

ALPHAVILLE HOTEL



followed by
A tale without a name

WIWAT LERTWIWATWONGSA



ALPHAVILLE HOTEL

A THAI NOVEL TRANSLATED BY MARCEL BARANG

To Anna Karina and Jean-Luc Godard

PART ONE

Chapter 1

Alphaville Hotel: midnight

A little before midnight I check in at Alphaville Hotel.

The electric panel bearing the hotel's name on the roof terrace blinks as if it had trouble breathing. Its light is reflected on the tarmac, slippery wet after a spell of rain. I walk across the low-lit main lobby, dim as if darkness had protectively enfolded the string of old-fashioned chandeliers as it would its children, dispensing dimness around the room. The middle-aged woman at the front desk with a forbidding face hands me the key right away. I wonder how she knows who I am, even though I've called ahead to book a room, which wasn't at all necessary for a downgraded second-class hotel

that'll be down to hovel status before long. As soon as she sees me, she hands me the key without a word, without asking for my ID card, without writing anything down in her register, as if everything has been readied for a special guest. Since she doesn't say anything, I don't either. We just exchange silence, looking into each other's eyes hypothetically. I make as if to look at her, but focus on the air behind her. I take the room key, thank her with a nod and walk up the dark stairs to the third floor under dull neon light.

There I reflect on whether I'll meet a Seductress, Third Class, in the room, sitting at the bottom of the bed and about to unbutton the tight outfit she's wearing. I'll slap her and chase her away. But what I meet when I open the door is a woman by the name of Ann.

Her big round eyes float prominently above the rest of her face as if that face bore nothing else but giant-sized eyes. No, she doesn't have popping eyes or anything like that; she only has big round eyes, beautiful and attractive. Just seeing her eyes you forget the rest of her features. I ask why she has come. She answers she's come to make sure everything is in order for me.

'I thought I'd meet a Seductress Third Class, actually.'

'I'm sorry your wish isn't fulfilled. I'm no third-class seductress.'

'I know. You're Ann.'

'You know?' She raises her voice on the last word in a way which makes me understand she's still a young girl, perhaps with parts of her body still in a girlish state actually.

‘Anyway, I only came to see if you had arrived properly. We’ll meet again, perhaps in a way that’ll surprise you.’

‘I’ll wait. I like surprises.’

The room is large and rather bare, with a high ceiling, and brighter than the central lobby – a bit too bright actually. Ann leaves the room when I go into the bathroom. I stand peeing loudly without closing the door, averse to being polite with her. I know she knows I mean to provoke her, to get on her nerves. The wilful sexual drive of a stranger who stands peeing without closing the door streams out of the hotel bathroom. That’s when she leaves. As soon as I hear the door close, I feel relieved as if I’d just gone through a trial in a crime case I’ve lost, but with a suspended sentence.

I should give a general idea of this story before you mistakenly think I’m a criminal or a private detective. Actually I’m a down-and-out writer. Claiming this isn’t right, though, because I still have the opportunity to write columns in a couple of magazines, boring columns no one is interested in for which the writer listlessly lifts whatever he needs off the internet, transforms and enlarges it with provocative personal turns of phrase, which I am good at, and then sends by email to editors whose only concern is to fill the empty spaces in their newspaper with rows of printed characters. In this way I get enough money to survive, relying on the past favour of a number of die-hard fans too besotted to realise I’ve long lost the

ability to write and make do with the dregs of playing with words in a style of my own. I'm bored to the point of almost freaking out with stories of this kind, with words that go begging.

I haven't said yet why I'm here. Well, I've come here at Ms Ann's request. She called me late one night after I'd fallen asleep post most passionate most insipid sex with a young man I hardly knew. We'd met in a bookshop. He was a book fan, we chatted and he showed clearly he'd be pleased to carry the relationship forward. I went to his room, we listened to music, drank a little and had sex together. I act like that with him two or three times a month and with others, women, men, it doesn't mean anything, it's not important. But I remember that night, the little girlish voice on the phone waking me up at three in the morning, introducing herself as Ann – short for Anna. She was calling under instruction from Monsieur Godard, her father, who wanted me to come here, to travel by train from Bangkok to Lop Buri. Monsieur Godard had read my stories and meant for me to come and help write a film script for him, making an appointment for me at Alphaville Hotel, a hotel with a strange name hidden away in a small blind alley, Monsieur Godard's hotel, a Frenchman who lives here, perhaps a descendant from King Narai times when the first farang came streaming in.

Of course I was almost penniless. Thirty thousand baht – as first down payment – was credited to my account the next morning and I who dislike making off with other people's money or breaking my

word took the morning train to come here. But please don't ask me why I check in at almost midnight. It's irrelevant, just an incongruity of time.

Alphaville Hotel: noon

A little before noon, I check in at Alphaville Hotel.

Even though outside the sunlight is blazing, when I enter the area of the main lobby of the hotel the air is at once chilling, cold and dim as if I've erred into a land under solar eclipse. The chandeliers in the lobby still send a dull light as they have for years, a dark light as might have lost its way since the first bonfire in the history of mankind. I wonder if this hasn't happened to me once before. I've never been to Lop Buri, but it feels familiar as if I've just arrived here or else will come here in the future. I can almost recall the smell of the make-up of the middle-aged woman at the desk actually, cheap make-up bought at the weekend market. She asks my name, wants to see my ID card, her voice devoid of any feeling whatsoever, talking only when necessary, taking down only what she wants, not bothering about missing details. Once the ordeal is over, I walk up to the third floor, feeling on familiar ground, even in the darkness that surrounds the fluorescent tubes.

The Seductress, Third Class, is waiting for me in the room. She has almost unbuttoned her dress as I enter – small, well rounded body,

hair dyed blond –, putting me in a quandary. I knew (I don't know how) that she'd be waiting but I can't help being startled. I should chase her out of the room, by violent means if necessary, but I do no such thing, only say sorry, tell her I've got the wrong room and then close the door. I look at the room number compared to the one on the key before going back down the stairs to report it's the wrong key.

I meet another woman downstairs, big round eyes peering as if about to murmur incantations. I fall under their power of attraction. She casts a glance at my name in the register, a little surprised it's my name, says sorry about the room, turns to reprimand the previous woman who listens impassively. She changes the key and reports that I'll meet her father in the early evening. She introduces herself as Ann, daughter of Monsieur Godard, the owner of this Alphaville Hotel. Amused, I ask if she's related to Jean-Luc Godard and his film, because there are too many coincidences for it to be happenstance. She bursts out laughing and tells me that many people have asked the same thing. Some tourists even come to stay here only because the name makes them think of that film. Her father doesn't know that director personally, has nothing to do with him at all. He's never left Thailand since he was born, actually, but yes, he *is* a great fan of Godard's, perhaps because of his French blood. He watches Godard's films without relying on subtitles (something Ann herself cannot do). She was born here, knows nothing much about Godard

other than the coincidence in name, and now, all of a sudden, her father wants to be a Godard too, and that's the reason why I'm here.

Ann tells me to come down here in the early evening. I can go out and walk around town in the meantime if I wish, or just rest. Her father is in Bangkok and will return in late afternoon, and if I want her to be my guide she'll be happy to oblige. She writes down her phone number and gives it to me. I take it, feeling embarrassed. She reminds me of Anna Karina in one of Godard's films. In that film, Anna is singing before the film comes on and a voice warns: 'Light! Camera! Action!'

In the right room, I lie down on the bed without changing clothes, suddenly drowsy as if I've been drugged. I don't like waking up early in the morning. Besides, I don't like sitting on a train. So tiredness overtakes my nervous system. Before I drift into slumber, I think I'm in Alphaville, a town run according to scientific principles.



Wiwat Lertwiwatwongsa,
a noted film critic
(pen name Filmsick)
and short story writer,
lives in Phuket.