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Jungle Sickness

I had been lying here for what seemed like a very, very long time. It must have been days, maybe weeks. The humidity had seeped into my watch and it had stopped at nine-thirty one morning, or maybe evening, back in the mists of time. I lapsed in and out of consciousness, distantly aware of my delirious ramblings as if they were disembodied voices. Sometimes I thought I was not alone. Voices spoke to me and I would prize open a gummy eye but nothing moved and the voices stopped. There was nobody there. Today, I felt slightly better but I was pitifully aware of the rank smell exuding from my own putrid body.

I was lying on a bamboo *charpoy*, a sturdy bedframe made from thick bamboo trunks. A flat layer of beaten split bamboo gave a smooth but hard surface. My emaciated body was covered by a sweat-stained and sodden *pakoma*, a length of checkered cotton Thai men wear around their waists which serves a multitude of different tasks from towel to blanket. Hanging from a wooden rafter was a torn mosquito net, yellow with age, that kept the larger insects at bay and was probably helping to keep me alive.

My body oozed sweat. It ran in ever-changing courses across my chest and down my sides. Like raindrops on a window, it started as beads on my forehead, united and ran into my eyebrows, cascaded into my eyes, around my nose, down my face and into my mouth. The beaten earth under the *charpoy* turned a darker brown where puddles of sweat formed.

The *charpoy* was the only piece of furniture under the lean-to structure. The roof and sides were of palm fronds and on one side there was a gap which led into a small room supported by bamboo uprights. There were no windows, running water, furniture, electricity or any other hint of the 20th Century.

Prostrate on the *charpoy*, during fleeting moments of lucidity I could see the canopy of the tropical jungle over my head through half opened eyes. Immeasurable meranti, teak and other tropical trees soared into the thick green mat above, blocking out natural light save for the occasional patch of dappled sunlight that played off the ferns and orchids hanging tenuously from trunks and branches. Screeching monkeys crashed overhead swinging noisily from tree to

tree or sliding down the jungle creepers, like a small army of miniature Tarzans.

I languidly watched the leeches squirming their way across the mud floor. Inch-long tubes arching and waving their backs in the air trying to sense whether there was any flesh within range. Sometimes I caught them worming their way up the *charpoy's* bamboo legs, intent on reaching my body. Usually I was too late to stop them. I would feel something heavy on my thigh or arm and would tear off the *pakoma* to find a long slug attached to my body, gorging on my blood.

I called "Narong, Narong!" and again more urgently, "Narong, *ma ni reo!*" "Come here quickly!"

Narong entered quietly and sprinkled salt on the leach until it fell off leaving a small hole bleeding profusely for hours until the anticoagulant was flushed out of the wound.

I knew that at the age of twenty-two I was perilously close to death. The end in a remote tropical jungle in Thailand was profoundly depressing. I would be cremated on a pyre of brushwood in the jungle as the Thais do not bury their dead. My far away family would never know what had really happened.

Perhaps two more days had gone by, maybe three. It must be five days now since the party of doctors and soldiers carried me off the shallow draught boat with its long-tailed engine and left me in the care of the *Wat*. It should take the team another two days down the river to reach the road-head at Phra Saeng and a further day to the hospital at Nakorn Sri Thammaraj. The return journey, assuming that suitable medication was available, might take a day longer. It would be at least a week before a doctor could get back to the Buddhist temple, or *wat* in Thai. I was not sure I was going to make it.

The privy was in an *attap*-thatched hut some hundred feet from my shelter. There a deep hole was crossed by two thin slimy wooden planks a foot apart. I needed to perch with one foot on either plank while wracked by the agonising cramps that come with amoebic dysentery, sometimes vomiting at the same time. The trick was not to slide off the planks into the hole below. The privy provided sustenance and shelter to a menagerie of insects and little reptiles but I was past caring whether they had malicious intentions or not.

Sometimes I never made it but would collapse on the path outside my hut where I would be found by Narong whose gentle hand would cool my sweating, fevered, brow and although waif-like himself, he would pick me up and carry my thin body back to the *charpoy*. There he gently washed the sweat and vomit off my face and the slime from my legs. The slight smile never left his face, never for a second revealing the revulsion he must be feeling at the gore and stench oozing out of me.

I looked down at my emaciated limbs, bones and sinews. Surely there was not much in the way of physical reserves remaining.

My chain of thought was broken by Narong. He was a novice Buddhist monk, no more than fifteen years old and slight of build. He had been instructed to care for this strange *farang* who had been washed up on the shores of this little jungle community. His smoothly shaved head and eyebrows revealed a finely shaped skull and moon-like face with two dark eyes, a flat nose and a mischievous mouth set off by ears that sprung sideways out of his head. I communicated with difficulty – I had been in Thailand a little more than eighteen months, had mixed exclusively with Thai people and could speak the language fairly, but here was spoken a southern dialect quite different to the refined Thai found in Bangkok, the capital city, five hundred kilometres to the north.

Narong bustled around the *charpoy* with a broom made from rushes, sweeping the detritus of the night into a small heap: ants, dust, beetles, leaves and a red centipede the size of a cigar. He removed my dripping *pakoma*, rinsed my body with a half-coconut bowl of water drawn from a large earthenware jar at the foot of the *charpoy* and covered me with a fresh *pakoma*. This was no normal nursing task: my face was caked with dried vomit from the night before, my buttocks and legs with faeces, slime and blood. Throughout my ablutions the smile never left his face. He then gently lifted my head from the solid block of kapok that formed a hard pillow and spooned a pungent broth into my mouth.

Then as silently as he entered, he faded back into the jungle.

My eyes closed as the black curtain of unconsciousness wafted over me and my wavering distant thoughts turned to how I had found myself in this dire situation.

I had been marooned in a unique place, far from the traditional concept of a Thai *wat* with its green and orange tiled roof and golden *nagas* on the eaves, an architectural design that had not changed for centuries. This *wat* had been founded by a monk who believed that Buddhism in Thailand had varied too far from the original philosophy. Theravada Buddhism, in its pure form, aims to achieve enlightenment through meditation but Buddhism as it had come to be practised in Thailand, especially in the countryside, was much closer to idolatry. Worshippers went to temples with offerings which they laid in front of the Buddha image and prayed to Buddha to save them from their sufferings, grant their wishes, help them to buy a new car or win the lottery, conceive a child, or achieve any other human ambition in much the same way as Catholics pray to the image of the Virgin Mary and Protestants to the crucifix. This may be a human need but it is not Buddhism.

This particular monk had left his monastery in Bangkok and had carved a small retreat out of the jungle near Nakorn Si Thammarat. In his retreat he did not permit the presence of an image of the Buddha and concentrated solely on

meditation. He was to be joined by other monks of like mind and gradually a unique new monastery appeared. Each monk went into the jungle and created his own cell, in fact a small shelter made out of what could be found in the jungle. There were many such cells each connected to each other by walkways through the trees. A central building housed the administration and dining area. There was a large circular clearing in the jungle where the monks met to pray and chant.

Such was the remoteness of the temple that the monks could not rely upon daily donations of food from worshippers, so it was not possible for the monks to sally forth every morning with their bowls to gather food in the manner one sees on the streets of Bangkok. This monastery relied on cash donations from people who supported their particular mission and they would then buy food in the nearest market and transport it back to the temple.

Once I had set out on the road to recovery from the dysentery, I fell into the daily routine of the monastery. I was not the only *farang* there: once I stumbled across an American but he had taken a vow of silence and although he looked at me curiously when we met each other on a jungle path he quickly retreated to his cell and was not seen again throughout the time that I spent there.

It was a simple life – rising at four o'clock, assembling in the clearing, listening to lectures or sermons, eating, meditating, sweeping up the leaves (a constant occupation), more praying, more meditating and early to bed. Chanting in Thai monasteries is in Pali, a language descended from Sanskrit and unknown to me. I was hardly familiar with the Buddhist sutras from the Tripitaka and could not understand the intellectual Thai used by the monks during their lectures. The monks were extraordinarily kind and considerate to the stranger in their midst. I was allocated a spare cell and a novice to care for me. As soon as I was well enough, I ate and lived with them and followed their daily life as best I could.

I spent much time observing the tropical rain forest and learning its ways. Dark, forbidding and not a little frightening to most people, it became a source of fascination to me. The massive bulk and height of the trees was a wonder. The multitude of life never ceased to astound me. Armies of ants marched through the jungle devouring everything in their way. Poisonous centipedes a foot long lurked under giant teak leaves on the ground. Many other insects and reptiles were so well disguised that one did not notice them until after remaining motionless for a considerable period of time, something on a tree trunk, branch or leaf would suddenly move. The jungle is a busy metropolis where different species of insect and animal life live in harmony but for the occasional predator, dangerous to the uninitiated without doubt but not without its fascination. My

jungle education was to come in useful when I found myself in Vietnam not so many months later on long-range reconnaissance patrols with the American military.

One elderly monk, who spoke more than passable English, took me under his wing and spent several hours every day debating Buddhist philosophy and teaching me the art of meditation. I would then be left on my own from noon to dusk to practise what I had learned. It was a unique, valuable and spiritually rewarding experience but as my strength recovered I began to tire of the monastic life and I started to think of returning to the outside world.

So it was that after I know not how long in the jungle, the day came when I joined a group of monks on their way to Nakorn Si Thammarat on a provisioning expedition. Once in the town people stopped in their tracks to turn and stare at the little group of orange-robed shaven-headed monks chatting intimately to a lone *farang* in their midst. That evening I bade farewell to my new friends and caught the night train back to Bangkok.