

What Luck

by Marann Mincey

You've found him. By being brave enough to enter the gated yard and savvy enough to keep your mouth shut during a whole series of cockroach fights. Loc coaxes his roach by tapping stick against perch. Without looking at you, he says, "Females fight best," your only indication that it's alright to go on sitting there, straddling a bench and hoping he's in the mood for a farang (think gringo in Thai).

Be honest. He's not in the mood for you. You've already heard he's retired and now you are witnessing his absorption in a hobby that only retirement affords. But there is no one else who can do for you what he can. You don't want to sign up for a tour, trek on well-known paths and end up at shells of villages set-up for tourists like Hollywood sets. That's why you've ridden in a 3rd class seat on the local, "ordinary" train among throngs of Thai people and baskets and vendors selling grilled meatballs, and arrived at a town where some locals on the platform encouraged you to get back on thinking you'd made a mistake in your exit. That's why you've spent two days pantomiming, to anyone who will watch, your wish to visit some hill tribe villages.

Either out of pity or a desire to be rid of you, the man who runs the only restaurant you'd found told you to visit Loc. As if he'd forgotten the pleasure there is in charades, the man became animated in his effort to "tell" you that Loc is native to a nearby tribe and used to work in one of the tourist towns so knows about taking folks around. He established an initial direction which you refined by turning up dirt streets and repeating "Loc?" to old women taking in their hung laundry and children playing hopping games, who in response to your one word seemed to have whole tonal

conversations—all five pitches bouncing off your blank face as you tried to show patience in your wait for a finger point.

There was little sun left by the time you reached his house, made into a make-shift compound with chicken fencing and barbed wire. You thought “What luck!” to find him sitting outside until you spotted his cockroach recreation and felt like more of an intruder than if you had knocked on the door. “Shhh,” Loc said when he noticed your entrance and though you weren’t sure if he was wooing the cockroach or warning you, you made the auspicious decision to tiptoe in and watch without commentary. Somehow you’d passed a first test.

As Loc’s sparring partner houses the bugs, he asks, “You want to go?” He quotes the price for an exploration, leaving out negotiation or questions as to your wants. “Come back in two days, we go for four.” You are all at once filled with fears, irrational ones like things your grandmother would say about you travelling alone in Thailand if she were alive to say them: becoming a human sacrifice, being abandoned in the jungle, wild boars.

Then there is your first village arrival. Older children who have not seen white people for years and younger children who’ve only heard stories rush down the trail to greet you, flitting in and out of a safe distance. You feel like royalty escorted by fireflies. There are skirts and head cloths—dyed brighter than the flowers from which the ink was leaked—wrapped around women insisting you eat the dinner they had been preparing while they beat clean the mat’s of their children who will double up to make you sleeping room. There are men so wrinkled they seem older than the tradition of the opium pipe they offer. There is smoke, curling off cone, the smell of earth macerated in time. You

perceive how many worlds there are and in how few of them you've lived. You exhale and lay back under a new sky.