sugar daddy. I mean, a couple of days ago she came to work in a brand new Mercedes, 220 series. They

don't pay *me* enough to drive a car like that. And her clothes are more expensive now. It's designer stuff, I can tell."

"So it's find the sugar daddy?"

Baines swallowed some beer, his Adam's apple pulsing. "Right, that would be it. Find the sugar daddy. I mean, what else is she doing, selling embassy secrets?"

He said it in a way that was both studied and casual. Vijay had the feeling he was experimenting, trying the sentence out loud.

"Baines, do you think she's selling embassy secrets?"

He took a further interest in his beer glass and started rotating it again.

"No. She couldn't be. Anyway, that would be nuts, right? Go out, buy yourself a Merc on the proceeds and then drive it to work."

"Maybe it's double bluff? And you said the other secretaries were hi-so types? I bet some of them drive Mercs."

"Even so. I don't.... No, I can't see it."

Vijay wondered to what extent Baines was trying to convince himself. He said, "These days, tell a taxi driver you're from England and the first thing they want to know is how you feel about the Iraq war. And they're not asking because they think it was a good idea."

Baines sighed. "Tell me about it."

"But you still don't think she's up to something here? You don't want to call the spooks?"

Baines shook his head and then gave a mirthless laugh. "Hey man, what the hell. She probably just found a white guy."

#

Her apartment was in Bangmod. Vijay took a bus out there, and on the ride, studied the photo Baines had given him. It showed the two of them in front of the red crumbling wall of a Khmer temple. Ging wore jeans and a tight white T-shirt with pink polkadots. He was right, Vijay thought, she was a looker. She had that classic Thai heart-shaped face and wide brown eyes.

The ride was a long one. Vijay thought of Ging making the same journey behind the wheel of her 220 series Mercedes. He couldn't help noticing, it was the classic minor wife car. He had Thai friends who even called it that, the *rot mia noi*. He thought about Baines, who'd once said, "When a Thai woman looks at a well-dressed white guy, she sees money and respectability. When she looks at me, she sees an African without a work permit."

From the bus stop, Ging's soi split into sub-sois, all of the same cheap accommodation: five storeys above shopfronts. Clothes hung out to dry on narrow balconies, and through wire mesh windows Vijay could see overhead fans and the clutter of small rooms. At street level there were the usual foodstalls and steaming noodle carts and stray dogs with diseased skin. The sub-sois were all dead-ends, so there wasn't much traffic, just the occasional motorbike winding around the pools left by last night's rain.



It was three in the afternoon, and Vijay was there because he knew Ging was at work.

Under her block was a shop selling bedspreads and bolts of cloth. There were no customers. Behind a small glass counter sat a placid middle-aged woman, arms folded under her ample bosom. Vijay described Ging and told her he was a friend. Which apartment was hers?

“Ging doesn’t live here anymore. She went away.” *Pai laoew.*

“Really! She didn’t say anything to me.”

“Ging’s very rich now,” said the woman, smiling with genuine pleasure at Ging’s good fortune. “She went to live in a condo on Sukumvit Road.”

“So has she changed jobs? Last time I spoke to her she was working for the US embassy.”

“Still there, but I think she has a rich boyfriend.” She laughed and said, “It’s good isn’t it? I should find a rich man to marry me.”

“No problem,” Vijay told her. “I would marry you myself, but I’m poor.” That brought another peal of laughter. He asked about the boyfriend, but she didn’t know him.

As he was walking away, he passed a couple of men sitting at a metal table by a noodle cart. One of them called out, “You looking for Ging?” He had bloodshot eyes and a T-shirt with “Becks Beer” written on it.

“That’s right. I heard she moved?”

“Why do you want her?” There was a slur to his words that made Vijay think he’d been drinking.

“I’m a friend. We haven’t been in touch for a while.”

“A friend from where? How do you know her?”

“Calm down,” the other guy told him. *Jai yen yen.*

“I know her from work. I’m a translator, I work for the American embassy sometimes.”

“You’re an Arab?” his friend asked Vijay.

“I’m Indian.”

“You see, he’s Indian not Arab,” he told Becks.

“Why is he looking for Arabs? Is Ging's boyfriend an Arab?”

Becks glowered at the table and his chubby friend giggled.

“Were you her boyfriend?” Vijay asked Becks. His pal laughed, “In his dreams.

And when he was pulling his kite.” With alcohol-hilarity he put his head back and laughed. “Ha, ha! Pulling his kite!”

Becks glowered at the table.

#

Tor, the husband of Vijay’s assistant, Doi, lent him his car. It was a fifteen-year old Peugeot 205. Vijay knew that on clear roads Ging’s Mercedes would leave it for dead, but there were no expressways between the US embassy and Sukumvit Road, and with any luck the traffic would be as heavy as usual.

It wasn't possible to park directly opposite the embassy anymore, presumably for security reasons, but there was anyway only one sensible way to reach Sukumvit. So Vijay pulled into a *soi* further down, knowing Ging would have to pass him.

In the fading light he read the *Bangkok Post* and waited. Lately, the main news had been Summet "The Massage Parlour King." Tired of being a cash cow, he'd gone to the press with details of the fifty million baht-a-year in bribes he was being forced to pay top police officers and certain MPs. There had been an attempt on his life, and now he was in hiding, threatening to name names.

But in today's paper, for the first time in a week Summet had been shunted onto the inside pages. Instead, the headline news was US and British embassies in South East Asia having been put at heightened alert for terrorist attacks. Underneath the lead story was a long quote from Prime Minister Thaksin, doing his best to reassure the tourists. By the time Vijay had got through Taksin's version of events (there were certainly no terrorists in Thailand; in fact, there was no crime at all), Ging's Mercedes was edging through the traffic. Baines had given him the license number, and Vijay saw it was on a temporary red plate. Which meant the car was straight from a showroom.

He pulled out two cars behind her, and went inching down Ploenchit Road and then over the rail tracks onto Sukumvit. The quick tropical nightfall came down, and by the time they passed *soi* Arab he was using his headlights. Not much farther on, Ging turned into a winding *soi* on her left, finishing at a large walled compound called "President Condo." Vijay gave his ID card to the guard, received a laminated plastic pass, and followed Ging inside. She drove right to the end of the compound (it was five blocks deep – bigger than it appeared from the outside) and turned right. He held back and then

turned in himself. After a while, a light came on at a top floor window and Ging's silhouette briefly appeared as she yanked the curtains together.

Something caught Vijay's eye. In the space between Ging's building and the next, there seemed to be a patch of darker shadow, moving. Then it was gone.

#

It was time to see Baines again. This time the man picked a coffee shop on Wireless Road, close to the embassy. When Vijay arrived he was already there, blowing onto a cappuccino and looking slightly happier. Baines needed air-conditioning and a sense of order. Vijay took a seat opposite and Baines asked, "So, what news?"

"You tell me." The man looked puzzled. "Baines, why did you want to meet me on *soi* Arab?"

"I had something to attend to."

"Concerning Ging? You called the spooks as well, didn't you? I saw their man yesterday, outside her flat."

"Rubbish, I haven't called anyone. The only person investigating her is you. Why, what have you found?"

"She's moved – to a condo on Sukumvit Road."

Baines sighed, "Is that it? Vijay, I could have found that out myself, by asking."

"It's early days," I said. "Give me time."

#

He went back to Ging's old flat and had another chat with Suttiporn, the woman in the cloth shop. He joked with her about Ging's new boyfriend being an Arab – lots of oil, lots of money, right? Suttiporn chuckled, but then said, “That wasn't a boyfriend. He came with his wife.”

“Really? Was he here often?”

“Only once... no, it must have been more. I saw the wife with Ging on the day she left.”

Doi and Vijay set up a regular surveillance of Ging's flat, taking turns to watch from evening till the next morning. It wasn't difficult, as there was a row of shaded parking spaces opposite Ging's block. All they had to do was get down when the guard came round on his bicycle, and usually he didn't look at the cars anyway. The only problem was that obviously they couldn't leave the engine running, so no air-con, and it would look strange for a car to be parked with its windows down. Even at night, in the high humidity of the rainy season the Peugeot became unbearably close, and that made the hours drag by even more slowly.

Still, they had results. Two men regularly visited Ging's block, both arriving long past midnight in a Mercedes with blue diplomatic license plates. One man was bulky, bearded and wore dark suits. The other wore a red checked head scarf, and a white

flapping thawb that made him seem ghost-like in the darkness. Having timed the guard's bicycle visits (he came every half hour), Vijay was able to get out and copy down their license numbers. Mana, a police captain friend, ran a check and told him both cars were registered to the Saudi Arabian embassy.

“Vijay, now what are you up to?” he wanted to know.

“Nothing special,” he promised down the phone.

“So do you what you think?” asked Doi.

It was early afternoon and they were killing time, drinking iced tea in the office. Outside, hard tropical rain lashed down onto Chinatown and sent a damp breeze through the wire mesh windows.

“Could she be taking things from the embassy?” Doi said.

It was looking increasingly likely. And yet.

“There's always the Arab sugar daddy scenario.”

“But two people visited her. And Suttiporn said the Arab man arrived with his wife. So how's Ging the minor wife?”

“Can't Muslims take more than one? Come to think of it, how did Suttiporn know that was his wife? What she meant was, she saw an Arab man and woman, and assumed they were married.”

“It's time to tell Baines.”

Vijay thought of the man in the restaurant, frowning over his unhappy choices: she was betraying either him or his country. Which did he want it to be?

“Let's wait until we have something concrete.”

“Or she gets money some other way. Maybe she’s a woman who has to look for food?” It meant prostitution.

“Doi, Jesus.”

“What? Vijay, it happens. And to all kinds of people. My sister told me about two students where she was studying, at Ramkampaeng University. They paid their tuition like this.” Doi glanced at the photo he’d left on her desk. “Very beautiful,” she said.

“Enough to earn a Mercedes from it? And a condo on Sukhumvit Road?”

“The women at the top earn a lot,” said Doi. “At high class massage places, like the ones Summet owns. Cleopatra, Caesars, place like that.”

But if so, she was only getting two clients and wasn't even seeing them every night. And it still left the question of why she would bother to go on working at the embassy.

“So what we do now?”

“Continue the surveillance,” Vijay said, wanting to sound purposeful and confident, and not just as though he was blindly hoping for something to turn up.

For another week he and Doi spent alternate nights in front of Ging's condo, this time using a Honda belonging to Doi's brother-in-law – Vijay thought the Peugeot was becoming too familiar to the guards. As usual on these kind of stakeouts, he found himself assessing his time in Bangkok. I'd started the translation bureau four years ago, but had never been able to attract enough custom. So I'd begun calling himself a private detective and helping scammed tourists when the police wouldn't listen. Gradually the word had got out and suddenly Thais were hiring him. It was hard to know whether to think of himself as a success or not. He wanted to be a businessman. He wanted to the

nine to five. He wanted to ride to an air-conditioned office in the back of a taxi, sipping a latte and taking calls. Instead it was still cramped stakeouts and backache.

Meanwhile, although Ging never went out, she was visited twice more by the Saudis. Baines phoned on three separate occasions, demanding news of their progress.

“Baines, these investigations take time. You can't just snap your fingers and expect us to know everything. We're not oracles.”

“But that's the thing, man. I think we might be getting back together. I got talking to Ging today and it was almost like old times again. I asked about dinner this evening, and she said no, but wait till Monday. What do you think that means?”

“I'll keep you informed.”

“Of what for Christssakes? What are your leads?”

“Give me some time, okay?”

Baines slammed the phone down.

Saturday was an eventless night at the condo. Sunday should have been Doi's turn, but Vijay told her he'd go instead.

“I've got a feeling about this. Ging said she'd go for a drink with Baines on Monday. That means whatever has been happening must finish tonight.”

“Then both of us should go.”

“No, maybe it's going to be dangerous,” Vijay said, thinking of the embassy terror alerts.

“So then you'll need some help. What are you going to do by yourself?”

“Thanks for that vote of confidence. I'll be fine, alright?”



#

Sunday evening began as usual. Vijay parked opposite Ging's block, cut the engine and prepared to swelter in the pre-rain humidity. At around eleven flashes of dry lightning appeared, throwing her building into silhouette, and then at about half past eleven the rain started. At first it was like a quiet whispering all around him and then it began to really hammer down. There were cracks of thunder, like the sky being broken; and then above the sound of the thunder and the rain beating on the roof of the Honda, Vijay became aware of another sound, that of metal tapping against the passenger window, and he turned to find the barrel of an automatic pointing at him. The gun jerked downwards to the door handle. He leaned across and unlocked the door and Becks slid into the passenger seat, while aiming the gun at Vijay's chest. He ran a hand down his wet face. "You. Why are you here?" he asked.

When the door had opened, the car light had come on, and Vijay had taken in Becks and his gun.

"I'm not telling you."

"What? Why are you not telling me? Look, I'm holding a gun."

"It's a replica gun. It's got replica written on the barrel."

Becks shifted in his seat and glared out of the windscreen. "You think you're better than me just because I can't afford a real gun."

"I can't afford a real gun. I can't even afford a replica."

“You’re always here, you or that woman.”

“Which means you're always here as well.” *How many nights has he spent next to Ging's building*, Vijay wondered, *watching me watching her?* And yet after all that time, he still hadn't thought to bring an umbrella.

“I'm here because I care about Ging. What about you?” he asked. Vijay switched on a small pen torch and gave him a business card, showing him the side written in Thai. Becks frowned at it. “You want her to translate something?”

“Not that you idiot, the other bit. Where it says detective.” Becks assimilated this. Vijay could almost see the idea percolating through his brain cells.

“Who hired you?”

“None of your business.”

“That black man, right? I bet it was him.” Becks gave a sour laugh. “He’s very dark. I told Ging, he looks like the face on Darlie toothpaste, but she said she doesn’t care about skin colour.”

“Well good for Ging. And while we're on the subject, you’re not so light-skinned yourself.”

“I’m lighter than him, I’m lighter than you.”

Then the Arabs arrived. This time it was both of them together, one Mercedes drawing up behind the other. Both cars stopped with their engines running, their wipers still switching from side to side. Becks jerked forwards. “What are they doing?”

“How the hell would I know?”

The Saudi in the thawb got out of the front car, holding an umbrella, and entered Ging’s block.

“What should we do?” asked Becks.

“Just wait.”

“You know, Arabs are dangerous people. Terrorists.”

“That’s not true, they’re not *all* terrorists.”

“Very dangerous.”

The Saudi returned with Ging and a woman in a full black abaya and headdress. Crossing the lobby she gave the impression of a dense knot of shadow gliding through the yellow light.

“Dangerous,” said Becks again. *Antari*. He seemed transfixed by the word.

Ging held an umbrella up for herself and the woman. The two of them stepped out in the rain, with the Saudi guy behind. The Saudi in the suit came towards them, also holding an umbrella.

“I’m going to speak to her,” said Becks, opening the door.

“Wait!” Vijay made a grab at his arm, but Becks was too quick. So he followed him out into the warm rain.

“Ging what’s happening?” Becks shouted above the thunder. Being out there was like standing under a shower head.

The Arab woman saw Beck’s gun and gave a muffled shriek from under her headdress. The two Saudis froze.

“Nittipon, what are you doing here?”

“I’m looking after you.”

A car door slammed and Vijay turned to see Baines splashing towards them. Like Vijay, he was also without an umbrella.

“Baines what are you doing here?”

“I’m doing your job, what do you think?”

“You know, I had everything here under control.”

“Under control? Under control? Look at him, he's pointing a gun at Ging.”

“Oh relax, it's just a replica.” He told Ging the same thing in Thai.

Nittipon spun round and pointed the replica at Vijay. “Stop telling everyone!”

Vijay heard another car door slam behind him, then footsteps and Doi’s voice saying, “You see, you didn't even bring an umbrella.”

He began, “If you'd all just listen to me for once—“

“Who are these people?” Ging asked Baines in English.

“I hired them,” said Baines. “I was worried about you.”

“What is he saying?” Nittipon asked Vijay.

“He’s saying he’s worried about her.”

“What about me?” Nittipon asked Ging. “I’m worried about you too. And you can’t like him – he’s very...”

“What?” asked Baines in Thai. His hands were clenched into fists at his sides.

“He's what? He's what?”

“Old,” said Nittipon, putting his face close to Baines's. “Very, very old.”

“I like older men,” said Ging.

“And he’s bad for you,” continued Nittipon. “Look at all this. Look at what he’s making you do.”

“Nittipon you... you water monitor!” shouted Ging. In Thai it is the most foul-mouthed thing you can call someone. Hearing her say it, Nittipon’s mouth opened and his

shoulders slumped. There was a shocked silence from everyone, while the rain beat down onto them.

“And you complain about my language,” said Doi primly.

The suit Saudi then reached inside his jacket and drew out an automatic. “Okay everybody,” he said in English. “That one’s a fake, right? Well this one’s real.”

Baines grabbed inside his own jacket and Vijay threw himself at him. They hit the wet pavement hard. Something boomed like thunder and above the sound of drumming rain, a windscreen shattered. Vijay rolled off Baines and put his arms up.

“Who do you think you are?” Vijay asked him, “Bloody Bruce Willis?”

The suit Saudi, having dropped the umbrella, was now holding his automatic with both hands, feet shoulder width apart. “Leave the gun,” he said. The force of Vijay’s dive had knocked it out of Baines’s grasp, and it lay on the pavement.

“Don’t point that at him,” shouted Ging in English. “Go on, just finish. Finish everything.”

During all this, the Arab woman had stepped back onto the patio of Ging’s block and had been edging her way back towards the lobby door. Now however, she lifted up the hem of her abaya and made a run to the cars. However, she hadn’t adjusted for the patio being slick with water. Her feet went from under her and she fell heavily. Her headpiece came off, flopped onto the pavement, and there blinking into the rain, looking startled and defenseless, was a man, the eyeliner running in two vertical lines down his cheeks. Nittipon said, in the kind of reverent whisper usually reserved for film stars, “*Khun Summet.*”

It was then Vijay became aware of something orange at the edge of his vision. It was the bicycling guard in his orange poncho, noiseless under the storm. Vijay would always wonder what it was in that particular tableau that first caught the man's attention: whether it was the gun in the Saudi's hand, the gun in Nittipon's hand, the gun lying on the pavement, or Summett "The Massage Parlour King" on his knees in a black shift, peering up at them. Or perhaps it was all of those things at once. Whatever, the man was so stunned he forgot to pedal. He simply sat, turning his head to follow them as the bike trundled past on its own momentum, until it thumped into a Volvo, dropping the guard onto the pavement in a flap of poncho, the walkie-talkie still squawking from his waist.

#

"So he was her relative?" said Doi. It was the next morning and they were back in the office. For once the sky was clear, and the sun was beating in strongly enough to have the venetian blinds half closed.

"A distant one," Vijay said. "Distant enough for him not to have had anything to do with her, nor to have tried to help her financially in any way. But of course, when Summett needed a place to hide, then it became a different matter. In fact she was perfect, because no one would connect the two of them. Apparently, at first Ging didn't want anything to do with him, but he won her round in the end. Most embassies don't pay their secretaries all that much."

“And the Saudis?”

“A couple of embassy high-ups were regular clients of his. Something the religious police back at home wouldn't be too impressed with, I shouldn't imagine.”

“So Summett blackmailed them?”

“More or less. He wanted the Saudis to help him get out of the country. Perhaps he was after an Idi Amin deal. The Saudis agreed to help, but refused to let him stay at their embassy. That's why he needed Ging.”

“I think she's a good person,” said Doi firmly. “Everyone needs money.”

“Certainly Baines doesn't hold any of it against her. And perhaps all this has helped them. I think Baines hiring us, and then turning up at her place with a gun he wasn't licensed to carry – it all showed Ging how much he cares about her.” Vijay leaned back in his chair and put his hands behind his head.

“What you smiling about?”

“I was just thinking that Summett must be on foreign soil by now. I doubt the people at immigration check women in abayas too closely, not without being told they ought to. So once he's safe, I'm just wondering which politicians he's going to finger. D'you want to place bets? We could run a book with just the people in this building.”

“Gambling's illegal,” said Doi. Then she leaned forwards, eyes alight, “But you know who I think he's going to name?...”

The end

First published in a slightly different form in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*, June 2008

### **Under Sapparn Phut**

Vijay's chief occupation that afternoon had been making a chain out of paper clips while watching Doi fan herself with the current issue of *Thai Rath*. It was the height of the hot season, a week away from the Songkran Festival, and translation requests had dried up right along with the leaves on Chinatown's thin trees. The private detective side of things was equally stalled. Maybe it was the weather, Vijay thought. Bangkok was too hot for law breaking.

The clanking metal fan in the corner of the small office swept out a breeze that was too warm to help. Doi sighed and wondered aloud when they'd be able to afford air-conditioning. At that point the door jerked open and Doi's sister, Lieng, stuck her head in. "Not busy," she said, more as a statement than a question, and sat herself down and began.

The problem was work; the problem was Oot. Lieng's husband ran a car repair shop on the Thonburi side of the river. Doi had once told Vijay she suspected business wasn't too good but didn't know the details. Now Lieng was hammering out the small print. Did they have any idea what Oot's mechanics were like? Could they imagine what those men got up to? Take yesterday. They should have been raising the suspension on a



pickup. Only she goes into the back and guess what? They've got that portable TV on and they're placing bets on the boxing. Can you believe it? And where was Oot during all of this? Where did they think? Stuck in the office with his cronies from Sanam Luang, trading his bloody amulets.

She gave Vijay and Doi a dirty look at that point. Sanam Luang isn't far from Chinatown. It was as though she was holding the two of them responsible.

The funny thing was, Vijay did actually find the amulet business interesting, albeit in a completely non-religious way. Sometimes on a late Sunday afternoon when he had nothing better to do, he'd wander around the market by Maharat Pier, which was another big amulet-trading area. He supposed what he liked was the whole sub-culture; the mats on the pavement with thumb-sized Buddha images laid out in rows and the old men on stools guarding them like grandchildren. He liked watching the intense jewelers' eyeglass-examinations, and he liked the patience of the old men. It all seemed so timeless and peaceful.

Each temple produces its own style and particular amulets are valued because they were blessed by particularly devout monks. As reputations rise so do prices. In terms of a hobby, it's somewhere between stamp collecting and playing a stock market where the stocks also protect you from evil. Only the problem in this case was Oot treating it as more than just a hobby. He'd apparently forgotten about his garage. "You know a fortnight ago he was gone the whole week? I phone and he's at Sanam Luang. He thinks one day he's going to make some big deal," Lieng complained. "Always he's been like this. He won't work. He wants a shortcut."

It was another half hour before she'd left. Afterwards, Doi sighed and said, "You're lucky your family are all in England, Vijay." By that time it was four-thirty. Vijay reflected that it probably wouldn't kill them to close early for once, but then you never knew when a client might come in. So he waited for another hour and no one showed. Still, as he told Doi when they headed out, things were bound to pick up soon. Which was true enough, because the next day they did get a customer.

The strange thing was, it was Oot.

When he lumbered in and placed his bear-like body on the chair in front of Doi, Vijay was sure they were going to get the rebuttal. But instead he turned to Vijay and said mournfully, "I think I'm being followed."

Vijay sat up straight. "Why would you think that?"

"When I go to the shops, when I come home, there's always the same car. Silver Honda Civic."

"Oot, this city is full of Honda Civics. They're probably the most popular saloon car on the road. And silver's the most common colour."

Oot shook his head. "I'm a mechanic, I notice cars. Crack on the right side headlight. Little dent on the left side wing mirror, line of blue paint. So I write down the license plate. It's the same car. I'm seeing it for four days now."

"Why do you think someone would follow you?"

Oot winced. In the small wooden chair, with his sloped shoulders and his sad, jowly face, he looked more than ever like a big, exhausted bear. You felt he was going to trudge off somewhere and hibernate. Instead, he said, "I think there's two reasons. The first is

Lieng. Maybe she hired someone like you.” He peered at Vijay. “Or she hired you. Are you following me?”

“No, of course not. And I don’t own a Honda Civic. Or have access to one.”

From behind him Doi said, “Oot, Lieng’s not going to have you followed. Why would she do that?”

“She’s not happy,” said Oot. “I can tell.”

Doi and Vijay exchanged glances. It didn’t seem right somehow to tell him about his wife’s visit. Her complaints were all things she needed to say to him directly, not via a third party.

Vijay said, “Let’s just assume it’s not her.”

Oot’s hand scabbled under the neck of his yellow T-shirt and brought out a gold-chained amulet. “In that case it’s this.” He leaned towards Vijay, so that he could see the Buddha inside the glass disc more clearly. “From Chang Hai temple,” Oot said. “The period of *Luang Por* Tuat.”

Vijay heard a sharp intake of breath from Doi. To him the name meant nothing. She read his blank expression and said, “He was a venerable monk. Lived long ago, the time of Rama Five. A very powerful person, he could turn saltwater into fresh. Don’t look like that, it’s true.”

“By doing what?”

“With his feet. Just stand in the sea and pray, and people could drink.” She flapped her palm at him. “You’re not Buddhist, you don’t know about these things.”

“So I take it this is valuable?” Oot nodded. “How much?”

“Maybe – five *san*.”

“Bloody hell. Oot, you're not a mafia kingpin. You do not want to be walking around this city with half a million baht's worth of Buddha around your neck.”

“I know, I know. But I don't have a safe keeping place. Plus, someone's following me. The *Luang Por* Tuat Buddha can protect you, even from bullets.”

“But I thought you said that's why they were following you?”

Oot nodded. “Probably.”

Vijay thought, God save us all from an amulet trader's logic. “Okay, so the point is these mystery people in the Honda seem to know you've got a valuable— Actually, how did you get it?”

“I bought it at Sapparn Phut. The night market.”

“They sell amulets there?” It was the first Vijay had heard of it. Sapparn Phut is one of the road bridges over the Chao Phraya river. The market appeared every weekday evening on the streets below and around the bridge, running from seven-ish until past midnight. Vijay knew it mostly as somewhere for cheap clothes, amphetamines and porn DVDs.

“I didn't expect any. Was only looking for clothes and then I saw them. He had just a few on a mat and when I looked I couldn't believe it. Plus, he didn't know the proper price. He sold to me for three *san*. I said save it and I'll come back tomorrow. That was five days ago. And for the last four someone's following.”

“And you're convinced it's because of this? There's no other reason you can think of?”

He gave Vijay a lost look of imprisonment. “I'm a poor man. Why else would they follow?”

The answer carried a question of its own. “So Oot, um, where exactly did you get three *san*?”

“I borrowed from the bank. Put up the shop as security.” He turned to Doi and, “I don’t want Lieng to know about this.”

“*Chai*,” said Doi. Right. And from her steely tone it was impossible to tell if she meant, “yes I’m not going to tell her,” or “yes you don’t want her to know.”

Oot rotated his bulk back to Vijay and said, “But it’s okay, I found a buyer. He’s a rich man, works in construction. He’s going to pay five *san* in cash, but he needs time to get the money.” So not that rich then, Vijay thought. “I can make a big profit, but ... there’s this car now.”

“Well, for a start, if you can give me the license plate number I can find out who’s driving it. Apart from that, who else knows you have this Buddha? I’m guessing you advertised somewhere?”

Oot shook his head. “I was careful, only spoke to one person, a real dealer. He made sure it was *Luang Por* Tuat period and then announced it to a few of his regular customers. But he didn’t say who was selling, didn’t mention my name. Everything was very quiet. Very careful.”

And yet, thought Vijay, this Honda had turned up. Like a shark smelling blood in the water miles away.

“Okay, so in the meantime you can keep the Buddha in our office safe. I’ll write you a receipt. Basically, we have to look after the thing until it becomes your buyer’s problem.” Oot took out his wallet, but Vijay didn’t have the heart to charge him. “Forget it, you’re not hiring me. I’m just helping.”

Before he left, with another worried query about them telling Lieng, Oot wrote out the license plate number on the back of a business card. Vijay sat tamping it down on the desk after he'd gone. Doi said, "Are you going to phone Mana?" This was a police captain friend who worked in Chinatown. She made a face. "I don't like to keep bothering him."

"What I really want to do," Vijay said, "is visit Sapparn Put again."

#

The place meandered into a large flower market called Talat Pak Klong that Vijay had occasionally strolled around, and walking up from the bus stop, he found everything he remembered – the un-moneyed young in laughing groups, girls with inexpert lipstick and hot pants, pirate DVDs in wire baskets, an unshaven older guy whispering, *yaa baa* (amphetamines) to anyone who looked plausible. The stalls at Sapparn Phut were metal poles draped with plastic awnings, and when they went up the pavement space all but disappeared, sending the crush of people spilling out into the road, where the motorbikes and the constantly revving tuk-tuks weaved around them. The clothes were hung from the poles or piled high on trestle tables, and from the cardboard signs, were as cheap as ever. In some cases this would be because they were factory rejects, but in most it was because they were second-hand. Vijay wondered if Oot shopped here as a necessity. If so, it was probably that necessity which had led him to amulets in the first place. In fact, perhaps open-sky hope is a factor for any collector – to reach your hand into the jumble and pluck out amazing good luck. And to be fair to the guy, he'd done just that.

Away from the stalls on the pavement there was a fenced-off concrete apron where some kids were playing *takraw*, a piece of string strung across for the net. It was here he found the amulet-seller. A sour-looking old man in a metal folding chair, he'd put his mat down by the fence. He had no lighting of his own, but was reached dimly by the sodium lamps on the road above. Vijay saw he didn't have a huge number of Buddhas to offer. And then as he went over, Vijay began to notice the crowd.

He was used to tracking philandering spouses through air-conditioned shopping malls and so he knew how to hang around and kill time. And now he knew from practice there were two men keeping the amulet-seller under surveillance. He placed both in their late twenties. They were stationed at stalls equi-distant from the *takraw* "pitch" and were doing equally poor jobs of appearing interested in the clothes in front of them. The one nearest to Vijay – goatee beard, single earring, wiry build – was lifting a T-shirt from a rack without even looking at it. His attention was all on the people filing past him, and on the crowd browsing the Buddhas. The man on the far side was of a bigger build and looked Chinese-Thai. Likewise, he was fingering a pair of jeans with no real interest.

Vijay let the flow of the shoppers take him past the old man without even glancing at him.

#

"Whenever you ask for a license plate check I know you're not working on a divorce." Vijay thought of Oot and Lieng: not yet anyway.

"Right, I'm not."

“So... “

“It’s nothing dangerous. And nothing within Chinatown.”

A sigh came down the line. “Okay, you don’t want to tell me about it.”

Vijay could hear the sound of him pressing keys, so hopefully he was helping them anyway. “You know how it is, I have to keep the client’s confidentiality.” From behind her desk, Doi made a face – Oot wasn’t actually paying them, so he wasn’t technically a client. “If I ever hear someone is planning to knock off a gold shop around here, I promise you’ll be the first to know.”

Doi leaned across her desk and whispered, “Vijay, do you think we’re using him too much?” He waved away her objection.

Over the phone, Mana said, “Vijay, I think you use me too much.”

“You know, I really appreciate this.”

“Humpf.”

He put the phone against his chest and said to Doi, “He says it’s fine.”

“Who says it’s fine?” asked Mana when Vijay brought the phone back to his ear.

“The client. He’s pleased with how it’s going.”

“What’s pleased about?” asked Doi. “Lieng says they don’t have any business.”

“I mean the investigation. He’s pleased with how it’s progressing.”

“I thought you told me you’d only just started?” said Mana. “Strange client you’ve got.”

“That’s why I’m waiting to find out who owns this bleeding Honda.”

“Okay, here. Get a pen. The name is Parrista Nivatpumin. She lives on Charoen Krung, soi 44, number 503. And her year of birth is 2522, so that makes her ...”



“Twenty-eight,” said Vijay, thinking again how science-fictional the Buddhist calendar made everything sound.

#

Vijay didn't want to end up simply following the Honda as it followed Oot, so he phoned and explained that tomorrow, unless something life- or business-threatening came up, Oot should stay put. Vijay then checked with Doi's husband, Tor, about borrowing his car, a fifteen-year-old Peugeot 205. He always handed it over with good grace, but since Doi gave him little choice in the matter, Vijay always felt guilty about asking.

When Vijay drove off that evening, he found it was still running smoothly. Which wasn't surprising, since Oot worked on it for free. And now Vijay was working for Oot for free. While Mana helped him for free.

Vijay thought: no wonder we're all broke.

The next morning he left the house at 5 a.m., with a can of Birdy ice-coffee and a packet of Oreos on the passenger seat. He wanted to make sure he reached Charoen Krung before rush hour hit. Running parallel to the river for something like four kilometres, with the financial districts of Silom and Sathorn Road meeting it in the middle, the road was a stream of dusty, exhausted metal at the best of times.

As it happened, he reached *soi* 44 at 5.35 a.m. – earlier than he expected, and when he turned into the tight cul-de-sac it was still dark. Around him were the mostly unlit windows of narrow terrace houses, each with a metal gate padlocked across a small concrete yard. For some houses a car was parked here, where as for others the yard was a

place to store household junk and the car was out on the street. That was the case for the silver Honda, which Vijay spotted first from its cracked headlight. He pulled up some way behind it and then turned the Peugeot around so that he was facing the mouth of the *soi*. Then settled down to wait, relying on the mixture of caffeine and glucose to keep him awake.

As Vijay sat on in the car the sky lightened and the *soi* came to life. Metal gates rattled open as people left for work. Stray dogs slunk in, sniffing for rubbish that hadn't made it to the bins. A man on a motorbike pattered by, his panniers packed with newspapers to deliver.

There was no movement from 503 though. Vijay reached the fiery heat of mid-morning without seeing a sign of life. Finally he had to edge down the windows to breathe inside the suffocating smell of hot plastic. It became a sort of drawn out pain, watching the blank front of a house at which nothing happened, and his attention wandered. He only became aware of the bulky Thai man when he leaned on her bell.

Vijay took in broad shoulders under a white T-shirt and the back of a head shaved almost to baldness. The man rang once, stepped back and craned his head up. Then he leaned into the bell with the heel of his palm and stayed there. Faintly, from inside the house, Vijay could hear the unbroken buzz.

Eventually, a woman marched out, tucking a black blouse into a grey pencil skirt. In perhaps her late twenties, she had a weak chin and long black hair swept back from a broad forehead. You wouldn't say she was beautiful, but it was a striking, stylish face, even when tightened by anger, as it was now.

She dragged the gate open and tried to step forwards, but her visitor didn't move back. He held his palm out, while Parrista (presumably) stood just inside her yard, fists on her hips. Certainly the man's size didn't intimidate her, though Vijay noticed she didn't want to look him in the face for some reason: she spoke angrily to one thick shoulder and then slammed something into that waiting palm. The man sauntered over to the Honda and unlocked it, the right side of his face in profile. Vijay realised the argument had been about him wanting her car keys.

When he pulled away, Vijay chose the car over the woman. He waited and then tucked in behind, as the Honda turned right onto Charoen Krung and then headed up Sathorn Road. It entered *soi* three, a lane of narrow pavements where high walls enclosed condominiums with swimming pools, huge old-money houses, and in one case, a French restaurant called Les Nymphaes. This was where the Honda turned in. Vijay followed, onto a loose-gravel driveway that led to a parking bay behind the building. From the far end of the bay he watched the Honda park, and the man lumber out. He made for a door labelled "Staff Only," and this time Vijay saw the left side of his face. It was clumsily bisected by a scar that ran from the bridge of his nose, across his cheek, to the hinge of his jaw. After he'd gone, Vijay sat in his car, thinking about the ways of getting it.

The restaurant was a high-ceilinged, colonial-style building – a type which hardly exists in Bangkok anymore. Ice-cream white with sky-blue wooden shutters pulled back from its long windows, it had somehow survived in this tucked away corner. When he got out of the car and peered in, I found I was looking at a determined retention of the 1950s. The mahogany-paneled walls with their framed sepia-toned photos and elegant brass lamps should by rights have been embedded with Parisian cigarette smoke. Waiters in

white jackets laid down dishes on starched white tablecloths. In fact, the only thing out of place were the diners themselves. The young Japanese girl with her spiky hair and goth make-up, that Western man with his Bermuda shorts and his chunky, sun-burned knees, the freckled woman with the Ray-Bans and the camcorder on the table. The tourists had brought the new century with them.

And then as the woman shifted the camcorder to make space for a wine bottle, Vijay realised he knew the man who was serving her. The earring had gone but the goatee beard was still there. He'd seen him last running surveillance at Sapparn Phut.

Vijay couldn't, however, see any sign of Scarface, which probably meant he worked in the kitchen. Perhaps the management didn't want him scaring away the customers. Vijay heard a foot displacing gravel and understood this was only part of the reason. The rest of it was the fact that Scarface was standing behind him.

He was still in his street clothes – jeans and the white T-shirt pushed out of shape by his solid belly. Seen front ways on, the scar was even more arresting. It ruined the left side of his face, while the right side, taken on its own, gave him the smooth unmarked look of an over-sized child.

“You followed me,” he said.

“I don't know what you're talking about.”

“I saw your car in the *soi*.” He gave a thin smile. “I saw you before you saw me.”

“I came here for lunch. What does your employer think about you hassling his guests?” The right side of his face softly absorbed this news while the left side scowled. It was like getting the good cop/bad cop treatment all at once from the same person. He

widened his stance and tucked his thumbs into his belt, which made him seem even more cop-like. “I think you want to come with me.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

He took out a mobile and texted something. Inside the restaurant, Goatee Beard came back into view holding a mobile of his own. He spotted them through the window, gave a brief nod and turned and left. “He’s coming also,” said Scarface, and gave a smile of either innocence or malice, depending on which side of his face you were focusing on. “We’re going back to the garage. Say hello to amulet man.” He added, “You see, I knew you’d want to come.”

While they waited for his friend, Vijay thought about Goatee Beard and then about Parrista – the eyes, the broad forehead, the weak chin that a goatee didn’t really help. “So, is his sister getting tired of lending her car? Or does she just not like what you’re up to?” The surprise registered on the unmarked side of his face, and then he said, “Why would you care?” Now that he was off-balance Vijay wanted to take the initiative.

“We’re not going to the garage, we’re going to my office.”

He gave a spectacularly lop-sided sneer. “Think so?”

“The thing you want is in my safe. Oot, the man from the garage, will meet us there.”

He thought about it. “Where’s your office?”

“Chinatown. On Yaowarat Road. I’ll drive slowly and you can follow. Don’t worry, I won’t lose you.”

He gave his yin-yang smile again. “You’re not a good driver. You couldn’t lose me even if you tried.”

#

Vijay pulled out of the *soi* onto Sathorn Road and checked his rear-view mirror for the Honda. Having made sure it was there, he phoned Oot. The man must have been sitting with the mobile by his hand, because he picked up instantly. “Oot, I’ve got a question about your dealer friend. Can you trust him?”

“Yes, of course. Vijay, he’s a good person. He taught me about the Buddhas, which one to buy, which one not to. And he introduced me to some of his customers. Helped me very much.”

“It’s just that only a tiny number of people knew you had this amulet. Everyone needs money, Oot.”

“Not him. Khun Monchai is rich. Lives in a big condo on Sukumvit Road. He doesn’t deal for the money, only for his interest.”

“You know he’s rich or he just says he is?”

“Vijay, I know. Whenever we meet he takes me for lunch in the city. A big meal and he always pays.” Oot giggled. “And you know, I don’t even like French food so much. But he enjoys it, so I don’t want to say.”

*Oh good grief.* “Oot, what restaurant do you go to?”

“Very expensive. On Sathorn Road—“

“Called Les Nymphes?”

“You know it?”

“Oot, I want you to meet me at my office. We’re going to have a chat with some people about the *Luang Por* Tuat Buddha.”

“People in the Honda?”

“Correct.” Vijay waited and a sigh came down the line. He sounded weary and accepting. “Okay, I’ll come.” After Vijay shut the phone he debated calling Mana. It would be the safe thing to do – play the percentages, as they said. But then if he had the right hunch about what was going on, it was better not to have the police involved. Vijay fumbled the phone back into his trouser pocket and wondered if he had the right hunch.

As it turned out, when Vijay got to his office there was a further problem. The heavy traffic on Sathorn had led to Oot getting there before him. No big deal in itself, except in this case Lieng had already been ensconced, complaining to Doi. When Vijay entered, three pairs of eyes regarded him with a combination of reproach, hostility and warning. “Why didn’t you tell me Oot hired you?” Lieng wanted to know.

“Yes, Vijay, why didn’t you tell us?” Doi asked from behind her desk, and then gave a nod that seemed to say, “run with it.” Oot gave him a look that said, “why didn’t you tell me she’s here?”

“He hasn’t hired me as such, I’m just advising.”

“Three *san*,” said Lieng. “And he put up the shop as security.” The two of them were sitting in front of Doi’s desk, Lieng glaring at Oot and Oot staring glumly at the wall’s flaked plaster.

Vijay’s desk was at right angles to Doi’s and back up against the window. Behind the ‘L’ where the desks met was the office safe. Vijay looked at it and, hearing footsteps on the stairs, thought about the *Luang Por* Tuat protecting you from bullets. Then

Scarface came in and peered about him, looking half threatening and half startled. Goatee Beard was behind. He jerked his thumb at the two women and said, "Who are they?"

"They?" asked Lieng. "Who are you?"

Vijay wheeled his chair out and said, "One of you can sit in this." Then he perched on his desk and regarded them all. "We're going to have a chat about the *Luang Por Tuat Buddha*."

"What it's to do with them?" Lieng asked.

"What it's to do with you?" countered Scarface.

"She's his wife," Vijay said. "Why don't one of you take a seat?"

They were both still standing, arms crossed. "We're waiting for someone," said Scarface.

"In that case, let's talk."

At that point there were more footsteps on the stairs. "How is it their business?" asked Lieng. She tried out a scowl at Scarface and then looked away, disconcerted. The door opened and the old man from Sapparn Phut shuffled in, looking as sour as before. "You need to fix that lift," he said. Without prompting he took the vacant chair, and once seated, adjusted the creases of his trousers with great care. His assistants stood one at each shoulder, as though posing for a Victorian family portrait. The old man gave the office a look of general contempt and then said, "Translator-Detective? You can't decide?"

"I'm playing the percentages." He added to Lieng and Doi, "This is the man who sold Oot the Buddha."

"Then he can take it back," said Lieng firmly.



The old man turned his head in slow increments. He hadn't deigned to acknowledge her existence up to now. With a thin abbreviation of a smile, he allowed her the right to an opinion. "Of course," he said.

"You'll take it? Oot, that's settled," she told her husband.

"I've already found a buyer," said Oot, still peering at the cracked wall as though his future was written there.

"But we don't know when he can get the money. We have to pay the bank."

"Exactly," said the old man. "Listen to your wife." He pointed to the safe. "It's in there? Can I see?"

"Not yet," Vijay told him. "Oot?"

"We can make a profit." He dragged his attention away from the wall, finally. "Lieng, he's buying for five *san*."

She told the old man, "We'll keep it."

Again the abbreviated smile. He was maddeningly sure of himself. "I don't think so. You can't sell this, you don't know anything about Buddhas. If not for your dealer friend you wouldn't even know what it was worth."

"What dealer friend?" asked Lieng.

"Khun Monchai," said Oot.

"It's his property now," Vijay said. "It's his risk."

"Khun who?"

"If you sold it cheaply, too bad. You don't have any claim on it now," Vijay said.

"Have I met him?"

The old man slammed his fist down on the armrest and glared at Oot. “He cheated me. I asked him for five *san* and he said he couldn’t afford. So I sold for three because I’m a kind person and this is what he does. It’s not fair!” It was a child’s tantrum, but coming from that aged face it became threatening. You felt this man had a lifetime’s experience of getting what he shouted for.

“If you’ve sold it already, it’s too late,” said Lieng.

“You think I can’t make trouble for you?” he asked. “You think I don’t know Bang Khlo? I knew that place when it was *klongs* and coconut trees. I talk to people there and no one visits your garage again.”

“Before you start making threats,” Vijay said, “You should think about what I could do to you.”

That received a sneer. “You think?”

“Why not? It’s pretty obvious what your operation is. I used to be a regular at Sapparn Phut, but I’ve never seen anyone selling Buddhas there. And you know why? Because honest, law-abiding people sell them in daylight, or in well-lit shops. Not at night, fifteen feet below a sodium lamp. And that’s not to mention him—“ Vijay pointed at Goatee Beard, “—and another guy watching out for cops. You’re selling fakes, or thought you were. That’s why you let Oot beat you down. It’s quite ironic really, isn’t it? If you’d been doing this under natural light you might have realised you’d got your hands on the real thing.” From inside the tight skull of a face, the eyes glittered at Vijay. “One of my friends is a police captain here. If you want to start getting visits from plain-clothes cops that’s your lookout. Not their jurisdiction, I know. But believe me, they can still give you plenty of trouble.”

“And what about you? You think I can’t give you trouble? You have a work permit? You want to stay in our country?” His dry claw of a hand curled into a fist. He hammered down on the armrest again. “He cheated me. I had a real Buddha and he cheated me.” And this, thought Vijay, from a man selling fakes. “You think you can cross me? People like you? You’re failures and you know it. He’s a failed mechanic and you’re a failed translator.” He turned to Doi and said, “Why do you stay with the *kheak*? What’s the matter with you? Can’t type? Can’t spell?” Doi glowered at him without replying. He turned back and jerked his thumb at her. “And she’s a failed secretary. There are millions like you in this city, millions. You have no idea about business. You have no idea about life. You try and annoy me, you have any idea what I will do to you?”

For a moment no one spoke – he’d sucked the oxygen out of the room. And then Lieng said, “We’re not frightened of you.” She turned to her husband, but Oot had taken on that lost look of imprisonment again. He said quietly, “Okay, I sell.”

“Oot!”

And then he raised his head: he wasn’t completely beaten. “I’ll sell for four *san*.”

“Oot,” cried Lieng, “You don’t have to sell for anything.”

Vijay could see the old man considering. He said, “If that’s not a good enough offer you can leave now.”

The man gave Vijay another look of contempt. It wasn’t in his nature to win graciously. “You show me the Buddha first.” Vijay let him examine it and then stuck the amulet back in the safe. The man asked for Oot’s account number and said he’d transfer the money at an ATM. “I’m not the kind of fool who brings such an amount in person,” he said, which Vijay presumed was a dig at Oot for returning to Sapparn Phut with three

*san* in his pocket. Even though, presumably, the old man had insisted on cash in the first place.

After he'd trooped off with his henchmen, Scarface still looking both blank and furious, Lieng said, "Oot, why can't you stand up for yourself for once? That's one *san* profit we've lost."

"It doesn't matter," said Doi. "It's done now."

Before things could go any further, Vijay said, "Oot, when I was driving back here there was a knocking sound from the engine. Can you take a look?"

"Tor didn't tell me," said Doi.

"It just started."

Down on the pavement, Oot stood by the car, waiting to be handed the keys. Instead, Vijay said, "That Buddha really is a fake, isn't it?" Oot gave his slow hibernating expression, but Vijay wasn't buying it this time. He realised a bear was the wrong comparison for Oot. An iceberg would be a better one – moving in invisible increments and three-quarters hidden. Vijay said, "Everything I worked out at Sapparn Phut you worked out for yourself when you first went there. Not five days ago, but the week before. Lieng said you were gone for all of that week. That's when you were scoping this out, following each of them in turn. And doing a better job than me, it's got to be said. The breakthrough was the restaurant, wasn't it? Lieng hadn't heard of khun Monchai because he doesn't exist. He's a wish fulfilment, this rich dealer on Sukumvit who shares his contacts. You went there with one of your friends from Sanam Luang and acted out the whole it's-a-real-Picasso scene while that guy with the beard was filling your glasses. It was a gamble all right, but what the hell, he bit."

Oot giggled and said, “And what can they tell the police? I sold them the fake they sell me?”

“Never mind the police, what about what they can do to you?”

He waved his hand. “Vijay, it’s all bluff. That old man doesn’t know big people. If he did, do you think he’d be selling fake Buddhas from a mat in a night market? He talks good, but I followed him for two days, I saw how he lived. Only thing is, I needed someone with a safe. And I thought, maybe he’ll bring a gun.”

“Brilliant. What was I supposed to do if he had a gun?”

He blinked. “You’re a detective.”

“Oot, you’re playing with fire. You know that, don’t you?”

“Vijay, my last job I raised the suspension on a pickup. They paid me six thousand baht. Parts cost five thousand. Have to pay two mechanics each three hundred. It’s only four hundred for me. Never become rich like this. Always it’s a fight. And Lieng ... she’s not happy.”

“I don’t think the problem’s money. I think she’d be happier if you gave her more attention.” Vijay raised his hands. “Okay, okay, I know. Marital advice from the single guy. But still.”

Oot said, “If you want a better life, sometimes you need to be fast,” and then he opened his eyes wide. He was looking past Vijay, peering out at the bustle of Chinatown, at the gold shops and the heat-exhausted crowds and the trays of lottery tickets at the edge of the road and the motorbikes weaving through the hysterical traffic, at the dismaying rush of money, which was all around them and everywhere.

The end

First published in a slightly different form in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*

October 2010

### **The Farm in Ratchburi**

The middle-aged Thai man came into the office like a bull. He strode into the centre of the room with his head down, looking preoccupied: a busy sort of bull with appointments to keep. The sleeves of his white shirt were rolled up above the elbows and there were twin patches of sweat under each armpit. A burgundy tie was knotted under a collar which looked awfully tight. He raised his meaty forearms to form an inverted “V”: twin karate chops. In Thai he said, “You’re a detective.”

“And a translator. We do both here.”

“Nevermind about translating. I’m a busy man.” He peered around the office as though expecting Doi or Vijay to contradict him. When neither of them did, he added, “I need someone who can find things out. What do you think? Are you that kind of person?”

“Sure. That’s what we’re here for.”

“Good. Because I don’t waste time.” He took out his wallet and extracted a business card. “Noppoporn Wirarut,” he said as he handed it over. “But you can call me Nop. Freight Forwarding,” he added, pointing to the card. Vijay looked and sure enough,

it said, "Freight Forwarding" under his name. "You don't waste time in freight forwarding. Time is money."

"Quite," said Vijay.

"So look. I'm going to come to the point. Business is not good. And that's the point. I want you to investigate my business."

"And do you have any suspicions why it's not good?"

"Yes!" It was a loud, snort of a reply. "Should I tell you or should I let you investigate? I don't want to prejudice your results."

"Nop, you should definitely tell us."

"Right. I hired a new sales manager, interviewed him myself. Seemed good. But since he came we've been losing money. I want to know what he gets up to."

"But aren't you in the office with him? I mean, don't you know what he gets up to?"

Nop shook his head. "He's out a lot looking for sales. And I'm a busy man, I have a lot of ... business interests."

"Okay, well, if you give me his name we can see what he's doing. The charge is two thousand baht a day plus minor expenses and petrol money. We usually ask for the first two days up front—"

"Ha!" said Nop and made the twin karate chops again. "I thought you were going to say that. You see, at the moment I have a problem with cash flow. Liquidity."

"We can compromise on the advance. I'd like to get something, but—"

"It's okay, it's okay. I came prepared. I'm a businessman, I know what it's like. Business is all about trust. I want you to trust me." And with that he turned, re-lowered



his head and charged out of the office. Doi and Vijay looked at each other. She opened her mouth to speak and before the words could come out, Nop had charged back in. He was carrying a hemispherical bamboo cage in one hand and some newspapers in the other. He spread the newspapers on the floor and dropped the cage on top of them. It came to just below his waist. Vijay began to get a bad feeling. “Okay,” said Nop and went back out. He returned carrying a startled fighting cock that he popped under the bamboo. The bird ruffled its feathers and glared at him. “Here’s your guarantee,” he said. “This is Daeng. He’s a ten thousand baht bird. What I mean about trust. I can’t give you the money yet, but until you’ve finished investigating I’m going to let you keep Daeng.”

“You know, that’s probably not necessary, I—“

“What? You don’t think he’s a ten-thousand-baht bird? Listen, you take him up to Ad Carabao’s farm in Chachengsao and I guarantee Ad Carabao’s going to tell you that’s a ten-thousand-baht bird. He’ll probably want to buy him.” Nop karate chopped. “But you can’t sell Daeng, of course. It’s all about trust.” With that he went out again, and then came puffing in with a large sack of raw un-husked rice. “You’ll have to feed him three times a day. He needs to keep his weight up. And put some water in a bowl. You see? I trust you to feed Daeng and you trust me for the money.”

Vijay couldn’t argue with the logic, and so he settled for getting details of Nop’s sales manager. The man’s name was Sawang Tientong and according to his C.V., recited from memory by Nop, he was thirty-seven years old. Also according to the C.V., he’d had five years’ experience as a sales assistant in the Heng & Co. freight forwarding company. The general manager there had given him a glowing reference and explained to Nop, over the phone, that while he was perfectly happy with Sawang’s output, he

couldn't yet promote him – his current manager was perfectly capable. So Sawang had gone off to get his promotion elsewhere.

“Right, I have to be back at the office,” said Nop. He checked his watch. “I'm late already. You need something you call.”

Daeng craned his neck to watch Nop leave. Despite being a ten-thousand-baht bird, you could see he'd been in the wars. There was pink angry flesh visible on his chest and on the hinge of both wings. His remaining feathers were mostly black, other than the dark red splash at the tail that had obviously given him his name. After the door closed, Vijay said to Doi, “Well, this is different.” Hearing him speak, Daeng swiveled his head and stared.

#

As usual Vijay borrowed Doi's husband's car, a twelve-year-old Peugeot 205. And as usual Tor handed the keys over without complaint, which made Vijay feel guiltier than if he'd just moaned about it.

Nop's office was in a four storey building on Charoen Nakorn Road, in-between a furniture shop – wardrobes and bookshelves out on the pavement – and the wonderfully named, “Angel Reinsurance Broker Co. Ltd.” A small *soi* curled behind these buildings. Following it round, Vijay passed the staff-only car park for Nop's place. A bit further on he turned the car around and waited with the radio down low. Sawang's C.V. was on the

passenger seat. Nop had returned to drop it off and feed Daeng a brownish-red paste that he squeezed into pellets with his fist. (“We don’t want parasites, Vijay.”)

The *soi* was more of an alley than a lane, and there was little to see except high walls and loading bays and at one point on a wall, written in chalk in Thai, “If you want amphetamines wait here at eleven pm.”

After an hour a guard opened the wooden gate of the car park to let out a Nissan Teana. It had the license number Nop had written on the C.V. Vijay let Sawang turn left at the end of the *soi*, and then as soon as he was out of sight, gunned the Peugeot. He followed the man for about thirty minutes, into the bumper-to-bumper traffic of Silom Road. The Teana got halfway down and then stopped outside a handicraft shop called the Tien Chan Gallery. Vijay pulled up a few doors behind, left the engine running, and zoomed his digital compact into the shop’s plate glass window. The LCD screen showed Sawang talking with his hands, smiling and being disarming, and one arm and half a leg of the woman he was talking to. The rest of her was obscured by a large wooden dragon. Eventually he handed over a business card and came back out. Edging the Peugeot back into the traffic, Vijay reflected that at least he was trying.

And he continued to try, stopping at a second handicraft shop (Lai Mai Antiques) on Silom to leave another business card and then heading out in the direction of the port, where he enquired at a furniture warehouse (Siam by Design). Even if his sales patter was lacking, at least he wasn’t doing anything dishonest.

As Vijay was thinking this, the man took the Teana out onto the expressway in the direction of Dao Khanong. Vijay paid the toll and went after him, knowing he was going to have trouble. Sure enough, the Teana eased into the fast lane and accelerated away.

Tor's Peugeot couldn't live with that 2.3 litre engine. Behind Vijay a BMW came up and flashed its lights. So he pulled back into the middle lane and chugged along, wondering what to do next. It occurred to him that, according to his C.V., Sawang was heading in the direction of home. Vijay couldn't think why he'd be going there at 2 pm, but he didn't have any other leads, and Nop was paying for the petrol, so what the hell. He came off the expressway, onto the Rama II Road, bumped along past a construction site and then turned into Sawang's *moo bann*.

This was a grid of *sois*, entered through a security gate where Vijay had to hand over his ID card. On the other side of the gate were broad tree-shaded pavements and plenty of speed bumps. The houses were all detached and of a comfortable size. You knew that come evening there'd be Toyota Fortuners and Izuzu MU7s parked in driveways.

Vijay found Sawang's place eventually, and there was the Teana sitting outside. It was still only 2.30 pm, so he parked in the shade of a peepul tree and waited for the man to head back out. At around five, school children began ticking back home in their white-shirted uniforms. By seven the streetlights had come on and it was obvious Sawang wasn't going anywhere. Did he really think these were acceptable hours? How could he when he'd already worked in freight forwarding?

As Vijay drove back to Chinatown he thought of how hard the man had tried in the handicraft shop, how disarming he'd been, chuckling away with heaving shoulders, inviting the woman into his good cheer. And Vijay realised what he should have done after Sawang had left.

#

The next day Vijay hunted out his Lonely Planet guidebook for Bangkok, put on a pair of good jeans and his one and only silk shirt. He hoped the look said “tourist with money.” To keep up the look he returned the Peugeot to Tor and travelled to Silom by taxi, making sure it stopped directly in front of the Tien Chan Gallery. The woman inside saw him alighting. By the time he’d reached her door she was already holding it open with a bright, professional smile. Vijay nodded and tried to look like a serious shopper. Which wasn’t easy, given the shop. He was surrounded by monstrous Chinese carvings – fierce robed warriors brandishing halibards, dragons with bulging eyes – you felt diminished standing under them. Who bought this stuff? More to the point, what did they do with it? Moving further in he found a knee-high stone lion which he supposed he could be credibly interested in.

“Twenty-thousand baht,” said the woman, moving up to his shoulder. He had an unsuccessful try at lifting it. She giggled. “Real granite,” she said. “Handcarved.”

“I like it, but I bet the shipping’s going to cost.”

“You don’t worry sir, can arrange everything for you. Have a special rate for this shop.”

“Yeah, thing is, I’m actually quite concerned about shipping. It’s just that ...” He realised he’d chosen totally the wrong object. “I’m a bit worried about breakages.”

“Sir? It’s real granite.”

“I know, but that’s the thing. A friend of mine had a stone lion shipped from Thailand and when it arrived the nose was missing.”

“How can the nose be missing?”

“God knows. That’s what the freight company said, you know, it’s carved from one piece of stone, how can it be missing? But I’ve seen the lion and the nose definitely isn’t there. My friend thinks it was chiseled off. Some kind of fetish.” The woman was now looking at him weirdly. “Tell you what, can I have the name of your freight company? I’ll email my friend and check it’s not the same one.” The woman gave an irritated glance and clicked away on her high heels. She returned from her desk with Sawang’s card, which Vijay made a great show of copying into the flyleaf of his guidebook: “Sawang Tientong” and underneath in red embossed letters, “Heng & Co. Freight Forwarding.”

So that was half the puzzle completed. Sawang hadn’t left his last employer at all. The remaining question was why he’d chosen this particular shop. And Vijay already thought he had the answer to that one. Outside, he flagged down a taxi and asked for Charoen Nakorn Road.

According to the bell push, Nop was on the third floor. When Vijay leaned on the outer door it opened, and so he went up the musty stone stairs without bothering to ring. At the third floor landing there were only two doors – one was locked, while the other opened onto a small cluttered office. On the other side of a wooden counter a young woman was sitting at a computer. Her hair was dyed an incongruous blonde and either she was following the craze of “big-eye” contact lenses, or she’d been staring at her monitor for way too long. Behind her were three metal desks piled with files, and behind

them a glass partition with two more desks, one empty, the other occupied by a young guy eating mango slices out of a plastic bag.

No one seemed to notice his entrance. He leaned on the counter and asked, “Is Nop around?”

“Nop?” asked the girl, with her huge Sailor Moon irises still on the screen. Vijay leaned over a bit more and saw she was playing solitaire. “Khun Noppaporn. Your boss.” She clicked her tongue and looked up with a puzzled expression. “Is he expected?” Vijay asked.

Looking at him oddly, she went off to the glass partition. He heard her saying in Thai, “There’s a *kheak* here asking for *pii* Nop.”

The guy came out from the back, licking his fingers. “Yes, hello? Can I help you?”

“Hi, I’ve been hired to do some work for Khun Nop, and I need to see your client list.”

“Khun Nop hired you?” This was apparently weirder than wanting to know his clients.

“Do you want to phone him and check?”

The guy slouched back to his desk, ate another mango slice, licked his fingers again and finally decided he was willing to call. After a brief conversation he looked up and waved Vijay in.

All Nop’s clients were in a single Excel file, listed alphabetically, and so they didn’t take long to find: Tien Chan Gallery, Lai Mai Antiques, Siam by Design. Sawang was clocking off at two because he didn’t want to bleed Nop dry too quickly. Vijay

considered phoning in the news, but then decided to wait. After all, Sawang could just say he'd handed over the wrong card, forgot it was in his wallet, hey what do you know? He needed more proof and thought he knew where he could get it.

#

As Vijay stepped into the office the ripe, farmyard smell hit. "God." Doi shot a look from her desk. "Think it's bad for you? You're the one who's out driving. I'm sitting all day with this chicken." As though knowing he was being disparaged, Daeng stuck out his chest, strutted for a couple of steps and then dropped a wet green sludge onto the newspaper. "And he keeps doing that! Vijay, I'm not cleaning after him. I took this job to be a secretary and improve my TOFEL score. You didn't say anything about animals."

"I didn't think there'd be any. But look, don't worry, I've just about got this cracked." Vijay pulled open the top drawer of their battered green filing cabinet and began hunting. "Do you remember Khun Rit? The guy whose wife was having an affair with her gym trainer? If he can do me a favour then we could have this finished." Doi humped and went back to her translating. Finally digging out his number, Vijay phoned Rit. The point being, he worked at Thailand's Company Registry. Vijay had suspected the *moo bann* was far too upscale for a lowly sales assistant. Sure enough, when he gave Rit the name "Heng & Co. Freight Forwarding," it turned out Sawang was on file, listed under directors. Vijay thought, let's see you talk your way out of that one.



“And how are you doing, Rit?”

“I’m bench pressing sixty kilos Vijay.”

“That’s good Rit.”

He phoned Nop and told him to come to the office. Then Vijay sat back with his hands behind his head. “It all came together in the end.”

“You think I gave him too much food? He’s crapping so much.”

“Possibly. But he’s a ten-thousand-baht bird, we need to keep his weight up.”

This was confirmed by Nop, who arrived carrying another sack of rice in case they’d run out. “And I’ll clean the cage as well.” He waved a handful of newspapers at them.

“That’s not necessary, you can take him with you.”

“What?” asked Nop.

“Our investigation is over. I know why you were losing money.”

His eyes bulged. “You do?”

Feeling pleased with himself, Vijay pushed an invoice across the desk. “Two days’ work, plus I’ve added ten litres of petrol money, mostly from driving out to Sawang’s place.”

He explained what he’d found: Nop looked stunned. “I can’t believe it. I ask you to find out if someone’s cheating me, and guess what? They’re cheating me.” His mouth dropped open. “Ha, ha,” he said with despair. He was staring rigidly ahead. He looked like something from the Tian Chan Gallery.

“There we are then,” Vijay said.

Nop nodded.

“All finished.”

“Mmmm.”

“Nop, is there anything else?”

“Who knows? Who knows what else is going on in my life?” He flung out his arms. “Maybe I’m being murdered by someone.” Vijay couldn’t think of any reply to this, so he waited. Finally, Nop said, “There’s something else, Vijay. I think you should follow my wife.”

#

“Your wife, Nop?”

“We’ve been having ... problems. I always thought it’s because of business, because we’re losing money. But now I think maybe she’s seeing somebody. I need to know.”

“I can do that. You’ll have to give me an up-to-date picture of her. And I need to know what her habits are. Does she work?”

“She has a few little deals she does. Just to keep busy. You know how it is, she’s bored if she’s at home all day. You have a pen?” He wrote down their address – it was an apartment in the centre of the city, near the Chidlom BTS station. With a bit of luck Vijay could give Tor his car back and use the monorail.

Nop dug out his wallet, opened it and looked sadly at the contents. “Vijay, you think it’s okay if I pay you just three thousand right now? Have a problem about money coming in. But it’s okay, I’m a businessman, I know what it’s like. I’m going to let you keep Daeng.”

He went out crumpling up the old newspapers. After the door closed, Doi hissed, “Vijay! The chicken's still here.”

Vijay shrugged. “He’s a businessman, he knows what it’s like.”

“He knows what what’s like?”

Vijay drummed his fingers on the desk and listened to the sound of Chinatown traffic drifting in through the wire mesh windows. “Doi, this isn’t helping.”

#

Opposite Nop’s condo there was a dinky little 24-hour coffee shop – white tables, tomato red seats, chessboard floor tiles. At 8.00 am Vijay bought a cappuccino and settled himself at a stool facing the window. Outside, the traffic was inching through morning rush hour. It should have been a sight to wince from, but to Vijay these glimpses of the city were always glamorous. After success finds me, Vijay thought, my daily commute will look like this. I’ll head very slowly to an office block on Sathorn Road. The kind of place that has a Starbucks on the ground floor and an information desk in the granite-floored lobby. And no livestock anywhere in the building.

As he was the only customer he placed his heavy rucksack up on the stool next to him. The weight came from a photo album. When Nop returned with a picture of his

wife, Vijay told him one wasn't enough. People often looked different in real life, and so the more pictures he could see the better. He also explained that for this kind of work he liked to look through old albums, it gave you an idea of the subject's personality. Vijay explained to Nop, "It's all about personality."

And so now he had one in the rucksack, and another at home on his desk. He leaned the album up against the window, to be able to see over it to the glass-walled lobby of Nop's building. He leafed through to the picture he'd been studying earlier. Nop and his wife, Suppaporn. She was roughly his age, fairer than him and still good-looking in a haughty sort of way. In the photo they were holding hands, under the shade of a mango tree that had borne fruit, looking proud but self-conscious. You felt the photographer had coaxed them into that pose. When he asked about the picture, Nop said it was from their farm in Ratchburi. Waving his hand, he said airily, "Just somewhere to go on the weekend. Get away from business. You know how it is."

In the picture he was in a "working guy" outfit – jeans and a denim shirt with his sleeves rolled up, while Suppaporn was dressed the way you'd expect for a middle-class Bangkok woman denied air-con: sun hat, dark glasses and a long-sleeved blouse – every inch covered so that, pray to God, the sun wouldn't turn her moisturised skin brown. Looking at the two of them, Vijay wondered why he'd spun Nop that whole needing-to-see-your-photos tale in the first place. And now that he had them, what had he learnt?

As he was pondering this, Suppaporn came out of her building and waved down a motorcycle taxi. Nop had said this was how she got to the Chidlom BTS station. Vijay left three twenty baht notes under his coffee cup, hefted the rucksack and went out to hail a motorbike for himself. He'd already bought a one-day pass for the Skytrain, so he could

follow her wherever she went. And as the day dragged out, there was a lot of following to be done. First down to Tonglor Station, then all the way up to Phaya Thai, then back down to Asoke. Brisk and business-like in a navy blue skirt and sensible blouse, she was taking young professional types around condominiums. She had one of those combined phone-PDA things, and was always either talking into it or tapping it with a stylo. All of which made her terrifically easy to follow.

One result of the government finally extending the monorail system had been a mini-property boom. In a city of grid-locked traffic, everyone wanted the convenience of living near one of the stations. Clearly Suppaporn was doing well out of this. In fact, judging from the number of clients, she was doing a lot better than Nop. Vijay couldn't see how anyone could describe her day as "a few little deals." Perhaps it hurt to admit she'd ended up more successful than him?

Vijay also couldn't see where she was going to find the time for an affair. She barely had time for lunch. It was only around 2 pm that she finally decided on food. (Up to that point all Vijay had eaten was a sausage in a bun, ripped out of the packet and crammed into his mouth in the Seven-Eleven next to Tonglor Station). Unfortunately for Vijay she chose Emporium, a high class shopping complex connected to Phrom Phong BTS, and then decided to eat at the Greyhound Café – one of its priciest eateries. He decided he couldn't in all conscience stick lunch there on Nop, and went off to Boots for some energy bars.

She was at one of the café's outside tables, looking down on Emporium's marble-floored lobby, two levels below. Vijay was behind her, standing by the brass rail, looking down at the lobby also. With Suppaporn's table only set for one, he let his gaze wander

away from her and onto the crowd drifting in from the BTS stop – expats needing air-con and the reassurance of all those global brands (Nokia, Jaspal, Guess), middle-class Thais dressed for work, eye candy in high heels and short skirts on the arms of older men; and a guy in a white T-shirt and polyester trousers who came in and grimaced. With an A4 manila envelope tucked under his arm, he made his way down the aisle, scowling at the shops. Vijay found himself thinking of Nop for some reason (because he was dark like Nop? Because he was of a similar age?) Entering the Greyhound Café section of the aisle, the man wound his way between the tables, until he was in front of Suppaporn. He stopped and *wai*ed. It was the *wai* you gave a superior – palms up high, level with your forehead, and Suppaporn's was the classic boss's *wai* – hands lower down, fingers barely touching. So no affair there then. But just to be thorough Vijay took the compact out of his pocket and zoomed in for a couple of snaps. One as he arrived and another after he'd sat down.

The man slid the Manila envelope across to her, and while she examined its contents, began talking. There was lots of shoulder shrugging from him, raising his hands with his palms up, smiling and trying to make eye contact as she examined his documents. If forced to make a guess, Vijay would say he was apologising. Eventually Suppaporn must have said something critical, as the man stopped talking, looked serious and nodded his head. She leaned into the table and probably, from the respectful look on his face, spoke again. Then she took a call on the PDA, waved over a waitress and was back on the move.

After she'd left, the man shuffled his documents back into the envelope. He noticed her half-drunk wine and finished it in one gulp. By now the waitress had returned

to clear the table and he raised the empty glass to her in a bitter, ironic toast. Watching it all, Vijay felt as though a ghost had walked over his grave. And then he knew he had to follow the man, not the woman. Which he did, onto two different buses and, with a sinking feeling, back to his shabby office above a laundry. By then it was almost four o'clock. Vijay debated going back to Chinatown, to see if Doi wanted any translations proof-read, but decided what he really needed was some quality time with Nop's photographs.

He carried a couple of bottles of Leo beer up the five floors to his one room flat and (at last, at last praise God!) got the damn rucksack off his shoulders. After a shower, he sat at his desk shirtless, pulled the fan up close and, with the beer on hand, cracked open Nop's second album.

This was from further back in time, and Vijay had to admit, Nop had been good looking in his younger days. He was leaner then, and had his hair combed back into a quiff with a thin, David Niven-style moustache. It was the old fashioned Thai film star look and Vijay thought he played up to it a bit, cigarette sticking out of the side of his mouth, squinting into the sun. These earlier pictures were from the farm in Ratchburi. In all of them Nop was hamming it up in full "working guy" mode – dark blue Thai farmer's shirt, jeans, a *pakowma* wrapped around his waist. Mostly he'd had himself photographed in the act of planting: look at me getting my hands dirty. Funnily enough, he and Suppaporn were less tactile in those early shots. They usually stood apart, separated by whatever Nop was putting into the ground. Going between the two albums, you could see how the farm had come on over the years – kapok trees drooping their long brown fingers, chili plants growing wild, towering banana palms, *koon* trees and their

yellow April flowers. From the position of the wire fence and the blue mountains behind, Vijay matched up the present day photo of Nop and Suppaporn under the mango tree with a picture of its planting, decades before. Nop was kneeling by the sapling, giving the camera his film star squint. Suppaporn stood a few feet away and stared at Nop. There was a look of discovery on her face, as though she had, only now, spotted something that had been under her nose the whole time.

Vijay closed the album and drank some more beer. He thought he finally understood what the photos had shown him.

#

“I need to sit down,” said Nop and fumbled for a chair. He plunked himself on the other side of Vijay’s desk. It was nine in the morning and the bird smell wasn’t too bad yet. (“But just wait till midday,” Doi warned. “Just see what happens when it gets hot and there’s no wind.”) Nop put his elbows on the scarred wooden table and placed his head in his hands. “I don’t know what to do about you Vijay. Every time I hire you to find things out – you find things out. I have to stop hiring you.”

Vijay couldn't resist asking, “There isn’t anything else you want me to investigate?”

He shook his head. “You’ve investigated my life too much. She’s really having an affair?”

“That’s my deduction, based on the assignation I observed. I have supporting photographic evidence.” He produced the photo he’d printed off – Suppaporn in The



Greyhound Cafe opposite the man in the white shirt. He hoped Nop wouldn't notice there was no place setting in front of him.

"This is the guy?" He gave a hot exhale of air, as though he'd been stabbed. "How can she have an affair with *this*? He looks just like me."

"Like you how, Nop? You mean he looks like he works for her? Like you used to?"

"I always thought she'd leave me for a businessman. One of those guys with his big deals and his BMW."

"So you became a businessman yourself? Convinced her to put you in charge of the freight forwarding? Though according to my friend Rit, she's still the sole director."

"And look how that turned out," said Nop glumly. "I didn't think our sales manager was good enough, so I fired him and hired Sawang. And now she's having an affair with this."

Vijay didn't have the heart to keep it going. "Nop, it's not an affair. Jesus. He works for her. Like I just said. And do you know what he does?" Nop shook his head. "He's a private detective."

"Ah-ha," said Nop, and looked away.

"And why would Suppaporn hire a private detective, do you think?"

He put on a deep frown and began stroking his chin. "Now there's a puzzle, Vijay. There's a real question."

"And I think you know the answer to it. He was hired to investigate you."

Nop held up a finger. "How do we know this guy is a detective? He could be anyone."

“Nop, I know. I followed him back to his office. And don’t change the subject. Why would Suppaporn want you investigated?”

He spread out his hands. “Who knows? Who can tell how women think? No offence,” he added to Doi, who’d stopped work and was watching the two of them.

“She suspected you were up to something she didn’t approve of. What was it you said to me – it gets boring if you’re at home all day? So you went back up to the farm in Ratchburi and found a hobby. Breeding fighting cocks.”

“And why not? There’s nothing illegal about breeding *gai chon*. Okay, so betting on them’s illegal, but there’s nothing against breeding.”

“And yet Suppaporn didn’t like the idea?”

He waved a hand. “Bangkok women, you know what they’re like. She was convinced the mafia was going to come round, or some bent cop was going to try and get involved.”

“So let me guess, you told her you’d quit and she didn’t believe it?”

“One day the farm manager told me there was a guy hanging around the morning market asking questions. At first I thought it *was* the local mafia, but then he said the car had Bangkok license plates.”

“And the fighting cocks?”

“What can I do? If she finds out it’s going to make her crazy. I have to get rid. But everyone knows I need to sell. I tell you, getting birds to fight is a cut-throat business. No one gives me a fair price. I’m almost giving them away.”

“All except for Daeng.”

“Vijay, I can’t give away Daeng. He’s a ten-thousand-baht bird. He’s going to be the Kao Sai of cock fighting.”

“So you brought him here to the city, invented a whole story about needing someone investigated and dumped him on us.”

He turned up his palms. “I was driving around Bangkok all day. I didn’t know where to go and then I saw your sign. It’s so strange, you know? Translations-Detective, I never hear of such a thing. And then I thought, a small place like this, maybe you just...”

“Take the money and don’t do anything?”

He sighed. “I suppose I’m not a businessman.”

“Maybe Suppaporn doesn’t want you to be. But look, can’t you just leave him with friends?”

“Bangkok’s not like Ratchburi. I asked everyone I know but they all refused. They complained about the smell. I don’t know what the problem is. You don’t think he smells bad, do you?”

Vijay waved a hand at Doi. “Not now, later.” Then said to Nop, “I presume it was those two layabouts in your office who set you against your sales manager? I wouldn’t be surprised if they were in with Sawang, though I don’t suppose we’ll ever prove it. The best thing you could do now is apologise to the previous guy and give him his job back. And Nop, it’s no good just calling yourself a businessman, you’ve got to, you know, be in the office sometimes.”

“But what about Daeng?”

“You could do worse than take him to the apartment. Talk to Suppaporn, tell her he’s going to be the next Kao Sai.”

He squinted at Vijay. “You think so?”

“We’re sure,” said Doi. “And don’t forget to take the rice with you.”

After Nop had bustled off, she nodded at the Japanese tea cup where they kept the petty cash. “I hope there’s enough for some air freshener. Vijay – what?”

“Oh ... nothing.”

Vijay found he was thinking of the private eye Suppaporn had hired and the shabby office he’d followed the man back to. An office not unlike Vijay’s. He thought of what the man’s job must have done to him: spying on other people’s snatched happiness, watching them live far beyond his own means. Give it ten, fifteen years and it wouldn’t sum to much of a life.

Vijay thought, good thing I’m really a translator.

The end

First published in a slightly different form in *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* May 2011

### **The Calculator**

“I am a calculator.’ That was the first thing he said to me. Can you imagine?”

She explained how the two of them had been in the McDonalds at Chidlom, central Bangkok. The place so crowded on a Saturday afternoon that when they took adjacent tables at the far wall they were effectively sitting next to each other. Atiya thought he was asking for a calculator and passed her Nokia across. He looked at it sadly (“Like he felt sorry for it,”) and shook his head. “No, that’s not a calculator.” Pointing to himself. “Me, I’m a calculator.” And he could prove it. The cube root of a six-digit number? No problem, rattling off the answer to 10 places when the Nokia could only reach 9. Or how about picking a random seven-digit number and then doubling it continuously? He could get further in 15 seconds, in his head, than she could furiously keying the numbers into her phone. After that she laughed and conceded. “Okay, you’re a calculator.”

Was he trying to pick her up? Vijay wondered aloud. Atiya was in her mid-twenties and had the classic heart-shaped face, dark eyes and full lips that brought men to Thailand. Or if it didn’t, was at least responsible for keeping them there. She shook her head. No, definitely not. She knew all about displays of male plumage. She’d come to the Chinatown office directly from work and was still in the light purple blouse and dark

purple skirt of Siam Commercial Bank. When they put her at a counter it happened all the time. Some rich, middle-aged guy would think she must be impressed by the stack of cash he'd just handed over, and decide she'd make the perfect *mia noi* (minor wife). She was used to requests for her phone number and used to batting them away. But The Calculator (Anthony, apparently) wasn't like that. "So what was he like?"

"Very thin, very white, very lost."

It really did seem to her that he just needed to talk, and so she listened while he told her he came from London, was unemployed, had been in the kingdom four days. It had to be said, Vijay thought, there were more ambitious pickup lines.

As a reward for not hitting on her, she suggested they meet the next day, same place, and she'd take him to see the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. Vijay raised his eyebrows at that. "Because?"

"He needed a break. Needed to stop thinking about his competition." This was the World Human Calculator Championship – what else? Vijay had never even heard of it, but apparently it was going on in Bangkok at the moment. Anthony had showed her the events page of *The Bangkok Post* (she hadn't heard of it either) and said, "That's what I should be doing." He looked so stressed she said, "No, you need to relax." Atiya shrugged. She was the one putting her younger sister through college. It was her *doung* to be responsible for other people. So the next day she turned up at the McDonalds, took a corner table, sucked her way through two vanilla milkshakes, and after an hour realised he wasn't coming. "I have a feeling about these things. When my mother died, I knew. It was the same stretch of road she took every month, here to my uncle in Rayong. But that evening, suddenly I knew. I sat by the phone and when it rang I thought, 'I have to look

after Fon now.’ It’s the same. Something bad happened to him.” Not surprisingly, the police hadn’t seen it like that. “They just laughed at me and said, ‘He’s gone to Pattaya to look for girls.’ They think I’m some Thai woman who’s lost her *farang* boyfriend.” She crossed her arms under her chest. “I have a good job, I have my own car. I don’t need a *farang* to look after me.”

Vijay looked across and caught Doi’s eye. “I’ll be honest, it’s not a lot to go on. But if you’re really willing to pay for this, then it’s two thousand baht a day, two days in advance. Okay, look ... make it one thousand five hundred, one day in advance.” After she’d gone out he said, “As it’s for a good cause.”

Doi made a face. “A good cause with good legs.”

#

Atiya didn’t have Anthony’s phone number or the address of his guesthouse, which left Vijay only the Calculator Championship itself. They were holding it in Pantip Plaza, which is the computer geek Mecca of Thailand. Six floors of motherboards and CPUs and memory sticks and hard drives and LAN cables and webcams and basically anything else guaranteed to make a geek drool; not to mention pirate CDs of all the most up-to-date software, newest films and latest porn.

The floors of Pantip rise around an internal courtyard, the first half of which was devoted to Pantip’s particular brand of miscellaneous tat: alarm clocks, binoculars, hair curlers, laser pointers, megaphones... The space beyond this had been cleared out to make way for a small stage covered in red velvet, set in front of four rows of chairs. Up on the

stage were two tables, each with two chairs facing each other. A large whiteboard, currently blank, loomed behind the tables. Nothing was happening on the stage, while for the 30-odd chairs below, about half were taken. Vijay reflected how it would be nice to report to Doi that the audience for the World Calculator Championship represented a true cross-section of Thai society: dark-skinned manual labourers, middle-aged professorial types, Hi-So women dripping jewelry, young girls in low-rise jeans ... Nice but impossible.

Yup, they were all guys under thirty. Everyone had left his girlfriend at home, possibly on his hard drive. Well, they do say clichés exist for a reason.

Vijay spent some time scanning the audience without really being sure what he was looking for. Perhaps The Least Geek Geek. Or The Most Geek Geek. Then two *farangs* came up onto the stage and took seats facing each other. The one on the left was in his late twenties, had a shock of unruly red hair and a flinty, unhappy face. He stared down at the table, as though forced up there against his will. The guy on the right was about ten years older, slightly podgy, wore a Hawaiian shirt, a black goatee and an air of quiet toleration, like a film star who was used to being noticed. He looked at his opponent, looked out at the crowd. Then a Thai woman in a tight black bodysuit joined them, tossed her hair a couple of times, and told the crowd via a microphone how excited she was to begin the last match of round one. She placed a sheet of paper and a pencil in front of each competitor, paused, and said, “Go,” into the microphone. Each man snapped over his paper and sat staring. Redhead looked angry, Goatee Beard looked blank. On the whiteboard the woman wrote  $\sqrt[4]{9648573}$ . For a beat nothing happened. Then Goatee snatched up his pencil, stabbed an answer onto the paper and dropped the pencil as



though it had burned him. Redhead made a despairing noise, pushed his chair back and stared up at the ceiling. The woman took Goatee's paper and wrote 55.733 on the board. Below that she wrote the true answer, demonstrating what the crowd, with its calculators out, could already tell. The man had been right to the first five figures. There was a scatter of applause and the two men shook hands. As the audience drifted off, Vijay reflected that while it wasn't the most compelling spectator sport in the world, the more you thought about what you'd seen, the more special it became.

Redhead jammed his hands into his trouser pockets and slouched off to the escalator. Vijay wondered what he was thinking. Unlike a physical competition he couldn't blame luck or the bad bounce of a ball. The loser was stuck in his own mind. As he watched, Redhead went up to the second floor and, once there, ambled over to the booth selling coupons for the food court. Meanwhile, Goatee Beard had disappeared into the crowd.

Off to one side of the stage there was an organiser's table. The MC in the black bodysuit was there, chatting with the woman behind it. Vijay went over. "Excuse me, a friend of mine is competing here. His name's Anthony."

"Mr. Ann-ony." The woman behind the table nodded as though she'd been expecting him. She wore a business-like white blouse and dark blazer, the effect off-set somewhat by a pair of shocking pink spectacles. Turning an A4 list towards Vijay, she pointed, "Care-wen-dish?" He scanned the list of names. Anthony Cavendish was the only Anthony there, so presumably it was him. "You have a number?" the woman asked.

"No, sorry. Actually I came here trying to find him."

She took on the frowning, reluctant look of someone about to be drawn into an argument. “We can’t give a refund. I’m sorry. It said in the rules.”

“Right, and that’s because ...?”

She waved a hand at the stage. “Round One already finish. It’s too late.”

“You mean he never turned up?” She shook her head. “Oh well, don’t worry. I mean, I’d explain that to him if only I could find him.”

“You try his friend?”

“That’s a Thai woman, right?”

“No, a Thai man.” She craned her neck to look over my shoulder. “He was here asking as well, but I can’t see him now.”

He thanked her and left, thinking: *this is what I should be doing.*

Vijay decided on lunch, bought a plate of *grapao moo* at the food court and then went looking for Redhead. He was sitting by the railing overlooking the courtyard, toying with a bowl of noodles. He glanced up, saw Vijay by his table, and said in one of those Birmingham accents that always sounds querulous, “Eh mate, d’you know what this is?” He was holding a wobbling brownish-red cube between his chopsticks.

“It’s coagulated chicken blood.”

“Oh well, that’s all right then,” he said taking a bite. “Can’t be too careful in the tropics, can you?”

“Hey, by the way, sorry about losing down there. It’s amazing you can even try something like that.”

He shrugged. “Blown out before I got started.” He took in the fact that Vijay was still standing in front of him. “Have a seat, if you want.”

They shook hands and introduced themselves. He was Colin Krasinsky (“Me dad’s Polish but I don’t speak it,”) worked for the DHSS and was going to use his remaining time in Thailand as a holiday. “I’m owed some leave.”

“And you seemed close to getting it.”

“Mate, you’re always close to getting it. It’s brutal, this game.” He sighed. “Heinrich’s a piece of work.”

“Guy you were playing?”

“He’s a motivational speaker, y’know. That’s where the money is. It’s not in the calculations, it’s in being the person who can do them.”

“Why not try it yourself?”

“I would ... but I’m not very motivational.” He looked out across the food court. “Can’t believe they had it here. Computers everywhere you look. It’s like they want to tell us we’re obsolete.” He raised his head and intoned, “You are the discarded fag ash of the electronic world.”

Vijay decided he was probably right about the motivational speaking. “There’s a contestant here I’m trying to find. Bloke called Anthony Cavendish.”

“Yeah, I was wondering why he didn’t show. Lucky ol’ Enrico got a bye.”

“You know him then?”

“We all know each other. There aren’t many people in the world who can do this. In fact, I was talking about it to Anthony one time.” He leaned over the table. “Take your footballer. Top zero point one percentile in the country will probably be enough to get you a flash house, a Porsche and a lingerie-model girlfriend.” He sat back and pointed to his chest. “Me, on the other hand. I am in the top zero point zero zero one percentile of

human calculators. Not to be coming it, but I am. We all are. And I'm on peanuts from the DHSS, Anthony was in a sub-post office last I heard—“

“I think he's unemployed now.”

Colin shook his head. “Never lasts long. Calculating on work time. I've told the lad.”

“The reason I'm looking for him is there's someone who thinks he might be in trouble.”

“Someone who?”

“A Thai woman.”

Colin grinned. “The sly old dog.”

“But why would he come all the way here and then not show?”

“Beats me.” He frowned. “I wonder if Heinrich knows? He'll be pissed.”

“Because?”

“He was going to help Anthony pay for his plane ticket, that's what I heard.

Always a bit on the brassic side is our Anthony.”

“That was nice of him. Heinrich, I mean.”

“We're brothers. I know that sounds wet, but ... it's only other Calculators who understand you. Say you get the seventh root of a nine-digit number in under thirty seconds, who are you going to tell?”

“You could tell me, I'd be impressed.”

“Yeah, but can you see how it's so much harder than the fifth root?”

“Fair point.”

“Poor ol' Anthony. And he could have been the Man here.”

“You mean he could have won it?”

Colin nodded. “If you’re talking brain power, yeah. I’ve seen the lad do ninth roots for fun. But it’s never just that. People like me and Heinrich, we’re not the greats but we know how to compete.” He pointed his chopsticks at Vijay. “You’ve got to bring your game to the table. Where as Anthony ... he’s a dreamer. I can be talking to him about football and he’s looking out the window multiplying license plates. Then he comes to a championship like this and while everyone’s getting their head together he’s thinking about football.”

“So what are your plans now?”

“Ko Samet I reckon. I’ll have a word with Heinrich probably. Get the gen.”

“Heinrich knows Thailand then?”

“Comes every year. That’s motivational speaking for you, that is.” He sat back and put his hands behind his head. “Have you noticed how some people sort of do, and some people sort of don’t?”

“Do?”

“Life, you know. They sort of get it.”

Vijay gave Colin his card, copied down his mobile number and asked him to call if he heard from Anthony. Then he wised up and asked if he’d given his Bangkok address to the organisers. He had.

Back at the organiser’s table Vijay had a chat with Pink Spectacles and learnt her name was Narisa. She told him Anthony had done the same.

“So you must have talked to him?”

“No, it’s by the internet. Have a website,” she said in English. She clicked at her mouse while staring at the flat screen monitor. “He pay for an entry fee by the internet as well.”

“Can you tell me when?”

“It’s the 23rd,” she said, the white screen reflecting off her glasses. Today was the 30th, so he’d paid from England. Then she said, “It’s the same as Bausch-man. Mr. Heinrich. Same card.”

“You mean Heinrich paid Anthony’s entry fee? The guy on the stage just now?”

She nodded. “You know, I could really do with finding out where Anthony’s staying.”

“I’m sorry, we can’t give the addresses.”

“It’s just that a friend of his thinks he might not be well. She wants me to check on him.”

Narisa tilted her head to one side, considered Vijay in a friendly, interested way and relented. It was the Orchid Guesthouse in Banglampoo, a low budget area where all the backpackers went. He borrowed a pen and scribbled the address on the palm of his hand. Then he checked on the Championship schedule. Heinrich would be appearing in the quarter-finals in two days time.

#

“He left,” said Mr. Wen, owner of the Orchid Guesthouse. He was a large Chinese-Thai man, sitting in his office, bare chested below a ceiling fan. A small portable TV balanced on a filing cabinet was showing a Thai boxing match, the reception from the indoor aerial waxing and waning. Mr. Wen was behind his glass-topped desk, bills and receipts visible under the glass. On the wall behind him was a commercial calendar and above that a picture of the King. The tiny office had no windows and the ceiling fan really did very little in the way of breeze.

“So we’re talking two days ago?” Vijay asked. Mr. Wen nodded. Before his chat with Atiya then. “And he didn’t say where he was going?”

“Yes, he didn’t say.”

“How did he seem?”

“Seem?”

“Happy? Sad? Worried?”

Mr. Wen shrugged. “He seem like he want to leave. Why don’t you ask his friend?”

Vijay thought, *not again*. “Is this a man or a woman?”

“It’s both.”

“What did they look like?”

“The woman.” He put up his thumb. “*Suey*.” Beautiful. “The man ... he’s a man. They want to know where he go.” He added in Thai, “And don’t ask me if they’re happy or sad, I’m not a fortune teller.”

Vijay left Mr. Wen a business card for good measure and went off to get a bus back to Chinatown, reflecting that Atiya's sense for things gone wrong was turning out to be pretty good.

#

It was half past two by the time Vijay got back to the office. The fiery March sun was slanting in between the slats of the venetian blinds, throwing bars of shadow onto the wall behind Doi's desk. A standing fan was rattling through a half circle. It wasn't much cooler than Mr. Wen's place. Doi was busy translating the documents of a *farang* who was applying for a resident's permit. It was the only work they had. So Vijay resorted to his usual strategies when there was nothing to do: drummed his fingers on the desk, set about clearing out the drawers of said desk, considered re-reading the day's *Khao Sot*, drummed his fingers some more. Doi looked up and said, "Vijay why don't you go if there's nothing for you?"

"You never know, we might get a client."

She pouted. "Whenever you say that no one comes."

And sure enough no one did. But at close to five his phone rang. "Vijay, now what are you up to?" It was his police captain friend, Mana.

"At the moment, drumming my fingers on the desk to help Doi concentrate."

"Don't joke about, I'm serious. Who've you annoyed?"



“No one, as far as I know.”

“Your work was supposed to be helping *farangs* with gem scams. You’re not supposed to trouble big people.”

“I didn’t think I was.”

“Someone phoned my boss and made him nervous. Now he wants to know all about you. I’m supposed to check you have a work permit. You have one, right?”

“Sure. I mean, it’s out of date, but I’ve got one.”

A heavy sigh came down the line. “Please tell me you at least have a visa.”

“Yup, that bit’s okay. But look, the only case I’ve got is finding a *farang* who’s gone missing. He’s no one special. Just some unemployed guy from London.”

“Who wants to find him?”

“A Thai woman.”

“The girlfriend?”

“No, it’s not like that. Just ... someone who thinks he needs finding.”

“Vijay look, I’m going to tell my boss everything’s okay. You’re lucky you live in my precinct, you know that? Remember, this is Thailand. You don’t make trouble for people at the top.”

Vijay told Mana he wouldn’t, which was easier said than done considering he didn’t even know who this person was. All he did know was that he’d only given out two business cards, and it was for damn sure Colin Krysinsky did not have a hotline to the rich and famous. Which meant the man and woman who’d visited Mr. Wen had come back and he’d told them about Vijay. Or possibly they’d told him to get in touch if anyone came asking. Either way, it had only taken a few hours for Mana’s boss, a Chief

Inspector, to be at someone's beck and call. The secret life of Anthony The Calculator was getting stranger and stranger.

#

The next morning Vijay made it to Pantip Plaza before ten o'clock and hung around outside the tinted glass doors, waiting for them to open. When he got inside he found Narisa already there, setting her computer up. Again she was in a serious business outfit – navy blue trouser suit – topped off by her dippy pink specs. He wondered if that particular look was supposed to say something about her, and if so, what.

She saw him and smiled. He decided to play the *farang* in trouble card, which among ordinary working people succeeds surprisingly often. It's a part of Thai national pride and a part of Thai kindness to want that foreigners come here, enjoy themselves, then go home and speak well of the country. He told her how Anthony was still missing and how people in England were worried. Perhaps if he could speak to Mr. Heinrich, that might help. He knew she wasn't supposed to give away addresses, but this was an emergency. And he was Mr. Anthony's friend, had paid for his registration, remember?

Eventually she agreed and searched it out. No backpacker hangouts for Heinrich, he was in the Amari Watergate, a short walk from Pantip. Very convenient and very expensive.

At the Amari reception desk Vijay asked for Mr. Baushmann's room and phoned up. When he said it was about Anthony, Heinrich replied that he'd come down immediately. Vijay sank into a deep lobby armchair and enjoyed his surroundings – polished marble floor, high chandeliered ceiling, bus-boys and waiters padding through the calm, air-conditioned hush. When Heinrich arrived he was in Bermuda shorts and a bright yellow silk shirt of Indonesian design. You just knew he'd have two sets of clothes, a Tropical Tourist outfit and a Germany outfit and never mix them.

Vijay waved him over and introduced himself. Taking a seat opposite, the man said, "This is strange. To my knowledge Anthony has never been in Thailand before. Who is this woman who makes an interest in him?"

"Just someone he met, someone who thinks he's in trouble. What do you think?"

He sighed. "With Anthony, how can we know? But it is a pity."

"And a waste of money, I'd have thought. Colin said you were going to help him with the plane ticket?"

"I paid half, two hundred and thirty-seven Euros."

"And what about the competition? Is there an entry fee?"

"I paid with my credit card. But if you have taken my address from the organisers, then perhaps you already know this fact." Vijay opened his hands and grinned. "Anthony did not have a card. In some ways he is not wholly of the modern world. But he promised to return something to me."

"You believe him?"

Heinrich shrugged. “I do not care. I help him as a friend, and I help him for the realisation of potential. He has the ability to be a great Calculator, another Nakamura. But he must learn to compete.”

“Colin was saying something like that.”

Heinrich fingered his shirt. “This was not purchased from calculations. Neither my hotel room. I am a motivator, I liberate human potential. And you know, I am good at this. I have held seminars for Siemens, Mercedes, Beh-Meh-Veh. All these people I can motivate, but I cannot motivate Anthony.” He sat back. “What do we conclude from this?”

“Perhaps it’s because those people were competitors, like yourself Heinrich.”

He nodded unhappily, and then said, “I want to know, who is this woman who wishes to help him?”

#

Walking back to Pantip past the mats on the pavement (plastic toys, children’s clothes, mobile phone cases) and the food carts (fried chicken, gelatin sweets, freshly squeezed orange), Vijay found he was starting to wonder about Atiya himself. After he finished with Heinrich he’d phoned her at work. She agreed to pay for a couple more days searching, which was pretty decent, all things considered. But he doubted she’d go much longer without some concrete results.

Inside the mall an audience had gathered. On the whiteboard it said, “QUARTER FINAL.” The stage was still empty, but off to one side a pear-shaped Chinese man was

pacing like a boxer, his chunky fists clenching and unclenching. The MC was there also in high heels and another tight black body suit. Vijay had a feeling that, for this particular audience, she was as much of a draw as the competition itself.

As soon as she saw him Narisa waved Vijay over. “You just miss Mr. Ann-ony’s friend.” She came out from behind her desk and walked him down past the stage. “He went ... there.” She pointed to a guy in light blue jeans, sneakers and a dark blue cotton shirt. As he turned, Vijay saw a pair of Aviator sunglasses hooked onto the front pocket. The Least Geek Geek competition had a winner.

“Thanks, I’ll go and have a word. Just right now. Thanks.”

He waited until she’d gone back to her desk and then followed the man up the escalator to the second floor. He ignored the food court and took a brief, incurious stroll past the shops. When someone offered him a packet of porn CDs he grinned and patted the man’s shoulder, as though to say, you don’t think I can’t get the real thing? At the end of the corridor of shops he went out to the car park. Vijay followed and watched the man click his key fob to pulse the headlights of a black Toyota Fortuner. He scribbled the license plate on his palm and went back inside to phone Mana.

#

“Vijay, this had better not be the same case.”

“No, no, quite different. It’s the usual thing, this one. You know, forty-something guy, young wife. He thinks she’s playing away from home and instead of doing the

sensible thing and talking to her about it, he hires me. Anyway, I saw her getting into this Fortuner and I know hubby wasn't driving.”

Vijay could hear him tapping keys. “That’s good to know, you don’t want to ... this guy’s even older. She left her husband for a sixty-five-year old?”

“Oh well, you know how it is. Trading up sugar daddies.”

“His name’s Boonchai Wongsawat and he lives out in Tungkru. The address is Phutta Bucha Road, *soi* forty-four and the house number is ... Vijay, it’s a triple nine, if this guy can—“

“Great, just what I needed. Bus coming, I've got to dash. Bye Mana.” Vijay wrote the address on his forearm and looked at it. Thought #1: Why was he never carrying a notebook when he need one? Thought #2: It was a triple nine address.

In countries where people believe in fate they also believe in luck, and in Thailand nine is a lucky number. The Ministry of Transport auctioned off license plates containing only nines, and the highest possible combination – two Thai characters followed by 9999 – went for around ten million baht. The same fetish applied to house numbers. If you had enough pull you could see to it that your house got a big nine combination, irrespective of the street’s number sequence. Which suggested Khun Boonchart was Old Money and serious influence.

Vijay left the air-conditioned cool of Pantip to get an expressway bus that would take him across the river, out to the suburbs of Tungkru. But “express” was the wrong word for the caravan of hot exhausted metal they joined, and by the time they’d come off the toll road it was 3 pm. Vijay was starving. So he had lunch at a curry shop and asked which bus would take him to Phutta Bucha.

By the time he got there it was almost three-thirty. *Soi 44* was a narrow, straightish lane. At its entrance there were a couple of motorbike taxi guys sitting at a stone table under a tree, playing draughts with bottle tops. Vijay waved away their offers and strolled down, keeping to the right-hand side where the shade was. The mouth of the *soi* was all shops – hairdresser, general store, pharmacy, and then further in it was residential, houses behind high walls, and about a kilometer down, number 999. This wasn't so much a house as a compound, with five saloon cars lined up outside. High vanilla-white walls were topped by cobalt-blue metal spikes. The same shade of blue had been used for the ornate metal gates set at each end of the compound, almost twenty yards apart. It was hot and still and, away from the mouth of the *soi*, relatively quiet. Vijay walked up to the gates and peered inside. In the centre of a gravel courtyard was an oval fountain where two faux-Roman cherubs were being cheerfully soaked. Behind that, white walls, white Doric columns, and broad white steps leading up to an entrance of black-tinted glass that revealed nothing. At either end of the courtyard was a covered area for cars. The black Fortuner was parked here, next to a silver Mercedes. And lots of free, shaded space.

The buzz of an engine came from behind him and one of the motorbike taxis swept past, a middle-aged woman on the back, seated sideways with her shopping in her lap. He looked up to where the bike had come from and saw the other taxi driver was looking down the *soi*. Vijay had the idea the man was watching him, and as he strolled back up to the entrance, flapping out his wet T-shirt, it seemed that was indeed the case. At least as far as he could tell, given he couldn't see the man's eyes behind his dark glasses.

Vijay stopped in at the general store, bought two bottles of Fanta from their refrigerator and then carried them over to the taxi driver. He was a big, dark-skinned guy whose corded forearms were covered with blue protection-from-evil tattoos. Vijay handed him one of the bottles, and he took it in a silent, matter-of-fact way, like a tribute that was owed to him. Vijay sat where his friend had been.

It's a given in Bangkok that any long *soi* will have a bunch of motorbike guys making a living from ferrying people down it. And it's a given those guys will know far more about the life of the *soi* than the *soi*'s residents realise.

Vijay said in Thai, "It's really hot. "

"Really hot."

They were agreed on that then.

Vijay ran the cold bottle along his forearms.

"So, the house down there. Nine-nine-nine. What's going on?"

"What do you think?" If Vijay couldn't make an intelligent guess why should he help him?

"Lots of shaded parking space inside, but cars parked out in the heat. For a house a long way down a *soi*, away from nosey people, from the wrong kind of cops. Cops who haven't been paid off. I think it's a casino."

The man's dark face split into a very white grin. "That's what we all think." He rotated the Fanta bottle. "No one knows for sure. The visitors don't use us, they all have cars."

"But it's the same people who keep coming?"



He nodded. “In the afternoon there’s older women. Hair up here and small handbags. In the evenings it’s mostly men. On Friday nights a Jaguar always comes, leaves very late.”

“I bet you can remember the license number.” He could as well and Vijay keyed it into his phone, as it was just getting silly scribbling on himself the whole time. “What else stands out?”

“There’s a Chinese-looking guy, bald head, comes in an old Red Mercedes. He left very angry one night, drove very fast. Almost hit my friend.” He glugged down some Fanta. “Have a young woman with him usually. *Suey*. But when he was angry he left by himself.” He shrugged. “Many of the cars have tinted windows. At night you can’t see much.”

“Think I could get a game there?”

He looked troubled. “*Pii* ... why would you want to do that? I’m not looking down on you, but I’ll speak straight. You can’t afford it. This game is for rich people.” Vijay let himself be convinced and then they went on to other things, football and politics and how business was. Still concerned, the man handed over his phone number and said if Vijay wanted a game he could find a much cheaper one from his brother-in-law.

As Vijay was walking back to the bus stop the man called after him. “*Pii*. You thought it was a casino ... just from the cars?”

“That wasn’t the only thing.”

#

“Twenty-one, right? That’s the game you can win at?” It was late afternoon and Vijay was back in the office chatting with Doi. She frowned. “I don’t think you win at anything. The casino wins.”

“Most of the time. But for twenty-one it’s different. I remember reading about this someplace. It’s the only game with a memory. They put four decks into the shoe. Every card that comes out changes the probability for the cards that are left. If you keep track of everything that’s been played and keep calculating the odds, you know when to bet against the house.”

“Vijay, I think that’s so difficult.”

“There’s a bunch of people in this city right now who could do it for fun.”

He thought about Colin Krasinsky, in the top zero point zero zero one percentile of Calculators and still no lingerie model girlfriend. And, unlike Heinrich, no motivational speaking to bring the money in. So what did he turn to? And then you had Atiya, who was apparently altruistic enough to hire a private detective to find someone she’d met just once, in a McDonalds. Or in a different reality, had fallen out with her Mercedes-driving sugar daddy and now needed a new source of funds. Vijay decided he wanted a chat with both of them, together.

First he phoned Colin and found that he hadn’t left for Ko Samet after all, but was still in the city. (“Just thought I’d check out Patpong, eh?”) Vijay told him he needed help finding Anthony and as the man allowed himself to be convinced, the scales of Vijay’s suspicion dropped in his direction. Then he phoned Atiya and told her the same thing, and when she let him talk her into phoning in sick at the bank and meeting up, the scales righted and were level again. He leaned back in his chair with his hands behind his head,

thinking about the two of them. And then Vijay realised that, while picking him up was going to be difficult, he did actually know where Anthony was.

#

At close to eleven in the morning Doi went to get him. She was supposed to stay in touch by phone and had her sister Lieng and her brother-in-law Oot along to help. It wouldn't be easy, Vijay thought, given that none of them had seen the guy. But on the plus side he had an idea of what they should look for. Meanwhile, Vijay was in the food court at Pantip, which was filling up fast. He was sitting with a glass of ice tea at a table for four and was constantly waving away people who wanted to know if the seats were taken.

Colin arrived first, carrying over a bowl of noodles. "I'm quite getting into the food here. And it's like, sixty-pee for lunch. So what's the score with our Anthony?"

"Looks like he wandered into some trouble. Or was led into it."

"Yeah? " He looked mildly interested. "Poor bugger."

Vijay liked to think he was good at spotting when people concealed things, mainly because he got so much practice. His clients hardly ever told the whole truth, and never in the divorce cases. Who can face the whole truth about a failed marriage? But it had to be said, Colin was very good at putting up a front. Or was completely innocent.

"Someone convinced him to try and get rich."

Atiya came over. She hadn't bought any food and was again in her tight purple skirt and purple blouse. "Vijay, I have to go back this afternoon. If I miss a whole day I need a doctor's note."

Colin was looking at her with interest and obviously wondering what she'd said. Vijay introduced the two of them and explained why she was looking for Anthony. He leaned over the table. "I'm a Calculator as well, y'know. Tell me any five digit number."

She gave him a tight smile. "It's okay, I believe you."

Vijay said, "So about Anthony. I think he was card counting in a casino." He added for Colin's benefit, "This is a gambling-mad country where gambling is illegal, other than the state lottery. So basically, you get underground casinos everywhere. I think he won big in one and they put the frighteners on him. And I think one of you already knows this."

Colin and Atiya looked at each other. Colin put up his thumb. "Nice one."

Vijay's mobile went. Oot said, "I think I saw him. A guy with binoculars. But then I lost him."

Atiya said, "What nice one?"

"Oot, tell Doi and Lieng, maybe he's heading their way."

"Figuring out about the card counting."

"I don't know what's card counting." She looked genuinely puzzled.

Vijay said to Colin, "How's it go, zero point zero zero one percentile but still no Porsche?"

"So?" He looked genuinely puzzled as well.

There was usually a point where Vijay figured people out, but this time it didn't seem to be happening. He turned his attention to Atiya and said in Thai, "It's good of you to pay me to find Anthony. I just wonder what you get out of it."

"I get to know he's safe. What's wrong with you?" Colin's phone rang and he answered it. She said, "I don't know about counting."

Colin looked up from his phone and said, "Eh mate, Anthony's just called me. He says there's someone following him."

"Tell him not to worry."

"Ant don't—" Colin put the phone down. "He's rung off. What was that about?"

"Why was he phoning you, I wonder?"

"Remembers my number, doesn't he? He's a Calculator." He grinned at Atiya. "Like I am." Then he said to Vijay, "But he doesn't have a mobile, if that's what you mean. Must have been phoning from a call box."

Vijay dialed Oot, bent under the table, cupped his hand over the phone and whispered in Thai, "Find the public phones. That's where he is."

Atiya said in English, "What are you doing? Why you being so strange?"

"*I'm* being strange?" Vijay asked, straightening up.

"You are a bit actually mate," said Colin.

Vijay's mobile rang. Oot asked, "Where are the public phones?"

"I don't know. That's why I asked you to find them. Try Doi."

Atiya said, "Doi from your office?"

"I think you should both know, my life has contained many people who've tried to deceive me."

“See, this is a bit weird as well,” said Colin.

Vijay said to Atiya in English, “He went to a casino in Tungkru. Phutta Bucha.” She looked blank. “You fell out with your previous source of funds.” She was now staring at him as though he was mad. “Then a guy in a McDonalds tells you he’s a human calculator and the baht signs go up in front of your eyes. Why else would you come to me?”

“I came because my friend tell me. She live in Chinatown. She said you work hard and don’t charge much.” She crossed her legs and gave him a haughty, triumphant look. “And you know what else? She said if I wore this skirt you’d give me a discount.”

This, thought Vijay, is what you get for being a good Samaritan.

Colin leaned across the table and said, “I can vouch for her.”

“You’ve only just met her.”

“Yeah, but I know about people. DHSS innit? We get all the scams.”

Atiya smiled at him. “Thank you.”

Vijay decided to raise the stakes. “The reason I called you both here is that I already know which one of you set up Anthony.” They both turned to him and then Colin looked over Vijay’s shoulder, waved his hand and frowned. Vijay turned back. “What is it?”

“Heinrich, I thought he’d seen us. Never mind.”

“What would Heinrich be doing here? He’s competing tomorrow.”

“I told him what you said, about finding Anthony. I thought he’d want to know.”

Vijay digested that.

“So,” Atiya put her chin on her palm. “Which of us is it?”

“Neither, now that I come to think of it. It’s Heinrich.”

His phone rang. Oot was panting. “Vijay ... I found the phones ... no one there.”

“Okay, keep looking.” He stood up. “Come one, we’re going to get Anthony.”

“But we don’t know where he is.”

“Of course we do. He’s here, where else would he be? He doesn’t know this city and besides, he couldn’t keep away. He’s up on one of the higher floors with a pair of binoculars, watching the whiteboard for the next set of numbers.” He said to Colin, “You and me will try and find Heinrich. I think he’s figured that out.” To Atiya he said, “You try and get to Anthony, you’re probably the one person he trusts.”

“So I pay you to find Ann-tyon and now I’m finding him.” She stalked off.

Colin watched her hips sway down the food court and said, “I’d have given her a discount as well.” Then his phone rang. He answered and said to Vijay, “Anthony. Says there’s still someone after him.”

“Tell him not to worry. It’s a friend of mine.”

“Ant relax, it’s a mate.”

“Big guy, slopping shoulders?”

Colin repeated the description and said to Vijay, “No, slim guy, Polo shirt, Aviator sunglasses.”

“In that case tell him to run like hell.”

Colin waved the mobile. “Gone already.”

They started pushing their way to the escalator. It wasn’t easy. Vijay had chosen this time because he wanted to be sure the Championship had started, but the problem was the place was now packed out. As they jostled their way up the steps he phoned Oot.

“Where do they put the public phones here?”

“They fix them in the wall.”

“I mean *where* Oot?”

“It’s out towards the car park. The corridor to the toilets.”

They ran around to the next escalator, dodging bodies and banging shoulders.

“What was Heinrich wearing?”

“Light blue shirt, sort of patterned malarkey.”

They levered their way up the next escalator. On the corridor above Vijay couldn’t see any such shirt. “Come on, we’ll go up again.”

They ran around and his phone rang. Lieng asked, “Vijay, twenty-five thousand baht for a notebook computer, you think it’s too much?”

“Lieng, the guy with the binoculars? Remember? Could you concentrate on finding him for two minutes?”

“Well excuse me for asking.”

Up on the next corridor Colin shouted, “There!” Vijay looked but couldn’t see anything. Colin shrugged. “I’m sure it was.” They pushed their way down and such was the press of bodies Vijay almost missed him. He was in the Apple shop looking at a MacBook, his phone in one hand. “Waiting for a call, Heinrich?” He glanced up and took in the fact that Colin had come in behind.

“Always in the Apple product we find the superior design quality.”

“And poseurs buying them, but then I’m an old luddite at heart. We know about the casino in Tungkru and the card counting, so you can call off your henchmen.”



“I know nothing of henchmen, only of an opportunity I extend to Anthony.” He said to Colin, “Yes it’s true. I arrange for this. Anthony phones me in Frankfurt and again he has no job and no money. I have learnt about the casinos here and so I apply this knowledge.”

Vijay said, “In return for a percentage of the winnings I presume?”

“It is standard business practice.”

“You must have known the casino owners would go after him.”

“For this reason I chose carefully. I know a woman who plays there.” He shrugged. “Okay, so someone visits him and points a gun of some description. This is just a bluff. It is not cheating to card count, it is only a higher understanding of probability.”

“Right and the fact that he’s now got some psycho after him?”

“Again you are misunderstanding. This is not the owner of the casino, only the son. He wishes to hire Anthony to damage a rival casino.”

“My God and you think he’d agree? He’s scared out of his wits as it is. Can you just phone the guy and call him off?”

Heinrich gave Vijay a heavy satirizing shrug and made the call, speaking in a mixture of English and German-accented Thai. “So are you happy? This is an opportunity he loses.”

“And so do you. But why do I think the casino’s served its purpose already? You must have known how they’d react to a card counter. And how Anthony would take it. But that removes some of the competition, right? After all, your motivational gigs are all about being a Calculator. If you become the World Champion Calculator, I’m guessing

your fee goes up. And Anthony's good. Perhaps the problem wasn't he couldn't compete but that he was learning to."

"You apparently forget I help pay for his plane ticket."

"And by doing so gave him a sense of obligation. Whereas if you hadn't paid there was a danger someone else would. Colin says you all stick together."

"Pish, pish. This is a state of mind on which you are speculating. It is utterly unprovable."

"Maybe, but like I say, Calculators stick together. They can draw their own conclusions."

Colin said, "Not classy Heinrich. Not classy at all."

"I am not to debate class with an untermensch."

At that point a woman in denim hot pants and a pink spaghetti strap top came in and ticked her way over to Heinrich. He put a hand on her hip and called her *liebchen*. Mr. Wen had been right, she was beautiful, although in a completely different way from Atiya. As for the owner's son, Vijay didn't see him again. He must have just got in his Fortuner and driven off. And as for Anthony, Vijay never did see him at all. Atiya phoned to say she'd found him on the fifth floor and that was that. Vijay later heard they'd arranged again to see the Emerald Buddha, and Colin had somehow managed to wangle his way along. Lieng took Oot off to look at the computer she wanted and Doi left Pantip to go and shop for clothes at a mall nearby. Heinrich and his *liebchen* left together with her cooing about couldn't he buy her an iphone, *ti-rak*?

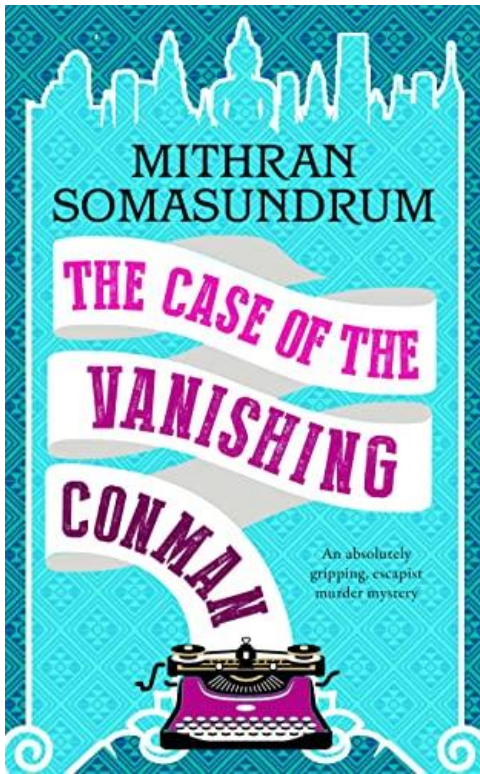
On his own in the noise and bustle of Pantip, Vijay felt oddly deflated for some reason. Everything had come together and yet it felt like one of those divorce cases where no one wins.

With nothing better to do he went down to the ground floor to see how the Calculator quarter-finals were going and between bouts he got chatting to Narisa. He decided those pink specs weren't any kind of statement. She liked pink so she wore them to work, why not? People don't have to be more complicated than they first seem. He liked that thought and liked chatting to her, and so he asked for her phone number. But this time he didn't scribble it on himself or key it onto his mobile. He just tapped the side of his head and said, "I'm a Calculator, I'll remember it."

And two days later when Vijay went to call her up, he still could.

The end

Vijay's first novel-length case is now available from Joffe Books. In *The Case of the Vanishing Conman* Vijay finds himself juggling two different jobs. For Khun Pleum, a ruthless ex-gangster, he's investigating the strange shooting of a novelist. Meanwhile, for Khun Pleum's wife he's trying to discover the name of Khun Pleum's mistress. Vijay knows he shouldn't have taken on both clients, but he's got a debt collector with a claw hammer threatening to make his ankles turn all the way round.



[https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B0BG63B55R/ref=dbs\\_a\\_def\\_rwt\\_hsch\\_vapi\\_tkin\\_p1\\_i0](https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B0BG63B55R/ref=dbs_a_def_rwt_hsch_vapi_tkin_p1_i0)