

## Only You Farang Are So Easy to Come and Leave

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In '97 we bought back our old townhouse on the outskirts of Bangkok<sup>1</sup>. We came down from the condominium Ma had framed in her mind as the high-water mark of our family's achievements. The townhouse had a plot of earth in the back that Dad used to call a garden, and it had once charmed Ma to pot plants, indulge the mud patch. When we returned after the economy collapsed, Ma had the washer dragged out back so that the house felt bigger.

The occupying family had divided up our home, and I went cautiously into the new territory.

"The Thai-Chinese are all like this," Dad said expertly. "They make walls. They like to live in little boxes." Ma, part Chinese herself, allowed him this transgression. [...]

My British international school was a luxury we maintained. I was fourteen and in love with a boy who had ears like cymbals. It was all I could do not to clap my hands on either side of his face and kiss him. His name was Tom Bell. Tom called me Laura, like a wholly white girl, when actually it's Lara. I never corrected him.

"Hullo, Laura," he'd say, and I'd nod mutely because we all knew what I thought of his attention. We all knew too much about one another: who had touched whom in the music rooms last week, what the note slipped into Shruti Singh's locker said (*curry cunt*), and why Charlie Ong walked around with both hands in his front pockets. We knew that Bow Wattanakorn's father shot himself in his Mercedes before the debt collectors could take it away. On her last day at school, we signed Bow's white polo: *See you soon, Sad to see you go*, and, from one idiot boy, *Get well!*

Dad worked the living room wall while I watched television. After he had complained about the Thai chatter, a poor accompaniment to his rhythm, I muted my soap opera.

As an American, my dad could only fall so far in this Southeast Asian collapse, but he was unsuited for unemployment. He measured his worth in working hours.

"We were meant to live by our hands," he said.

"Right, like hand-to-mouth?"

He laughed. "A person should know their way around a toolbox. Come the apocalypse, blue-collar workers will inherit the earth."

Dad had worked in finance.

I said, "This is Thailand. 99 percent working class. We'll be fine."

"They teach you too much at school." He swung the hammer like a golf club at a stray piece of plaster.

"You know, no one warns you that your kids are less fun when they grow up."

Two months with only this hammer to handle had added to his bulk. But his were an old man's muscles, his shoulders like worn tires.

"There's gray dust in your hair," I said.

Ma came in to check the disorder. To oppose Dad's newfound broadness, she had adopted the mannerisms of a bird of prey, hunched, stalking Dad's efforts, her censure biting into him like a hooked beak.

"Dad says it's the end of the world," I told her.

"Yes," she said, surely recalling the *Bangkok Post's* cover image from last week, the baht's value falling into the graph's underworld.

"Don't be stupid," Dad said to me. Then, to Ma, "How's my KitKat?"

Ma hadn't responded to that in months. She looked over his work, and then at me.

"It's a mess," she said in Thai.

"It's a mess," I echoed, in English, for Dad.

Ma nodded, satisfied with this transaction, and left the room.

Dad laid down the hammer and surveyed his wall. "Why do I feel like you girls are teaming up against

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<sup>1</sup> capital of Thailand

me?" [...]

I skipped the next English class to follow Dad downtown, my motorbike taxi in the wake of his car as it navigated to a construction site.

Posters along the perimeter promised Bangkok another level of luxury. Diamond Heights, they called the condominium. Two buildings. Swimming pools for everyone.

They had erected the honeycomb cores of the twin condos, thirty stories of concrete, but there were no windows and no outer walls. I slinked easily after Dad through an opening in the gate.

I had started to wonder about his disappearances. He had lived in Thailand so long that it seemed reasonable for him to yield to its mores, that practice of keeping another household. "Minor wife" was the Thai title for those women, as if it were a privilege. But Dad went to a vacant home.

He saw me coming through the fence and smiled, maybe to hide his surprise.

"Going up?" He held back the gate of a construction elevator.

"Please," I said.

"All the way up." He took us to a penthouse where we sat with our legs over the edge. The view was of the twin building. Graffiti was the only embellishment, and inky swamps had formed in what had been intended to be private, balcony pools.

"Your mother and I are thinking about what to do next. If it continues to be this bad, I might go back to the US for a while, to work there until things smooth over on this side. A temporary move."

*Temporary move?* Ma had said weeks ago when we left our condo. *Only you farang<sup>2</sup> are so easy to come and leave.*

I swung my feet. "Why can't we all go?"

"Your mother doesn't want to move."

"Well she can stay here on her own," I said. [...]

I could tell Ma had made an effort with dinner. The pasta, angel hair, was coiled elaborately, dressing up its simple tomato sauce.

"I really like this. I do," Dad said, and made sure Ma looked at him.

"Tomato," Ma nodded.

"Pomodoro, pomodori<sup>3</sup>," Dad sing-songed, happy.

Ma asked, "Where you come from?" and Dad lied blithely:

"I met an old contact at an office development company."

Ma asked if this was Khun Pin's company, and I translated for Dad. "Oh, no. Just an old acquaintance," Dad said, responding to my translation but looking at Ma.

Ma cleared away dinner and Dad unfolded his newspaper. On the cover was an image of Thai policemen ransacking a foreign bank's offices.

"It's hard being a foreigner in a recession. The Thais blame us for their mess," Dad said.

He then set a box wrapped in signature red-and-white twine on the table.

"For my girls." He smiled like a boy.

Ma said to me, "What is this supposed to mean?"

I didn't speak.

"Ask him," she said.

"Ask him yourself."

We knew the box, the string, the cloying scent. It was the bakery at the base of our old condominium. A charming, Parisian place that reminded the residents of how far above the rest of the city they could consider themselves. Ma had loved it.

Ma turned on Dad. "No job but you waste money. Soon no house?" She pointed at me, jabbing with each phrase. "No school. No future. No good. What I want cake for?"

What *had* he thought?

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<sup>2</sup> Thai word for someone of European origin

<sup>3</sup> (Italian) tomatoes

He raised two empty hands. "I thought we all might like to share something nice for a change. It's been bleak lately. How about we cut it up and then decide?"

95 "Decide what?" I asked.

Ma said, "You eat. I clean up. Only in slum they don't have maids."

"Why don't *you* get a job, Ma?" I asked in English. "You want to live big so bad, you go and make it happen. Do it yourself."

"Don't talk to me that way."

100 I nodded towards Dad. "Speak in English so that we can all understand. Go on, tell him."

"Lara," Dad said. "We've been talking. We think it might be best for me to move back to America. Back home."

There was work, he could send money, and we could afford my last years of school.

I said in English, "She's doing this to you. Making you want to go."

105 Even then he defended her. "No, she isn't. You should try to understand. Your mother didn't marry up to play a maid."

"We need you here more than we need money. Other jobs will come," I said.

"When things pick up again, I'll come back."

I said to Ma, "You're sending him away."

110 "Your father has to understand. He has to be responsible. Tell him that."

"Tell him," Ma repeated, but I didn't speak.

In the month before he left, I let the house divide us. It was easy to use the walls. I staked out territory and avoided common spaces. The family room stood empty. Ma left me food on the kitchen counter. Dad existed in a periphery, the sounds of his living always a layer removed, a room away. His only presence was in the traces he left: shaving cream in the sink, his sock buried in the sofa, the bread crusts he never ate in the trash. These were the things I would want to piece together after he left. I needed some semblance of his order, the way my life had come to orbit his. He left the walls unfinished. [...]

115 Bangkok that year became a graveyard of office towers and housing projects. I had taken to skipping classes. I sat in the hollows of buildings and read about the debt suicides. Some of those fathers were jumpers. In other homes across the city fathers were being dragged to jail. Others were running away to their second lives, those minor wives and backup families. It was a father conspiracy. They all had a plan B. You could trace their exploits if you wanted to; in their wake they left home-shaped shells and invoices totaling their obligations.

125 I eventually returned to Diamond Heights and found it inhabited by displaced families. They had easily appropriated, portioned, and adopted the space as a home. They had plumbed the showers with hoses taped to blue piping scaffolds. They strung up clotheslines and hung patterned fabric to separate the households, but in a wind, those walls fluttered and lifted.

When my next school break approached, Dad bought me a flight to go see him. We couldn't afford two tickets, so Ma would stay on at home.

130 On the last day of English class, I told Tom Bell I was leaving for the US. I needed something to work right then, and I could start with his attention.

"What? What're you on about? Like a holiday?"

"I'm leaving. I'm flying tomorrow. America. To go live with my dad."

"You're *leaving* leaving?"

135 "That's right." I fished out a marker. "Will you write something on my shirt?"

"Well, sure. Didn't realize you were off as well. How does 'I'll miss sharing stuff in English. Goodbye and good luck' sound?"

I nodded and angled my chin up so he could lean in to sign my front. "And it's Lara, Tom. You'll remember me? Lara."

140 "What do you think?"

Dad walked me through the two-bedroom house he was renting, a house built to hold heat through winter. He had a dishwashing machine.

"This looks permanent," I said.

"Funny you should say that."

145 "What's funny?"

He had lost weight since resuming deskwork. I pictured Dad bigger, less than a year younger but at the height of his health, it seemed, marching through the house with his chest too broad for his shirt, earning his keep with bare hands.

"You're not coming back, are you?"

150 "You'll be out here soon, for college."

I waited for him to invite me to stay in the States so I could tell him what I thought of him: just another foreigner passing through, a white man with minor wives, an imperialist, a cultural bigot – what else? What had the papers said of them – foreigners – in recent months? Dad didn't ask me to stay.

"College," he said again. "You'll be out here soon?"

155 "And Ma?"

He ran his palm along a pristine dining table. "She wants to be in Bangkok, doesn't she?"

Ma called that night and I answered the phone. I told her I was coming home and Dad wasn't.

She asked to speak to him.

"He doesn't want to talk to you," I lied, in Thai so that she understood.

160 "I want to speak with my husband."

I switched to English, "I told you, he doesn't want to talk to you."

The line was bad. Or she was crying, I don't know. Something couldn't contain her voice.

She tried English: "Please."

(2017)