

cobra

WA-NIT JARUNGKIT-ANAN

TRANSLATED FROM THE THAI BY MARCEL BARANG

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The cobra slithered out of the thick wild grass along the bank, moving slowly. Its fat, pitch-black body, more than two metres long, glistened in the fierce midday sun. As it crept unhurriedly across a territory safe from enemy intrusion, it looked like an ordinary, inoffensive reptile.

Right then, an old man came by, and its nonchalance was gone instantly; the head was raised and the skin of the neck expanded into a hood.

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Chanachon didn't pay attention to the woman. In fact, her incessant merry chatter got on his nerves. Even though what she said occasionally made the people around them laugh, he wasn't interested.

She raised laughter by mocking the names of fellow travellers.

'Mr Somchai, that's a very nice name. So many people consider it to be such a very nice name that there are

more than a thousand Somchais in the telephone book. Ah, and then Mr Prasit. Is it Mrs Chamoi's Prasit*, I wonder? Glad to meet you, sir. And we have Mr Ma-na, whom we've known for a long time. Actually, Ma-na as a name isn't enough. It should be Ma-na Wiriya Utsaha Phaya-yarm**, because when you first opened your shop it had only one shophouse, now it has expanded to four and you're having a new building built as your office. And then... Mr Chanachon, perhaps a new man to this kind of travel. You don't look very happy. Yours is a beautiful name***. When you were a child, did you fall into the water and someone rescued you, I wonder...'

That's what made him pay attention to her.

He smiled at her a little and smiled at the laughter of the people he knew more or less around him.

Of the nearly twenty tourists in the luxury coach he did seem to be the odd man out for the reason she had teased him about. He didn't feel happy, because while the others were having fun, he was silent and grave. It couldn't be said he was a stranger, though, as he knew a few people on the coach.

Chanachon knew the organiser of this trip to Suphanburi and if he had come along it was because he wanted to see a

* Mrs Chamoi was the operator of a huge pyramid loan sharking scheme in the 1980s involving the upper crust of Thai society. She blamed everything on a mysterious Prasit.

** Meaning 'endeavour', 'perseverance', 'industry', 'attempt', 'try'

*** Chanachon means 'winner over water'.

Thai house. He had made up his mind to buy one. Upon learning of his intention, some people had suggested he'd be better off buying an existing one and have it reassembled on his land. He'd get better old wood, maybe completely teak, and it'd be cheaper than building from scratch, let alone the fact that finding craftsmen to build a traditional house in these modern times wouldn't be easy.

'You won't find craftsmen to build a house these days, just Chinese contractors,' one of his friends had told him, the one who organised the cultural tour, as a matter of fact. He didn't think he'd come along, but his friend had insisted, telling him to take the trip on the odd chance he'd find a Thai house he'd fancy, and besides, before returning to Bangkok, there was a visit scheduled to admire one old Thai house of the Central Plains style.

It was perhaps this last item on the itinerary that clinched his decision to take the trip.

All those who knew he was thinking of building a Thai house thought he was following a fad of the wealthy. The house he already had was huge and luxurious, so why bother setting up a Thai-style house next to it.

When the people around him who had that opinion saw that he was determined, the advice and warnings regarding the shortcomings of Thai houses for a modern lifestyle petered out. His friends repeatedly entreated him to think carefully of why he wanted a Thai-style house, because Thai houses weren't fit for people used to a modern way of life, especially those who had long

lived abroad as he had. To make it comfortable would damage its Thai character, with the addition of brick and mortar, coats of paint, air conditioning and whatnot, as those 'with Thai taste but Chinamen's hearts' did.

'But if it's to boost your prestige, that's something else,' his friend concluded after making lengthy comments.

To cut the matter short, Chanachon admitted he wanted to have a Thai house to boost his prestige.

But actually it wasn't the case. He wanted to have an authentic Thai-style house on the model of those in the past, an authentic Thai house without brick or mortar, without air conditioning or even a fan, without modern appliances of any kind.

And he wanted to live in such a house.

Why? What for? He still couldn't answer himself. He only knew he wanted it more and more with each passing day. The need to sleep in his own Thai-style house grew deep inside him, but he was patient enough to wait. His friends promised to send people to ask around on his behalf, it might be possible to buy one right away, 'but maybe it won't be good enough for a wealthy man like you'.

The coach had sped across Suphanburi town already. It was getting late in the afternoon. The coach turned back to Bang Pla Ma district and was about to reach the last part of the trip he was waiting for.

That woman still spoke merrily through the microphone at the front of the coach.

'...When you were a child did you fall into the water and

someone rescued you, I wonder...' Those playful words still resounded deep inside him.

She was the guide on today's trip to Suphanburi. He didn't even know her name, heard only people calling her 'Miss May', making him think she was rather pretentious to have a foreign-sounding name though her skin was rather dark. Just the way she was dressed was enough to blot out any interest in looking at her further, though he felt she was rather pretty. The shirt and trousers she wore were loose and oversized. Her shirt was red, big and messy, and she had a big necktie loosely tied to look like a neckerchief, not to mention the scarf around her head.

'We've entered the Bang Pla Ma area. Actually, if we had more time, we'd go to Kao Hong and to Makharm Lom to see the fish-farming reservoirs there. They raise catfish. It's very interesting. If we went there, we'd see how they farm the catfish we eat – uh, maybe you don't eat it, it's not edible, it's got that fishy smell, you only eat salmon...'

She stressed the word 'salmon' while glancing at him with a smile on her face. He wasn't sure whether she smiled at him or at someone else, because as she spoke her face was beaming all the time.

'...But never mind. Once you have visited the Thai-style house, before returning to Bangkok, you'll stop to eat grilled shrimp. Besides fish, Bang Pla Ma also raises a lot of shrimp. Do you remember? On the way in this morning we drove by many shrimp ponds...'

'...Bang Pla Ma also has plenty of rice fields. This is the

flood season. In the eleventh month, the water overflows; in the twelfth month, the water is stagnant. We are now in the twelfth month, before long it'll be Loy Krathong. Who will come and float a *krathong** with this Suphanburi girl?'

There were exclamations from a few young men sitting at the front as well as boisterous laughter.

'...Do come, and I'll send you floating with the krathong down the river. Do you see the rice fields? Those green fields you see, they are called rice fields...' She looked towards him and seemed to smile. He began to feel that her smile was teasing and derisive. She probably knew from his friend or from someone else that he had been abroad since he was a child. ...



Wa-nit Jarungkit-anan, born in Bangkok in 1949, is best known for this one novel and for a collection of short stories which earned him the SEA Write Award in 1983. This son of a Chinese immigrant, thoroughly fascinated by Thai cultural mores, has made a career in multi-media entertainment. *Cobra*, which came out in 1987, was turned into a successful movie, *Mae Bia*, in 2001.

* A hat-sized banana leaf receptacle