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What Birds Want

“CALL ME JENNY,” she said as she picked at some microscopic particle under one of her long, dark red fingernails. “One client said my real Thai name was too hard for Americans.” Her English was perfect. Better than perfect—her words sounded slippery and warm, unhindered by harsh, ugly glottals.

Louis and I glanced at each other, then each bent down to shake her limp hand at the low table she and Martin shared by the window. As I leaned over, I caught a glimpse of their bare feet in the compartment built into the floor at traditional Bangkok restaurants such as this; Martin’s hairy ivory toes pressed up against her tiny caramel ones. Her toenails were painted the same forbidding red as her fingers.

Martin looked incredibly pleased with himself, as though this stunning woman was his by virtue of his personality or his looks (both mediocre by my brief estimation) or even by virtue of his latest research publication credit (also mediocre, according to Louis) rather than a straightforward, cash-for-services transaction.

Louis forced a smile. “See you at the New Trends seminar at four?” he asked Martin.

“Sure, sure, should be some good stuff there. That hotshot from Hopkins is on the panel.”

We followed our waiter’s outstretched hand to our own table a few rows back and clumsily hauled our large, American-sized bodies under the Thai-sized teak wood table. The waiter followed, squatting gracefully to place two glasses of the most orange orange juice I’d ever seen in front of us. Tang, I thought, despite myself. The drink of astronauts. TV commercial of my childhood: two faceless actors in big white astro-suits upside-down in a gravity-free spaceship, reaching for that elusive, floating jar of powdered drink mix. I took a sip—of course it tasted nothing like Tang. It tasted delicious. This was Bangkok after all, and we were at the luncheon buffet of the Oriental Hotel (a “five-star joint” as Louis called it. He was a complete sucker for the Michelin restaurant ratings system.) My God, the *straw* was wrapped in live orchid blossoms. Improbable purple blooms with the improbable orange juice. I watched Jenny adjust her blue silk halter top across the restaurant.

Martin was a vague collegial acquaintance of Louis's. He lived in Miami, he was married (Louis told me) and had three grown children, probably about Jenny's age. He was the sort of man my mother would have described as "shambly"; he was quite tall, overweight, and wore an ill-fitting business suit uncomfortably. Jenny's eyes shone as she listened to him talk. When she laughed, she tossed her long black hair behind her shoulders and touched him appreciatively on the hand. She was earning her pay.

"You okay?" Louis asked me.

"Just watching the river taxis," I lied, nodding toward the slick brown water of the Chao Phraya River that lapped the shore behind Martin and Jenny's prime table. Actually, the taxis were astonishing—long wooden boats that sliced through the waves at Mach speed. When Louis rode one, he wore a surgical mask he brought with him from his office back in Manhattan so no bacteria-laden water would fly into his mouth. He looked silly, but after my first splash, I wished he had brought one along for me too. The garbage that floated up the Chao Phraya! Even past the exalted five-star windows of the Oriental Hotel.

"Kind of shocking, isn't it," Louis said to me in an undertone.

I pretended not to know what he was talking about. "The river taxis?"

He blushed, as I knew he would, and held up his orange juice to shield his mouth from a side view. "Martin," he hissed, trying not to move his lips, "and that woman."

"The prostitute?"

"Nancy!" he snapped. "Shhh."

"The way you're holding that orange juice makes it look like the orchids are tucked behind your ear. It's pretty, Louis. Like a Thai welcome wagon."

Louis blinked in his why-am-I-here-with-her manner. He was too easy to tease. Truthfully, I was pretty shocked by them myself, but I didn't want Louis to know. I had some sort of upper hand—world-sophistication bonus points—if I came across to him as unflappable. Plus, it was the opposite of how my mother would have reacted.

I knew all about Bangkok's reputation as an international brothel, of course. But I had imagined it would be relegated to the sex-show atmosphere of the famous Patpong District, to the "body-body" massage parlors. Or to the men we saw late at night slinking out of "Soi Cowboy," the neon-lit Disneyland alleyway of sex that had the reputation, for the time being, of housing fewer HIV-positive girls than the Patpong. I hadn't expected the International Society of Pulmonary Medicine Specialists' annual meeting ("*This year in glorious Thailand, the Land of Smiles!*") to

turn up a girlfriend-for-hire.

“Well, I hope he’s smart enough to use condoms,” Louis said. “Are you ready for the buffet?”

We unfolded from the delicate gold cloth-backed floor mats and padded in our bare feet to the enormous luncheon spread. How funny Louis’s gray-white feet looked sticking out from under his cuffed, pinstriped trousers—like two dry-docked porpoises. Why did our American feet look so much more vulnerable than compact Thai ones?

I accepted a plate offered by a waiter dressed like Yul Brynner in *The King and I*. Louis and I circled the buffet, heaping our plates with chicken in green curry, beef in red curry, rice noodles with eggplant and lime leaves, steamed rice, sticky rice, aromatic shreds of lemongrass topping pink shrimp with their tiny legs tucked under morning glory leaves. We both shoved greedy forkfuls down so we could go back and restock.

I wanted another not-Tang orange juice, and looked around for our waiter. I found him kneeling at Martin and Jenny’s table, showing Jenny one of the decorative watermelons from the buffet table. I had noticed it myself—the pink flesh was cut in a hundred different directions to create a rose in full bloom. Unbelievable. Martin was smiling possessively as Jenny gently touched the fruit. Why did she get to see the garnish at her table? Was she such a VIP? Great, I thought as I waved to the waiter, I’m jealous of a prostitute with a watermelon. But I had to admit it: I felt a physical shudder of jealousy.

“Louis,” I asked, changing the subject in my own head, “isn’t it ironic that the meeting of lung doctors is happening in one of the world’s worst polluted cities?”

Louis was wrestling with one of his shrimp. The head, with its beady black eyes, was disturbing him.

“Is your breathing a problem?” he asked. “Are you taking your inhalers?” Then, “Got it!” he said triumphantly as he extracted the familiar, shrimp-cocktail version out of the scary shell with its accusatory stare.

He looked up and smiled. I smiled back. We were united again by our mutual relief at the anonymity of the shrimp. Anonymity. This, I remembered, was why we were here.

LOUIS WAS JUST ONE MORE DOCTOR, one more year. Since childhood I had long-lasting bouts of bronchitis that kept me coughing for weeks. My mother grudgingly dragged me to doctor after doctor, none of whom ever found anything. I kept going

myself out of some sense of obligation, more than anything else—bronchitis meant a doctor's office.

I was alone, hacking, miserable. Even the receptionist was gone. ("You don't mind if I run out for a cup of coffee, dear. I'm such an addict! I'll be back in a jif.") After a particularly loud coughing fit ended, I realized that I was sweating like crazy. The first day of classic New York summer heat—ninety degrees, humid, the pavement trapping every heat particle and magnifying it intolerably. A very powerful-looking air-conditioning unit sat in the window, turned off. I quickly assessed it at a minimum of 12,000 BTUs—enough in this small space to cool me off with the flick of a switch. Estimating BTU levels was a skill I never dreamed I'd acquire when I moved to Manhattan. Glossy magazine industry, hot bylines, power lunches at the Royalton or Café Un-Deux-Trois was the kind of New York knowledge I had in mind. Three years later I was the top-tier copy editor at a second-tier women's magazine (*Figure—For the Woman Who Cares About Hers*) living in a 350 square-foot studio on the Upper West Side. I knew how to use semicolons, *The Chicago Manual of Style*, and how to get the best air conditioner with the highest BTU level at the lowest price that wouldn't short out the entire building.

So when I saw that unit that morning in that waiting room, I wanted cold air. She meant to turn it on before getting her coffee, I rationalized. It's so hot. This is an office. Sick people come here. So I got up and made for the switch, even got my hand on the control, when I heard the bleat.

A person hears a lot of noises on any given day in the City, but bleating isn't usually one of them. Yet this was an unmistakable bleat. More than one bleat—several, high-pitched, screeching bleats coming from the air conditioner itself.

I peered over the window frame, which rested on the unit and was thick with peeling layers of glossy brown paint that flaked onto the top of the air conditioner, and through the dingy second-floor window at people hurrying along West 10th Street. The bleating sounded sharper, more desperate, and was coming from below me. I looked down at the back of the air conditioner; the beige metal was covered with dried crusty pigeon droppings, splattered like white Rorschach tests. There's Illinois, I thought, locating my mother's old house in Urbana. I saw that drafty, peeling Victorian everywhere, even though the last time I had returned was for her funeral two years earlier.

Then the bleats again, loudly. I pressed my cheek against the glass to get the sharpest angle possible—the pane emitted no coolness, only the sickly heat from inside and out. By contorting myself this way, I found the very tip of the nest,

wedged on the left-hand side of the air conditioner on the tiny bit of concrete ledge that stuck out over the sidewalk. There was a rustle of feather, then quickly, a wingtip shot in and out of view. They had to be babies—the feathers looked soft and naïve, and that bleating rang at the same pitch human babies used when they were hungry.

I dragged the nearest chair—some imitation Edwardian thing with a conveniently hard upholstered seat—next to the window and climbed up on it. Now I could see them clearly. Two babies, heads yellow, wet, and fuzzy, tiny beaks wide open and longing. Feed me, feed me!

I was even hotter from the effort of moving the chair. Sweat was pooling up in all the uncomfortable places and I could feel another coughing spell lurking. But what if turning on the air conditioner killed the babies? One flick of my wrist and I could cause the death of two living beings. And for what? My own short-term comfort. Was I that cruel?

Maybe the air conditioner wouldn't affect the babies at all. But what if it did? Were there odds? Did moral quandaries ever come with odds? I stood with my hand on the trigger, my eyes on the birds. Why couldn't they tell me what would happen?

This was how Louis found me when he came out of his office: standing on one of his expensive-looking chairs in his waiting room, my face smashed against the window, having a moral quandary.

“Can I help you?” he asked. I turned quickly. He was fortyish, with light brown hair thick in front and thinning on top, curly eyebrows, and a pale face with a slightly soft but not unpleasant jaw line. Medium height, physique obscured by the long white doctor coat. One red ballpoint and one blue ballpoint tucked neatly in the breast pocket, a clip-on laminated ID card with a blurry but obviously unflattering picture. He wore Rockports. I remember liking that he wore Rockports.

I was not at the height of my verbal skills. “I . . . hello . . . well, it was hot, but the pigeons might be in the way . . .” With that brilliant introduction, I started coughing again.

“I'm sorry,” Louis said. “Jeannette should have turned on the air conditioner.” He came over to the window and grabbed the air conditioner's control.

“Wait!” I shrieked.

Louis pulled back his hand. “What? What's wrong?”

“There's a nest of baby pigeons on the ledge. The motor could kill them.”

He looked blankly at me, then said, “That's not going to happen.” He turned on the unit and a blast of air—immediately cold, as only the best models provide—hit my bare legs.