

FIRST PRIZE IN THE BOATHOUSE WRITING CONTEST

THE GIFT

By Eric Rosenkranz (Singapore)

If you turn right after leaving Mom Tri's Boathouse, and pass the coffee shop called "Summer" where they make the best iced lattes in Kata, and, just before you reach the tailor shop where the man who always stands outside seems curiously interested in knowing your country of origin, you turn right into the small soi that leads down to the beach, you will find a massage parlour which specializes in traditional Thai massage (no funny business), founded and operated by a woman named Daeng.

To be young, pretty, thin, healthy and a woman in Phuket means that a fortune of some sort is to be had, but if, like Daeng, you lack four of the five characteristics, your future is not at all assured. Her youth and beauty were taken away in the same fishing accident that also took away the good use of her legs, and the life of her younger brother Chit, but brought her in exchange the land upon which her massage parlour now stood. The thinness went away later as the years of forced lack of exercise took their toll.

Traditionally, inheritances were simple things in Phuket. As the only thing of value was the fishing boat, that went to the eldest son. The worthless beachfront land, worthless because everyone knew that nothing could grow in the sandy soil, went to the second born son. When Daeng's father finally died, coughing his way to sweet oblivion, her eldest brother Rit got the boat, Chit got the land, and Daeng got nothing, being young and pretty and thin and assuredly healthy.

The accident was not one that Daeng remembered the details of, everything being combined in a *mélange* of noise, lightening, waves and a tangle of ropes. When it was over, and she came to in the little infirmary by the water's edge, Chit was gone, the boat was ruined, and Daeng would have to learn to shuffle about using two canes.

Fishermen in general, and older brother Rit in particular, suffered from muscle cramps, both in the legs as was normal for a Thai farmer, but also in the arms, shoulders and back from the incessant hauling on ropes that was the trade of a fisherman. Daeng had been giving both her brothers as well as her father massages every night for years, and now found that others, mostly tourists, would pay for the same thing. In the shack that used to store the boat equipment she set up shop, and now, eighteen years after the accident, was well content to see the approach of her fortieth birthday, unmarried, but satisfied with her lot in life.

It came as a small surprise to her when Goong, the handsomest boy in town, started calling on her. First there was a massage once a week, then twice, soon it was every day. Then the gifts started arriving. To Rit, eldest brother, there was no surprise at all, and when Daeng came to him to tell him that Goong had asked to marry her, and was it all right with him, Rit merely nodded and recalled the time he was twenty five and Goong was seven and making a nuisance of himself so Rit had to teach him a lesson. Now Goong was twenty five and Daeng was pushing forty and Rit felt it was her last chance at happiness so he said Yes although he knew no good would come of it.

But as a surprise to all, Goong seemed to give up his drinking and gambling and settled in to domestic life with some ease. He made Daeng laugh, which she hadn't done much of since the accident, and looked after the finances of the massage parlour, not stealing any more than was expected. Goong seemed happy, Daeng was certainly happy, Rit was happy that Daeng was happy; in fact, everyone was happy except Moo, Goong's girlfriend.

The whole idea of Goong marrying Daeng was Moo's idea. She was working in the Summer coffee shop, where they make the best low-fat cappuccinos in Kata, when Oliver Henry had come in. He worked for a property developer and had an open checkbook to buy whatever beachfront property he could get his hands on, beachfront property being the most valuable thing anyone could possibly own, now that fishing had taken a back seat to tourism. The only person Moo knew who still owned property was Daeng, and the only way she could think of getting her hands on it was to persuade Goong to marry Daeng, convince her to sell the land to Henry, get the money, so Moo and Goong could ride away together, preferably on a bright red Honda motorcycle.

However, the problem now seemed to be, content in her married life with an apparently doting husband, Daeng could not see a reason in the world for her to sell the land, which had been in the family for years, and was the site of her only source of income. Goong had tried every argument in the book, and with Moo no longer talking to him, not to mention withholding sex, Goong felt the only way to convince Daeng was to be beaten up.

While he knew there were many in the village who would gladly beat him up for free, and many had done so in the past, he felt that by paying for it some of the worst bruises could be avoided as his malefactors might take a slight pity on him seeing as he was paying them for the work. So he chose the two largest bruisers he could find, paid them 500 baht each, and had them take him out back one night where he was roughed up.

Entering his and Daeng's rooms at the back of the massage parlour, with a face bloodied and lumpy, he explained through swollen lips that he had gone back to his gambling, had lost 120,000 Baht on football (who could have

expected Man U to lose?) and that tonight's action was only the beginning if he did not come up with the cash within seven days.

Oliver Henry was dragged out of bed and the papers were signed that very night. Goong took the huge sum of money to Kasikorn bank where she put it into annuities, except for the 120,000 baht that she gave to her husband. Goong promptly gave 25,000 to Moo so that she could get 2 Baht of gold, bought the bright red Honda motorcycle, and lost the rest gambling on Man U (who would have thought they would lose, this time for real?).

There is a road that leaves Kata village at the Orchidea hotel, goes up to a lookout point and then descends sharply down to the flats where eventually it dead ends near Rawai beach. Goong and Moo never got there. On the maiden voyage of the bright red Honda, one night when Goong's face was still lumpy and his eyes still half closed, he failed to see the patch of oil on the road, and the bright red Honda went into a beautiful skid that ended in a clump of trees. Moo broke her nose in three places and lost most of her teeth, and Goong's pelvis was shattered. When they brought him back to their rooms behind the massage parlour, Daeng got up, made a cup of tea, and put Goong to bed. She then went back to feeding the soi dogs the sausages and big mango she had bought from the street vendor. Moo sold her two baht of gold, making a profit as the price of gold had risen sharply, and bought herself a new nose, sharper and less flat than her original one, a set of teeth, and with her new found beauty wooed and eventually married Oliver Henry. She quit her job at the coffeehouse and began selling beachfront condos on the property once owned by Daeng.

If you turn right after leaving Mom Tri's Boathouse, and pass the coffee shop called "Summer" where they make the best double espresso in Kata, and, just before you reach the tailor shop where the man who always stands outside seems inordinately interested in knowing your country of origin, you turn right where a handsome man in a wheelchair sits and directs you into the small soi that leads down to the beach, you will find a beautiful beachfront condo where, in the ground floor there is a pharmacy, a shop selling groceries, a travel agency, and a massage parlour which specializes in traditional Thai massage (no funny business), founded and operated by a woman named Daeng. She no longer gives massages herself, but if you mention my name, she might be inclined to do so.