

my age for an Indian, with my messy short hair, older-than-marriageable-age look and shabby Western clothing.

I cover my body with a hairy blanket and try to close the privacy curtains with my trembling fingers, only to get it stuck midway. The boys take delight in my state as they whisper and break out in bouts of laughter. My fist closes around my om pendant in an attempt to muster a little courage.

'Rascals, stop it! Immediately!' A strong female voice surprises me. I was so focused on the boys that I had forgotten about the family in the compartment. The young mother, dressed in a green sari and maroon cardigan with jasmine flowers decorating her curly hair, makes sharp movements with her left hand as she supports her young bundled daughter on her hips with the other. Her son looks on as her husband, in a striking white dhoti trimmed with gold, puts his newspaper down and twirls the dhoti into a shorter kilt, just the way I imagine South Indian star Ranjini Kanth would. The boys say it was all fun and games and they profusely apologise to me for the torment they put me through. I want to really give it to them, but they seem remorseful and so I let it slide.

'Madam. Relax. *Abb sab okay hai,*' the father assures me in Hindi. His accent and clothes are different from the others and remind me of a South

Indian style, possibly Tamilian.

Moments later, *dabba* tins rattle, releasing whiffs of heaven in the compartment. The mother lays out two newspaper parcels that reveal bright white curd rice, savoury brown *dosas*, white *idlis* and tamarind rice. Aromas of masalas from a drumstick *sambhar* broth further infuse the tangy air. With her every fist rotation, I look on in nostalgia; the parents feed their children lovingly, just as my own used to with *khakras*, *gathiyas* and homemade *theplas*. These are well-known Gujarati foods that have been constants in all of my family travels in India.

'*Akka saapidunga!*' Their son, probably aged seven with oiled hair, rabbit teeth and high-waisted pants, reaches up to pass me a parcel, his hands now lined with wet rice particles. He speaks to me in Tamil, and I briefly wonder if this family, like many others such as my grandparents, have moved from their homeland in Tamil Nadu for better pastures. Will this boy and his sister know of their roots and be comfortable with it, or will they lose most of it in adopting a new identity and culture? Will they one day, like me, knowingly or unknowingly, come back to their native place in search of their heritage?

I humbly accept the little boy's offer and attack the food, licking my fingers every step of the way, as it comforts and nourishes me with every bite. **P**

Wenlin Tan • *Chiang Mai, Thailand*

# The Giant and the Bird

**A swarm of** Chinese tourists clusters around the small space in front of the red brick wall directly opposite me, at the T-junction where Ratchadamnoen Road meets Tha Phae Road. Each tourist is determined to get a selfie with a small golden plaque with 'Tha Phae Gate' inscribed on it.

Different from that of typical oval-shaped Thai settlements, Chiang Mai's architectural plan is rectangular, with a defensive wall and moat surrounding the city centre and a main gate in each direction. Tha Pae Gate lies in the east, signifying prosperity, and was the main gate through which diplomats and monks entered the city in the 13th century.

I'm imagining the reactions of feisty Lanna warriors when told that their strong and impregnable fortress, which once fended off countless attacks

from Burma, has now been overrun by vacationists armed with selfie sticks. A firm tap on my shoulder rouses me out of my daydream. My gaze floats up to meet a pair of porcelain blue eyes, at least two heads above mine.

The first thing I notice, height difference aside, is the Hat, sitting above a pair of eyes.

It is a beat-up straw hat adorned with colourful pins, badges and sequins, finished off with a translucent pink ribbon like the final flourish of a well-practised signature. The owner of Hat has chosen to match it with a bright-blue short-sleeved shirt with excited mustard-yellow fish splayed all over like they're having a fiesta, jeans so old and tattered they'd make any mother frown and equally worn-out sandals.

'Hi, I'm Ju, you replied to my thread



on the Lonely Planet forum last night.'

'I know, you said you'd be wearing a hat...' I try my best to keep a straight face.

The crowd is swelling, so we agree to escape to Nong Buak Hard, a quiet park in the southwest. We consider walking or taking either a *tuktuk* or a *songthaew*, a rustic carpool service. You simply flag one down and let the driver know your destination. If the driver is going your way, you haggle on the price. A *songthaew* costs easily half or less than a *tuktuk*. Great value aside, a *songthaew* forces me to practise my half-arsed Thai and be squished like marshmallows with strangers: the true gem of the ride is indulging my twin loves of people watching and storytelling. I steal quick glances at the driver or fellow passengers and conjure up secret identities and backstories.

The clear skies after a few days of unexpected downpour is a rarity, so we agree on taking a leisurely walk. The air is thick with the dry, unrelenting heat of March. Just ten minutes into it I start to regret our unfounded optimism.

My attempts to be a good listener fail miserably; most of what Ju says gets lost in the sweltering heat as we dodge streams of weaving traffic and fight the constant bombardment of smells, colours and sounds from the market at the corner of Mun Mueang Road.

Most tempting of all are the bowls of *khao soi*, a tangy Burmese-influenced local favourite of wavy yellow egg noodles peeking out from ponds of rich and creamy mustard-yellow curry broth, accompanied with chunks of tender-cooked chicken and lily pads of fiery-red chilli oil floating on top. I resist a second lunch, peel my eyes away from the street stalls and soldier on.

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Finally, the colours surrounding us spin to a chromium green, telling me we've reached Nong Buak Hard. The park consists of three main areas: east, central and west, with a concrete running path wrapping its circumference. Lawns dotted with climbing ylang-ylang trees, ixora and orange-jasmine bushes, and small ponds with koi fish and large



fountains occupy the central area. A fitness corner and a large deck for koi feeding occupies the east area, while to the west lies a playground. The park is a hit with the locals, who have occupied almost every space of leafy shade. We luck out with a spot right by the pond under a willowy tree.

Ju says his trip started off as a simple dream to spend a few months in Asia photographing locals.

'What about your Hat? Where did you get it? Doesn't wearing it make you feel weird?'

'Do something that makes you feel uncomfortable, every day.'

It's the mantra of a famous entrepreneur, Ju tells me. When he was browsing Ben Thanh Market in Ho Chi Minh City, he chose this Hat – the most feminine of all the available designs, to accompany him on his journey through Asia.

'It's a little weathered now, but it was once fit for a lady.' He crosses one leg over the other, hands folded demurely over his knees, his best impression of an 19th century Victorian lady. It takes all my restraint not to burst out laughing.

It brought him weird stares and pointed looks, but the Hat also became a conversation starter, enabling him to make friends with all kinds of people: curious backpackers, nosy middle-aged vendors, lonely elderly folk. As he met other travellers with hats, they would exchange souvenirs and attach them to each other's hats in memory of their meeting.

'What about you, what brings you on the road?'

'Actually, I...'

My eyebrows furrow as I hesitate to divulge the intimate details of my life with a stranger. I look up into Ju's eyes, iridescent and flecked with blue like the ocean, and I decide he doesn't seem like a dodgy person.

'I had a burnout at work, my first and only job, seven years now. Taking some time off while I think through things.'

'Time off will do you good... Why Chiang Mai then?' Ju's face remains unchanged as he looks away.

'My yoga teacher incorporates massage techniques in class to help us get deeper into the poses. She told me about the certification course here. Touch is special – it gives comfort beyond the physical, and it's fun learning about human anatomy. I've been here three times previously to learn massage, staying about two weeks each time. It's like home now, almost.' I smile, softening, memories flooding back.

A moment passes, and there are no words. Maybe it's that we've lucked out with a really comfortable spot or that I have experienced catharsis of some sort. All my senses are heightened: the chattering of a small child chimes with the chirping of sparrows, the warmth of the sun lies evenly over my body like a silk sheath, the lightest breeze caresses like a cat's tail. I close my eyes, relishing the moment.

'Have you ever tried Acroyoga?'

My eyes fly open. I frown, irritated at the loss of the sweet silence.

'Only briefly; it feels more like acrobatics than yoga to me,' I reply, pensive.

Ju sits up from his slouch and turns to me abruptly, eyes gleaming with mischief.

Uh-oh.

'Let's do it. Acroyoga. Here. Now.'

HERE?

NOW?

I do a double take and look around us. We are surrounded by people, mostly locals. What would they think about these two crazy *farang* executing some kind of funny yoga in the park? Maybe a kind soul will reward us with 30 baht for a bowl of *khao soi*.

'You've got to leave a bit of space for the magic to happen. Don't be a stick in the mud!'

After ten minutes of coaxing, I give in. We decide to try the 'bird', the simplest of all poses. Learning to trust and let go must be one of the hardest things in life. Inwardly, I cringe at the absurd idea of being a 'flier', having always associated my body and its movements with being heavy, strong and clunky, rather than light, dainty and nimble. Being a giant, however, Ju naturally has to be the base, and I the 'flier'.

Ju lies flat facing me, knees bent close to his chest, while I awkwardly position the base of his feet against my hip bones. We put our palms against each other's, arms outstretched. At the count of three, he straightens his legs and my feet come off the ground completely, his body in an inverted L shape below mine.

I hover and almost fall, but Ju catches me at the last second. After failing a couple of times, I start to feel self-conscious at the attention we are attracting. Ju smiles encouragingly and asks to try again. I grit my teeth and relax my muscles, determined to nail it this time.

We start cautiously. Something feels right this time – his soles fit like a puzzle piece against the groove of my hip bone. He straightens his legs and I prop up, feet off the ground. This time, instead of the sinking, lopsided feeling from before, I feel light and free. Slowly, I let go of the grip of his palms and allow my arms to follow my body, fingertips towards my feet, in a Superman-like position. Apprehension subsides under rising excitement as I realise I am flying above Ju, supported only by his feet against my hips.

After a few breaths, Ju slowly lets me down to the dry, yellowing grass. We turn to each other, laughter bubbling from our chests, goofy grins mirroring each other's. I laugh so hard I curl up like a caterpillar, abs aching, tears slipping out from the corners of my eyes.

Silence returns, and we lie side by side, arms and legs spaced out wide but not touching each other. I'm in my own little bubble observing the clouds floating in the sky: a bird, a snail, a butterfly...there's an elusive one that somewhat resembles an elephant. I jog my memory, trying to remember the Thai word for it, but my memory fails me.

'Can I kiss you?'

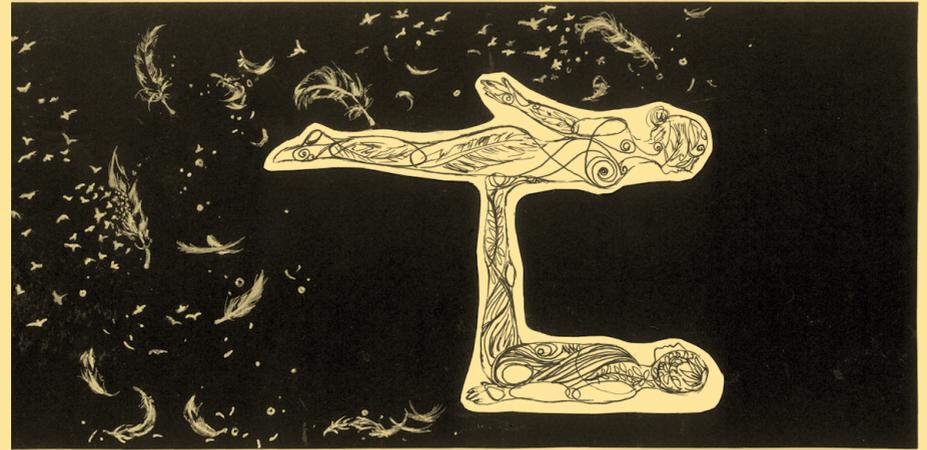
My eyes widen as exhilaration turns to shock and my cheeks start to burn. But *why* –

In an instant, a dozen bricks free fall down to form a wall of rejection in the Tetris of my mind but in the small gap remaining, a thought escapes –

*Why not?*

Sheepishly, I shrug my shoulders.

Ju inches over, and on my cheek, the kiss is gentle and brief.



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The golden hour approaches, the sky in folds of saffron orange like *Kāsāya*, the robes of Thai Buddhist monks, a common sight in Chiang Mai. The chattering of children and the chirping of birds have subsided; I feel the sun's warm silk sheath slowly sliding down my body and the air becoming still, quiet. We take our cue from the locals and meander to the exit. At the gate I stand awkwardly, hands in my pockets, eyes downcast.

'I'm terrible with goodbyes,' I mutter, knowing we'll never see each other again.

Not hearing a response, I look up to see the ugliest, most goofy face I've ever seen and Ju's lanky arms open and outstretched. Laughter dissolves my awkwardness, and we fold our arms over each other.

Engulfed, something moves in me, something I can't quite put my finger on – it feels like stirring a bowl of piping hot *khao soi*, yellow and red swirling and blending, eventually settling, into the same shade of saffron orange as the sky.

'*Sabai dee*, Ju.'

'You too, *sabai dee mak*.' **P**