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DANCING WITH SHADOW PLAY

THE EVENING WAS STEAMY and scented with jasmine that floated along a rambling trellis into the temple courtyard. The abbot's receiving room was lit dimly with a neon tube, just like all the electric light in the countryside. I slipped off my sandals and entered slowly, following my neighbors. Phra Ajan Sawang sat calmly before us at the head of a large mahogany table, his saffron robes folded over his aging and insubstantial body. He greeted me warmly as I bowed three times to acknowledge his Buddha nature. Rumours claimed that he was well respected for brokering peace deals with local godfathers who fought over contraband, drugs, and terrain. The region's reputation was tough and the newspapers I saw carried disturbing photos of the dead to prove it. Armed with Buddha's teachings and a love for all life, even in its many ugly forms, Phra Ajan was known to embrace the pitiful and to teach them another path. Tonight he radiated wisdom and kindness, his thin face glowing with an inner light as he held a small teacup in his right palm. He listened patiently as a villager explained that I was studying theatre in Thailand and was in Phetchaburi province to research *lakhon chattri*, an ancient form of dance-drama that rang throughout his courtyard each day. This temple, his beloved Wat Maha That, was the epicenter of the dance-drama, where its patron saint was enshrined in a statue that was covered completely with gold leaf, testimony of the faithful.

I strained to follow the regional dialect, a staccato that struck my ears and attention. Suddenly I understood two words, *nang talung*; shadow play. Phra Ajan Sawang turned to me and smiled gently. "As a small boy I ran across the rice paddy whenever I heard the music. So exciting," he laughed. "I could never sleep."

Everyone nodded, understanding the thrill. Performances of *nang talung* were known to attract an audience from all directions. The music traveled for miles through the night as the din of drums, cymbals, and xylophone hammered out a dizzying score. Joined by the piercing sound of an oboe, the *pi*, the music was haunting and filled with the tension and fury of an exciting story.

“Did performances happen often in those days?” I asked, wondering if the tradition had changed since he was young.

“They were frequent.” He gestured for us to accept the tea prepared for our visit. “Especially at temple fairs. Stories played for many nights if there were funerals or ordinations for young monks. Families made the arrangements.”

Remembering his childhood fondly, Phra Ajan Sawang claimed that *nang talung* had held him spellbound until dawn as he sat on the edge of a makeshift stage and watched the puppet master, the *dalang*, sweep kings and queens, jokers, monkeys and mystics across a screen for hours. I’d seen kids cluster back stage to watch these shows and could appreciate their curiosity and wonder. Set in the darkness, beneath a hurricane lamp, this was where the action took place, where a *dalang* whispered mantras to his invisible teachers and lined-up his hand-made puppets along a banana stalk, freshly cut for the performance. As he sat cross-legged in only one spot a *dalang* swirled puppets into distant lands where their shadows, flickering on a taunt screen, drummed-up trouble, sang love songs, battled demons, and flew through the air telling sexy jokes that made the audience howl and blush.

“Jokers in *nang talung* are loved by the people,” Phra Ajan continued. “The best *dalang* bring them to life by playing with the language, reversing words to make new ones. Great fun. Very wild. It depends on the *dalang*’s talent.”

I drank my tea slowly, enjoying his story. I’d read that *dalang* were a special lot, intensely committed to performing an ancient form of storytelling that belonged to the shadow play traditions of Java, Malaysia, and even southern China. They were initiated into an art form that traced its lineage through a line of teachers that finally ended in a divine realm. Skilled in rituals unknown to villagers, *dalang* were held in high regard by most, and they cultivated their mystique by performing well and guarding the secrets of their art, some of which involved incantations, and even curses, just in case competition got nasty.

Laughter circled the room. Suddenly, everyone remembered a special night of *nang talung*. When the lyrics were truly poetic. When the monkeys flew off the screen chasing demons. When Auntie Noy met her lover. When the mosquitoes were fierce. When someone’s child was entranced and made a fuss when it was time to go home. In the midst of the chatter I watched Phra Ajan Sawang rise from his chair and walk slowly across the room to his bookcase. His slender body bent with ease as he opened the glass doors of a lower shelf

and brought out three large *nang talung* puppets. Everyone stopped talking as he returned to the table and lovingly placed them before me.

“For you,” he said simply. “They are for you.”

I felt my heart skip a beat, totally surprised by the honour, and hesitated before speaking, not sure if I should accept such a precious gift. They looked fragile and well worn, their leather smooth, most of their colour fading into a soft patina that told me they were very old and were now valuable antiques. Who was I, a stranger in the village, to walk off with such a beautiful collection? But Phra Ajan Sawang was certain and pressed me to take the puppets. “To share with students and friends in America.”

I touched them cautiously and wondered if a woman had ever handled them before. *Nang talung* was strictly a man’s art form when these puppets performed. I’d heard that women had become *dalang* only recently, and finally gained access to the secrets and paraphernalia associated with *nang talung*. But I kept these thoughts to myself, not wanting to challenge Phra Ajan’s generosity or to appear ungrateful for his beautiful gift. Instead, I asked him how he’d come to acquire the puppets.

“Ah,” he replied slowly. “These three were given to me long ago, after the *dalang* passed away. He had no apprentice. His relatives brought them here, to the temple, to be sure the family would be safe.” Phra Ajan picked up a puppet and pulled the ragged string attached to its arm. A walking stick moved forward identifying the character as the Rusi, a seer and wiseman featured prominently in *nang talung* stories.

Everyone laughed politely, ignoring Phra Ajan’s curious comment about safety. Taking my cue from the others, I watched him pull another string that moved the wispy beard of the Rusi, forcing its mouth to open and close. The puppet was majestic and flickered fragments of gold leaf in the dim light, the faded markings of its sacred status.

I knelt before Phra Ajan Sawang and thanked him for the puppets, assuring him that they would benefit my research greatly. He blessed us one by one and we departed, knowing that I had been welcomed into the community by its heart.

I returned to the small wooden house I rented at the edge of a rice paddy and climbed the rickety stairs to a door that now had a shiny new lock. Although my one-room abode belonged to a bygone era and was weather-beaten to a fault, it stretched gracefully to the sky with a tapered roof that told me I was in Thailand. Small hand-carved birds poised for flight decorated the terminals on either side of the entrance and enchanted me daily as I

came and went. But the place, perched on stilts to survive seasonal flooding, swayed dangerously on windy nights, making me question if I'd been wise in choosing a quaint old house riddled with termites and tradition when I could have had the security of the faculty dorms at the technical school. The slanted floors drew me into a vaulted space where my sitting choices were confined to a thin mattress draped in mosquito netting or a rather prickly rattan chair I'd just purchased in the night market. Despite my conflicted feelings, this was now home, at least for a few months, and where I hoped I could enjoy a little privacy, a concept that my curious and well-intentioned neighbours could not understand. As a *farang* who came from the USA I now offered them a new form of daily entertainment that rivalled the popular TV soaps. I had to remind myself to smile whenever they asked me where I was going and what I was up to.

I set the puppets in a ceramic vase that allowed them to stand upright on my writing desk. I hoped they would inspire my research, or at least amuse me when I felt lonely or was frustrated with my work. I laughed as I looked at them, imagining the wild nights they'd lived on the screen entertaining hundreds of villagers who adored them. The Rusi, wearing the crown of a mystic, was a stately puppet, but the other two were full-bellied jokers with big noses and even bigger feet. Grotesque and bawdy, one carried a huge phallus and the other a *kris*, a sharp-bladed knife with magical properties. Named Ai Theng and Ai Nu-Nui, I'd seen them cavort through a story exposing shady characters who lusted after the usual vices. They generated an artful chaos that set things right whenever they went wrong. Although the *dalang* created their antics, these two were slapstick partners who revealed the truth if deception was on the prowl.

The news that Phra Ajan Sawang had given me *nang talung* puppets travelled quickly throughout the village and confronted me the next morning as an elderly woman stopped me on the road to tell me the puppets were charmed. Not sure if I understood her correctly I hurried to the temple courtyard, where I raised the matter at once with several *lakhon chatri* performers I trusted. They clustered around me, a colourful sea of taffetas and sequins, eager to tell me what they knew. Baa Ying, the matronly leader of the dance troupe, spoke first.

“Yes,” she confirmed. “The puppets have *saksit*.”

Here it was again, that special word I heard each time something was described as having divine or occult power. *Saksit*. It resonated from shrines where deities, revered teachers, and even Lord Buddha were believed to re-

side. A mysterious charge that could animate people, amulets, mantras, and a host of other items, most of the time *saksit* came through invocations and blessings made by ritual specialists. Other times it was undeniably present, as in the ancient enormous trees that inspired my awe and reverence whenever I walked near them and heard their large leaves rustling.

“A *dalang*’s props have *saksit*,” she explained. “Puppets, screen, also musical instruments, if he owns them. *Dalang* are like all performers, they have everything blessed each year by their teachers, even themselves.”

This ceremony, a highlight for performers, was a way they secured blessings infused with the power of *saksit*. These set them apart from others and tied them forever to a tradition they loved. The more time I spent with performers the more I understood that their status seemed to be based on talent, lineage, wealth, and mysteries that revolved around *saksit*.

Nong Khai, a young dancer sitting next to me, inched closer, her powdered face cracking anxiously as she frowned with concern. “The *dalang*’s family couldn’t keep the puppets,” she whispered. “They have too much *saksit* after hundreds of blessings. Too strong.”

“Are they dangerous?” I asked.

“Many people think so,” Baa Ying cautioned. “They can bring about bad luck once they leave a *dalang*’s care. That’s why they were brought to the temple. It’s the only place where they can be stored safely and not cause anyone trouble.”

A clash of cymbals and drums echoed from inside the temple as the music of *lakhon chattri* began the dancers’ morning. Suddenly I felt vulnerable and uneasy, now that the discussion was focused on me. Wasn’t this talk about power and danger just another piece of performance folklore? Why would a notion so specific to Thailand apply to me, an outsider who was only trying to do research here? I looked at the dancers, hoping someone would acknowledge my gaze and laughingly dismiss the conversation as a joke, but everyone was quiet and fussing over their costumes and jewelry.

“But what about me?” I raised my voice, competing with the music. “If I keep the puppets will they cause me trouble?”

“Not if Phra Ajan gave them to you.” I recognized Anucha’s voice. Sitting on the sidelines applying his make-up, he’d listened to us all and finally put the issue to rest. “No need to worry,” he assured me. “Phra Ajan is a Buddha. You are safe. Very lucky.”

The music changed tempo, calling the troupe to perform. As they rose to follow Anucha, an elderly dancer approached me, his eyes twinkling. “Just

remember,” he laughed, “Ai Theng and Ai Nu-Nui will take care of you.”

I shook the cramps from my legs as I rose, and tested my balance before I started walking. Sitting on the ground Thai-style was a painful challenge. Although it was only mid-morning I already felt tired from straining to understand a new dialect and a custom of honouring objects that supposedly had power. And yet, the situation was intriguing, the kind of adventure I loved. I walked toward the courtyard gate that opened to the bustling city and resolved to trust Phra Ajan Sawang who had chosen to give me the *nang talung* puppets.

Over the next three months I traveled down the Malay peninsula with Baa Ying’s dance troupe, recording stories, meeting patrons, interviewing dancers, and battling the rising heat and dust that would dissolve eventually in the thunderous monsoons that always ended the performance season. I learned that despite the economic risks and physical demands of an itinerant lifestyle very few performers would choose to exchange places with their sedentary neighbours. The dancers I knew were bodies in motion who took to the stage and the road with a passion. In minutes they transformed shabby markets and ordinary courtyards into glittering kingdoms that surprised and entertained their many patrons. I marveled at their talents and felt privileged to know them.

As Baa Ying’s dance troupe passed through a coastline of fishing villages I encountered *nang talung* and *dalang* who performed for patrons seeking their skills and entertainment. A counterpoint to the daytime dance-dramas of *lakhon chattri*, *nang talung* was a nightly event in which *dalang* relied on the dark to create mystery, illusion, and excitement. I gathered with villagers after sunset to watch shadows float on a screen, and then dissolve, just as magically. Although *nang talung* stories always pitched good against evil, they were laced with timely political satire that jokers, like Ai Theng and Ai Nu-Nui, bantered about in a zany dialogue that made locals shout for more. Fascinated by the spectacle and lost in the darkness I soon discovered that I was anonymous and finally beyond the attention of curious villagers, who usually watched me instead of anything else. At the end of these nights I left the performance area with the smell of incense clinging to my clothes. I inhaled the fragrance as I snuggled into my sleeping bag and conjured up the music and voices to my dreams.

Whispers circled around me each morning. “She watches every show. Stands there for hours.” “She’s entranced.” “*Nang talung*; it’s in her blood.”

“*Mai pen rai*, never mind, her Thai is improving.” Baa Ying and her dancers assessed my sanity and current obsession with *nang talung*.

Inwardly, I had to confess, I was hooked, ready to run off with a puppet troupe at the slightest invitation. Just the sound of a drum and an oboe echoing through the darkness moved my feet in the direction of the nearest show. I wondered if my strong attraction to *nang talung*, now bordering on the irrational, was connected to the secret incantations *dalang* muttered at the start of each performance. Locals claimed that these were powerful and could hold an audience for days if a *dalang* sought to gain notoriety. But this was a narrative for my research notes, not something I could invest in personally. After all, I was committed to free choice and belonged to a world where spells and superstitions were not taken seriously. And yet, each day my heart was more and more in love with *nang talung*, while my head constructed objective boundaries that kept me from packing a bag and wandering off with a *dalang* I’d never met. Mercifully, the rains intervened, ending my obsession abruptly and flooding every outdoor performance space for miles. Sheets of water cascaded from the sky as children danced through the muddy lots with glee. As I hurried across a vacant field to the shelter of a market stall I stopped to enjoy the dramatic moment that would end the heat and discomfort of many months. I stood in the rain, amazed by its force, and felt a tremendous relief. The performance season in Thailand was over.

Exhaust fumes burned my nostrils as I stood on the tiny balcony of my apartment at dusk and surveyed the traffic inching its way through the narrow *soi* below. Bangkok, known to Thais as *Krungthep*, the ‘City of Angels,’ was a polluted hell realm at rush hour, destined to destroy the health of its ten million residents and send the angels elsewhere. I wondered if the jackfruit piled high in front of the corner hair salon were completely saturated with diesel, and if their metallic flavor would be detected by the many women who prided themselves on selecting the best the season could offer. Neon lights blazed and blinked, casting colourful shadows on the blank walls of the room where I organized my research papers and prepared to leave the country. Somehow I had ended up at Asia Apartments, a four-storey cement block that housed the mistresses and children of Thai men who kept their *mia noi* sequestered in a lane off Thanon Phayathai, where they were out of sight, and sometimes out of mind, depending on relations. The apartments were cheap, clean, somewhat secure, and off the tourist track. I found it fascinating to talk with these women and to conclude my year in Thailand listening to

their heartfelt and often tragic stories of lost love, loneliness, and economic betrayal; stories that resembled many of the epic tales I'd seen performed over the past few months.

Ai Theng, Ai Nu-Nui, and the Rusi stood gallantly on a plywood dresser next to a stack of books I still needed to cram into my suitcases. The puppets reminded me of more magical nights. I lit some incense and placed it before them, a small tribute to the adventurous season we had shared together. I checked my watch and headed down to the front desk to secure my 5:30 a.m. taxi ride to the airport. Even though I hated to start my day so early, experience told me it was the only way to escape the Monday morning rush hour and still make my eight-thirty departure on Korean Air, a flight well known for double-booking.

I hissed as I dragged my suitcases through the dark and deserted *soi* and headed to Thanon Phayathai, where I hoped to flag down a taxi. After waiting thirty minutes for the ride I'd reserved the night before, it was nowhere in sight. "Absolutely irresponsible!" I threw the words into the dark, judging every ne'er-do-well I'd ever met in Thailand. "I'll bet he's gambled all night and too drunk to tell time!" My mind raced, cursing the driver who'd never showed. The chatter stopped instantly as I reached the corner and surveyed the empty street that stretched endlessly before me. I clenched the puppets and my purse under my arm, and wondered how such a surreal environment could manifest itself on a major thoroughfare I'd always seen teaming with activity. A lone dog sniffed some garbage nearby and ambled across the street to where vendors sold sweets during the day. I stamped my foot, annoyed at my stupidity and how I'd handed over two hundred baht to the woman at the front desk who'd promised she would secure my ride. When would I accept the fact that I was a *farang* here and would always be a target for hustlers?

Trapped in a moment of truth, I flashed upon the face I'd seen in the mirror only yesterday while washing my hands in the streams of hot water that distinguished the Oriental Hotel restrooms as the best in Bangkok. After spending months on the road with Thai dancers, far removed from any foreigners, I'd forgotten that my appearance did not match theirs, and that the woman with blond hair and green eyes staring back at me was a *farang*. Ironically, these were the very features that allowed me to enter the posh hotel in the first place, take my respite from the crowded streets, and exit gracefully, posing as a guest I really wasn't. The hustle was two-fold.

I turned back to the *soi* and squinted into the headlights of a car cruising towards me. Instinctively I waved my arm, connecting with the driver. Screeching to a stop he jumped from the car and hastily threw my luggage into the battered trunk of his white Peugeot. I climbed into the back seat, distancing myself from his alcoholic breath. As I placed the puppets on the seat next to me I realized my hands were trembling. Along the sidewalk Buddhist monks gathered in the dawn to collect their alms, forming a steady line of saffron that inspired confidence and calm. I closed my eyes to save this picture forever in my mind. The driver's heavy foot hit the gas pedal and we accelerated forward.

Vehicles of every description double-parked in front of the passenger drop-off, ignoring the yellow signs and security guards that forbade congestion near the swinging doors of the main terminal. The traffic was criss-crossing aggressively, determined to unload families, lovers, students, and VIPs despite the flashy white gloves and whistles of irrelevant airport employees. My driver slid into a ragged queue forming an outer ring of cars that idled in place as passengers gathered their belongings and dodged the on-coming traffic. I handed over his exorbitant fare and scrambled out of the back seat to grab my luggage before it disappeared in the chaos. As I returned to the car to collect the puppets, it lurched forward, slamming the back door shut before me. I jumped aside to safety and hollered for the driver to stop, but he was already gone, speeding down the road. I looked at my empty hands in disbelief.

"Don't worry, my car is fast," the driver assured me, circling a roundabout at top speed. I watched the white Peugeot careen down the highway in front of us, oblivious to our pursuit and my quest. Now holding on for dear life in the backseat of a taxi I'd just commandeered, I berated myself mercilessly. "How could I let this happen? How could I break one of my travel tenets and be so careless? Never, never, *never* pay a driver until you have collected all of your belongings." I gripped the back of the front seat and focused on the highway. The white dot was picking up speed, weaving through the heavy traffic and heading toward the heart of Bangkok.

"Don't lose him," I cried, wishing I could take the wheel and drive. "Keep track of that car. Drive faster. We've got to stop him now, before we hit the traffic lights."

"Lady, *cai yen, yen*, cool down, we'll get him."

Amulets and jasmine strung from the rear-view mirror danced in the center of the windshield. I desperately hoped they would guide us to

our destination; wherever that was going to be. The guy was sweet, another urban refugee from the northeast battling poverty and prejudice in a city that relegated his kind to Khlong Toei, one of Bangkok's sprawling slums. Upon jumping into his taxi, I had commanded an intense presence and demanded he take up my cause of retrieving the puppets from a run-away car. Somehow he was willing, even devoted, especially after I'd told him they were given to me by a revered Buddhist monk.

The traffic slowed and stopped, paralyzing four lanes of cars and lorries. Motorcycles zipped past us unfazed, spiraling black fumes into the thick air. I hit the seat with my fist and sank back against the upholstery in despair. Horns blasted as drivers vented in unison and coaxed movement of any kind. The Peugeot was gone, absorbed into a metropolis where white sedans were parked on every corner, creating a hall of mirrors. I looked at my watch and noted the hands slipping past seven o'clock.

"Where, where is he?" I muttered to myself, unwilling to accept defeat. The traffic moved forward, wrapping slowly around the suburb of Bang Khen. In the distance the golden spires of local temples glinted in a sunrise that persisted despite the smog. As we approached the last exit to head north, back to the airport, I leaned forward, "Drive on to Thanon Phayathai. *Soi 13*." My decision was final. I would miss my flight. "You know Asia Apartments?"

The *soi* was awake, full of little kids heading to school, weaving between vendors pushing their carts into place and a stream of traffic that honked its way to the end of the lane. As we passed cheerful faces I wondered how many lived in the neighbourhood, tucked away in small rooms and apartments that lined both sides of the *soi* and extended beyond into an endless labyrinth. Shopkeepers, already decked in high heels, cranked open their grates, exposing mannequins clad in scanty suits of bright polyester. Residents washed their cars, a morning ritual that left the pavement streaming with the dirt, debris, and bubbles of urban life. Somehow I was riding on intuition, trusting that I could track down the driver who had my puppets. Although I had no reason to confirm that the fellow with the Peugeot had come from Asia Apartments, I now felt the coincidence of him appearing from the *soi* was just too curious to ignore. He'd claimed innocence when I'd asked about my reservation, but I knew from experience that truth could be negotiated in Thailand, if someone wanted to save face.

I got out of the taxi as it jolted to a halt and ran over to a cluster of cars parked randomly at the end of the *soi* near the fateful apartments.

"Here, it's here," I yelled, running between six or seven white sedans.

“It’s got to be here! This one.”

“No, no! *This* is it. Over here. The engine is still warm.” My taxi driver, joining in the search, was feeling the hood of a Peugeot and checking a bent fender that looked familiar. Certain he’d found the car, I tried to force the locked doors. As we both peered through the smoky windows, hoping to locate the puppets, we saw that the backseat was just as empty as the front.

“Lady, you stay. I’ll go find him at the desk.” I stood by the car stunned and watched him disappear into the apartment block. Incredibly, against unbelievable odds, we had found the white Peugeot, the exact vehicle that had disappeared in a city of millions. Overhead *luktung* pop music crooned into the parking lot from a crackling radio located nearby. I took a few deep breaths and tried to slow down. Suddenly, the warnings I’d heard months ago flooded my mind. Was this the trouble and danger I should have expected? What was I doing, chasing all over the city at the last minute hoping to find three puppets? I pushed these thoughts aside as I paced the concrete, unwilling to entertain questions that would challenge my resolve. Somehow I had to believe that Phra Ajan’s gift was free of harm and meant for me. Several women closed the door of the hair salon and walked past the jackfruit stacked out front. None of them seemed interested in buying any. I circled the car defensively and surveyed each dent and crack in the paint.

“No luck. He’s sleeping. Nobody knows where,” my driver delivered the news as he walked toward me.

“Maybe we should hit the horn until he wakes up,” I retorted and gestured to the dashboard of the unlocked taxi we’d arrived in. But my frustration was cut short by a tall, muscle-bound fellow who emerged from the appliance shop opposite the parking lot to participate in our crisis. He walked casually to the vehicle in question, clinking a large metal ring that secured forty or fifty keys.

“I’ve got every make in Bangkok,” he declared, referring to the wild assortment of car keys in his hand. “This is a Peugeot 505,” he pointed to the white sedan with confidence. “Good car for the city.” Not questioning his judgment I followed him obediently to the trunk and hovered next to it as he spun the ring, selected a key, turned the lock, and popped it open.

And there they were, Ai Theng, Ai Nu-Nui, and the Rusi, lying majestically on a blue blanket in the battered trunk of the car. I picked them up lovingly and laughed with joy and disbelief, hot tears rolling down my cheeks. I was speechless, reeling from the stress of the last few hours and astonished by my unexpected good fortune.

I turned around to thank my Hero with a Thousand Keys, but he was already hustling back to his shop where customers were waiting. I ran across the lot and caught his arm in a bold gesture that challenged Thai etiquette, and surprised even me, in its urgency. He turned and laughed, jingling the keys before clipping them to his belt. I paused to collect myself, not wanting to make a scene by crying again, and thanked him. As he extended his arm for a *farang's* handshake he looked me straight in the eye and replied, "Lady, helping you was easy." He disappeared into dozens of rice cookers, radios, TVs and teapots, leaving me to wonder about his impeccable timing and how he'd changed my life instantly.

Still speeding along the busy streets and bi-ways I headed for the airport with my loyal taxi driver at the wheel. He circled the last roundabout and swerved boldly between the cars before joining the traffic destined for the main terminal. While I shifted from side-to-side in the backseat I balanced the three puppets across my lap, grateful to have them in hand once more. I whispered a prayer to the shrine dancing in the windshield and thought of Phra Ajan Sawang's gentle smile. His gift and the magic of *nang talung* were still with me, guiding me through a world where destiny was stronger than logic and the power of *saksit* somehow defined the terms.

Entering the airport I hurried to the ticket counter where clusters of angry passengers had abandoned the queue and now were demanding the seats they'd been promised. Papers and passports fluttered before two overwhelmed agents with steely nerves. The young women, impeccably uniformed and coiffed for the early morning, smiled and nodded politely as they explained ever so sweetly that sadly, the seats were not available. I plunged into the throng, mindful of the puppets, pushing my luggage ahead of me to clear the way when miraculously, I heard my name announced on the overhead speaker in a final call for boarding. Without pause and breathless from the commotion, I willingly followed this divine mandate and transferred my heavy bags to a petite agent who led me gracefully through the snarling and stranded passengers to the sanctity of Immigration.

I handed my tickets and passport to a serious-looking officer at the turnstile and surrendered to a flow of events that were headed in one direction only. The digital clock on the wall behind him flashed red as it advanced another minute. It was 8:23, just moments before take-off. I watched as he pressed the embossed seal of Thailand on my exit visa and stamped the date on the centre of the page. The turnstile shifted forward carrying me to the other side of my adventure. I held the puppets securely and floated down the corridor to the plane.