

mad dogs & co

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CHART KORBJITTI

TRANSLATED FROM THE THAI BY MARCEL BARANG

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The sea at that time had turned pitch-black and glossy. Bulgy monsoon clouds blurred the sky above. Vicious blasts of wind pounced on the beach, relentlessly driving rain and waves to the shore. An army of huge waves, gloomy walls of coiled-up water, crashed thunderously on the seafloor upon reaching the shore. Wave after wave crashed in a ceaseless, caroming cannonade, assaulting the beach and forcing it to recede, but the beach stayed put and refused to yield. Instead, they retreated in a sizzling slush of seawater, leaving behind white foam that smeared the sand with telltale signs of defeat, but still more impetuous waves came rolling in, doomed yet undaunted.

The sun had gone into hiding, as if it didn't want to know what was raging on below.

There wasn't a human soul in sight on the wide-open stretch of the beach, which was strewn with driftwood, torn nets, plastic bags, rotten fish and garbage swept up and thrown onto the sand, as if the sea meant to tell the beach it didn't want any of this rubbish.

Three or four local dogs were foraging for food on the beach, undeterred by the raging downpour. The smallest of them stood gnawing at a dead fish while snarling at the

other dogs and soon a war started under the pelting rain.

Way beyond the beach luxuriant rows of green coconut trees bowed low in terror of the wind. It was as if they were putting their last energies into a fight to survive the monsoon and make it to the next dry season, when they would stand still, merely flicking the tips of their fronds as they played with the breeze.

Amid the shaking coconut trees a little hut nestled in a recess of the hill. It seemed to be trying to keep out of sight, but the wind and the rain were unrelenting. At times, violent gusts made its thatched roof flap.

A small red-earth track ran from the main road to the beach, parting neatly the long rows of coconut trees into two sections. In the hot season, this track was full of tourists of all nationalities, but now the rain was its only custom.

At a junction, down the better part of the track to the beach, was a large lean-to that had been turned into a food shop. Only the kitchen at the back had walls. The thatch of the roof had been covered with nets as protection against the wind. The floor had been built at a slightly higher level than the road. A thick, dark-green awning was stretched across the side of the shop exposed to the rain, and the wind shook and slapped it deafeningly.

A short distance from the food shop was a small gift shop that sold souvenirs to tourists. It was so simple it looked more like an ordinary hut. On the red-earth landing in front of it, an ancient motorcycle stood basking in

the rain, leaning on one side. Its paintwork was so flaky it was hard to see any trace of the original red.

The souvenir display case was made of a wooden frame around a chessboard with a glass lid. Under the glass covered with raindrops, one could see a few shells gathering dust. It looked like the shop was abandoned. Above the display case, a small brown board with gold lettering in Roman script read 'OTTO'.

Outside, the rain kept thrashing down and gave no sign of letting up.

A motor made itself heard over the roar of the rain and wind. A passenger vehicle came chugging along the red-earth track. As it drew closer, one could see it was a pickup van whose double row of metallic passenger seats at the back had been replaced with wooden benches to transport more goods and people, and by the same token its bodywork had been dolled up with stripes of garish colours, which said something of the crude tastes of the locals.

The vehicle stopped in front of the gift shop. A man with a backpack jumped out and ran straight to the door of the shop, which was tightly closed.

The pickup revved its engine and moved away, leaving behind a cloud of reeking gray smoke.

'Otto! Otto!' the man shouted as he shook the bamboo-stripped door.

He was drenched from head to foot. His beautiful long hair had been soused. He was dressed in a pair of faded

jeans and an off-white T-shirt, both dripping as if he had just fallen into a river. He pressed himself against the door to escape from the pelting rain.

‘Otto! Otto!’ His hand, which wore a surfeit of rings as his wrist wore a surfeit of bracelets, banged on the doorjamb. He called out as if he was certain there was someone inside because the key was not in the door.

‘Otto! Otto!’ he yelled into the keyhole.

‘Yeah, yeah, I heard you,’ came out the drowsy groan of someone just woken up. The man stopped banging on the door.

‘Hurry up, I’m cold,’ he shouted.

‘Just a sec. Who is it anyway?’ asked the voice inside.

The man outside knew from the movement of the boards under his feet that the person inside was walking to the door. He didn’t answer the question but stood there with a smile on his face.

The door opened. The man who had opened it stood in his black underwear. ‘Well, if it isn’t that sonofagun Chuan!’ Otto sounded astonished. All signs of drowsiness cleared from his face. ‘When did you arrive?’

‘This morning,’ the man said, stepping inside.

Otto moved aside to let him through. ‘You came alone?’ he asked, looking at his friend’s face.

‘With lots of others,’ the friend said casually.

Otto went to have a look outside. The rain struck his face but he wiped his eyes and looked from side to side. ‘Where did ‘m mothers go?’ he asked his visitor, screw-

ing up his face. He was thinking that they were playing a joke on him. His friends were always up to weird pranks.

‘How would I know? When we got off the coach, everyone went their own way,’ Chuan answered with a smile.

‘Where’d they go?’

‘Who?’

‘Oh, come off it. The people you came with. Who are they?’ Otto looked at his friend in a ‘What the hell are you up to?’ way.

‘How could I ask for names? There was a full busload of them. When we arrived, everyone split.’ Chuan laughed heartily. Otto laughed a little too. He closed the door and bolted it. ‘You bastard,’ he swore.

Chuan leaned his backpack against a large table set against the wall. Otto did his work on this table and it bore a mess of things – thermos flask, bottle of water, flashlight, pot of glue, leather off-cuts, bottles of liquid plastic for joins, spools of thread, patterns for bags, chopping block, cutter, and an ashtray placed next to a packet of cigarettes.

The boards were thick with dust and trails of footprints as if they hadn’t been swept or cleaned for months. There was nothing to sell inside the shop. The clothesline was empty too. The bamboo-plaited walls, once used to display gifts, now displayed cobwebs.

‘Your shop’s gone bust, right?’ the visitor asked after he took the place in.

‘You and your mouth. You’ve just arrived and you’re already busy badmouthing,’ Otto said with a smile. ‘There’s no one around this time o’ year, man. I packed the stuff away and stopped selling more than two weeks ago. You’re lucky you came today. A few more days and you wouldn’t ’ve found me.’

‘Why? Where’re you off to?’ Chuan asked as he opened his backpack and foraged inside.

‘I was going to go and see you in Bangkok.’ Otto laughed.

‘It was raining hard in town too,’ said Chuan to change the subject. He pulled out a towel and started to dry his hair. ‘I don’t get it. It really rained like hell in town, but why are the eaves of the buildings so god-damn short? You can’t shelter from the rain under them. If I were the governor, I’d put a roof over the whole town.’ He hung the towel on the clothesline.

‘It’s pissing down almost every fucking day this time o’ year. What’s the time?’

‘Around eleven I guess,’ Chuan said, pulling off his T-shirt.

‘Had anything yet?’

‘If you mean food, yes, I’ve eaten.’ Chuan kicked off his thongs and peeled off his jeans. ‘Wash your face, and let’s have a morning drink together,’ he said with a smile as he hung his jeans on the clothesline.

‘Wash! What the hell for? I’ll just put on some pants and we can go.’ Otto turned and walked into his bedroom at the back of the shop.

'You don't have to, you know. You can go like you are,' Chuan shouted behind his back.

'Yeah? You think I wouldn't?' Otto shouted back.

Chuan smiled but didn't answer. He pulled blue-green Chinese-style trousers and a white T-shirt out of his backpack, then took off his white underwear, hung them near his jeans on the line, and put on the fresh trousers and T-shirt.

To say that a diminutive can tell something about someone's character isn't often true, but when it comes to a nickname, there is no way for the owner to ignore it. 'Chua' means 'evil'. The man's name was Chuan ('invite', 'induce'). He got 'Chua' as a suffix because when he drank to the point that he felt he no longer feared anyone, he ransacked the shelves of Buddha images in his friends' houses. So his friends gave him the nickname of 'Chuanchua' ('the evil-inducer'), and whenever someone asked 'Which Chuan?' if the answer was 'Chuanchua' they knew who they were talking about. Although he had stopped behaving badly, the nickname had stuck with him.

Otto came out of the room. He wore red-and-green shorts and a T-shirt that had once been white. Printed on it was a picture of a red sun, with a row of black coconut trees inside the sun, and the words in English 'PHUKET – THAILAND' printed below it.

'Aren't they rocking? Feast your eyes.' Otto pulled on the hems of his shorts to spread them out.



'Rocking indeed.'

'Know what? Them mothers're killing me.' Otto laughed.

'Who?'

'Them shorts. Fuck, man: I had a dozen of 'm made. At first, a farang gave me a pair and asked me to make him some. I thought they were nice, so I had the shop make me a dozen. Reckoned I'd make a killing. But damn it! I haven't sold a single pair, so I've got to wear 'm myself.' He had this funny way of talking, as if he didn't really care about anything. 'How 'bout putting a pair on? You'll be doing me a favour.'

'No – the colours scare me.' Chuanchua shook his head in mock fear, although he was fascinated.

'Met Khanun took some. He looked real funky in 'm, man, I'm telling you.' Otto was still trying.

Chuanchua thought of Met Khanun, who was short and round and dark, and imagined him wearing garish red-and-green shorts. Quite a state, definitely.

'Are we going then?' Chuanchua asked.

The rain was still pouring down and gave no sign of stopping. It sizzled on the roof in waves under mighty gusts of wind. Yet the two men remained undeterred.

Chuanchua opened the door. The rain flushed in, and both of them bolted out. Otto locked the door then ran along the path through a curtain of water.