

*The Fortunate Puppies
of the Isthmus of Kra*
SAMUEL KLONIMOS

Disdain

AGE EIGHTY-ONE, Michael Brutus Murphy discovered possibilities; possibilities for tolerance, card games, introspection. Age seventy-two, he had ceased to be Michael B. Murphy Junior. Time, curved as is space, promoted him from junior to undiluted Murphy. The promotion had not seemed inevitable; Murphy Senior's death had retreated of late from certainty to some category of things that were supposed to happen but had not, like understanding better when you are older. Then, within days, it happened. He held his father's hand at the end, not that the old boy knew it or much else. Murphy Senior's last thoughts cooed and clucked from whichever pigeonhole in the mind last thoughts nested. Perchance there sang for him a hymn to irresistible force—*vis major*—as if sung by the Fat Lady herself, a cappella? Perhaps he once again argued—a last trumpet blast—*B. V. Steamship Partners v. Montague Salvage & Refitting Ltd.*, judgment reversed on appeal, Murphy for the defendant.

His boycott of Yankee fast food broken by a punishing sequence of pork strips wormed in among oily Thai noodles, Murphy—the live one—was patronizing a red plastic armchair at a Kentucky Fried Chicken stand in Kathu Province, Thailand, Route 402, when it happened. Disdain for KFC, disdain for cigarette smokers, disdain for card games, disdain for this and that, melted away like a damp patch upon the sands. As if a charitable flush, a bath of universal values had done away with layers of scruples deposited in his self-consciousness by decades of intercourse with the best families of Eastern Canada. This change did not, as feared of old, bring moral disintegration; he was entirely conscious of natural law, the moral virtues, the deadly

sins and the sacraments of the Church. It came rather as a novel zest toward abstract ideas, such as tolerance and possibilities.

After weeks of pork shreds booby trapped with chilies, Kentucky Fried Chicken was not so bad. So what was so bad about those card games played by the dread suburban couples seated around tables at twilight? What were these games called anyway? Poker, of course, hearts, bridge. And yes, pinochle. And canasta, whist.

At the side of the road a solemn Thai maiden fed helpings of rubbish onto a patch of low flames. Murphy watched as she swept the things of this world into an invisible rubbish-karma with respectful or at least careful passes of a broom fashioned from twigs. No disdain there, not even for trash. A purple cloth wrapped round her head made of her face a cameo, glistening, expressionless, and beautiful. An icon. The Tawny Virgin of Kathu. Bright faces of playing cards appeared to his eye—hearts, spades, and diamonds, ancestors of the logo perhaps, like Coca-Cola or the yellow camel of Camel cigarettes. Was now his time to play? Hearts and spades, he thought, images “classic” as sun, moon, or the Devil’s horns and tail; but clubs? Somewhere he had once handled, of course with disdain, a pack of Tarot cards. Swords—there had been swords, instead of hearts or spades. And clubs but not those black cloverleaf clubs—real lumpy clubs, like pictures in *Adventures of Robin Hood* seventy years back down the curve of time. A fat monk clubs a tall man wearing a peaked cap. The tall man falls off a log bridge into a river. So does his club. Friendships are made, broad shoulders clapped; they ride horses side by side, arrows fly. Adventure, risk, defiance. A creamy girl with yellow hair in pigtails puts on a green tunic; her breasts point up under a ruffled blouse; everyone cheers. The Blond Virgin of Comic Books and Lies.

What about this liberated future with card games? Must put things in right order, thought Murphy, where to find a teacher? Learning new tricks at eighty-one, even a badminton-playing, long-walks-regular-sleep eighty-one, was no snip. Thai pronunciation for one—improbable nasal groans, bird twitters, different clicks or clucks.

He glanced round the red plastic tables, the white and red awnings, and out to the field of pineapples; who might teach him

popular games with playing cards? First, however, someone to teach him Thai. Four months' hard work for sure. Then, a cards teacher. By eighty-two, mastery. On the other hand, maybe, as for astrology or auto-engine repair, some "teach-yourself" book would do better? Teach Yourself Thai. Followed by Teach Yourself Solitaire.

Michael Brutus returned to the chicken-dispensing counter, his steps disordered by the sauna-like heat that saturated south Thailand.

"Is bookshop Phuket Town?" he enunciated slowly at the teen-aged girl smiling from under a paper KFC cap. She nodded and smiled twice more, radiant. "Thank you" she managed. Then "Welcome." Murphy flinched. He got off a nod, a little bow, as if she had done at least one thing right.

Murphy took to the road. That is, to his bright red Avis auto, an under-powered Jeep-like Suzuki, a xylophone if you listened too hard. No sooner had he fisted the stick shift than an image seized him, a memory that threaded and braided in with recent naps and waking. Not a welcome memory; it stooped on him like . . . as an eagle or a truck driver might seize upon a Kentucky Fried Chicken.

The aloof Thai lady massaging him twice enquired, "pain?"; once when—his far shoulder held down by a powerful hand—she snapped his pelvis the opposite way; again when she trod on the small of his back. Impassive, tireless, burly, she effused calm; Michael Brutus drifted in and out of somnolence. The word "serenity" formed somewhere to his left. She gestured him to turn on his back once more, unknotted his kneecaps and thighs. Time floated in a warming sea, his body dreamed away. Murphy closed his eyes, sighed, thought of youth then mangoes then drifted into sensual half-sleep. He came to when the serene lady collected his penis in two hands, pulled it out to its historic length, and set to firmly masturbating his long-lived organ. Murphy meant to exclaim "whoah" but the sound emerged as a squeak. "Papa not OK?" queried the lady, her tone polite and far off as before. Insofar as she now knelt between his knees, recently mauled and pushed apart, his position resembled that of a roast duck; Michael Brutus found it impossible to sit up decorously or at all. His organ, companion in bachelorhood for many decades, headed for a

mild inflation, neither runaway nor controlled. That “Papa” was too much for his worldview: “No, stop,” exclaimed Murphy, partner emeritus of Hanhoran, Murphy & Sinopoulos, the best law firm in Richfield.

Conversational, lexical, and dialectical trauma followed. Murphy’s confidence in language and universal values stressed, then failed. A stare tinged with worry met his assurances that while yes, “Very nice lady,” very no, this procedure. To statements of his venerable age her expressions replied, “and so?” Ideas to him elementary were not, *prima facie*, getting across. At the end she defined this absurd customer with a staccato “up to you”—a complete thought if not a complete sentence. This “up-to-you,” and the frown from which it rose, wrought bad spiritual effects. Murphy’s head weakened back into the pillow: “down to me,” said Murphy to Murphy. He became, and remained, morose. Morose over tea, morose walking the beach. He woke morose next day. There are moments when memory gropes after what never happened. Two-edged memory and much reading of books cut him sorely, with fragments such as “in mankind’s fables, even the gods repent and suffer pain.” So much for disdain; so much for acceptance.

Welcome

The roadside shacks scarcely amounted to a hamlet—three huts, or was that a fourth behind the third? How many people poured out though! Children and more children. Barefoot, excited, they flitted onto the road; Murphy braked to a stop. A bare-chested man waved thanks at his windscreen. Two women, girls really, appeared from another hut. Soon there were fifteen, twenty people on the road and roadside, chattering. What is this, wondered Murphy. The children shouted; one then another waved in welcome. Now Murphy saw; from out a nearby rubber tree plantation two elephants emerged and swayed toward them across a paddy. The mahout on the neck of one beast sported a crimson cloth binding up his head; the second driver, naked to the waist, meaningfully flourished a white stick. The children exulted. The elephants swayed nearer and nearer. More exaltation. Enormous smiles.

The first elephant curled its trunk round a felled tree and with a grinding noise tugged the whole pile off the roadside verge, tree trunk, branches, and brush, down the muddy embankment, broken limbs stabbing and rolling. All cheered anew. Up came the second elephant. Another head of logs and branches. Dust rose, and shouts. Exhilaration.

Murphy, putting the jeep into first gear, prudently steered round the prancing children and drove on, perplexed—strangely pained and perplexed, as so often these days. “Incomprehensible,” he thought, and then, “there is no single *human nature*. Probably for them elephants are royal. Those children were proud of them, not just excited, *proud*. Are elephants ancestors? Do I welcome anything or anyone the way they did those elephants? Some live. Some sleepwalk.”

The Fortunate Puppies of the Isthmus of Kra

As the Suzuki jounced downhill he braked and peered round the curve. Down there ahead the macadam road narrowed dangerously, trees and shrubbery walled it closely. Had the road finally reached the inlets of the sea? He pictured the map where Thailand itself narrowed here at Kra Isthmus, indefensibly thin alongside the east flank of Burma.

Coming the other way, up from the Andaman Sea toward Chumpon Junction, a white Mercedes stopped on the left verge. A crowd of people massed to the right, on the roadside opposite where it overlooked a clear flatland, sparse in grass. Further to the right, out past a few coconut palms, gleamed one inlet of the Isthmus of Kra, shallow, glittering waters, open to the sun.

Murphy pulled onto the sand the far side of the crowd, confident of his 4x4 powers. He drank a slug of mineral water and unfolded his legs onto land. What awful lower-back pain; at least an hour yet to Ranong. What were they all looking at? He walked into the crowd. Puppies, there beside the road, in grass. What wonderful puppies! Puppies, two of them tussling, black, perhaps six weeks old.

A third puppy now, fluffy and black as the others, threw itself on its fellows with a flash of pink tongue and a prance up on hind legs.

A fourth puppy appeared from under sinister vegetation, cocking its ears and staring at the others thrashing on the leaves, little jaws hidden in each other's fur. With hops, with a totter, it scampered up and crashed on top of the others. What a bundle of fur and zest! Laughter zig-zagged through the human crowd; fingers pointed, teeth sparkled as white as those of the little dogs. As in a circus joke, where twelve clowns unfold out of a tiny car, two more puppies appeared, all black and fluffy. Eagerly they charged the others. All tumbled and wrestled each other so that one could not easily count them. There were six. "Improbable," muttered Murphy, aloud "amazing." A Thai boy, perhaps nine, looked up at him solemnly. "You're a puppy, too," Murphy informed him, and received back yet another of a thousand beautiful uncomprehending smiles.

Murphy moved here and there among exclamations and cries in this language almost entirely closed to him, more and more conscious of a current of joy and liberty that rippled among what was now a crowd of thirty or more. "This is a miraculous event," he whispered to himself, "or are we all bewitched here, an outbreak of mass hysteria, speaking in tongues." A plump grandmother dressed head to foot in blue, lifted big black spectacles off her nose and dabbed away tears of laughter; Michael Brutus noticed her knuckles, seamed by dark red lines. "Everyone is innocent," thought Murphy, then, "you couldn't possibly describe this in your diary."

It was then that Murphy spied the big sea canoe. It glided across the inlet from the left, the Burmese side, framed by nearby coconut palm boles like a cutout prop across a stage for marionettes. A male figure on the high stern stood at the long-shafted outboard propeller. Seated—six, seven figures, all but one hatted by pale straw cones against the terrible sun. Murphy raised the miniature binoculars suspended on his chest. Just as their bright circle found and magnified it, the vessel collided with something in the muddy shallows. A seated woman threw up her arms to catch her balance. Murphy thought he

saw, was certain that he saw, metal shining on her wrists. She was the hatless one. All seated there were women. He steadied the glasses. Now the binoculars had the boatman, his face. Its color was not Thai beige but darker, grayish. Nose flat, fat lips agape, a heavy jaw, and bulging forehead. Khaki bandoleers crossed down over dirty shirt, worn open. Belly. Khaki belt, military belt. No pistol visible. Now the woman seated second in the boat turned to look aft; in that movement her arms rose awkwardly, together. No question about it now: handcuffs.

The boatman spied the crowd, faces turned his way, toward his cargo. Some hundred meters separated them. The outboard revved, flung up a brown skeleton of mud, and the vessel surged east. In a moment it had dodged behind mangroves, further into shallows, sinuses of marsh, and private landings, somewhere.

Sweat wiggled down Michael Brutus's back under his madras shirt. He downed binoculars and backed toward the macadam. The puppies? They rested now, one open mouthed on its back, two sitting, others on their sides, tongues out. Euphoria dissipated, the audience turned toward their autos. Bending over, the blue grandmother buttoned the blouse of small girl, a white blouse, like a school uniform, prettily washed and ironed. The child, hair in a ponytail, stared solemnly at one, then another, adult, then fixed on enormous Murphy. Did he seem an elephant to her? Pink flapping ears? If he bent down and said "don't be scared" it would terrify her.

Murphy, standing beside the jeep, turned the ignition key and waited for the air conditioning to take effect. "Those," he thought, "those were the fortunate puppies of the Isthmus of Kra."

Ranong Port

Murphy steamed himself all through lunch hour and early afternoon, afloat in the Ranong hot springs. Famously mineral. His dark hotel squatted above gloomy pools that sobbed out of black rocks and stank. "We best place healthy," declared the receptionist. Twice. Murphy's back improved, his eyes went pink.

He drove up and down wide streets posted with British names. The port lay at the end of four kilometers of a two-lane avenue richly planted in flowering laurels. He parked the obvious Avis beside a police booth and walked toward the piers. There, waiting for him, were more purple-gray Burmese faces, filthy shirts, tousled hair, and yes, more than a dozen black sea canoes, prows pulled up into mud or tied against square iron floats reached by metal-mesh gangways from the pier. "You go Burma?" "Want Burma?" the men plucked cigarettes away from mouths to call out.

Treading carefully on wet concrete he snooped into a hanger. Bright sunshine to gloom—one saw nothing, then yellow plastic barrels with their tops open, then children took shape, squatting on the wet cement, handling fish, small fish in piles two feet high. Disregarding him, a forklift from out the hanger depths heaved recklessly past him, halted and, with a hiss of its lift-cylinder, emptied its bucket onto the floor—a cascade of small fish. The children, five boys, glanced at him with disdain, their fingers never stopping, fish carcasses flung up into one or another yellow barrel. Sorting in the dark. It would continue all day, all night, all the century.

Piercing this dead-end warehouse with its buried children of darkness a thin alley ran back out toward the square from whence he had come. He sidled through it. On the far side a gleaming white and stainless steel refrigerator truck: "Shanghai Seafood Company Ltd." Eighty thousand dollars worth of truck? Worth the journey, it seemed.

Someone touched his elbow. A man stood just behind him. One eye socket was empty—a pink knot of skin from which star-points of scar tissue ran to their horizons. He gestured two fingers at his mouth. His age maybe thirty. His shirt was soiled and hung open. Michael Brutus, who disdained cigarettes and cremation, found a fifty-Baht note in his shirt pocket, touched it into the man's palm. Could the man see at all? He could. "*Taan, Khrap khun,*" he murmured, offering Michael Brutus the arched fingers of a *wai*, the hands joined on the chest, the all-purpose courtesy bow. Murphy, unhappy, *wai*-ed him back. The pauper owned a heroic torso—muscle ridges peeped through the open shirt, bulged in the short sleeves. "Those," thought

Murphy, “who have only the strength of their arms. . . .” “*Taan*,” he thought, not “Mister,” but “Lord.”

Standing on the curb he was peering this way and that, wondering just which way drowsed his red Suzuki when a flat-faced Burmese man came from his right and stepped down into the gutter so as to face him. “You go Burma, I take you good place.” Murphy shook his head. The man designed a curvaceous shape in the air with two hands—bosom, waist, hips. “Any how young you want number one young you want you say,” he gurgled, grinning. Images darted at Michael Brutus; at these, anger caught up with him, and with it memory, not of women.

The final bout of the intercollegiates put him up against Charlie Parnell for first place, cruiser-weight division. Three rounds. Parnell got the decision and the gold medal. “Mike, myself I thought you took it,” Parnell said, coming across the ring to where Murphy, hands cut free of his gloves, eased arms into a sweatshirt. Parnell said this decently, not currying favor; they had boxed each other four times for titles since age sixteen, under the approving eyes of the Jesuits. “Charlie, you won this bout,” Murphy replied. His disappointment was great, but tolerable. Tolerable.

Michael Brutus felt how dry the skin, how sharp the bones of his knuckles now. He would damage himself if he broke this pimp’s jaw. And of course, the police. Fixing the man’s eyes, Murphy for plaintiff drew lips back off his teeth, thrust his jaw forward. International sign language, he thought. “Up to you,” sneered the other; he shifted and moved off. “Complexion gray,” thought Michael Brutus, “very bad complexion. Up to you. How number one young? Twelve, ten, and in handcuffs? Up to you.”

Pran’s Cottage

Far west in Kathu Province, on the Andaman Sea, Michael Brutus at last rented his cottage—one bedroom, a sitting room, and, separated from it by a six-foot screen, a small kitchen with its pine table. It was not ideal; the sea curled treacherously upon this beach;

cautious swimming then, parallel to shore, never beyond the second trough of wave. A rubbish dump disfigured the view inland. From the macadam road further inland a dirt track died away here among four Thai huts and his Western-style cottage. The palms were scraggly, shade scarce; the few broad-leafed trees pained among sand patches. The owners' name began with "Pran," but ran on five syllables longer. He could not pronounce it. "Mrs. Pran," he said, or "Mr. Pran." The second time they caught on, laughed. The daughters were Gai and Noi. The son was Ko. There was another son, in Bangkok. "Four year," asserted Mr. Pran, holding up eight fingers. Gai overweight and Ko, pudgy, lumbered like Mrs. Pran; Noi was agile and strode briskly, like Mr. Pran.

The third week Mr. Pran injured himself thatching his roof. The family motorbike broke down. Ko failed at repairs. Michael Brutus Murphy drove Mrs. Pran and Gai in the Suzuki to the European hypermarket below the junction of 402 with Phuket Town. They had never been inside that paradise. The women inspected every aisle: shoes, all TV sets, garden tools, all kitchen gadgets, and the festival of displayed meats. The ground pork special they seized, far cheaper than up-country. And a birthday cake in its pink carton, oozing icing. Fat Gai, coveting mobile phones but hostile toward bikinis, went gloomy after an hour. She trod in her mother's steps, picked up and put down tins on shelves. Murphy watched her, thirty-something years of age, sulking like an adolescent. Dully she read aloud a label when her mother, unschooled, asked. Mrs. Pran seemed oblivious to time and Gai. Never saw so much so cheap in one place.

Gai was decommissioned; Noi came to clean his cottage. Gai foundered in a depression. She would eat only sweets; sheltered in vast pajamas she stuck inside the Pran hut, refused all chores. Senior sister, senior spinster, and schizophrenic aborning, diagnosed Murphy. Noi turned out to be thirty-one, not nineteen as he first fancied. She wore orange often. Her face, oval and otherwise smooth, went distorted around the nose, a corner of her left nostril savaged, like the repair to a harelip. Ko, who took to hanging around to peer at Murphy's laptop,

the Suzuki dashboard, the cell phone, the reprint of *Model Penal Code*, explained. Murphy listened, little the wiser. He guessed Ko to say that Noi had suffered a growth in the left nostril, that it was cut out in Phuket Hospital. They had done something. In Phuket Hospital. With or to her nose. Ko, a broad intact nose, was lazy in all matters except motorbike. With satisfaction he informed Murphy: “baby”; he, Ko, was the family baby.

Noi loved rides on Ko’s motorbike. Ko lost a week’s pay gambling with Chinese crooks in the village across Sarrasin bridge to the mainland. Michael Brutus, feigning an errand, borrowed the motorbike. He puttered back, the petrol tank brim full. At sundown Ko could again ride Noi down the beach spraying sand and hilarity. An orange blouse hugged her bosom, her mane of black hair streamed out behind and she screamed.

He wrote daily—an essay opposing Canada’s adoption of the American Model Penal Code—carried a pad and pen on sundown beach walks, felt knowledgeable, sometimes even witty, swam longer each morning, woke to morning erections, ate shrimp and mangoes with a will, and admired seawater’s amelioration of his toenails.

Mrs. Pran had only one set of clothes that he ever saw.

One afternoon at the Phuket nature museum he bought the Prans a magnificent seashell. The gift produced worried foreheads, anxious eyes. Remorseful, he tried a big rake, heavy-duty stainless steel. This time, success; a true gift. Mr. Pran would hold it up—it came with a green handle—admiring the steel teeth. One night in Patong, after being overcharged for frozen Wiener schnitzel, Murphy drifted into a jewelery shop.

Sixty-three years ago the allure of twin silver bracelets had blended with the alluring wrists and risqué banter of Laura LeBlanc. And her stockings, which swept into shapely ankles, and her bosom. That it happened to be Laura’s bosom rather than the next girl’s did not penetrate, back then, a teenaged Murphy. Recklessly, urgently, he bought and conferred the bracelets. Laura LeBlanc wore them with purpose and éclat. Mr. Murphy Junior gave her these bracelets, weren’t they lovely? She arched one hand round a silver-weighted wrist, like a shaft

for her fingers to test, and stuck out the tip of her tongue. The other girls praised the bracelets—an obligation—but flushed at her gestures. This was 1938; Richfield's gossip was a chief pastime.

His mother flew at him. He was told about making one's way up in the world, family, "Frenchies," and finally, "Michael, you have been stupid and self-indulgent. Can't you see what expensive gestures mean? You will now back out of this mess. We will think out every step! You, me, your father—we are all in danger. And Michael, I will say it once and forever; now this LeBlanc girl will try to have sexual relations with you. Yes, mister big eyes, she will! On no account may that happen. Think of being alone with her as *The Occasion of Sin*. Think of her as diseased—I don't care with what except that it's incurable—but never be alone with her again."

The Patong bracelets were not so seductive as those others that had put a stop to so much. Too many things had not happened to him. A lifetime of questioning looks, of false starts—he felt as if he took it between his fingers there in the shop, put it down, slid it on the glass counter. A squeaky sound on glass. Sentimental circles. The bracelets were silver with gold clasps; bevelling decorated half their circumference only. Thoughtful.

Murphy thought. Noi had taken to washing and ironing his clothes. She did this well. And the daily cleaning. Quite some hours of work, thought he. He bought the Patong bracelets. Next day he gave them, but still in their wrapping, to Noi, saying thank you but muddling the word for "work." The seashell all over again! The reward produced a troubled forehead; she gave him a dutiful "for a foreigner" smile but her eyes retreated.

Murphy went ill from explosive chili and catfish. Ko motored to Maki village fetching rice pasta and green vegetables, a leggy sort of broccoli. Noi appeared on Ko's heels, cooked the bland meal for him. Murphy pointed to this and that about the house, their reliable language game. Now she supplied Thai words dully, did not correct his pronunciation. He felt irritation mixed with guilt. He had given offense. But how exactly?

Mr. Pran appeared next dusk. "Car-bu-ret-tor," he explained; Ko's

achievement with motorbike repairs. Murphy, still queasy, nodded, repeated the English word, smiled, kept up his role. Now Mr. Pran said something about Noi. "What?" asked Michael Brutus. "You like Noi?" "Oh yes," asserted Michael Brutus, alarmed. Here was the fall-out from that bracelet *faux pas*. He should have given money. "Oh yes, I like Noi very much, Noi is a very nice woman," he hurried, emphatic. This mix-up would not do! The senior Prans might be illiterate, their world might stop at Sarrasin bridge, they might superstitiously assure him that should he swim at night the ghosts of drowned fisher-folk would pull him under by the legs (Mrs. Pran demonstrated how), but to underpay, and/or somehow to offend, the Prans . . . a wound in his heart forever. Might as well go back to Canada.

Mr. Pran nodded, mused, stuck a twig in the sand and rose from a squat. Lawyer Murphy, at the bar of Asia, watched with anxious eyes. "So, OK." In Mr. Pran's "so OK" Murphy saw possibilities; harmony and esteem would be restored. "Noi say you good man," added Noi's father. With this reassurance Murphy's spirits lifted: a touch euphoric with relief he presented Mr. Pran a wai. Mr. Pran wai-ed him back, of course, only better at it. And solemn. The sun set behind the Andaman. Incisive Model Penal Code paragraphs rose on his laptop.

Next sunset Noi—in black trousers, an orange blouse, and a kitchen apron—appeared at the front door. She shed her clogs briskly. "What you buy market?" Surprised to be fallen upon at this late hour Murphy exhibited the refrigerator: shrimp—ocean shrimp not farm—green mangoes and ripe mangoes, sweet peppers, and green asparagus; a kilo. Also a huge white radish. And three small bags of sweets, fruit rinds with too much granulated sugar. And two minced pork patties in banana leaf wrapping pierced by toothpicks.

"I cook you com-pu-ter," ordered Noi, pointing at the laptop, the table, the chair. Murphy obeyed. Murphy sat. Murphy typed. His attention circled down onto words on the screen and prospered there. Subjectivity, subjectivity at war with Common Law; the heart of the matter, this penal code.

"Hot OK now," declared Noi, from out of sight. Murphy came round the screen to discover his pine table set for two. Not sure what he felt, dead sure that protest was unthinkable, he sat. Mute.

The first shrimp with its square of translucent onion tasted remarkable. Delicious. He looked to Noi, perplexity on the wane, gratitude on the rise. She made round eyes, miming hunger, a grimace that momentarily transformed her from thirty to seventeen. An unshelled shrimp tail fought clear of her lips and she wrinkled her nose. The scar reddened. Quickly she threw a hand over her face. He stared, surprised. She paled. Humiliation. She must feel that tissue all the time, thought Murphy; a far-reaching distress of heart and mind assailed him.

“Noi looks very pret-ty tonight,” he drawled as in their English/Thai lessons.

“No pretty.” Noi tapped an index finger at her mutilation.

“For me Noi very pretty. I like your shrimp.”

“No my shrimp, you buy.” Michael Brutus, emeritus partner, felt like laughing, then like weeping. Their language as their thinking ran as on railroad tracks. Steel-like and factual, of a single piece, and straight ahead.

Big spoons one-handed, nicely as a headwaiter, he pincered up asparagus and set them by her shrimp. “Here Noi.” She pointed to his hand. “You no. . . .” she imitated trembling hands. “Shake?” supplied Michael Brutus, imitating Noi imitating shakes. “You no shake. Old man shake, you no shake.” Another fact stated, but his body warmed to it.

“Noi number one cook,” proclaimed Murphy, then “Thai lady cook shake?” At last she laughed. Not a smile, an international soprano laugh. Murphy, become age fourteen, silently thanked Saint Jude and Mary, Our Mother Full of Compassion.

Back at the laptop he found himself dazed, unfit to assemble words. Far side of the screen Noi washed dishes, clattered implements, and rustled in plastic bags. He sensed every barefoot step. When she crossed the room he pretended to type. Moving in the matter-of-fact way that, without realizing it, Murphy himself had taken on in Thailand, she slipped round his chair and into the bedroom. A light went on there; a glimpse of her arms tidying a shirt on a hanger, a creak from the wardrobe door. He did not look up when she passed to the bath, bearing ironed towels. Now the shower drummed.

Murphy felt queasy, his mind fell ajar to sights and fear. He knew he was and was not by the shore for his morning swim and yet it was night for the sea and for him, he saw in the green water where the current expressed its omens, its voyage to nowhere living. Now emotion, to do with home. Such a young man at the train station, endless plains all around, beyond them the far Pacific, the piercing rails through them, the railway carriage, the piercing journey into the world, its cities. Home, afraid to stay, afraid to leave. He touched the laptop keys. He was, he knew, afraid. "This is like parting," he remembered, then how the crowd had deserted the puppies at Kra, caring nothing for them really, and no one had pointed at the canoe, at what was there. "It is," he thought, "my future"; his thoughts turned wordless and ventured on at his peril.

He came to of a sudden, for there stood Noi, black hair shiny with water, rubbing a blue towel to her fluffed mane, a second blue towel become her tunic from breasts to knees. In a single blow he saw his bracelets. The bright silver shone all the brighter for the solitary table lamp and silence. Her wrists were handsome, elegant under the metal. "This," thought Murphy, "is not a land of explanations. This is not a land of explanations and this is not a people of explanations."

"Noi stay?" she asked. How quiet they were. It was concern for him, the glance she now gave. And the voice of Noi: "up to you."