

## Chapter Three

When I finally got to Kasesart University after a rather long ride through Bangkok's infamous crawling rush hour traffic, I found that the situation there did not look all that much different from that at the park. Red shirt supporters were all over the sprawling university compound located right next to the main road, doing pretty much the same things the supporters at Chatuchak Park were doing. I began to wonder if there were really so many red shirts around despite the city being an affluent one. Apparently, beneath the dazzle of the metropolis, a huge bulk of the population were from the grassroots that benefited more from Thaksin's policies than the minute grace extended to them by the city's rich. The division of the people by the colour of their tops had visually underscored the class divide that had previously been more perceived than seen.

I was at a new place, but I felt I had landed back on square one. I had to search through the mass of people all over again.

It wasn't long before the sun started to make way for the arrival of the evening, and my search thus far had proven fruitless. By then, my morale had gone down somewhat, and I did not hold my hopes high of being able to locate her. In order not to tire myself out and lose my patience and hope in the process, I decided to simply stop searching. Wading through a crowd that was in constant motion was a lot more tiring than I thought, and I felt drained after I called off my search mode. I found a bench along a path in the university compound facing the main road and sat down, and my mind began to drift. Hundreds of thoughts flitted across my mind, but I was thinking of nothing in particular.

Just then, a commotion that broke out at a visible distance jolted me from my thoughts. A mixture of people in red tops and uniformed policemen was fast approaching where I sat, and very soon, I was engulfed in the crowd. Through the frenzy, I could see that a group of people were being rounded up by the police amid shouts and arguments from both sides. The jostling and pushing in the chaos made it hard for me to stand properly, and I was made to move along with the people. All I could think of at that moment was, 'I have to get out of here. I'm not involved in this!'

The group of people being rounded up was quite a large one. Just as I was about to turn and leave the place, a policeman grabbed my arm and said something in a stern, loud voice, and pushed me back to where I originally was. I tried to push my way out again, but another policeman dragged my arm back. I realized I was in trouble. They must have thought that I was together with the group of protesters they were rounding up.

I was puzzled. These policemen came out of nowhere to disrupt the activities here, seemingly without a reason. Everything was going on peacefully, and there had been no sign of disorder. It wouldn't have been hard to notice if there had been. All I saw up till then, however, was these people going about their activities like they had been doing since a few hours ago.

Disorder erupted when a few people in red tops tried to escape the rounding-up. A few policemen ran after those who tried to escape while the remaining officers stepped up on securing the rest of us. The officers pushed the people even harder to get them to converge at a central spot surrounded by their colleagues.

Before I could think of the next step, I was pushed again by an officer. I ambled backwards to regain my balance, which was restored by a person whom I bumped against on

my way down. As I struggled to regain my footing, I grabbed the arm of the person who broke my fall. As I stood up to thank the person, my eyes nearly popped.

“You!” that person gasped.

“Busha!”

The whole rounding-up calmed and became more orderly a few minutes later as the police managed to stop everyone from trying to disperse. Amid murmurs and grumblings, everyone present stood and wiggled around while waiting to see what would happen next.

“What are you doing here?” Busha asked, obviously still bewildered by my presence there and then.

“To look for you,” I replied without much deliberation while I scanned around to assess the situation. It was at this time that I felt I was able to talk to Busha properly.

“Let’s talk about this later,” I told Busha. “Tell me what’s going on here first. Why are we being rounded up?”

“Are you a red-shirt too?” she asked innocently.

“Of course not!” I replied in exasperation.

“Then why are you being caught as well?”

“I told you, I was looking for you around here when all this happened suddenly. I wanted to get away but was pushed in here with the rest of the people.”

“You said you were here to look for me, but you want to run away when there’s trouble?”

“If I’m caught and put into jail, how am I going to look for you?”

Busha giggled at my reply. I had no idea she had such an ability to stay so calm in such a situation.

“I think somebody spread a rumour about what we were doing here,” Busha continued. “That is why the police is here. We didn’t do anything wrong. We didn’t create any trouble.”

“Rumours?” I pondered. “From the opposing camp, huh?”

“Must be. They always think that we are troublemakers.”

“We, huh? What were you doing here before all this happened?” I asked.

“I was just listening to some of the other fellow supporters of Thaksin sharing about how he has helped them since he became prime minister, and how the yellow shirts were just jealous of his wealth. Thaksin’s wealth. Those people didn’t do anything for us. Not the way Thaksin did.”

The noise began to grow louder, and I found it increasingly harder to hold a conversation with Busha. At the back of my mind, I was still trying to devise an escape plan. As I looked around, however, I saw no holes through which we could hightail.

As if an answer to my predicament, a break came. There was a sudden burst of shouts followed by huge splashes of cold water from different directions. That drove the crowd wild. In between the splashes, I caught a glimpse of what was going on. About three pickups drove up along where we were being rounded up, and the people at the back of the pickups started scooping and pouring water from large drums. They did it in relay, and so the splashing was fast and furious. It created a good enough diversion for us to escape, and we did just that. I grabbed Busha's wrist and ran out of there as fast as we could. One of the policemen ambled into my path. I pushed him away without hesitation, and he fell tumbling on the ground. "Yud! Yud!" I heard him shout behind me. I must have pushed too hard. It was the first time I had ever done something like that to a police officer, and I knew that if I were caught, I would be in hot soup. That gave me an even better reason to run away faster.

We finally got far enough from the chaos to stop and catch our breath. I looked around again to make sure we were truly out of the woods. We found ourselves at the back alley somewhere that I wasn't familiar with, but that didn't matter. The alley seemed broad, and the late afternoon sun emanated soothing amber wherever it could penetrate through the gaps between buildings of various heights and designs. Busha sat at the top of a short flight of three steps where there was sunlight to allow herself to dry under the sunlight. I joined her.

"What now?" I asked myself before turning to look at Busha. She sat quietly with her knees tucked under the embrace of her arms, staring silently at the floor at a distance. I didn't expect an answer from her; that much about her I had come to accustom myself with.

"Do you have anywhere to go now?" I asked Busha.

She looked up at me and shook her head. It made perfect sense to me, since she had been sleeping at the rally site along with the other participants for the past few days.

"Great," I said resignedly. "You made it all the way here only to end up in the streets. I don't get it at all. Is Thaksin really worth all the trouble you went through?"

"You don't know anything!" she snapped suddenly. Realizing that she had lost grip of herself at that moment, she tried to regain her composure quickly.

"You don't know anything at all. You don't know what it's like to grow up in a family where the father was a drug addict," she said in a calmer voice, though her indignation was still evident. "Make that a VILLAGE where almost everyone had been a drug addict at some point in their lives! Some of them still are. There were nine children in the family along with my mother. All of us had to eat. All of us had to live! But what did the head of the family do? He squandered all the money away to buy drugs because he could not live without them! Never mind if anyone else couldn't live. As long as he could, that was all that mattered to him."

I offered no reply. I simply waited as she paused. I knew the story has not ended, and so I waited patiently for her to continue.

"We always had to live in constant worry about our lives. Not only about food. We worried about school too. Three of my eldest sisters had to stop schooling after they finished high school because the government paid for us only up till that point. If we wanted to continue studying in the university, we had to pay our own fees. How were we able to afford

that? One of the three sisters actually had the interest to study more, but she couldn't. They all had to go to work in town after high school. What could young girls like them do?"

Busha looked down again as she paused, as if waiting for me to answer her question. Fortunately for me, she did not wait long enough before she went on. Fortunately, because I did not want to say anything, even though I already had inkling what the answer might be.

"They did everything from being waitresses and shop assistants to helping others to sell things at stalls in the night bazaar. Being girls, they were often bullied, especially by men who always wanted to take them to bed. My second sister lost her virginity after she went with a farang who she thought was true to her. The next day, that man disappeared, and she did not know where to find him. Luckily, she did not get pregnant. My parents still don't know about this. It was my third sister who told me and my fourth sister about this."

I had half expected Busha to start tearing at this point, but she didn't. She continued to relate the story as if she was telling that of somebody unrelated, though her tone remained solemn.

"Over time, my sisters found that those work made too little money. After settling their own expenses, they did not have much left to send home. They took the responsibility of paying for the expenses of our mother and the other six siblings. It was a very heavy burden, three girls providing for seven people. In the end, after my fourth sister finished school, they got her to join them in town to work. She didn't even have the chance to think about going to university. My fifth sister, on the other hand, didn't like to study, and when she saw that my fourth sister had the chance to go to work in town, she jumped at the chance to quit school and join her."

"So that left four children back at home," I interjected. Not the smartest of deductions, but I figured I'd give her a chance to breathe before things got too heavy for her. "What's your position among your siblings, by the way?"

"I'm number seven. My sixth sister is still back home with me."

"How old is she?"

"One year older," she replied almost instantly. "Than me," she added after a short pause to complete the thought.

"And the other two sisters?"

"No. Number eight is my brother. A boy. The last one is a girl."

"Oh."

"Going to work at that age changes people, you know," Busha continued without missing a beat. "Even though the burden at home has been lighter with so many of them having gone to work, when my sisters come home during New Year after a few years, I felt like I didn't know them anymore. I know they still love me and my other siblings, but their behavior, their style, everything... everything has changed. I don't know how to put it.

The first time they all came home after nearly a year to celebrate the New Year with the family, the three eldest ones had their hair colored. One evening, after dinner, I saw my eldest and second sister leave the house even though it was cold. I went out after them to look for them, and found that they were standing at the side of the house smoking.

"Both of them started to dress in modern fashion. Tight jeans, tight T-shirts that showed their bodies. Big earrings, a lot of accessories on their hands. They made me promise

to keep quiet about their smoking. I think at that time, my second sister was not even twenty yet. Only big sister was, I think, twenty-one. They were young, but they already started to smoke. I was shocked, but I kept quiet.”

“What about the other three sisters?” I asked.

“They were still the same the first few times they came home,” Busha replied. “Even now, I don’t know if they have picked up smoking. I didn’t ask. I never asked. I am afraid to find out.”

“This year’s new year was... how long ago was that?” I fumbled.

“Two months ago,” she offered. “Why?”

“Did your sisters come home?”

“Only my third, fourth and fifth sisters came home.”

“Oh? What happened to the other two?”

“Big sister was married to a farang. My mother told me the man was from Russia. Second sister was married to a Korean guy.”

“Really? How long ago was that?”

“Last year. Both of them got married last year and followed their husbands back home. Up till now, they haven’t written any letters back to us. My mother misses them, but she is angry at them for not writing home.”

“So what are your other sisters doing? Where are they working?”

“They are still in town. I don’t know what they are doing.”

“Have you ever visited them?”

“I can’t. My parents won’t allow me to. They are afraid they will lose one more daughter.”

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The sign of an afternoon giving way to the twilights of an impending evening was evident as the strong rays of the golden sun that shot out from the gaps between the buildings in front of us grew closer to the horizon. And here she is, telling me this tale while she is all alone here in this city of chaos.

“This doesn’t make sense to me at all,” I suddenly flailed my arms as I said that. “You’re not allowed to go to Chiang Rai by yourself, but now you’re here alone! Won’t your parents kill you when you get home?”

“Get home?” Busha looked at me coolly. “I... I’m not sure how I can get home now. Maybe I have to find work here to earn enough money for bus money.”

“That’s exactly why I’m here!” I tried to contain my exasperation. “I’m here to bring you home.”

“Why do you think I would go with you?” she shot back firmly.

“You’re not even eighteen yet. Who would want to hire you? Aren’t you afraid of danger, or that you have to work in jobs you don’t want to? Look around you. This city is in a mess. In chaos. There are rumors of a military coup coming. It’s not safe for you to be here by yourself.”

“Coup? What is that?” she asked innocently.

“They want to throw your Prime Minister Thaksin out of his office.”

“That’s why I’m here.”

“For what? To overthrow him too? Or save him?”

“Support him. I want to show him my support.”

“What?” I said in amazement. “What’s this about supporting him anyway? I see many of these people in red clothes, they seem to support Thaksin as well. I don’t understand a thing they’re saying, but I read about all this on the Bangkok Post. A lot of these people don’t seem to be city folks, I noticed.”

“Only the people in Bangkok are against Thaksin,” Busha said gingerly. “Everyone else support him. We are grateful to him for the things he has done for us.”

“You know our village used to be full of drug users, right?” she asked me. I nodded.

“When Thaksin tried to wipe out drugs in Thailand, it became harder and harder for people in my village to get their drugs. Some of the drug dealers were arrested, and some died fighting against the police. But he was the one who helped us get rid of drugs in our village, and also other villages. You don’t know how serious the drug problem was in the past.

After that, with the help of the church at the neighboring village, my father and many other drug addicts in the villages were able to quit their drug habits. Slowly, the whole district was nearly free of drugs. Now, the drug rehab center at the village even helps people from other villages to kick their drug addiction. I know you think it’s the rehab center’s work that helped the former addicts. You are not wrong, but without Thaksin, drugs would still be all around the mountain.” I began to see where she was coming from.

“I know the general history behind how the village got rid of drugs entirely over the last twenty years, though,” I offered. “But there are still people coming for rehabilitation. I suppose that the drug trade is coming back because Thaksin is no longer here to fight it, isn’t that so?”

Busha shrugged her shoulder absently. “Maybe.”

“The church has done a lot for our village ever since the missionaries from your country came,” she continued. “It was the drug rehab center that helped my father kick his drug habit. I really thank them for it.”

I looked at her while she continued to look on at nothing in a distance.

“I remember there was once when I was younger, my father fell very sick because he was so weak from taking too much drugs. We have a doctor in this district, but even she was unable to help him. One of our friends in the village suggested bringing him to the hospital in Chiang Rai, but my mother objected to it. She was very fearful because we had no money to pay the hospital bills. She said if my father were to die, she would accept it. Our family would struggle for our livelihood, but at least we would not be deep in debt. My father was so sick he was not able to make a decision, so his life was in our hands.

But our friends persuaded my mother to let them take him to Chiang Rai. They said he was seriously ill, but not to the point that he should die. But if we did nothing, he could. They all said he could be cured. Everyone said the church would help with the medical expenses. It would not be worth it for my father to lose his life over a sum of money. We all knew that in our hearts, but at that point we didn't know what to do.

“Just then, one of the men carried my father and put him in his pickup, and another man and his wife got in too. They told my mother not to worry and drove off.

“A few days later, my one of my sisters called home and asked us to go to the hospital to see Father. We got to the hospital in a friend's car and met my sisters at their house before heading to the hospital. Along the way, we feared the worst. When we got to the hospital, however, I was surprised to see Father was healthy and smiling. The look of suffering he had on his face before was gone. He could even walk around in the ward and talk to other patients. I couldn't believe it. A few days ago, we thought he would die soon. The doctor told us that it was a good thing we brought Father to the hospital in time. Otherwise, nobody could have saved him.

“The first thing Mother asked was how much the medical bill was. The nurse standing beside the doctor said that the bill had already been paid, and they turned and left. My eldest sister told us that she had settled the bill already. Mother asked her where on earth had she found so much money, and my sister laughed and said everyone has the money. It was only thirty baht! She went on to explain to us that Thaksin's health care policy allowed poor people like us to receive medical treatment for only thirty baht, and the government would pay the rest of the bill.

“So, do you understand now? Thaksin saved my father's life. Without his policy, can you imagine what sort of life we would be living now?”

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Before I realized it, the sky has darkened to a deep shade of cobalt blue. The sun sets at about six in the evening here, and the traffic on the road had already built up around the same time as well. The rallies showed no sign of abating. In fact, as more people got off work, the crowd began to build up. Those who were not in red garb went about their businesses on the streets as if nothing happened.

A few hours had passed since our last conversation, and silence fell between us throughout those hours. Busha followed me back to my hotel room reluctantly off an hour's walk to where the hotel was located. She was still pensive about being alone in a hotel room with me. However, seeing that she needed a place to rest for the night, Busha agreed to come back with me. We risked gossip, but at least I was able to keep an eye on her this way. Heaven knows if I had lost her that evening, I would have to look for her again. It wasn't something I would rather go through one more time.

She fell asleep on the bed without changing her clothes, while I sat on the only cushioned wooden chair in the room, my clothes changed, and was wondering to myself what I was thinking about. She declined my offer of a clean tee-shirt to change into. I left her alone

to sleep and tried to distract myself by watching the television, but could not settle on a channel. Busha finally woke up from her nap a while later. She sat up slowly but remained quiet.

“Are you hungry?” I asked her. By then, her clothes had dried sufficiently, and we had hung around for long enough.

“Yes, a little,” she replied. “We can go and get some food from the stall.” She walked over to the window of our room on the third floor, pushed the curtained gently out of the way, and pointed out at a makeshift food stall among the crowd of protesters. The ‘festivity’ was building up, and once again, the stage came alive with people getting up to sing presumably motivational songs in Thai, and giving passionate speeches of how Thaksin has helped them while the previous prime ministers had done nothing for them. The roars of approval from the audience were loud, clear and strong.

I noticed small groups of people walking around with a purpose, and thought that they might have been appointed to patrol the grounds to guard against people from the opposing party infiltrating and creating trouble. The heat sure seemed to be building up.

“No, let’s go to a shop somewhere to eat,” I told Busha, not wanting to associate with any of these activities as a foreigner for the fear of unnecessary complications.

“But I don’t have much money with me,” she replied.

“Don’t worry, I’ll take care of it,” I assured her. As I began to move off, I tried to grab her hand, but she pulled away, and she lowered her head shyly as she did that.

“Um, let’s go,” I said, seeing obviously that wouldn’t work. I turned around to leave, and she followed.

We ended up at a small shop eating beef noodles after walking for half an hour. Neither of us could decide what we wanted to eat, and as we walked farther away from the hotel, we found ourselves on a stretched of road where all the shops were closed, and there wasn’t any eateries in sight. Neither of us said much along the way as Busha kept a steady distance behind me. When we found finally arrived at the beef noodle shop, both of us headed in without so much as a consensus. We were hungry, and we didn’t have to think too much about what we wanted to eat anymore.

From where I sat, I could see the television set that was placed on a rack above the entrance to the kitchen, right beside an altar for the god that the shop owner worshipped. The program running was in Thai, but the moving images were obviously about the rallies as well as news about the impending political crisis involving the current prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

“Aren’t you afraid of what might happen when you came to join the rally?” I asked Busha as she tucked gently into her noodles.

“What do you mean?” she asked back as she looked up.

“I don’t know. I mean, what if Thaksin really loses his power, and the government or whoever is in charge next would come after his supporters...”

“Come after? You mean, arrest us?” she cut me off.

“Yeah, something like that,” I concurred. “You’d be in big trouble then. Who is going to help you then? Have you ever thought about that?”

She shook her head slightly and continued with her dinner after pausing for a moment.

“Then again, after hearing your story, I can understand why you’re doing this,” I said as I continued with my own bowl of noodles.

“Then you’re not against what I do?”

“This has nothing to do with that!” I paused my eating again. “I don’t want to get involved with your country’s politics. I’m just a foreigner here. I’m here to bring you home, and that’s all I’m going to do.”

“But why you?” Busha asked. “There are others in the village who are able to drive down to Bangkok and take me home.”

She got me there. I hadn’t thought about that at all. Why me?

“Are they able to find you when they get here? Can they afford to make the trip?” I asked her back.

“Not everyone there is poor. We are not what you think.”

Both of us paused for a moment, not to ease the tension before an argument broke out, but because both of us were apparently stumped.

“Maybe it is because they think this would give you another chance,” she paused again. She looked down at her bowl of noodles shyly and continued eating.

That sudden cleared it up a little. In the heat of all that had happened that led up to my search for Busha, I hadn’t thought of the question that she brought up at all. For no good reason at all, I just took it upon myself to fulfill this mission, naively thinking that no one else in the village had the capability to come and look for her themselves. There was probably only one reason for my impulse: I still harbored hopes between us.

“I’m sorry,” Busha said haltingly. “But I…”

“It’s okay,” I cut her off. “I understand.” I just disguised my sigh with a deep breath.

“I understand,” I mustered again without looking at her.

Both of us started to eat our noodles again, for the umpteenth time. This time, we found that we had almost finished the noodles. Neither of us looked at each other as we sipped the iced tea we had ordered.

Suddenly, Busha put her glass on a table and looked up, apparently having thought of something.

“What?” I asked.

“Before you came here, did anyone talk to you about marriage?” she said.

“What? Marriage? No. Why?”

“Did you come here to look for me because my parents promised to give me to you in marriage?”

“What?!” I exclaimed at the absurdity of the idea. That really came out of nowhere.

“Did they?” she persisted.

“Of course not! They were the ones who objected to me getting into a relationship with you, remember? Why would they turn around and give you to me in marriage?”

“My parents didn’t like the husbands of my two sisters as well. But because they could provide for my sisters, it was a relief for my parents. So they let them marry my sisters as well.” She lowered her gaze once again after having said that. By now, I had gotten used to her habit.

“So you think I’m here so that I could own you?” I said in slight exasperation. “Yes, I do have feelings for you. I even dreamed of having you as my wife. But not this way! I want you to marry me because you love me, not because I bought you or earned you. I’m not those damned farang, okay?” That was the first time I had ever been so straight with her about my feelings.

“Sorry,” she uttered meekly after having seen where I was coming from.

“It’s okay, forget it,” I said under my breath. At that moment, I was at a loss of where to take this conversation. As with all the other times when our dialogue came to a standstill, we let silence take over. She continued to sip her glass of ice tea slowly.

A minute later, I looked up at her intently and said, “So, when are you going to go back with me? To your home, I mean. We can’t be staying here forever, you know.”

“But I still want to support...”

“What have you done ever since you came here?” I cut her off. “What more do you think you can do?”

I looked at her and waited for an answer, which never came. She lowered her gaze once again, only this time she brought the ice tea close to her chest. I could sense that she was trying to come up with a reply, but it was clear she was not able to think of any.

Just then, a commotion broke out at a distance from the shop, on the other side of the road. Both of us looked out at the direction from which the noise was coming, wondering what was going on. A lady who worked at the shop came over to us and spoke to Busha in Thai. She sounded worried.

“What did she say?” I asked Busha.

“She said a clash broke out between the red shirt protesters and some policemen across the street, and now the police are going around to search for the people who started the trouble. They might round up anyone who is wearing a red shirt for questioning. The lady told us to go home quickly in order to avoid trouble.”

I looked at her. The crimson polo tee she was wearing was clear enough as a beacon.

“We better go then,” I left enough money on the table to cover our meal and hurried out of the shop.

Sure enough, the street turned chaotic in the span of our dinner. Some people in red shirts were running while other passers-by looked around them wondering what was going on. This time, in order to avoid letting Busha get rounded up and wind up in more trouble than I could handle, I grabbed her hand and led her away. I held on to her firmly so that she would not struggle free again like she did the last time. To my surprise, she complied and followed me.

There wasn't so much as a frenzy, but there were definitely groups of red shirts running about in order to avoid arrest. We had to dodge the oncoming human traffic while trying to overtake some others ahead of or alongside us.

“Where are we going?” Busha asked.

“Back to my room, of course! Where else can we go?”

“Your room again? No! I can't...”

This time I did not wait for her reply. I just held on to her and pulled her with me.

Just about a minute after we started moving off, shouts that sounded like commands were heard. In the crowd, I wasn't able to tell where they were coming from.

“What's that they're shouting?” I asked Busha.

“It's the police,” she said. “They're telling everyone to stop running and cooperate.”

Stop? They're crazy! That's the last thing we would do. Not even the last. We just wouldn't stop. I can't handle all that trouble. Besides, they had no record of anyone on the streets. I was certain they would not be able to locate anyone of us after we had gotten away. I simply ignored their commands and picked up the pace.

“There's a taxi,” I pointed to one not far up ahead of us.

When we got to the taxi, we found to our dismay that there was no one in there.

“What you want to do?” A man's voice rang out from behind us.

We turned around and saw a man in his thirties with thick black-rimmed glasses and his hair gelled pointing upwards. He sported a goatee, and a yellow checkered shirt wrapped his rather stout body.

“Are you the driver?” I asked him, pointing to the taxi.

“Yes khrap.”

“Great! Can you take us to Saphan Khwai?”

Busha shook free of my grip on her hand stood a few steps behind me.

“Saphan Khwai?” the driver eyed me suspiciously as he queried again.

“Yeah,” I told him. “That’s right. Anything wrong?”

The man turned his head to look at Busha for a few seconds, and then scanned the surrounding for another few seconds. After that, he said something to Busha, to which she said nothing more than a few “kha” and nodded. At the end of it, she said something in reply. The man smirked, glanced at me for a second, and then opened his car door and started up the taxi.

“Reo reo,” he turned around and said to us.

“Get in,” Busha told me as she opened the door and shuffled in. I got in quickly, and the driver drove off as soon as I slammed the door shut.

“What did the taxi driver say to you back there?” I asked Busha when we finally got back to my room.

She was sitting quietly, with a bottle of mineral water she barely drank, at the edge of the double bed in a room with nothing more besides a wooden closet and a dresser with a mirror in addition to the bed. I sat across her on the only other piece of furniture with nothing in my hands.

“He said he is a yellow shirt. He was hesitating at first whether to take us when he saw that I was wearing red. He didn’t want to be seen helping red shirt people and get into trouble with his own side. Then he asked me whether you are a foreigner.”

“Oh?” my interest was piqued. “What did you say to him that he was finally willing to take us?”

“I lied to him,” she said abashedly.

“How...?”

“I told him you are my boyfriend from another country, and we are going to your hotel.”

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That night, neither of us changed out of our clothes. We laid down in a position perpendicular to how we were supposed to sleep on a double bed because Busha wanted to avoid being too close. A look at my mobile phone told me it was one in the morning already. She was fast asleep lying on her side and facing me. I laid on my back with my hands tucked

behind my head. She must have been really tired and lacked sleep the past few days. She had not made a noise in her sleep, though her soft breathing was audible in the quiet of the night.

I looked at her smooth, innocent face as she wandered in dreamland, at peace despite having gone through a frenzy of events. Was it her naïveté that allowed her to shrug away the cares of the world when it was time to switch off, or was I the one who could never let go of my thoughts and burdens no matter when or where?

There were only two of us in the room. It was the perfect opportunity for me to seal the deal with her, and our union in marriage would be a foregone conclusion. I had always wanted to be with her, and the opportunity was right in front of me. However, after all that I had gone through with her, after all that I had heard from her, I just couldn't do anything like that. That night, I did nothing more than gaze at her in sympathy. I wanted to reach out and touch her, but my hand braked when I got near her shoulder. I withdrew my hand and simply looked at her until I fell asleep as well.

I looked back at Busha, still sound asleep at the moment, and thought about the conversation we had earlier that night ...

We remained in the room that evening even after Busha had awoken from her nap. We did not want to go anywhere else after all the excitement we had earlier in the day. Busha turned on the television and flipped through the channels looking for something to watch while I just sat on a chair watching her do that. She seemed oblivious to the fact that I was looking at her. Maybe she was aware, but pretended not to care. All the channels she paid momentary attention to were in Thai, and she skipped all those that were in English or Mandarin.

I suggested earlier that she should wash up in the common bathroom outside the guestrooms at one corner of the common corridor, but she said she had nothing to change into. I offered her one of my T-shirts again, like I did before we went for dinner but she declined. I left her alone with the television and went for a quick shower and changed into a new set of clothes. When I got back, she had turned off the television and was sitting at the head of the bed quietly, staring at nothing. I organized my luggage a little without talking to her.

After the long pause in communication, I finally broke the silence and asked, "What if Thaksin is no longer the prime minister?" I knew I asked her the same question before, but I did it anyway. To be honest, I did not ask that just to break the silence. It was really something that I wanted to know.

"Huh?" she looked at me, puzzled.

"I mean, what if he was no longer the prime minister after this whole thing has ended?"

Busha looked blankly at the floor, but I was certain that she understood my question. Obviously, however, she hadn't thought that far ahead, and now she was taking the time to think about it.

"It would be unfortunate for Thai people," she managed a reply.

"But there are a lot of people who are against him as well."

"Those are the rich people. They never understood the kind of hardship we go through every day. You have been in Bangkok for the last few days. Did you notice that there were even students in uniform who drove nice cars?" she said in a sanguine manner. What struck

me about her was that even when she spoke with indignation, she seldom, if ever, displayed anger. It always felt like she was describing life from a celestial height.

“If the rich people became the government, I don’t know if they would stop all the policies that Thaksin had started,” she continued. “If they did, we would surely suffer. The older people in my village said they had never seen a prime minister who traveled to the villages far outside of Bangkok, into the homes of the poor people, to talk to them and eat with them. The rich often avoided associating with us. If they went to build their houses in the countryside or smaller provinces, it was mostly because the land was cheap.”

It was then that I realized the things I heard about the class divide in this society was true to life, and were not just a media commentary or an account given by some beer-guzzling white retiree who spent most of his time in the bars of nowhere else but the popular tourist haunts of Sukhumvit Road. With Busha’s account, the stories I heard in the past were no longer stories; it was life itself.

## Chapter Five

The scene on the street was a sharp contrast to that of the previous night as we drove out of the guesthouse parking lot. Though it had been a chaotic flurry of people running to avoid arrest the previous night, everything seemed peaceful now. People were walking about and vehicles moving in an orderly manner, as if nothing had happened. Amazingly, in spite of what had taken place the previous day, there were no signs of damage anywhere. No broken windows, vandalized public properties or even mass litter beyond what was normal in the city. The city’s ability to switch mode between chaos and order so quickly and seamlessly really opened my eyes.

Along the way, Qiang explained to me the news that was being read on the radio. It seemed that Thaksin and his officials had headed for a meeting in New York, and that he predicted that Thaksin’s political opponent and once a close friend Chamlong would make his move in his absence. A sense of tension and that of something bad was imminent belied the peaceful scene outside of the car window. I looked at the rear-view mirror from my seat at the front at Busha. She had come all the way here to support someone she regarded as a savior of her family, but now the situation seemed unsettling, and the odds seemed to be stacked against her personal hero. I wondered how she was feeling at that moment. Amazingly, she hung her head in silence as she always did. I wanted to ask Qiang if her posture indicated that she was shy or apathetic, or did it indicate something else. I didn’t, however, at least not in her presence.

As my gaze drifted back onto the street, my mind drifted back to the day that led to the situation Busha and I were in...

~

Busha was like no one I have ever met.

It was the first time I had laid my eyes on an Akha girl. Her appearance was somewhat new and captivating to me. She had the sharp features of a highland Chinese, yet her light mocha-brown complexion suggested that she is not entirely one. She had a small, sharp nose, and eyes with pointed corners that did not tilt upwards. Her face was almost oval with a pointed chin, but her jaw lines below her cheeks were a little squarer, and that took some of the gradient away.

Her pupils were clearly brown, and her naturally long eyelashes on her double eyelids endowed her with a gentle look in her eyes, which was a departure from the ostensible glare that some of her friends seemed to have, though I knew they had not intended to glare at all. It was just how their eyes made them look.

She sported short hair that stopped at around her jaw. Though her hair was straight and fine, I could see that it did not stay as orderly and unidirectional as rebonded hair would. Though it appeared quite black most of the time, her hair betrayed a bright shade of hazelnut brown in the light of the sun. Strands of the fine brown hair would dance in the direction of the occasional gust of wind.

I was at the open space next to the main church in the village, the site where I first met Busha. She perched herself on a motorcycle, hers apparently, among a row of motorcycles, cars and pickups that used the open space as a parking lot. The church service that morning was over, and people gathered at the open space before heading to wherever they wanted for lunch.

Busha smiled naturally and gleefully when she chatted with her friends. Whenever she looked my way, however, that smile morphed quickly and seamlessly into an intensely shy one. She would close her mouth when she smiled and nod at me in acknowledgement of my presence even when we were meters away. Even though she turned her head away, I could still see her looking my way on and off a few more times.

I joined her in turning my head away so she would not feel awkward, but even though I turned my head away, I could not take my eyes off her. I was sure she noticed that as well.

One of my friends Ho, who was on that trip with me, suddenly appeared from behind Busha and tried to steal a shot of her with his digital SLR camera, slung around his neck. Busha giggled shyly but did not dodge as her photo was being taken. A thought struck me at the moment.

I walked up to Busha and said, “May I take a photo with you?”

The request appeared to have taken her by surprise, but she obliged. She got down from her motorcycle and stood beside me. Ho promptly aimed his lens at us as we readied ourselves for the shot.

Click. That moment in time was stored in the digital storage card in Ho’s camera, but the memory was etched in my head.

There and then, I had fallen for her.

~

It was a cold, dark morning half an hour before sunrise in the mountain three months after the day that the photo of Busha and I was taken. I was rubbing my palms near the fire at the stove boiling water in preparation for cooking rice for breakfast, in the kitchen of the drug rehabilitation located at a valley not far from the main church in the village. This place doubled up as an accommodation for visitors for those who were not too particular about staying in simple, unadorned but functional rooms. The valley was shielded from direct sunlight, and it trapped the wind that passed through. The place was therefore perpetually cool during the day and cold at night. Come the break of dawn, it would feel like winter. Temperature ranging seven to twelve degrees Celsius at the wee hours was common. One of the ways people kept warm around here was by eating a hot meal of rice and simple dishes as well as drinking piping hot tea in the morning. The locals ate rice for all their meals. Western

style breakfasts were not so common for them, and they considered such items a luxury around here.

A cat stretched, yawned and laid lazily next to the stove, enjoying the warmth emanating from the stove. Nada, the wife of the person in charge of managing this place, was moving busily around the kitchen preparing breakfast before everyone else at the quarters got up. She did this every day, no exceptions; no weekends and no public holidays.

She looked a little surprised to see me up so early and in the kitchen, looking like I was prepared to go out, which I was, in fact. Somehow, she did not ask me any superfluous questions such as “Why did you get up so early?” or “What are you doing here at this hour?”

I reached into a pocket at the right side of my jacket and drew out something. I showed it to Nada.

“When did you take this photo? You two look good together,” Nada said with a laugh.

“The last time I was here, a few months ago,” I replied with a smile. “On the last day before we left the mountain. She was near where I was, so when Ho was around with his camera, I asked her if I could take a photo with her. You know Ho, right?”

“Yes, I do,” Nada replied. She returned the photo to me after looking at it for a few seconds.

“Teacher,” Nada said as she sat beside me. They called all visitors ‘Teachers’ in Mandarin for some reason. “She is a good girl. She studies hard, and helps out in the family and the church. We watched her grow up.” Nada wasn’t very eloquent, but the way she said this was as if she was trying to tell me that I had made a good choice. It was meant as an encouragement, and I took it as one. I smiled in acknowledgement. I had not known Busha long enough to agree with her assessment, but I knew Nada meant everything she said. I was grateful enough she did not laugh at my act of silliness. Somehow, it was as if she already came to know what I was up so early for.

“Her house is that way,” she gestured to her left as she faced the door of the kitchen, pointing up beyond the steep slope that was about ten meters away from the kitchen.

“When you get out of the village to the main road, her village is to the left, down the road.”

“Oh, that way?” I pointed along in acknowledgement. I was holding a cup of hot tea in one hand by then to beat the chill. “How far away is it?”

“Not very far. You passed by their village on your way back here yesterday.”

“Oh, I see...”

As I sat down again near the stove to finish my tea, Nada continued to talk about Busha as she went on with her chores.

“She has many sisters and one younger brother. There are nine children in the family. She is the seventh in line. Two of her elder sisters were married to foreigners and had gone with their husbands to foreign countries. Another one was married to a Japanese man. I think they are still in Chiang Rai.”

“What about...? Let’s see, that’s three married sisters, so that leaves five girls,” I calculated.

“The fourth one is working in town, and the fifth and sixth ones are studying in town as well. So, the three of them are staying together,” she recounted without the need to pause and recall any information.

“That leaves the three youngest ones in the family here,” Nada continued. “Out of all the children, she is the one who studies the most diligently, and she does well in school. That’s why her parents dote on her, especially her mother.”

“They treat her especially well?” I asked out of curiosity.

Nada moved visibly slower at that moment, perhaps deliberately.

“Not special. They just want her to do well in her studies and go to the university. If she does, she would be the first one in the family so far.” Nada continued in a softer tone than before.

“Aren’t her two other sisters studying in the university too? You said they were studying in town.” I asked.

“We all heard that they are only studying English and some simple courses in a private school, not in the university. Their studies don’t take up much of their time. They spend the rest of their time working.”

“Oh? What do they work as?”

“We heard that the eldest among the three in town opens a bar. They should be working together,” Nada spoke in a more subdued tone. “That is why their parents have such high hopes on this girl. They hope that she wouldn’t have to follow her sisters’ footsteps, and end up working in jobs like that, at the bar.”

Nada paused for a while and turned to look at me.

“Also,” she continued, “They don’t want her to marry a foreigner and be taken away from them.”

The cold morning wind hit my face every second I was on the moving motorcycle leading up to the village where Busha lived. My friend Dao, Nada’s husband, found me near the entrance of the village just before the sun rose, when everything took on a deep shade of blue before the first rays hit. I had hiked all the way from Nada’s kitchen up a steep slope and walked through the village for ten minutes before hitting yet another slope upwards that led to the main road outside. Not only was the slope a steep one, it was also long. By the time I reached where I stood, I had probably taken more than thirty minutes. And this was on the high mountains where the air was thin. The walk made me pant heavily. When I saw Dao’s bike approaching me from behind, I tried hard to catch my breath. When I looked up again, I saw that he was also ferrying his two daughters on his bike. He was fetching them to school.

“Get on the bike at the back,” he said while letting out a laugh. It sounded like he was amused at my effort in running up out of the village where everyone else went around with either a car or a motorcycle.

Without saying another word, I got on the bike behind his elder daughter. The motorcycle was now carrying four passengers, but none of the few villagers even paid

attention to us. This sort of passenger arrangement must have been so common among them that nobody even cared anymore.

After we had dropped off Dao's daughters at the village school, he took me to the village where I had earlier wanted to head to. The nearer I approached the village, the more nervous I felt. According to Rom, another friend of mine who lived in another nearby village, and who helped everybody to send and receive mails as he was the only one around who had access to a post office box in a nearby town, Busha had come to his place in recent weeks asking him whether I had arrived.

"She came by almost every day on her motorbike just to ask me whether you have arrived," I remember Rom saying with a laugh on the first day I arrived at the village. He was the first person I went to visit just to announce my arrival. "Your letter got her excited about your coming visit."

That piece of news got me excited too. Ever since I heard that, I kept thinking about Busha and was both nervous and excited about seeing her again.

Minutes after enduring the biting cold of the wind hitting my face, Dao made a turn and rode up a rather steep slope. Most of the slopes I had encountered thus far were steep. The people here must have developed really strong legs and lungs if they walked regularly.

Finally, the moment that I both looked forward to and wanted to put off for as long as I could was upon me. We got off the steep slope and braked right in front of a single-storey house with white walls and blue tiled roof. The extension at one side used the same building materials. The ground in front of the main door extended for maybe about five meters before cutting off as a grass-covered cliff. At the edge of the cliff stood a rectangular bamboo platform a little larger than a king-sized bed that was probably twenty centimetres tall. This was a typical feature outside Akha houses, and they come in various sizes depending on how much space they had. They used it for everything from having their meals there, taking a nap, or simply sitting there and spacing out.

The sun had already risen and was heating up the place, but there was nobody around. Dao called out something in Akha, and we waited for a response. Nobody replied. We paced around and waited for a while.

"Perhaps they have all gone out to work," Dao told me. I guessed as much. It was a weekday morning after all. Mountain or city, everyone had the same economic activities in order to keep the society running. What was I expecting running over to Busha's house at a time when she should be in school?

My anticipation suddenly died down with that bite of reality, and I turned around and walked towards Dao's motorcycle.

"You're right. Maybe there's no one around here. Today is a work day, after all."

Right at that moment, I heard a creak from behind me. I turned around and saw a head peeking out through a half-opened door.

To my surprise, and surely gladness, it was Busha!

When she saw me standing right in front of her house, she was very surprised as well. For a moment, she stood at the door and did not say a word.

"When did you arrive?" she finally said softly after a few seconds.

“I just arrived yesterday,” I replied. “I thought you were not at home, so I was ready to leave. I was so surprised when I saw you. Why are you not in school?”

“I have no lessons in the morning, so I stayed home to sleep.” She answered. “I’m going to school later, after lunch.”

“I see...” I uttered, not knowing what to say.

This was the hardest and most frustrating part. After having longed to see her, and after having built up the anticipation of the meeting, I had nothing to say to her when I was finally in her presence. The air was awkward for the both of us at that moment, neither of us knowing how to proceed from there.

At last, Busha turned and walked towards the bamboo platform and sat facing the sight beyond the cliff, the sporadic peppering of houses along the slope Dao and I came up from. I looked over to Dao and saw that he had already wandered to another house further up the slope to chat with another villager. I was left on my own to carry on with the meeting. I walked over and joined Busha at the platform.

“Are you used to staying here in the mountains? It’s cold at night,” she said in an attempt to break the ice.

“Yeah, it’s okay for me,” I replied dryly, thinking how I could steer this conversation from ending up nowhere.

She looked out into the distance and said, “I... I can’t talk very well. I’m happy to see you here.” She buried her head in her hands after saying that.

“Me too,” I said, pleasantly surprised. “I’m glad I made it here.”

Again, silence fell over us as words failed to find their way out of the both of us. At this time, I reached into the pocket on my jacket.

“Here, this is for you,” I said.

“Oh,” she let out in surprise. It was the photograph I showed Nada earlier that morning. The photo I had taken with Busha.

“Please keep it well,” I looked at her.

“I will. It looks very nice,” she said softly as she held the photograph to her body. As she turned her eyes away, she lowered her head and uttered, “Thank you.”

Busha looked out into the field below the platform we were sitting on, and I joined her in her gazing. Neither of us knew how to carry on from there. Something suddenly occurred to me.

“Wait a minute,” I said. “You’re still in high school, aren’t you? How old are you exactly?”

“Fifteen,” was her short but comprehensive reply, as she turned to look at me. “Why?”

“Fifteen? I thought they said you were sixteen.”

“Oh. I am actually fifteen, but on records, I am sixteen.”

“What?” I was puzzled. “Why is that so?”

“The Akha people consider a baby to be one year old when he or she is born.”

The week that I was in the village happened to be the long vacation for primary and high school students where the new term ahead would see them being promoted to the next level in school. Unlike the previous time that I was here, the village was filled with students everywhere going about various activities that had nothing to do with school. Some played soccer on open fields under the sun while others wandered about, either on foot or on bicycles or motorcycles. Eating places were also more populated with young people. A village that used to be a rather quiet village district now buzzed with activity.

For the next few days, I spent my days trying to find a chance to talk to Busha whenever I could. The only opportunities I had to see her was when she was with her friends in church, not only during Sunday, but on certain weekdays when they appeared to be having some programs conducted in the church. I was staying near the church, and so I often walked over when I had nothing else to do. Every time I went there, I harboured the hope of meeting her, and if I did meet her, of talking to her more. It wasn't because I had a lot to say to her, but in the back of my mind, I kept feeling like I wanted to know her more. Not just intimately, but to satisfy a curiosity I had developed about her since that morning at her house. Beneath her simple and introverted exterior, Busha struck me as having a special quality that I could not place a finger on for the longest time. Perhaps it was trying to understand what it was that kept me mystified. It could also perhaps be due to a very simple fact, one that was primal yet undeniable and strong. I was attracted to her.

True, attraction was led me all the way from Singapore to a mountain in Chiang Rai. I had already been attracted to her in the first place, so saying that I was attracted to her one more time seemed redundant, but this was different. The first attraction was on sight. I was attracted by her beauty and the innocent air she had about her. This time, my attraction was due to the fact that she aroused my curiosity, a wanting to get into her head and into her heart. Perhaps it was an instinct to conquer what I could not immediately seize the first time round. Perhaps it was all those things at the same time. Whatever it was, the feeling simply lingered on.

I thought for a moment that the morning meeting had opened the door for us, but as time went on, it felt increasingly clear that it was closing shut instead. Not a hard slam, but a creaky closing that drew me farther and farther from her.

A chance finally smiled upon me. I was told that Busha and her friends had been coming to church on weekdays because they were training for an evangelical outreach they would be holding that very night I heard the news. The group of people staging the rally, which pretty much involved almost all the church workers I knew, invited me to join them. I did not have a role to play, but I could just follow them and see them in action. Anything was better than hanging around doing nothing, and I could find a chance to get close to Busha again, I thought. With that thought, I gladly accepted their invitation.

I was not prepared for the fact that there wasn't much I could do to participate in their efforts. A lot of time was spent on the back of a pickup that drove us from one village to another, which took about an hour for each trip on average. Though I occasionally enjoyed the view of the mountains along the way, my mind was with Busha much of the time. She had her other friends, most of them girls of her age, packed together with us at the back of the

pickup, but oddly, they appeared so young to me, whereas Busha felt more matured even though they were all around the same age. I had probably, or most certainly, lost my objectivity then.

Most part of the days on this one-day trip passed uneventfully, with me keeping quiet most of the time as I was not able to edge in to the conversations of these students much. An odd greeting here and a short dialogue there was all that transpired between me and a few of them at the back of the pickup. Whenever we stopped, everyone got down and went around to the houses of the village we visited to invite them to the evangelical rally that would take place the following evening. I followed some of them but still kept quiet as I wasn't able to speak in the languages they used, be they Thai or the tribal languages.

The experience was interesting, however, as I was able to see different villages, none of which I had visited before the last time I was in Wawi. I was also able to observe how simple it was for the students to invite the villagers. All they did was announce the event time and venue, and asked them to come. None of them met with resistance or rejection. The invited villagers either simply smiled in acknowledgement or said a few words before the students moved on to other doors. And amazingly, nobody slammed their door shut when the students moved on. The villagers stood around and watched the action until we got on the pickup and left. Some of them even came forward to wave goodbye. This contrasted so much with the experiences my friends and I had back home inviting guests to our events in church in Singapore. Resistance was part of the deal, and we had to deal with a lot of skeptics at times. We also had to try hard to convince the guests of our benign intentions to invite them.

The time had come when the sun was retiring for the day, and we were soon back at our own homes. I spent pretty much of the rest of the evening just thinking about Busha and what went wrong. Where was the girl I talked to just a morning ago? The others at the place where I was staying noticed my solitude but left me alone with my thoughts. I had wanted to talk to Nada again, as she seemed to know quite a bit about her, but when I finally got up to do that, she was going back to her house to sleep. I forgot that the people slept early every night because they had to wake up very early the next morning to work. I kept the feeling of frustration to myself as I retired for the night as well.

The evening came for the rally to take place. Tired of feeling alone and frustrated, I volunteered to help set up the rally site in whatever way I could in order to take my mind off Busha. However hard I tried, though, I could not help but to glance at her whenever she moved within sight. The only consolation to all this was that I was able to make new friends with some of the members from the church in the village. It appeared most of the people I had met at the village turned up at this rally even when we were only setting the place up. They were enthusiastic and helpful. The men helped with setting up the stage and the outdoor audio system while the ladies prepared dinner with the food they brought. The rally site was quite a distance from home, and it made no sense to go all the way back for dinner and come back here again. The communal dinner outdoors in the cool of the sunset was an experience to savor, nonetheless.

An opportunity presented its fleeting self when I noticed Busha sitting by herself eating a bowl of noodles dispensed from the food truck not far away. I walked over and sat next to her. She gave me a shy smile in acknowledgement.

“How's the food?” she asked me.

“It's good,” I replied and tucked in, thinking of what to say next.

“Did you enjoy yourself?” she followed up with another one.

“Huh?” I didn’t understand what she meant.

“I mean, did you enjoy... following us around?” she struggled with the right words to say.

“Er, oh... Yeah, I did. The scenery along the way was very nice,” I replied.

“Oh, really? You are new here. We are already used to it. We don’t find the view to be anything special,” she continued to eat her noodles.

“I guess so,” I dug into mine with the pair of chopsticks in my hand as well.

“I wish we could talk like we did when we were at your house the other day,” I raised the subject. It was then or never, I thought.

Busha looked up at me. Her mouth moved a little as if she wanted to say something, but swallowed her words back down her throat and hung her head. This time, instead of eating her noodles, she stared at them.

“Look,” I added, quickly realizing her awkwardness. “I don’t mean anything. I just... I mean, why can’t we be like that day...?”

“Busha!”

Right there and then, two of her pals came walking to her with a bowl in each of their hands. They greeted me with a smile, and I returned the greeting. I could sense a sigh of relief from Busha as her friends sat beside her. Neither of them took the space between Busha and me, though it wouldn’t have mattered. The space between me and her was beyond what the eyes could see, and it got wider at a time and for a reason that I did not know.

The rest of the night went as they had planned, and many of the villagers they had invited earlier turned up to see what the rally was about. As usual, I wasn’t able to understand most of what went on as the entire rally was conducted in Thai. I basically hung out with people who I knew and could speak Mandarin. The venue was at an open space at the top of a bare mountain. The night proceeded with performances and a pastor delivering an evangelistic message.

The wind grew stronger as the night went on. It came to a point when the wind got too strong, and the ending of the rally was sped up so we could disperse earlier. It was just as well, as many of the people in the audience went home to hide from the chilling mountain wind.

Everyone chipped in to help dismantle the stage, and all of us rushed to load all the things we had brought here onto the transportations. Many of the younger ones took refuge inside the cars while waiting for us. I was not prepared for the wind, and did not have enough clothing on me to ward off the cold. I had to jump into a car every few minutes to hide from the wind before I felt warm enough to go out again and help out. I felt really lousy for being such a hindrance, though no one seemed to mind. In fact, not that many people even paid attention to me.

This time, Busha and I weren’t even in the same vehicle on the way back. Seating arrangements were made on the spot, and we ended up in different vehicles, and there went

my hope of trying one more time to get back on the same track I was on that morning; the morning when I got to see her for the first time again.

Sunday arrived when I opened my eyes the next morning. When I arrived at the church for the morning service, a few minutes walk from where I stayed, I noticed people, mostly the young girls, glancing at me. They either smiled when I looked back at them, or looked away. They acted as if they were stifling thoughts that were manifesting themselves through their eyes. That aroused my curiosity, but I did nothing about it. I walked on to the church hall at the second floor of the building.

I was greeted by Chiang and a few other friends while I exchanged greetings with other friendly villagers who came over to shake my hand and say hello. As we gathered outside the hall while waiting for the service to start, I looked out at the open space where villagers arriving from all over parked their vehicles, mostly motorcycles, and hung around to chat. I scanned around and found who I was hoping to see. Busha perched on her motorcycle while she chatted with her friends. She must have arrived after I did because I had not noticed her when I came to the church.

“How did you find the rally last night?” Qiang asked as he came up to me.

“Oh, it was quite fun,” I replied, half in doubt of the sincerity in my answer.

“Did you manage to talk to her?” he asked as he looked over to where I had been looking.

“No. Totally not. She behaved in a totally different manner from the way she did that morning when we met. I observed that she avoided me intentionally all this time. When I went up to her, she would turn away and go off with her friends. Is this how girls around here are like? I noticed most of the other girls I met around here aren’t like that.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t spend a morning with the other girls like you did with her,” Qiang said with a chuckle.

“Is that the reason why they’re all looking at me in a funny way?” I asked him back.

“What do you mean? Who’s looking at you?”

I explained to Qiang about the funny, furtive looks I had been receiving since I stepped into the church compound.

“You’re getting popular here!” he proclaimed with another chuckle.

“Come on,” I looked back out at the vast landscape view that lay beyond the compound.

“You know the community here is small. It’s not hard for news of your infatuation with Busha to spread fast. Besides, you have to admit, you, a foreigner, traveling all the way here on your own to meet a girl is really big news. We don’t get this often, you know?” Qiang offered.

“Yeah, I know...” I said with a sigh, knowing full well the truth in his words.

“I don’t know if you know this, but some of us have been talking to her about you the last few days, trying to put in good words for you,” Qiang informed me.

“What?” I said in genuine surprise.

“Everyone’s keen to help you,” Qiang said with a chuckle again. “Of course, we just do what we can. In the end, it’s up to her to decide. There’s only so much you can do, despite the sincerity we saw in you when we came to know that you took the trouble to come back here all the way on your own.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. I kept quiet for a moment.

“Don’t worry too much about it.” Qiang patted me on my shoulder. “Just enjoy your stay here. Take your trip here as a good holiday instead of a ‘mission’. Who knows, you might be missing on other opportunities because you’re eyes are so fixed on her.”

“What do you mean?” I looked quizzically at him.

“Come, service is starting soon,” he said as he turned around and walked into the hall.

~

I snapped out of my reminiscing about my first meeting with Busha when I noticed we had left the bustle of Bangkok behind and entered the Paholyothin highway heading to the mountain, and towards what I was going to face.

## Chapter Six

Two days had passed since I had returned to the village with Busha and Qiang, and I was due to leave in another two days and be on my way home. It was a weekday, and everyone was busy going about their work. Even the students were quiet. With no events coming up, they were probably just hanging around at home or at one another’s houses. Unlike affluent societies, many of the people here did not have the luxury of going on overseas vacations. I was told that some people simply go to other villages to visit relatives and friends, an activity that would not cost them much but that could allow them to get away for a while.

Just as I was walking around the church compound, now mostly quiet except for an occasional villager or two passing by on a motorcycle, with nothing to do on a hot afternoon, I saw a motorcycle moving up the steep slope that led to the compound, approaching the spot where I was standing. Nobody put on a helmet around here, so I knew who it was before the rider even got close. It was Adu, another friend that I had made during my previous trip here. He was busy running around during my visit this time, and we spent less time with each other. I was thus surprised to see him looking for me.

“So here you are,” he said with a smile as he turned off the motorcycle engine.

“You’re looking for me?” I asked as I walked towards him and shook his hand.

“Yes. Are you free tonight?” he asked.

“Yeah, of course,” I shrugged. “I literally have nothing to do until I leave this place in two days’ time. Why?”

“Somebody’s inviting you to dinner.”

That wasn’t anything unusual. The folks here were a hospitable lot, and meals at one another’s houses were common. It was even more so when there were guests from afar, whether local or not.

“Sure, I’d be glad to have dinner with friends here,” I told Adu. “Who’s hosting?”

“Busha’s parents.”

Unlike the first time when I was excited and happy, I approached Busha’s village this time with a huge dose of nervousness. I had all but given up on any possibilities between Busha and I after what had transpired over the last few days in Bangkok. This sudden invitation just didn’t feel right, especially not when the dinner was going to be on her home turf. The hardest part was that while I wanted the opportunity to see her, I could not shake off the uneasy feeling about the whole situation, which made me want to just turn back and forget about the whole thing.

My inner struggle came to an abrupt end when I realized I had arrived. The sun was on its way down behind the irregular horizon outlined by the distant mountains. In the golden late afternoon light, children were playing at the open field where most of the vehicles in this village were parked. The adults hung around to chat while some of the ladies were moving around preparing dinner. This scene of serenity and normalcy was in great contrast to the unease I felt inside. I went with it anyway, since I had already arrived at the village.

Adu led me up the slope to a house that was familiar to me, only this time I was greeted by a middle-aged man with a head of white hair. Even while he was seated, I could tell that he wasn’t a tall person. Next to him was a man who looked much younger, but was definitely in his forties nonetheless. The older man beckoned us to enter the house, and when Adu and I approached him, he got up and shook our hands as we exchanged greetings. We did likewise with the younger man.

“This is Busha’s father,” Adu said to me, gesturing to the older man.

“Nice to meet you,” I bowed slightly to him.

“Welcome to our house. Feel free to sit anywhere you like,” he said as he gestured to a variety of seats available within sight, from the few chairs around to the bamboo bed at the edge of the slope, where Busha and I had our conversation that morning. I felt a little uneasy about meeting her family. There wasn’t anything wrong with them, but when I noticed how a lady, who I assumed was Busha’s mother, glanced at me as she passed us by before disappearing into another room. The atmosphere felt strange. I couldn’t put a finger on it, but something just did not feel right.

I looked around for Busha as I sat down but did not see her. Noticing my search, Busha's father said, "She's in the house. Somewhere. She's helping her mother prepare dinner."

"I see," I replied with a smile. "That's okay. Everyone's busy."

Right then, Busha popped from the kitchen, a small building separate from the main house a few meters away from where I was sitting, and served me a glass of tea, a staple drink for everyone in this district as far as I could tell. I could tell that it was a kitchen, because I was able to see a few kitchen items through the open doorway from where I was sitting. She scurried over, handed me the glass, and turned and scurried back into the kitchen again without letting me say 'thank you'. She avoided eye contact with me when she served the tea. The strange feeling I had grew stronger.

For a good few minutes, Busha's father paid no attention to me as he continued to talk to his assistant in Akha. It wasn't until Adu walked over that I turned my attention away from the room Busha was in to the rest of the people around.

"We are aware of how you feel towards Busha," Busha's father suddenly declared in Chinese, which caught me off-guard. He did not even have an opening line to prepare me for what was to come.

"Frankly, we, as parents, have no objection to this relationship," he continued. "But it all depends on her decision. She is free to choose if she wants to go with you. We respect her decision."

For a moment, I did not know how to respond to this. I just kept quiet and my eyes on her father.

"Are you really serious about her?" Busha's father asked in an attempt to break the silence.

Just then, Busha's mother emerged from the kitchen and said something in Akha. She spoke at length for a while, not allowing any interruption until she had finished saying what she wanted to say. Her expressions ranged from calm to emotional to firmness as she spoke. During this time, Busha's father remained silent and looked as if he had no interest in interjecting either.

After she stopped speaking, Busha's mother turned and went back into the kitchen. It was then that Adu explained to me what she had said.

Adu looked at me and spoke with a hint of hesitation.

"She hopes you will leave Busha alone."

"She said Busha is still young, and she is still schooling," Adu continued. "She still has some way to go, a future ahead of her, and she doesn't want Busha's studies to be affected. You are much older than her, and you should look for someone around your age. You should look for a city girl. A girl from the mountain like Busha is not suitable for you. She has already lost two daughters to foreigners, and she doesn't know if Busha's other sisters would go with farang as well. Busha is the brightest student among her siblings, and she should concentrate on her studies."

My heart sank upon hearing this. All hopes of being able to be together with a girl that I had been thinking of for such a long time were dashed at that instant.

“Ignore her. What does a woman know?” Busha’s father said to me as he gestured for me to not pay attention to her by waving his hand in a shooing manner. “The family follows what the father says.” That might have been the words he said, but I knew he thought otherwise. If he really had wanted me not to hear what his wife said, he could have ordered her to stop, and she would not have defied. Rather, he allowed her to speak till the end, and even allowed me to hear the full interpretation from Adu. He had obviously just said that to save face for himself as the head of the family. His intention, however, couldn’t have been clearer.

The words “leave her alone” kept running in my head, and I wasn’t able to say anything in response. I didn’t.

Just then, I saw Adu move. He walked towards the room from which Busha’s mother came out, and when I turned to look in that direction, I saw Busha fetching something from outside. She greeted Adu as he walked towards her, but avoided looking at me. Whenever she was not talking to anyone, she would hang her head low. Adu stood beside Busha and talked to her for a while. I could not hear what they were talking about, and could only see some nods and hand gestures sometimes.

After they had ended their conversation, Busha went quietly back into the kitchen again. Adu came and sat beside me. All this time, I did nothing but sat where I was and watched everything going on around me.

“I spoke to Busha just now, and I asked her what she thought about all this,” Adu explained to me. “About her decision.”

I nodded in acknowledgement.

“She said she understood how you felt for her,” Adu continued. “But she said she wasn’t ready for you. All she wants to do is to focus on her studies. She thanks you for your feelings for her, but she is sorry she cannot accept it now.”

I tried as hard as I could, but I could not find anything to say in response. I looked at the kitchen, hoping to catch sight of Busha, but she did not come out again.

Dinner that evening proceeded as planned, but the awkwardness and tension that hung in the air could not be dispelled. Although Busha’s father appeared diplomatic, he did not direct any of his conversations that evening to me. Instead, he talked to Adu as if he was the only dinner guest they had in the house. Not that it didn’t suit me fine since I had nothing I wanted to say anyway. Adu did his best to ease the tension in the air by talking about things that was happening in the village and other small talks. Busha did not join us at the table, and neither did any of her siblings. Busha’s mother also took her dinner without saying a word. She did not even participate in her husband’s conversation.

Dinner ended soon enough before it entered eternity. After that, however, we had to proceed to a family devotion service Busha’s father held for the village at this time every week. As we shuffled into another small house near where we had our dinner, a group of children and teenagers were already seated and talking among themselves. I scanned the interior quickly and caught sight of Busha sitting with two other girls. She gave me a polite nod, but turned her head away quickly after that. I pretended not to mind and took my seat

near the entrance, which could turn instantly into my exit if and when I felt I really shouldn't be there any longer.

The service went on without much event. When I got up, ready to leave, I took another glance at Busha, who continued not to look my way. I could only heave a silent sigh as I filed out the door, where Adu was waiting for me. I was tempted to continue looking at her until she disappeared from sight, but I knew it would achieve nothing. Moreover, the others would be looking at us, and that would have caused her more embarrassment. I looked away in disappointment.

As I was putting on my shoes, a lady who looked no older than me came up to Adu and spoke to him in Ahka. As she spoke, she looked at me. I was curious as to what she was telling Adu.

The chilly wind that hit my face as Adu's motorcycle zipped back to the village I stayed in would normally have me complaining, but this time it didn't bother me at all. My mind remained frozen in that moment hours before, unable to get out of the scene that took place during sunset.

"That lady who talked to me just now was Busha's elder sister," Adu broke the silence. "She told me she understands what you were going through, because she had seen these things happen in her family before."

"Really?" I replied in a sanguine manner.

Soon after this conversation started, Adu stopped his bike at the porch of a house along the way. He got down the bike and greeted the owner of the house, saying something to him in Ahka. The owner gestured him to the side of the porch where a few plastic chairs were left in an unorganized manner. I greeted the owner and followed Adu to the chairs, and both of us sat down.

"But she said that she felt you are a nice person," he continued. "She also said that Busha may be too young now, and she's not ready to deal with affairs of the heart. If her parents had made her accept a marriage proposal from you, she would have no choice but to follow. But ever since her family became Christians, they stopped believing and practicing these traditions. They followed the farangs' concept of giving their children a free hand in deciding their own marriages. In the end, however, three of their eldest daughters ended up marrying foreigners, and they had to follow their husbands back to their countries. The family couldn't be whole again because of this practice of free marriage. Her parents didn't take very well to that."

"But why did they allow two more of their daughters to walk down the same path if they didn't like what happened after the marriage?" I asked.

"It took them a while to realize the impact these marriages had on the family," Adu continued while looking out at the road. "The three daughters married one after another within a short span of time, and the effects didn't settle in until much later, when the old couple realized how far their daughters went. The girls only visited them once a year, and only for a very short time because the journey home is too far and expensive. One of them even married a Japanese man who did not stay in any job for long and spent most part of any year unemployed. The couple found that hard to deal with. They must be feeling lonely as well."

I could sense sympathy in Adu's voice as he related all this to me.

"So Busha's parents are afraid the same thing would happen to her? That lady who spoke to you before we left also wanted you to dissuade me?"

"No," Adu looked at me in earnest. He broke out in a smile, "She told me to tell you not to give up."

"I did not do anything to her in Bangkok!"

I found myself back in Busha's house the following day, perched on the edge of my chair with my back straightened as I defended myself before the interrogation of Busha's parents, right in the hall of their house. They wanted to talk to me again, this time to find out what had happened when Busha and I were in Bangkok.

"But you did spend a night alone in a hotel room with her before Qiang found you the next day, didn't you?" Busha's father inquired as he looked at me, not shifting his gaze.

"Yes, I did," I replied without hesitation, as I felt there was nothing to hide. "It wasn't safe out in the streets at that time. The police were out arresting anyone in a red shirt. Busha would've gotten into trouble if they caught her. The police wouldn't care who they arrested as long as they caught people."

Busha's mother buried her forehead in one palm and appeared distraught as her husband explained to her in Akha what I had just said. She was apparently more ready to believe the worst-case scenario, one in which her daughter lost her virginity to me, than to believe the truth I had just related.

"Yes, I heard the situation was quite serious that night when I arrived," Qiang chipped in to defend me. "I believe he did what he could to protect Busha. Let's not allow our imaginations to run wild. We don't have proof that he did anything to her either."

I did not say anything in case I appeared to be justifying myself. Busha's parents remained silent for a moment, evidently having nothing to counter Qiang's argument. Busha's mother, however, kept her frowned gaze on me.

"Even if we believed you, news of you having spent a night alone with Busha has still gotten out," Busha's father maintained with a straight face.

"How?" I cut him off.

"You don't have to care. News spread in this village very quickly," he countered.

This time, even Qiang had nothing with which to counter his counter.

"Are you serious about Busha?" Busha's father asked after a moment of silence that felt like an eternity. Silence in this household always felt threatening to me. "Are you ready to marry her?"

"I thought you opposed to her going with me?" I asked him back.

"That's true," he admitted. "You haven't known her long, and neither do we know you well. And here you are, back here in the mountain all the way from Singapore just for the sake of seeing our daughter! Others may be impressed with your sincerity, but how do we

know if you are serious about her? How do we know if you won't abandon her one day once you've had enough of her?"

"Trust me," I tried to assure him. "I would..."

Just then, Busha's mother said something loudly in Akha again, flailing her arms occasionally as she spoke.

Moments passed after she was done. She took a seat beside her husband and remained quiet from then on. I looked at Qiang rather bewildered. "She said just leave them alone," Qiang explained, knowing immediately that he had to. "Leave their family alone. They have lost three daughters already, and they've had enough. She said that even if you are our friend, you still live so far away. Busha is the only hope in the family now. She doesn't want you to take her away."

"You understand Akha too?" I asked him in surprise.

"No," Qiang replied. "She spoke in Thai. I didn't know she could." He looked rather surprised himself.

"Well," I shrugged. "She seemed upset enough."

"That child is bold enough to go all the way to Bangkok on her own!" Busha's father retorted his wife. "If it wasn't for him, who knows what would happen to her? I would rather he take her than losing her to someone or somewhere we don't even know!"

"Wait..." I tried to interject.

"Enough!"

Busha's loud and stern command froze the whole conversation. Everyone turned to look at her as she stood outside the door of her bedroom.

"Have any of you asked me how I feel? You just make decision for me as if I'm a pig in your farm! This is not ancient China. I'm capable of choosing who I want to be with. And I don't want to be with anyone!"

With that, she ran past us and shot out of the house. I got up from my seat and looked at Chiang. He nodded to me, clearly having understood my intention to go after her.

Before I left the house, I turned around and looked at Busha's parents.

"Do you know why she went to Bangkok even when the situation there was so chaotic? She is grateful to Thaksin for having saved your life with his policies when you were seriously ill. When he is in trouble now, she went to show him her support. That was how much she loved you as her father."

With that, I turned and left the house.

Busha was standing outside of her house near the slope that led out of the village.

“Busha,” I called out.

“Leave me alone,” she said in a calmer manner, without turning to look at me. “Why did you have to come here? Why did you have to come for me?”

My steps froze at those words.

“If you hadn’t come,” she continued. “None of this would have happened.”

I kept quiet as I sensed that that was not all she wanted to say.

“I am still a student,” she went on. “I want to enjoy my life as a student like all my friends. I want to study and make good in life instead of ending up as a prisoner, a captive of marriage. The way my sisters are! Can you understand that? Why are my parents forcing me into this now?”

I understood, but no words came out of my mouth. Just then, a girl arrived on a motorcycle. She did not greet me, and neither did I say anything to her. I watched as she climbed onto the motorcycle behind her friend.

“But I want you to know my feelings as well. I’m not like what they make me out to be,” I said.

“Don’t say any more. I understand,” she assured me.

Just as her friend revved the motorcycle and was ready to move, Busha gestured for her to hold on. She turned her head slightly towards me, but still she managed to avoid direct eye contact.

“I am... happy to see you.”

With that, the motorcycle roared and zoomed off.

***Edward Seah doesn’t have a list of titles he has authored himself, but writes for interest. He is a full-time freelance Chinese-English translator and a photography enthusiast. He has self-published a photo book “Chasing Fuji” that documents his hike up Mount Fuji in Japan, and is currently working on his next photo book. He welcomes your viewing of his photography works on <http://edward-seah.pixels.com/>.***