

# Death of The Matriarch

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*...Life, Death and Funeral of The Head of The Family*

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by

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*...Life, Death and Cremation of The Head of The family*

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**Part A.**

# **COUNTRY MEDICINE**

# 1. The Trek

Our excursion for the day is commenced.

We are on the road to Surin from Prasat, in Isaan...North Eastern Thailand. The fuel gauge is showing we are at one quarter full. I am learning!

There are 3 of us...Na and I, and Na's Mum, Yai. We are off to get Yai some 'medicine' to assist her with her countless ailments. The destination is "Surin".

Ok....fuel enough for 600km.....that should be a reasonable margin for approximations from my navigator.

"When we get to Surin, then we go to Roi Et."

"OK....I will stop now for more diesel." Roi Et is about 250km round-trip from Surin. I have learned quite a lot in the past couple of years!

The fuel is low, so I ask "When we get to Surin, how long to place for medicine?"

We are on the road to Roi Et and moving quite nicely in the light traffic. Na is looking a little edgy, considering there is still 100km of familiar road between where we are and Roi Et. Time for some more guidance.

"Soon we turn" Na replies.

"Can you tell me what we look for, so we will know where to turn off this road?" I venture.

"lieu sai (left) ruhr (or) lieu kwar (right)?"

"So, who knows how [where] we go?"

"I don't know."

I glance in the rear view mirror. Yai is having a little lay down...her memory banks don't seem to be relying upon anything like ocular stimulation.

"Ok", I smile, "good thing car full with diesel."

"Yai...maybe she know...she go one time before, so maybe she can remember."

10 minutes and about 15km pass.

Yai sits up.

"Slow down" says Na, "we take next turn."

"Left or right?"

"Left" she instructs, pointing to the right. I relax...the hand speaks better English than the mouth in these circumstances.

It is a sealed road, but not typical of Thai up-country roads...the bitumen surface is in very poor state, with many deep pot-holes and very rough patches; it is a narrow surface; the many small villages have buildings erected right up to the edge of the pavement; the buildings nearly all have the appearance of temporary constructions that have nevertheless remained intact and in-use for a long time. There are places where one lane has changed its function; polygrass matting, on which rice is spread to dry, taking advantage of the heat absorbing qualities of the black bitumen...hardly appropriate to name it "road" or "thoroughfare" any more.

We are slowed by a procession that has spread across the entire road surface. There is a Thai band at the front, followed by 30 or more

freestyle dancers, followed by 3 pick-up vehicles...the first contains a large seated Buddha image; the second has a raised platform on which is sitting a teenage boy in a white costume and under a large saffron umbrella; the third has a tub full of old or middle aged monks in saffron garb..., followed by another 20 or so dancers, followed by another Thai band. The boy is a candidate monk, and this is the ceremony that proceeds his induction...a ritual journey and handing over of the boy from his family and community to the temple.

"Slowly, slowly...turn here" instructs Na. I didn't hear any conversation between Na and Yai, but somehow Na knows this narrow, raised single-lane concrete path on the right is the way to the village with the medicine.

We pass through 5 or 6 villages. In between the villages the country-side is dead flat and contains virtually treeless expanses of rice fields. It has rained here recently, and the greyish soil has the appearance of swamp.



## 2. Taking The Cure

There are about 30 wooden houses on an earthen platform, like an island in the ocean of rice fields, and this is The Village.

Yai is quite alert know and she directs me to the target house with simple hand signals. It is quite like the other houses, except that it has a 2 metre high concrete wall at the front.

I back the car into the yard, through the open gate; no shade available but no big problem as the sky is overcast and it is not so hot.

We step out of the car. I look around. There is a deep verandah across the entire front of the house, and this shaded space is almost entirely taken up with a couple of large, low, wooden table/bed/seats such as one will see in almost every up-country verandah. To one side is a small concrete shed...the outside bathroom. The side boundaries of the property are marked with flower-beds but no fences.

Seated on the wooden devices under the umbrella are two ladies; one appears to be quite old...I estimate 60-70...and is evidently small and thin; she has an impish grin on her face, and her lips and teeth are very stained from the betel.

The other lady is younger...perhaps 40...stout, smooth skinned, white toothed, and with a totally relaxed and benign expression. I decide immediately that this is the folk medicine perveyor.

Everyone wai's everyone else...low, and polite. There is some polite chatter, in Khmer, which I take to be salutations and statement of intentions. Na and I sit in the shade but some distance from the others. A 45ish year old man appears from the house, bearing plastic soft-drink bottle of chilled water and 2 clean glasses for Na and I, and then mounts his motor-cycle and departs the scene.

The old lady prepares her enormous betel wad, and somehow stuffs it into her mouth. She climbs down from the seat; I see she is tiny, and permanently crippled in the back, such that her torso is at 90 degrees to her legs when she is standing. She wanders off for a moment, then returns, and resumes her seat.

Medicine Lady and Yai chat quietly...I suppose this is the "gathering of symptoms" phase of the treatment. Yai steps out of sight around the corner of the house, then returns a short time later and I can see she has removed some under-garments as well as her thin, bright yellow jacket.

They sit close together. Yai takes from her dilly-bag a plastic bag of fresh leaves [one of the ingredients of the betel wad] that she had gathered from her house garden just before we commenced the trip and hands it to Medicine Lady, who selects several large leaves, smears them with the white paste that is also a wad component, stuffs them in her mouth and begins to chew vigorously.

Yai pulls another plastic bag out, and I see it contains 4 very clean chicken eggs. Medicine Lady studies the eggs for a while, then selects 2; holding them in one hand, she places them on Yai's body and starts to rub them slowly but firmly all over Yai's back.

Medicine Lady starts to chant quietly; I can tell...although I am no expert...she is not speaking Khmer, nor Thai, nor even English; her expression is peaceful and her mouth is full of masticating leaf.

Suddenly, Medicine Lady spits...actually more like whistling with a mouth full of water...vaporised, blood-red, saliva stains the whole back of Yai's previously white cotton singlet; then again on the back of her neck; I am shocked, momentarily, by the sudden violence of it all.

Then peace again. Medicine Lady sets down the eggs, then takes the fresh pair and repeats the whole performance on the front of Yai's torso and

throat. I feel tense, then realise I have been holding my breath for a long time; I force myself to breath...slowly and deeply. I am somewhat prepared for the saliva shower this time, but still feel the violence...no, "intensity" is a better word...of the act when it comes.

Yai has her eyes squeezed shut, and is perfectly still. Medicine Lady stands, walks to a garden bed and evacuates the thoroughly chewed leaves, which will no doubt start their new life as compost.. She returns, wiping her lips on the back of one hand. Placing her hand lightly on Yai's shoulder, Medicine Lady recommences the chant; after a couple of minutes Yai opens her eyes and the two ladies chat for a while.

Medicine Lady leaves again. She disappears into the house, but returns almost immediately with something in her hand...bone, chickens foot?...no! Just a cellphone! She checks a text message, or "missed calls" then drops the device into a large pocket on the front of her skirt and goes back into the house. An interlude, I decide, not part of The Cure.

Presently she returns again, this time carrying a deep, clean, white ceramic dinner plate, which she places beside Yai. Medicine Lady strolls over to a flower garden, snaps off a dead flower stem, which she brings back to where Yai is waiting.

There is some conversation, in Khmer. An old lady has wandered across from a neighbouring house; she and the first old lady crawl across the furniture and squat close to Yai. The 4 ladies are all sitting in a tight group. Na is invited to join, and she obliges but doesn't get real tight with the group. I am not invited into the party.

Medicine Lady cracks each egg on the side of the plate, and drops the contents into the plate. She takes the flower stem, and uses it to slowly stir the eggs. Some of the egg mucus receives special attention; she guides it up the side of the plate, peers closely, draws the attention of all the ladies to texture.

Out of Medicine Lady's large pocket comes a small, saffron prayer candle, and a butane cigarette lighter. Several attempts are made to ignite the candle, but the lighter is on strike. Medicine Lady makes another quick foraging trip into the house and returns presently with a replacement lighter; this one obliges at the third attempt. Candle wax is drizzled into the raw egg.

More slow stirring of egg, and examination of mucus occurs. Particular attention is given to egg that has attached itself to the wax drizzle...small strings of white solid matter.

There is talk, mumuring, nodding; everyone is satisfied that the cure has worked, and the strong medicine has allowed the eggs to suck some impurities ["bad seed", Na calls it] from Khun Yai's body.

Presently the group breaks up. Yai revisits the side of the house, and soon returns fully clothed. She takes a tissue and is about to wipe her throat clean of the red spittle; Medicine Lady speaks quietly to her and it is agreed the healing juice should remain in situ for the rest of the day.

I return to the car, start the engine and get the air-con running. I look back...some small amount of currency is changing hands; farewells are being made, with the beautiful, super-respectful, high Thai wai exchange.

We all get into the car. As I select "drive" Na says "Well, what do you think?" Na knows well that I am capable of aggressive scepticism and feel no personal need for paranormal assistance.

However...as I said before, I am learning. I could have said something dismissive and logical like "Of course the hot candle-wax cooked small quantities of egg white, and that is what Medicine Lady has drawn your attention to"...truth at any cost! What I managed to say was "What I think is not important; your Mum feels she has had a good treatment, and looks more healthy already; that is what we came here for".

Placebo effect...what a wonderful thing!

**Part B.**

# **UNPLANNED EVENTS**

# 1. A late night call

I'm dead!

A close approximation, anyway....fast asleep and probably in the middle of my first REM cycle for the night.

I become aware of something rhythmic...what is it...feels sort of like a soft, persistent prodding on the rib-cage...perhaps I have fallen off my horse and landed on a rodent that was kipping beside the track, and he is feebly kicking, trying to get free of this dead weight.

I surface; coming to realise I am in my bed, and it is night-time, and I have been sleeping. It is Na, prodding me awake with her finger in my rib. But...it is not right; the action is not the usual, assertive demand for attention that I have become accustomed to; there is something hesitant and uncertain about it.

Ok...I am awake! "What is it?", I ask.

"Sister call me", she replies softly. "She say my Mum sick and have to go to hospital already in Surin."

"Oh! Tell me about it. What is the problem with your Mum?"

"Tonight...she watching TV...she say "Big Headache"...then Boonk! [hand gestures in the near-dark convey a strong image of a body collapsing]...she fall down...not wake up!"

Seriously awake now, I am diagnosing....the dread word "stroke" is already a large pulsing neon sign in my head. I fish a bit..."Oh, that's not good. Did she fall, or hit her head before in the day?"

Na doesn't answer me. Rather, she makes a phone call. I can recognise her

sister's voice, but have no idea what either party is saying, as they have reverted to their native Khmer.

Soon enough, the call finishes. Na says "Plane flies to Buriram now? Can you play Internet and find out?"

"Can", I reply, "but no need to play Internet... I can already tell you plane will not fly to Buriram until tomorrow morning or maybe later."

Silence for a few seconds, but I would swear I could hear the gears churning in her head; alternatives...plane, bus, taxi...?

"Best for you if I drive you to Surin", I say.

That's it! 10 minutes later, and we are in the car. It's 2:00am, and its nearly 450km to Surin. The kids are not coming...arrangements have been made and they will be taken care of. Na's sister will be ready when we get to her place in 20 minutes, and her baby is coming too. Na's soldier brother, and his 8.5 months pregnant wife will be ready in 40 minutes when we get to his barrack accomodation.

We have packed...2 cell phones, an ATM card, a change of underwear... what more could one need?



## 2. At the hospital

Na's Dad is waiting for us in the car-park of Surin Public Hospital when we pull in a little after 7:00am. I can see the news is not good from his bewildered, frightened expression...not a surprise to us, as our long trip has been punctuated frequently by cell-phone updates.

I am surprised by the greeting formalities. Normally, Thais greet each other with respectful, formalised wai's, initiated by juniors but always immediately responded to by seniors. Usually there is no actual physical contact but, I think, the gravity of the circumstances of this coming together of the family will cause a variation in routine. But, no, the routine is the same as always. Na's Dad looks frail and stressed, and I want to embrace him; I fall into routine though, as I realise a Western-style greeting at this time would only increase the strain.

I am, simultaneously, dog-tired and hyper-alert. My trip has been fuelled by 5 cans of strong, sweet coffee, and I feel that my nerve-ends are all buzzing. I am looking around, and it seems I am shooting hi-res images of everything I see.

Na's Dad leads us to the ward labelled "Stroke Intensive Care". The ward is heavily laden with beds, all of which are occupied. There is a wide, open verandah, and that, too, is stacked with beds.

Everywhere, there are people, and all seem to be jostling about on errands. It's clear we have arrived at breakfast time, as there are many people bearing tray/plates [serving tray sized sheets of stainless steel into which has been stamped depressions of various shapes and sizes], and I can see that the menu de jour is pork congi...a watery boiled rice gruel with a few small minced pork balls and a couple of green stems.

We make our way, en masse, to the bed occupied by Na's Mum. It is in about the middle of one row of beds and, in common with all the others,

has no drawn privacy curtains. She is laid out flat on her back; her chest is rising and falling powerfully; her facial muscles are relaxed and her expression is peaceful.

Now the details begin to form in this picture; a thick plastic tube enters one side of her mouth; the pink tip of her tongue is visible protruding from the other side; I trace the tube back to a green plastic machine on a stand beside the bed and I decide it is a respirator; beside the machine is another stand, containing a plastic bag of clear fluid and there is a thin plastic tube taking the fluid into her body via a shunt that has been inserted into a vein in the back of her right hand.

She is dressed in hospital clothes; the lower garment is hitched into a kind of shorts and her legs are bare to mid-thigh; I feel embarrassed for her, as she probably has not exposed her legs in public in all her adult life; I put this feeling aside as I realise it is all about keeping the patients cool...there is no air-conditioning, and just the smallest amount of air movement from a couple of ceiling fans; I feel cross with myself for registering that her legs are the exact same shape as Na's.

Na approaches her Mum and places both hands on the right calf; she performs a gentle Thai massage routine and I sense this is a disguise for Na's uncontrollable need for physical contact with her Mum.

A few minutes pass in silence, then we retreat to the verandah where we find a small amount of vacant bench seat near the food serving table and we claim it for our own.

### 3. Waiting...

Time passes.

The routine of the hospital plays out around us; breakfast finishes and is cleared away; the cleaner, in rubber calf-boots and bright red cover-all appears and with great skill sweeps and then mops the ward and verandah floors without interrupting the jostling and bustling of 150 or more people doing their things in the same space.

Our family group swells and shrinks, swells and shrinks; toilet breaks, eating excursions, information gathering expeditions.

Now and again some information, or rumour, to be processed; the doctor will be coming soon, but not sure when; a nurse says Na's Mum has some reaction to stimulus to right arm and leg; someone discovers a large x-ray picture in a brown envelope at the foot of the bed, so several of the family go to study it and bring back the news that there is a big black spot in the middle of Na's Mum's head and that has got to be bad; I am summonsed to interpret the pictures, and the family does not want to hear that I have no clue...so I look, and find there are things that can be gleaned, such as:

it is not a typical x-ray picture, as there is too much detail; I initially guess it is an MRI picture, but later decide it must be CAT as it cannot be possible this hospital has access to an MRI device,

the "black spot" appears in a picture which has evidently been shot from the top of the head, and is so regular that it just has to be the place where the spine and the skull meet,

there are a couple of pictures where lighter coloured sections of the brain have been measured and recorded, and this is telling me there is a blood clot of around 7x5x4cm deep inside the organ and a little right of centre.

I give this information to Na, and say the doctor will be able to tell them what this means about Na's Mum's situation. Na tells me the doctor is expected in an hour or so.

I ask Na "Do you know what is problem with your Mum?"

"Yes", she replies, "It is Stroke, like you say before."

I ask "Do you have Thai word for this sickness?" "Not have one word", she replies, "But Thais say BRAIN BROKEN - BLEEDING INSIDE....something like this."

I have noticed an information poster on Stroke on the wall near where we have claimed family territory. There are good illustrations and I can get the gist of the poster even though the words are in Thai. I point it out to Na, who walks across to it and studies it closely for 10 minutes. There is a lot of stuff about possible after-effects if the stroke victim survives... mood changes, partial paralysis leading to clumsiness, incontinence, etc, memory loss, speech difficulties, drooling, etc.

Suddenly I am very weary; I start to feel concerned about my ability to effect the return trip later in the day; I decide to try for a short nap in the car, while the family waits for the doctor and processes the information I have given Na. I lay down in the hot car and drift into a kind of extended cat-nap.....

Someone has opened a door of the car; I jerk awake, then see it is part of the family group; Na says "We go to village for a few hours and come back in the evening; sister and one brother will stay with Mum until we come back." I have to stand out of the car for a minute, and try to dry off a little of the massive sweat I have accumulated from the 30 minute nap in the car-sauna, then we can go.

"Doctor come already", offers Na. "He will operate at 8:00pm to take out

blood. He says 50:50 Mum will be nearly ok, but family must agree to look after Mum if she not OK; so we all agree!"

It is about 50km back to the village. We stop briefly at Prasat to visit the market and purchase food for the meal. While the meal is in preparation I find a string hammock and grab another hour of cat-nap; it is a low quality sleep, because I am sharing the verandah space with 6 new-born dogs who are telling their Mum they are hot and they are hungry.

I give up, and keep myself occupied with washing the car, while Na and her Dad cook the meal. We eat; the food is delicious; there are several onlookers...some of the villagers have come to the house for an update on the situation.

We all take a shower, clamber back into the car and do the 50km return trip to Surin, arriving at the hospital exactly 12 hours after our first arrival in the morning. Strangely, I am feeling somewhat refreshed, recovered from the caffeine high and not too concerned about the 450km return trip to Bangkok commencing shortly.

I go with Na to see her Mum; not much has changed, except that her face now has a red complexion and her chest expansion seems more violent than before and I think "that respirator is doing her breathing for her, rather than assisting her to breathe."

I say bye bye to Na and her family, load the soldier brother and his 8.5 months pregnant wife, and start the return trip.

## 4. The End

The long road-trip from Surin back to Bangkok is....eerrrr...Long!

I have two passengers who do not have a word of English between them; they chat together for an hour or so, and then sleep.

I have swallowed 2 cans of strong, sweet coffee already, so have reverted to my hyper-alert state; this is fine for seeing everything that is going on in front of, behind and beside the car, but causes the bizarre impulse to reach for strong sun-glasses even though the sun has long since packed it in for the night.

A couple of hours pass.

Na phones to tell me the doctor has informed the family he is not going to operate and "I not know how to do."

"What did doctor say to you?", I ask.

"He say now my Mum not feel anything left or right side."

I ask "Did doctor make one more x-ray?"

"I think so."

I am guessing the Doctor prepared for the operation by testing Na's Mum's sensitivity to stimulus and found none. Possibly he also made another CAT picture and discovered the blood clot had increased in size. I suppose the prognosis was extremely poor.

"Ray...what you think I can do?"

I say "Family must talk together about this. You must tell your family about how your Mum is sick, and then you must talk about it with your

sister and your brothers and your Dad, and they must all say what they think. And you must think about what would your Mum want. And then... your family will know what to do."

I say this, but I am feeling utterly inadequate; here I am in my air-conditioned capsule, belting down the road to Bangkok at 120 clicks; Khmer communications skills 0%; Thai communications skills bugger-all%; cell-to-cell phone link not good; English confined to Na's limited vocabulary; and, I am still in the early stages of understanding the great complexity of Thai Isaan family culture!

"Ok", she says, "Drive carefully, and don't forget pregnant lady need to stop sometimes for pee."

30 minutes pass. My phone rings. "Give phone to my brother soldier", Na commands. I pass the phone back to my passenger.

There is a 5 minute conversation in Khmer. I feel for the pregnant lady....like me, she has 0% Khmer. The conversation concludes, and my phone is returned.

30 minutes pass. My phone rings. "We all talk together, and everyone is OK. Tomorrow we will bring my Mum to her house. Then we will take out oxygen. Then we will take Monks to our house and we will have party for my Mum."

The family discussion has happened; the decision is made; there is a plan; the world continues to spin.

"Two days, you can come to my village? You can bring kids? You will need to take black shirt, OK?"

"Na....I feel so sorry for you about your Mum....."

"Yes Ray. It is Ok. There is nothing you can do. Now we go to my house"

and we will be busy because there are many things to get ready for party.  
Drive careful. See you soon. Don't forget black shirt, OK? Bye."

.....click!



**Part C.**

# **ISAAN FUNERAL RITES**

# 1. Two days of recovery and preparation

I am back in Bangkok after an exhausting unplanned 1000km day-trip upcountry...re-acquainted with the kids, but constantly conscious of the absence of Na, who has stayed behind to plan the big party.

After a few hours of restless sleep I make a phone call to Na, who gives me the following update... "My Mum already back in our home...already take out oxygen...already have Monk here and start party."

I am not in great shape for work, but go through the motions and manage to get a bit done. I make an excursion to the closest Department store and manage to find a black shirt. I pull together the clothes that will keep us presentable for a few days. I pay bills.

I wait patiently for the news of who will be accompanying me on the next trip to Surin. In due course the information arrives, and I am mildly surprised to discover there are no complete strangers scheduled; I do smile at the discovery that Khun Jahn the soi coffee cart lady has booked a seat.

Despite the lack of sleep, I seem to be in reasonable shape when the time comes and I commence the trip. I am thinking "this will be a quick and painless experience"; reality hits when I manage to put only 5 km on the odometer during the first 90 minutes, due to a detour I need to make into densest afternoon traffic to pick up a guest traveller who doesn't seem to know how to get to our apartment.

It gets better, though, and by the time we have hit Highway #2 we are rattling along at 120kph. So..it's not too late in the night when we finally pull in at the house where the funeral party has already been under way for 2 days.

## 2. Short story of a sad, old man

Yai was about 58 years old when she died; a few years ago that might have exceeded the life-expectancy of Isaan rice growers...but living conditions have improved somewhat, with better access to adequate food, medical supplies and advice, and with enough technology applied now to the growing of rice to make it less physically challenging.

Even though she had many medical complaints, Yai was not evidently in bad health. There is some possibility this brain-destroying stroke may have been triggered by a fall out of a hammock onto concrete, upon which she thumped her head quite hard according to the lady whose hammock and concrete are the possible villains.

Yai's Dad is still alive. He lives some way from the Village, in the province of Roi-Et which is North of Surin. I made the 250km round trip from the Village to collect him and bring him for the funeral party.

Despite his 84 hard years, this old guy is still quite strong and has retained all his mental faculties; his only real problem is his failing back, a common problem among rice farmers. He eats well, enjoys a beer, chats to anyone who will engage, loves to chew betel [actually, "suck" would be a more accurate description of what he does as he doesn't seem to have many teeth left].

I was amazed that the old Guy started working the crowd as soon as we arrived at the party. He was constantly moving from one small group to another, engaging in lively and animated discussion, slapping backs [unusual for Thais of any age] and guffawing at remarks others made.

After a few hours at the party he finally made contact with his wife, who had preceded him to the party by a couple of days. His wife is not the mother of Yai [she died many years ago], but a new wife who, apparently, the old guy ran off with when Yai was but a few months old. At the party,

they sort of bumped into each other when their paths of socialising intersected; a few words were spoken between them, and then each continued their separate ways. I featured this old lady and her Silk work in another story.

So, that was the Old Guy's first day at the party; thereafter, his behaviour changed, and he began to spend a lot of time on his own, and wearing a quite unhappy countenance.

I was a bit concerned about this change, and brought it to Na's attention. It turned out she was already well aware of the situation and had discussed it a little with the old Man. Here is something of the problem:

Yai was brought up fatherless, as The Old Man had run off a few months after she was born. Yai's Mum died when Yai was less than 10 years old, so she was in the care of an Uncle and Aunt until she married. Yai had no contact with her father until she was nearly 50 years old. By that time she had her own grown family of 5 children; the Old Guy has been quite productive with his new wife, and so Yai discovered she had quite a load of step-siblings.

Being a quite assertive person, Yai had made it her thing to remind the Old Guy every time she saw him that she would have some difficulty in forgiving him for running off unless he found some way to make a small gesture of material compensation or at least remorse.

Unfortunately, Yai died without ever getting that satisfaction! This was eating up the Old Guy. I saw him a few times sitting in front of pictures I had supplied of Yai, and at other times, and his distress was evident.

The good news is Yai's husband and kids all seem to have great respect for the Old Guy. At the end of the party, the Old Guy decided to stay with Na's dad for a few days rather than return with his wife to Roi-Et... perhaps some expression of remorse will occur and fix the pain. At my

suggestion, Na made a gift to the Old Guy of one of the large framed pictures I had brought to the party; he seemed to be very pleased to receive this memento of the daughter he hardly knew.

### 3. ...even professional dish-washers

I miss the first 2 days of the Big Sad Party [BSP] for Yai.

I arrive late in the night...about 11:30pm. This is way past the normal bed-time for the rice farming community, but there are quite a lot of folks sitting about on the verandah or on wooden benches in the 2 large marquees.

There is a group of men playing an earnest game of poker; they mainly ignore me after a quick glance as I approach but, one of them...Na's oldest brother...gives a smile and a friendly wai which I return.

There is a small group of older men, all bearing the somewhat glazed expression brought on by one glass of mekong whisky more than would have been adequate. I think, "they must be the dedicated mourning crowd...determined to stay the distance of the BSP."

Looking for Na, I amble to the back of the house to the outdoors kitchen. It has been radically re-engineered for a serious catering effort; in addition to the normal 3 small charcoal burners, there is a bank of gas rings; there are several extra wooden bed/chair/table devices [krear] which are the fundamental food preparation areas; there are several large dishes of different kinds of green vegetables soaking in water; there is an enormous plastic tub of raw diced pig; there is a gigantic red plastic ice-box; there is a mountain of draining, recently washed plates and utensils; many of the cooking pots contain marks, obviously identifying their owners and indicating that the cooking wares are a community collection.

No sign of Na here, but there are several perspiring women, and a couple of middle aged guys who are both wearing their t-shirts as turbans...this, then, is the cooking team; deep squatting at one end of the kitchen area, at the edge of the concrete apron, are two middle aged ladies who are chatting as they attack the considerable pile of dirty plates...these are the

professional dish washers. When I arrive, all stop what they are doing and apply the penetrating visual appraisal..a rare farang invading their working domain; I feel some small tension, but break it easily with a deep and respectful wai which is immediately returned and signals all clear to return to work.

I find Na in the house. She has not heard of my arrival, and is standing with a couple of friends and giving some instruction about sleeping arrangements for the night. As she looks up at me I am immediately struck by how tired she looks, and I know she has not slept in a couple of nights. I approach and place my right hand gently on her left shoulder; that's about as close as I can safely come to a welcome embrace without causing embarrassment to the strangers with Na; she leans slightly in to me, and it feels intimate.

I wai Na's friends, who return the greeting and then move away.

"How is the Party going?" I ask.

"Good!" she replies, and then adds the important dimension of "eat 4 big pig already!"

I whistle. "Wow, this is a Big Party! Everyone have good time?"

"Yes...good time, but little bit sad also."

The kids find Na, and so she is occupied with welcomes.

A little later, the household settles down for the night. I go outside for a pee beyond the cattle shed. On returning I note that the long verandah is the dormitory for the men, and there are about 15 bodies stretched out in a line..either on a single thin mat, or directly on the ceramic tiles...."ouch! I think, but then conclude they will not feel too uncomfortable as most of them are fortified with Thai whisky or Chang beer.

In the huge main ground-floor room of the house there are possibly 25 ladies sleeping on mats or thin mattresses; I can see they have arranged themselves into some kind of groups, but I cannot work out the clustering formula.

I am in the second room; the only man sharing the space with about 6 ladies; I am at the end of the line closest to the men's verandah, and Na is between me and the other ladies...nothing immodest at all!

The house-lights are all still on...I am surprised, but no-one seems to think it remarkable...tomorrow I will seek an explanation.

Also, positioned in a doorway is an enormous electric fan on a tripod, and it is operating at full throttle on a task to circulate air around the whole sleeping community so that mosquitoes will feel disinclined to operate their own party.

I am dog-tired; I collapse onto the ceramic tiles and turn on my side to face Na; she curls and backs into me; immediately I feel her body relax and realise she is sleeping.

I check my watch...1:00am...the cooking staff will return to their job in 3 hours.

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"Na...why did we all sleep in house with lights on last night?"

"Must have all lights on so ghost of my Mum can see which house in village is her house. After we finish Big Party...then we can put lights off again."



## 4. Keeping the family together

"Come", says Na, "You have to say something to my Mum. Can say what you like to say, and bow only one time...not like three times to Monk."

She leads me by the arm into the biggest room in the house, where about 25 ladies were sleeping last night.

To one side, but dominating the room, is a large, very colourful box. It is centre-piece of a kind of altar; there are lots of arrangements of fake flowers, lots of black and white lace, piles of what looks like brand-new bedding and cooking pots. Looking at the new mattress, still encased in industrial shrink-wrap, I think "my old hip-bones could have used you between them and the ceramic tiles last night."

I had been in this room several time already, but it never occurred to me that Yai's body might be in there. I guess it was quite obvious, really.

I study the large box; sure enough, there is a thick black electric lead coming out of it and terminating at a wall power point; it's an electric refrigerator, and its big enough to hold a body.

On the floor, in front of the mobile morgue, are a sandbowl for standing incense sticks, a small wooden platform for burning candles and on which a large candle [about 30cm long and 4 cm diameter] and a couple of smaller ones are flickering away, and an overstuffed pillow, positioned in a way that suggests to me it will protect the heads of over-zealous bowers.

I kneel in the appropriate place, take an unlit incense stick and light it from the big candle, hold it upright between my prayer-stance palms; I bow deeply...once, as instructed...; what can I say to Yai??... "Hi Khun Yai. I hope you were not disappointed with your just-completed life. I hope there is, as you believe, another life just starting for you, and it will

give you even more pleasure than the one just done." That's about as good as I [...a committed non-believer...] can do. I poke the incense stick into the sandbowl, stand up, move away.

Later, I ask about the piles of bedding, pots, etc stacked around the big box. It seems these are a facsimile of the sum of Yai's material achievements in this life; in the past, these things would all be incinerated with her body, but in this poor village they make do with display of possessions in the home and later at the crematorium.

There are several events each day in the big room, and these usually centre at some point on the big colourful box.

On the sixth day of the Big Sad Party [BSP] there is a ritual removal of Yai's body from the fridge. One end of the box is hinged and has a simple latch. The body slides out on a stretcher on rollers.

Yai's body is already covered in a white shroud, except that her face is uncovered. Many people crowd around and look at Yai; there is quite a babble of chatter, but little sign that anyone is disturbed by the sight. She has been dead for about 6 days, but the fridge has done its job and so the body still looks in good condition. I find it a bit disconcerting to see her head has been shaved; this is not a religious thing, but just evidence she was prepared for surgery before the doctor decided there was no point in proceeding.

The old guy, who is officiating at the BSP, exposes Yai's right hand and forearm; he grasps the wrist and raises the arm, then lets it drop; he does this a couple of times, and I have the impression this is a kind of demonstration to observers that she is really dead, and not just faking or playing around.

A couple of Yai's sons lift the body off the stretcher, and place it in the coffin that has been arranged nearby. The coffin is a simple light box of

compressed particle board, that has been covered in brightly coloured paper on the outside and lined inside with snow-white rayon-like material. String is wrapped a couple of times around the head of the body, and the remainder of the ball...still connected...is placed outside the coffin. A small hand-scythe is placed in the coffin, near Yai's head. The lid is placed on the box, but is not nailed down.

Presently, twelve Monks show up, arrange themselves in the big room, and go through a chanting ritual. At one point the Old Guy who is in charge of proceedings takes the ball of string; unravelling it as he goes, he wraps the string about the small Buddha image and then it is passed through the hands of each of the Monks so that they are all connected by the string to the body. At the finish the Old Guy, with help from Yai's husband, cuts the string between the body and the Buddha image with the flame from a candle.

The mobile morgue is loaded in a pick-up and taken away...perhaps there has been another death in a nearby village and this community property has been called away. Yai's body will start to deteriorate quickly now, in the hot and humid atmosphere; I guess that means the procession to the crematorium will be happening soon.

## 5. The Procession

There are young kids everywhere...alert, buzzing with anticipation...

A small group of the older ladies is busily filling a large woven-grass bowl with a mix of wrapped candy, coloured pop-corn and Thai coins.

Na returns from a temporary absence, and now she is dressed in white... complete with white head-scarf.

It is early afternoon, and its very hot! The twelve Monks have returned to the house. There is a brief ceremony in the big room.

I hear a loud buzz of milling people; I go outside to see what's happening out there; whoa!....where did all those people come from?

There are 2 pickups lined up in the drive-way; the first has a canopy, and is evidently intended to carry any people who feel incapable of the walk; the tub of the second is lined with palm and banana fronds, arrangements of fake flowers, and other colorful objects.

Presently everyone comes out of the house; Yai's sons and a couple of other family members are carrying the coffin, which they load on top of the fronds. A home-made rope of green grass leaves and stems creates an umbilicus between the two vehicles, and trails behind for 10 metres or so.

Na appears; she still has her white costume, but now is carrying the large bowl of candies mixture on her head, and it is evident she is intending to carry it to the crematorium. She positions herself between the two vehicles and next to one brother who has been assigned the task of carrying the large photograph of Yai.

Na sees me and calls out "Take many pictures." Then she sees I have donned the black shirt, and I am sweating profusely in my own private

sauna. She consults briefly with her brother, then advises "You not need to wear black shirt...too hot for you in the sun."

I smile at Na, then move off...already transformed into my assigned role of pretend professional events photographer. I ignore the suggestion about the black shirt...damn it!...I chased all over a Department Store, Menswear section to find this one, and so it is going to be worn! Besides...seems to serve as a kind of professional photographer's uniform...not unlike the flakjackets of the Desert Storm journalists.

The pick-ups roll forward. Almost immediately the crowd calls for them to stop; driver of the front vehicle yearns to gallop, while the driver of the second wants to avoid running over the people between the two vehicles. They start again, and this time they are synchronised.

Several of the Monks have found a way to fit in the tub of the second vehicle with the coffin; they begin to chant; some of the trailing crowd have grasped the grass rope and they begin to dance a little; kids are everywhere and they are waiting for.....

Na reaches into her bowl....she throws a handful of candy and coins over her head. There is pandemonium! Kids [and a few adults who didn't grow out of childhood yet] are scrambling and fighting over candy and coins in the road, in the grass beside the road, in the buffalo shit among the grass beside the road...

I [ahem...professional historian] am a whirlwind of activity...snapping this, videoing that; crouching in the grass one minute to grab low angle shots of the crowd; dashing on ahead for 30 metres to frame a panorama of the whole procession under a superb cloudy umbrella; trotting backwards in front of the procession while working the Canon and trying to calculate when/if I will need to replace batteries and memory chips.

And so we proceed. It's about 800 metres from the house to the

crematorium, but the journey feels epic! The Monks keep up the chant without pause; Na punctuates the journey every 50 metres or so with a handful of booty; Ray sweats...Buddha, does Ray sweat...I feel like I am a wet black inkspot!

Past the school; past the Police station; turn into the Temple grounds where we make our way past the temple building and on to the very ornate crematorium building at the front of the grounds; circumnavigate the crematorium anti-clockwise three times; we have arrived.

The crowd quickly fills the open-sided shed; the spill-over crowd seek refuge from the sun under the shade of the nearby copse.

## 6. The Cremation

The crematorium is easily identified...it is the building with the big chimney on top. It's quite an ornate building; basically white painted concrete, with highlights in gold and red. There are steps on 3 sides leading up to a platform in front of the actual oven.

There are a couple of people on the platform. I ascend in the hope of getting a good vantage point for the coming rituals. The oven is standing open; there are steel rails from the platform to the oven; on the rails is a heavy steel trolley, and I can see it is already loaded with charcoal. It appears that the two guys...middle aged...are the oven attendants; they are trying to appear that they are busy and [maybe] important, but there is not really a lot for them to do; their dress is odd...oversized shorts, old shirts, colourful hats; one of the guys gets my attention...there is something about his facial appearance, big open nostrils, prominent cheekbones, that gives me visions of skulls.

In almost no time, the family and helpers has carried the coffin up the front stairs and placed it sideways across the front of the trolley. Then there are many trips to bring up the piles of facsimile "earthly possessions" which are arranged on the tiled floor in front of the coffin.

The twelve Monks are seated in the roofed shed. A pick-up has arrived with a big ice-box and bottles of soft-drink; everyone re-hydrates.

A few people walk around the crowd and hand out slivers of sandalwood that have been hand-fashioned into daisy flowers; I clutch mine in my left hand while continuing to try to take pictures and short video snippets.

There are a some short visits to the platform by a couple of the Monks accompanied by one or two members of Yai's family; a few short chanting sessions occur and a few papers are placed on the charcoal.

Someone gets the idea that they would like to have a picture of their family sitting formally in front of the coffin; I oblige; a queue of small family groups forms and I have a small business happening.

Yai's husband and his kids line up at the bottom of the front steps, facing the crowd. One of the senior village officials, a teacher, steps up to the microphone and delivers a 20 minute eulogy over the booming temple PA system. I pick up a word or two in the speech, and even hear my own name twice.

Helpers clear away the facsimile "worldly possessions". The oven minders turn the coffin so it is positioned along the trolley and ready to glide into the oven. Everyone lines up, then files slowly past Yai's family and up the steps where they each deposit their sandal wood "flower" on the charcoal around the coffin. As people leave the platform, members of Yai's family meet them at the bottom of the steps and gives them a hand-made memento.

The platform is quite crowded now, but there are no Monks present. The Old Guy, who is officiating, steps up to the coffin and, with assistance from a couple of Yai's sons, removes the lid of the box. I am watching, and I see he is brandishing the small hand scythe that was placed in the coffin a bit earlier. I hurry up the steps to see what's happening.

I get a shock! The Old Guy seems to be prodding Yai's body, or maybe even stabbing it! I am appalled! I look more closely...no, I was wrong... he is using the scythe to cut through the thin rope that is binding the shroud to the body so that now it just lays loose on top of the body as though she is sleeping peacefully in bed with a sheet over her.

I get another shock! There is something black in the coffin. Ye Gods! Its a black-feathered chicken. The Old Guy hacks at the chicken a bit with the scythe; he then drags the bird down the length of Yai's body and then up again; he lays the bird on her chest, and spreads out the wings so that



they cover Yai's face.

People sprinkle the body with coins. The oven attendants have appeared, each brandishing an opened Thai whisky bottle in each hand; they sprinkle the body, the coffin and the charcoal with the liquid; I think it is whisky, but then the odor wafts over to me and I realise it is diesel fuel... an excellent fire accelerant.

Most people leave the platform. Those remaining replace the coffin lid, pick up the few sandalwood flowers that have fallen to the tiles and place them on the charcoal. The oven attendants roll the heavy trolley into the oven. They swing the heavy steel door into place and screw it down... "like a submarine compartment isolation hatch" I think. There is a smaller door within the door, and it is open; The Old Guy lights a roll of newspaper, and thrusts it in the opening; tongues of orange flame lick out; the oven minders lock down the smaller door.

People are finishing off the drinks, before moving away. The Monks have retired to the temple, where I can hear they have a long chant going. I look up at the chimney; black smoke is whispering out the top. Na and her siblings throw the remainder of the candy/coin mixture onto the crematorium apron, where dozens of small kids scramble and fight; everyone laughs.

Yai's oldest son suddenly remembers; he grabs a silver bowl and a knife; he cuts a lock of hair off all members of the family, including me; quickly he goes to the platform; an attendant unlocks the small oven door, and the son throws the hair into the fire.

We walk back to the house, taking a short cut through the school grounds and a neighbour's house yard.

Later, I ask Na to explain to me the meaning of the black chicken in the coffin.

"Hard to explain to you" she says, but then tries. It seems that it was well known in the village that Yai had some special knowledge about ancient and mysterious things; but she had not passed on this knowledge to either of her daughters; the black chicken ritual was to acknowledge to all spectators that Yai had kept these dark secrets and was taking them with her to her next life, even though they might be a burden to her in her next life.

## 7. Relics...the treasure hunt

It's been about 3 hours since the cremation. I am relaxing after a light meal of pork somethingorother with rice.

"Now we go to Temple", says Na. And so we return to the crematorium.

This time we walk around to the back of the building. There is a small group of about 12 men there, crouching around something; I move in closer to see what it is.

On the concrete apron there is a single sheet of old corrugated iron roofing material, upon which is a heap of charcoal and ashes. No...not a heap...the remains of the burn have been formed into an approximation of a human form...torso, head, arms and legs. There is a damp smudge on the concrete where excess water has run off the iron sheet; the white-flecked black charcoal is evidently still damp.

The effigy has been given a face, formed from wet sand...the nose is an exaggerated farang proboscis. Hair is a handful of leaves of green grass. The artwork is just being completed as we arrive; ten-baht coins represent the eyes, and two large flat brown stones are the knee-caps. A large banana frond is placed over the torso of the effigy, representing clothing or offering modesty, I suppose.

More people arrive, including several Monks. Clearly there is going to be a ceremony.

A clear space is created around the effigy, delineated by 4 thai whisky bottles, filled with water [some of the men are a little unsteady, so it is clear where the original contents have gone] and serving as posts for the thin white string fence.

The Old Guy is squatting near the head of the effigy; 4 older Monks take

up positions at each corner; the crowd arrange themselves all about the place; Yai's husband is squatting a couple of metres behind the Old Guy with two of his friends.

The Old Guy opens the chant, which is then taken up by the four older monks; it is short, and slow. The Monks complete their part and move away.

The Old Guy, with a couple of helpers, "feeds" the effigy some pork, rice and bananas. Now he takes a thai shovel and slowly breaks up the form so that it becomes just a pile of wet charcoal and ashes. He removes the banana frond, the wet sand and the food.

Family and friends, including the three young Monks, gather around the remains, and start picking through it. They are taking up burned coins. They are also looking for remnants of Yai's body. There is discussion, examination of "found" objects. Occasionally, someone finds what is regarded as a special piece...perhaps a tooth...and this is kept by the finder. Most of the small pieces of white bone are placed in a growing pile on the banana frond. There is a bucket of water available, and people rinse their hands and their found objects from time to time.

After 10 minutes or so, the Old Guy believes the search is completed. He scoops the remains into a brass urn, until it is completely full, then screws on the lid. Someone produces a piece of white cotton cloth, which the Old Guy fashions around the urn like a shroud and then ties down with the white string that had been used earlier to mark a perimeter around the corrugated iron sheet.

Na's older sister takes up the urn in her arms; Na takes up the large picture of Yai; they lead a small procession around the crematorium to where the vehicles are standing; both sisters look tired and, maybe, just a little fearful.

We are back at the house. The Old Guy officiates over a short ceremony to establish the urn and the picture below the small altar presided over by the Monk's small brass Buddha image.

It's night-time. We have eaten our evening meal [pork again]. Everyone is tired from the busy day and beginning to think of settling down for the night. I am contemplating a quick shower.

Na approaches me with a surprising request. We behave extremely conservatively in this rice farmer's community in Surin, as we don't want to embarrass the locals; here, adult's of the opposite sex rarely make any physical contact with each other in public.

"Ray...I want to take shower now, and I need you to come with me."

"Right!" I leap up, grab a towel, and follow Na into the small, darkish shower room.

While we are undressing I ask "Why do you need me to be with you just now? Are you not happy about something?"

"I think my Mum might be near her house just now, And I think she will be angry for what we do to her today. I am scared to be in this room, just myself."

"A little known positive aspect of ghosts", I think, as I enjoy the sensory delights of the unexpected dipper-shower with my wife.

On leaving the shower room we "suffer" the good-natured banter of a couple of older ladies, who miss nothing!

## 8. Stupa

A couple of days before the cremation ceremony I put a leading question to Na; "When body burns, you get ashes, right? Where do you keep ashes?" "Family get a special place near Temple. I already buy little land at Temple, but family have no money to buy place for ashes."

"Maybe I can buy for Family", I say.

There is a place, just a few kilometres from the house, where there is a selection of Family Stupa for sale. We go there to see if there is something suitable. I suggest we bring a few of her siblings, but Na says "No. You buy for us, so my Family say I should choose."

There are about 20 different models of stupa at the place. After careful inspection, Na chooses one that is evidently just a little better than middle of the range; there is a negotiation, some modest discount is agreed and this covers the cost of transport to the Temple plus pouring of a modest concrete foundation. I get some change from 10,000baht.

The Family Stupa is a 3 metre high, concrete, four-sided pyramid, with each side measuring about 1.5 metres at the base. At the top is a small brass bell on a brass holder. The surface of the Stupa is modestly decorated with small ceramic and glass-mirror tiles arranged in a simple pattern.

On the evening prior to the last day of the Funeral rites we go to the Temple to prepare the Stupa for the events next morning; Yai's kids, husband and a few of his friends. They have a small truck, which they use to transport the four large banana plants and dozen palm fronds. A few of the men are well fortified with thai whisky, and the event is carried out in a spirit of good fun.

We arrive to find the concrete base has indeed been poured, and covers

the entire "small land" holding of about 2metres by 2metres. laying beside the base are the 6 pieces that need to be put together to form the stupa...I am surprised as I didn't realise the thing was in pieces, but it should have been obvious as the combined weight of the Stupa would be about 500kg or more.

The guys seem to be trying for a world speed record in construction; all appears to be going well until they try to place the 4th piece and slowly come to realise they got the sequence wrong somewhere along the way. After a recharge of the "head-clearing" thai whisky, they pull the structure down and start again. Oops...wrong again! Third time lucky... Na's eldest brother, who swore off the grog a year ago, takes charge, and manages to complete the construction, except for the top section which needs to go to the house for a ceremony in the morning.

The sections don't fit quite neatly, and some sections wobble a bit; no-one is sure what to do, until I demonstrate the use of 10baht and 5baht coins as wedges; most of the guys laugh their appreciation of the farang ingenuity; Na's eldest brother makes some dry comments about inviting Stupa robbers, and then he produces a bright blue grout mixture that was provided to fill the gaps and cracks.

Meanwhile, the half-shot guys are wielding their machettes dangerously as they fashion the banana plants and palm fronds into a quite attractive bower around the structure. One guy has created 4 oil lamps out of tin cans and plastic soft-drink bottles and these are attached to the 4 corners of the bower.

All is in readiness for the two events tomorrow...consecration of the Family Stupa and then internment of the first set of Family relics.

It's early morning and we are back at The Temple. We have already had a ceremony at the house, involving Monks, feeding of Monks, and a kind of farewell to the urn containing the relics of Yai.

It's already quite hot, but there is heavy dew on the grass. A poly-grass mat has been laid out for the Monks, but the family and friends of Yai are making do with their slip-ons as kneeling mats. I have a folding chair in the car; I set it up for Yai's Dad, who sits in it for a while before deciding he is more comfortable squatting on the ground.

The Monks chant for a while...a pleasant and restful sound outside in the crisp and still early morning air.

The makeshift oil lamps have been lit, and each is giving off a ribbon of thick black fumes that quickly stain nearby palm fronds.

The Old Guy takes over from the Monks; he passes the urn of relics to Yai's sons who move to the Stupa and try to place it through the little door in the fifth section. It's a tight fit; they keep trying, this angle and that; they try pummeling the urn with fists, but stop quickly on realising this might look a little like they are beating their Mum; a few more twists, a bit more brute force, and finally it pops through the opening.

The oldest son takes up the bright blue grout and glues the trapdoor in place. The Old Guy jerks a little...ooops, he has backed into an oil lamp and burned his bum a little!

Perhaps 100 or more little rituals that combine to a seven day Big Sad Party for Yai...Matriarch of the Family.

All done!