FOURTEEN

Neither Melanie nor Rick said anything. They got up, wobbling slightly, and carried their plates and wine glasses to the sink.

"I'm going to make some coffee, Unc," Melanie announced.

"Fine," I said. "Do you still know where everything is?"

"Of course."

The perking coffee maker filled our silences. Finally, Rick ventured to say something.

"That last one was the scariest story yet. I guess we have the *least* to fear from others; isn't that what you're saying? We do the most damage to ourselves. We fall into completing the scheme others have laid out for us by living up to, or down to, their expectations of us."

"That's pretty close," I told him. "I'm glad to see you've got more than just meat between your ears."

Rick smiled and Melanie grinned. The gurgling of the coffee maker again filled the quiet kitchen.

"You still haven't said whether you can give us your blessing, Unc."

"I don't know that I have any blessings to give. I might bring you bad luck instead."

"You're not still spouting that Paige Turner propaganda, are you, Unc?"

"You mean the goofball billionaire?" Rick interrupted. "What have you got to do with him?"

"Unc was taken into his inner circle," Melanie said. I was grateful she was trying to explain it to Rick. I could hardly explain it to myself.

"Unc just returned from an errand for Turner in Thailand. But he hasn't talked much about it yet, have you, Unc? Turner said people shouldn't get married or have kids because we're facing the end of the world. He says the human race should just let itself die out and spare the rest of the planet our destructive mischief. But I thought Unc got over all of that."

"How'd you ever get mixed up with him?" Rick asked.

"My life's been so screwed up, I always fall prey to those I think have the answers. It takes me a while to figure out they're no smarter than the rest of us. Turner was my guru. He said humanity is irretrievable fucked up. I didn't have to work to convince myself of the truth of that. I'd lived it. But giving up and just letting the human race die out doesn't solve anything."

I went into my bedroom and brought back several packets of photographs. "My Thailand pictures," I announced. "I learned a lot more than the last time I was there. I learned we have to take responsibility for ourselves and those we love. Blame doesn't fix anything. And, no one's going to come and stamp wickedness out. We live after the Flood. The rainbow is the reminder we're on our own, that we're orphans, that we're…"

. . .The Children of Noah

I learned early during my stay in Thailand that if I had any business to conduct, it was best to tend to it early in the morning before the glowing disk of the sun emerged from behind the slumbering horizon.

I rinsed my shirt out in the chipped sink basin, waved it a few times at the open window like a torero challenging the enraged sun, and slipped it on damp. Even a fresh shirt, taken from its still crackling laundry paper, would be clinging to my back by the time I stepped out onto the dew-moistened street.

It was not only the more seasoned expatriate Midwesterners like me who took advantage of the coolest part of the day to wander through the produce markets, drop off a bundle of sweaty clothes wrapped in a sweaty pillowcase, or loiter outside the post office. No matter how early I arrived, there was a small crowd on the post office steps smoking black market cigarettes and sipping green tea purchased from sandal-clad vendors, waiting for the morning clerk to arrive, unlatch the doors, and switch on the flickering lights and wire-caged fans.

My friends Khuang and Doi Pia were arranging their glassy-eyed wares in order of size on the woven mat spread atop their little cart. I pointed to the fish I would pick up on my way back from my stroll to the post office. Doi Pia rolled the fish in a sheet of newspaper and set it beneath the bamboo mat. Khuang jingled the coins in the leather pouch hanging from the waist of his baggy

trousers. It was a gentle reminder that I hadn't paid him in the last week. I unwound my wad of tissue-paper bills, in the process of turning to papier-mache in my pocket, and peeled two off. Khuang nodded. The coins in his pouch stirred again. I shook my head and waved away his attempt to make change. He smiled and nodded some more, his head bobbing like one of those silly mascots nodding its assent in the rear window of a big blue Buick as it stops suddenly in the snarl of Bangkok traffic.

"Today it come," Khuang assured me.

"I hope so," I said. "See you later."

I knew Khuang and his wife found me a distraction while they were trying to align their fish, so I moved on. Those along the street for whom I had not yet become a regular morning and evening visitation paused in their drowsy duties to stare after me. I felt their gaze cling to my back like my sweat-soaked shirt.

I meandered back and forth across the murky rivulet coursing its way through the gutter in the center of the brick-paved street. I stopped in front of the cafe to have a cigarette and to stare at the remaining copy of a soggy, month-old *New York Times*. But I still arrived at the Phrakhanong Post Office too early. I took my customary place on the steps, shivering a little as a trickle of sweat spilled along the knobs of my spine and soaked the waistband of my pants.

I'd gotten used to the routine of waiting for my mail at the Phrakhanong Post Office, but I was weary of this habit which marked the high point of my day so early in the morning. It made the remainder of the day seem useless and wasteful. Pleasure merely made the rest of my life drab and numbingly dull. I no longer ventured forth in the afternoons. I slouched in the old claw-foot bathtub,

water lapping at my ears. I stayed in so long I thought I'd better drain the tub slowly, allowing my skin to re-harden, or else the flesh would simply slide off my bones like a chicken left in the pot too long.

The thought of my sister, who accompanied me on my last trip to Bangkok, made me aware of how much I'd been complaining to myself. Connie was always griping about how much I complained. In her absence, now, my thoughts to myself on the post office steps simply wove themselves into complaints as readily as vines twining around a stick.

The postal clerk arrived. She smiled and nodded, her ring of keys jingling with her exaggerated gestures. I lit up another cigarette. I didn't want to rush into the darkened post office as though I'd been waiting for her. The cigarette was a stalling gesture. I puffed it continuously, watching the ash lengthen and the paper glow and spurt, until I grew light-headed. Taking my time, I reached the glass doors and went inside. I put my hands in my pockets and stood at the counter for foreign mail.

The other postal patrons who'd been milling around and pacing on the steps followed me inside. A din of conversations was whipped around the room by the briskly-spinning ceiling fans.

The clerk bent behind the counter and produced an envelope for me. Her grin became glaringly bright. She slid the envelope across the counter. "Now you happy," she said, not as a question, but as a statement.

"Yes," I replied, "I'm happy." It was the best I could manage. The letter wasn't the one I was expecting. Even with the return address blurred by water stains and a series of smeared marks from rubber stamps, I could tell the letter was from my niece. Melanie's handwriting was as familiar to

me as my own, maybe more so, in fact, since she wrote more often. I didn't want to feel so disappointed, but I was and I couldn't hide it, even from the exuberant clerk. I folded the envelope and tucked it into my back pocket.

The atmosphere, linked since my arrival in Bangkok to my internal weather, became unbearably oppressive. I wondered whether I'd make it back to my hotel room or just lie down at the curb and give up. I knew, however, from trying the technique countless times before that surrendering my will to a humid melancholy, like a frustrated infant holding his breath, wouldn't cause the cessation of my miserable existence. It would only make it harder to bear.

I turned onto my own street and headed for the hotel. I heard Khuang and Doi Pia arguing before I even saw them. I caught a sound like a dead fish slapping the pavement and knew Khuang had struck Doi Pia. I wanted to dwindle into invisibility and retreat to the cool water of my bathtub, but they'd already seen me.

Khuang smiled and nodded; Doi Pia wiped her eyes on her fishy apron. I knew it was foolish, but I'd expected life to be different here, half a world away from the hectic pace and unrelenting pressures and unreasonable expectations that imperiled marriages in America. They may have aspired to it, but my Thai friends were clearly not American, except in the superficial accoutrements. Where could their meanness and ugliness come from? I didn't want to believe it could've originated in this beautiful country among these placid people. It had to be imported. Yet I knew it wasn't Coca-Cola that made Khuang beat his wife. It must be something in the water.

I collected my fish without saying a word. I couldn't look at the smiling couple. They had let me down more than they'd ever know.

After the Flood / The Children of Noah

I filled my bathtub with cold water and spent the afternoon complaining to the dead fish floating disinterestedly between the twin islands of my knees like a ship foundering midway between two havens of safety, equidistant from rescue.

Why had Paige Turner let me down so miserably? How long would I have to wait for his letter? Was this Thailand trip another of his tests to prove me worthy of his trust? A dispirited bubble of air escaped the mouth of the fish.

I was worried I'd lose my resolve to complete my mission on behalf of Turner's Voluntary Human Extinction Society. Yet every day I spent among the citizens of Bangkok convinced me there was no other option but to get rid of the lot of us. At least the other inhabitants of the planet would be spared our violent self-destruction. The fish bobbed and rolled over. It seemed to be grinning. A bubble of relief slid from the corner of its gaping mouth.

I cooked the fish on my hotplate. With the cooler, less humid evening air, my clothes had at last dried on the iron railing of the tiny balcony. A rust stain streaked the back of my shirt and the thighs of my cotton trousers. In a week, or maybe less, my Thai friends would be wearing streaked clothes, thinking this the latest fashion idea from America. They watched every move I made, imitating me to the point of parody. They made me feel I was living in a fish bowl.

The letter from my niece was still in the trouser pocket. It had turned rigid again and it crackled as I unfolded it. I set Melanie's letter on the night table and went out.

The night air had its own fragrance. The shift in the wind dispersed the exhaust fumes and fishy smells and stale humidity of the afternoon. The fragrances gathered on the street corners like bouquets of unrecognizable flowers.

After the Flood / The Children of Noah

The prostitutes congregated at the next intersection, their clinging, silky skirts hiked up to the tops of their thighs. They wobbled on their spiked heels as the scent-laden breeze jostled past them. The prostitutes, most of them still young enough to be considered girls, watched my approach and giggled with their hands over their mouths.

"You not wanting fun?" one of them asked me.

"Not tonight," I replied.

"You say that last night," the girl scolded, jutting out her lavender lips in a pout.

I smiled and they giggled again, concealing their faces with their hands, like geishas hiding behind their fluttering fans.

Bangkok's business districts, scattered across the city, seemed to change character after sundown, where the neon of the bars and discotheques and massage parlors was washed out by the glare of daylight. But at night the neon came into its own, and the small groceries and drugstores and fish markets receded into the shadows between the swirls of pulsing light.

The cinema in my neighborhood was showing a French film entitled *Mouton Menage A Trois*. The posters in the glass cases beside the theater entrance suggested a frolicsome threesome involving at least one sheep. The preposterous postures of the entangled actors in the still shots prevented my figuring out exactly who was doing what to whom. The vagueness of these suggestions seemed sufficient to draw a steady stream of patrons into the teeming, butter-scented lobby. A vendor hawked colored condoms and rainbow-hued tubes of petroleum jelly to the patrons leaving the cinema. A second vendor around the corner peddled packets of pills that came in all the primary colors.

A middle-aged American with a high forehead, wearing a dark blue suit and red tie, latched onto one of the Thai girls offering herself at the curbside. She did not appear, with her inexpertly applied make-up and immature breasts, to be more than about fourteen years old. Her pimp interrupted the repartee in tortured Thai and halting English for a discussion of price. The sweating American agreed to the pimp's price, but grew increasingly frustrated with the unwieldy wad of tissue-like Thai currency engorging his wallet. He shoved a fistful of bills at the chattering procurer. "Here. I can't figure out your stupid money. This better be enough. If not, you can go fuck yourself."

The pimp grinned and nodded, bowing with pavement-sweeping obsequiousness as he held open the wide door of the American's silvery blue Oldsmobile. The American slid across the seat and got behind the wheel. The girl slipped in beside him, resting her head against the padded shoulder of his suit jacket, and the toadying pimp heaved the door shut.

I would have liked to tear my compatriot to pieces right there on the street for the way he seemed to think he could buy anything with a flourish of his fat wallet. But one swipe of his meaty paw would have flattened me against the hood of his car. I had already been warned by the Bangkok police, who wore silly uniforms more appropriate to train conductors than officers of the law, that another attempt on my part to interfere with a legal business transaction would land me in a cell at the local constabulary. I'd get to spend the night with characters far more unsavory than the American businessman and the Thai pimp with whom I started the row.

Instead, I spit on the American's windshield, splattering it with the foul phlegm that had accumulated in my throat as a result of having to bite my tongue. Then I melded with the milling

crowd of Thais and head-taller foreigners bobbing among them like debris in a languidly brackish stream.

Finding my customary place at the end of the bar in the *Disco L.A.*, I settled in for the remainder of what I'd remember of the night. I felt comfortable away in my corner. The music and tumult of voices were too loud to think above.

I poured drink after drink down my throat, concoctions with little paper parasols stuck into the tropical foam spilling over the rims of the tall, frosted glasses. I collected these souvenirs, as I once had for my niece's Barbie doll, in the pocket of my shirt. I thought the paper umbrella was too small and delicate a device for a Puritanical Amazon like Barbie, but Melanie liked them and I never outgrew my habit of saving them for her. No one ever left them on the bar. They always took the paper parasols home.

As the night wore on, however, the watery colors bled through the pocket of my sweat-soaked shirt and streamed down my shirt front like the gory wound of the Sacred Heart.

I stumbled along the sidewalk on my way back to the hotel, spewing the nauseatingly fruity contents of my stomach into the gutter. The dead fish was back on the street.

Two students helped me to my feet. They were alarmed at the stain on my shirt and wanted to call an ambulance. They thought I'd been stabbed near my heart. I had, but it was not a wound anyone could see. I pulled the paper parasols from my pocket and showed them what had happened. They smiled and nodded. I couldn't look at the students any longer. As I tried to fix them in my gaze, their bobbing heads caused my view of the street to bounce and roll like a bad TV picture. I

thanked them and stumbled on, reaching my room without further incident. I collapsed on the bed and awoke with the sun slapping me in the face.

After rinsing out my shirt, which removed most of the stains, I dashed out of the hotel. My brain sloshed around in my head with each abrupt movement. I decided to take it easy. The post office would still be there when I arrived.

I selected my fish at Khuang's and Doi Pia's stand: another day, another flounder. We exchanged the usual pleasantries, but I didn't loiter.

No one waited on the post office steps and no one stood at the counters inside. I stepped up to the wicket for foreign mail out of breath, the sweat streaming down my face. I understood why the natives shunned alcohol: it brought all your body heat to the surface, leaving your insides chilly and your skin drenched. I vowed to abstain for the rest of my stay in Thailand, a promise I knew would be good until the next time I found myself sitting alone at the end of the bar in the *Disco L.A.*

The clerk came from the back room, nearly assaulting me with her ivory smile. She handed me another envelope, this one neatly typed, white and smudgeless. It was devoid of all marks of personality. My name seemed as bleak as an announcement in the obituaries.

"You lucky," the clerk said. "Two times a letter. You very lucky."

"Right," I replied, and thanked her.

Unable to restrain myself until I got back to the hotel, I tore into the envelope with my bloated and unwieldy fingers. I thought I knew what Turner's letter would tell me, but I needed to see it spelled out.

The letter was typed, and no signature accompanied the text. I doubted Turner's secretary had any idea what he was conveying by his cryptic message. "The seeds must be planted no later than the third week in May, when the forecast calls for an abatement in the seasonal monsoon. The agreed-upon location is still recommended as the most fertile."

I didn't have much time. I folded the letter, stuffed it into my pocket, and left the post office.

Khuang and Doi Pia were unloading a basketful of fish onto their cart. Doi Pia handed me my fish wrapped in newspaper and said, "You not looking good. Maybe you rest before festival tonight. You feel better then."

"Yeah," I replied. "I don't want to miss it. I'll see you guys there."

Doi Pia laughed. "Guy? I'm no guy," she said, putting her hands on her slender waist and thrusting forward first one rounded hip and then the other. Her hair dangled over the bruise on her cheek.

"It's just an expression," I said.

"Huh," Doi Pia remarked.

I shrugged. As I watched them lining up their fresh catch, a gloomy sadness overwhelmed me. I felt I would drown in it.

Khuang and Doi Pia arranged the larger fish at the back of their display, wedging the smaller ones in between, as though they were laying shingles. Such pathetically frail efforts to impose order on the chaos of life saddened me.

My simple friends were no different in their rage for order than Paige Turner and his followers. Turner's scientists pored over their charts and deliberated long into the night. They had

it all worked out. They'd been waiting for the perfect weather conditions and the right interplay of currents before giving me the go-ahead to smash the vials of the virus they'd concocted on the shores of the ocean.

I stared at Khuang's milky-eyed fish. Once I broke the vials at the mouth of the Chao Phraya, the virus would churn over the shoals at the mouth of the river and spill into the Indian Ocean. The treacherous tendrils would reach every place where water lapped against a shore or trickled slowly between the banks of a tiny stream: everywhere water flowed. Everything that breathed would carry the virus, but only humanity would feel the effects.

The fish Khuang and Doi Pia were arranging so neatly on their cart would be among the last they'd catch that wouldn't be tainted with the virus. Their careful display seemed so pitiful and futile an effort against the flood of plague about to wash over them. And there'd be no ark to climb aboard this time.

Turning and leaving Khuang's and Doi Pia's stand, I trudged to the hotel with my letter and my fish, burdened by the awareness that they were connected in a way only I comprehended.

I spent the afternoon again soaking in the bath with my supper. I set a pitcher of iced tea on a stool beside the tub and leaned Melanie's and Turner's letters against the sweating pitcher. Turner's letter was in front and I decided to reread it.

It was clear I didn't have more than a couple of days to accomplish my mission. I supposed it might offer some cover to spill the vials during the hubbub of the Songkran festival. I thought it'd be fittingly ironic, too. While the Thais splashed the blessing of water on each other and beseeched their goddess to grant them fertile crops and a bountiful harvest, I'd be unleashing a rapidly mutating

viral plague that would stay two steps ahead of any effort to provide immunity against it. Within two years, every human, male and female, would be completely sterile.

"You'll have the place to yourselves again," I told the milky-eyed fish bobbing between my knees, giving him a playful jab. I sank lower in the tub until the water filled my ears. I listened to the comforting sound of the water spilling down the rusty overflow drain.

I awoke, sputtering and coughing, when I swallowed a mouthful of fishy-tasting water. It was time to get dressed and cook my supper. I tore Turner's missive into tiny pieces and flushed them down the toilet.

After my supper, I stood on the narrow balcony and watched the sun complete its descent. It bothered me that I still hadn't opened the missive from Melanie. Her letter seemed to follow me around the hotel room. Several times I found the envelope in my hand, unable to account for how it got there. This spooked me so badly I was afraid to open it.

Melanie's letters were depressingly cheerful. I knew I'd break out in a rash of hesitations when the time came for me to uncork the vials. The only way for me to surmount these doubts would be to recall all the terrible calamities we humans had brought down on one another's heads, our life on the planet flashing before my eyes like a rapidly spooling microfiche of newspaper headlines. That was the only way I'd be able to go through with it. Melanie's letter would only distract me.

On the other hand, simply touching Melanie's letter made me remember the wickedness in personal detail: my sister's suicide, Melanie's abandonment by her father, and every incident in my own wretched childhood at the hands of my parents and Grandpa Linder and Uncle Ernie. I thought

maybe Melanie's letter might spur me on instead, and help me complete my task with relish rather than surrender.

As I took out my pocket knife to slice open the envelope, Khuang and Doi Pia called to me from the street. I put the letter back in my pocket, and went downstairs to join the revelers.

Khuang and Doi Pia were as eager as two children anticipating the circus. They bounced up and down on their rubber-soled sandals, leading me by the hand through the narrow side streets to the park along the Chao Phraya River where the festival was to take place. My small travel bag with the lethal vials in it clapped against my hip.

The throng of people became oppressively thick. I felt claustrophobically short of breath, as though I were in a crammed elevator. The individuals in this press of flesh had no wills of their own. Nearly everyone carried bowls or colorful plastic buckets. I bobbed along like a cork in a swollen stream.

Vendors of various goods, from bananas to hashish, stood in the doorways snaring the passersby, latching onto their shirt sleeves or purse straps. I avoided most of these rabid merchants thanks to the nimble maneuvers of Khuang and Doi Pia, between whom I was sandwiched and supported like a tottering drunk. We did not as easily evade those who splashed us with water.

Children paced on every streetcorner, winnowing out the head-taller, overdressed *farang* and, after gleefully dousing us with water, pressed flyers or cards into our damp hands. One boy caught me by the elbow and shoved a neatly folded hot-pink flyer at me. I caught it before it fluttered to the pavement and was trampled underfoot. I stuffed the advertisement inside my shirt and consented to be carried along in the surge, soaked to the skin by the bucketfuls of blessings showered on all.

After the Flood / The Children of Noah

As we approached the park, the narrow side streets were intersected by wide tree-lined boulevards. The crowd fanned out and spilled over into these wider avenues, lessening the press. I felt my chest expand to take in the rush of fresh air. The fragrance of exotic blossoms, incense and hashish displaced the sweat-laden, fetid air in my nostrils. My mood grew more hopeful, as though I had at last broken the surface of the water after a long, lung-bursting submersion. I might actually enjoy myself at the festival. The next bucket of cold water was poured over my head.

I had nothing with which to compare the festival atmosphere—clogged with singing voices, laughter, fragrant smoke, solitary chanting, and the taunts of children—except the be-ins of a former age. I knew this was a religious festival, but there was nothing in my background of decadent Puritanism that enabled me to consider the words "religion" and "festival" in the space of a single thought. I had grown up hundreds of miles from any celebration of Fat Tuesday. My family knew only the suffocating incense and somber smudges of Ash Wednesday.

Khuang and Doi Pia let go of my elbows. Khuang lit up his hash pipe and offered it to me. My expanding lungs made me aware of the flyer plastered against my sweaty chest. I took it out and unfolded it, noting a new, bright pink stain on my linen shirt.

My friends asked me what it said. They understood a fair amount of basic English, but could not read a word of it. The rigid Roman letters were probably too intimidating to those accustomed to the fluidity and grace of Thai script.

I read over the flyer and laughed so hard I had to lean against a tree to steady myself. No doubt the hashish helped in the hilarity. The flyer was an advertisement for the *Pleasure Palace*. It

contained several phrases not intended to be humorous, concocted by someone familiar with English slang, but whose facility among the fine points of grammar was a bit clumsy.

YOU HAVEN'T HAD YOUR JOB BLOWN

UNTIL ONE OF OUR GIRLS

DOES YOU FOR IT.

COME SEE WHERE YOU ARE MISSING.

I realized the futility of attempting to explain why this struck me so funny. Nevertheless, I read the ad to Khuang and Doi Pia without altering a jot or tittle. Their stony stares and baffled silence became as hilarious as the unintended joke itself. I slumped to the base of the tree, holding my sides and gasping for breath, a fish out of water. On cue, I received another dousing.

Those milling about in that quadrant of the park smiled at the *farang* who had decided to observe the festival in his own peculiar, though not altogether inappropriate fashion.

My friends helped me to my feet. I felt they no longer wanted to be seen with me. Khuang suggested a meeting place in the event we got separated, and then he and Doi Pia rushed several steps ahead of me, darting in and out among the festival-goers until I lost sight of them.

I was at first afraid of being left alone in the crowd. It was like the times our parents tried to ditch my sister and me in a department store. But, just as it did on those occasions, the fear gave way, slowly, to a feeling of exhilaration and wonderful lightness, of giddy freedom. I was no longer tethered to Khuang and Doi Pia. I could drift along wherever the mood of the crowd swept me.

I was drawn inexorably, as were all the other recent arrivals at the festival, to the towering wooden structure in the middle of the park, at the center of a huge, treeless, grassy field. The

building was constructed entirely of bundled sticks and long, narrow poles. The flimsy framework would be lit for a sacrificial bonfire, and I had no doubt it would ignite quickly and ferociously.

The tower of kindling was designed to resemble an elaborate spired temple, like those the Thais and their neighbors had built centuries ago. The temples and palaces could be found throughout Southeast Asia wherever uninterrupted use prevented their encrustation with voracious vegetation, or where archaeologists had rescued them from the devouring jungles. But this edifice of sticks and poles and lashed twigs was not intended to last.

As the crowd pressed closer to the base of the wooden temple, its spires tottered and swayed like the soft limbs of a Malacca tree tugged by the wind. I wondered if the tower would stand long enough to have the torch put to it.

I drew closer and saw that sheaves of grain, bunches of herbs, and bouquets of flowers had been tied to the ends of the thousands of branches comprising the temporary temple. Crude clay figures in improbable erotic postures dangled from colorful ribbons.

There were also more modern artifacts hanging from the twigs and wedged into the gaps between the lashed bundles of kindling: carefully folded wads of currency, mostly one-*baht* notes; small toys; articles of costume jewelry; double-dyed scarves; and baubles, trinkets, and strung beads of every size and color. I suspected the significance of these objects tied and pegged to the ceremonial woodpile was known only to those who tied them there. It was a ritual both communal and private. I felt I might want to put something on the sacrificial altar, too, and fished around in my pockets.

A familiar voice called out behind me. “Mister *Farang*!”

I turned around and saw the little Thai woman from the Phrakhanong Post Office. She grinned with the simple delight of having discovered me in an unfamiliar setting. Her husband and two daughters stood behind her in the shadows. They all splashed me with water.

"Ah, Mister *Farang*," she repeated. "I happy you come to *Songkran*. You will like it. Like Happy New Year."

I looked down at her and smiled. Her whole family nodded and bowed.

"You like letter you get? It make you happy?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said, rather sheepishly. "I haven't looked at it yet."

"What you say? Every day you come bother me for important letter. Then letter come, and you not read it? You goofy, Mister *Farang*?"

"Probably," I admitted. "The weather here cooks our brains. All *farang* are a little strange, don't you think?"

"Yes, yes," she said, nodding and bowing. Her family joined in. I suspected they didn't know to what they were agreeing. The postal clerk said good-bye, tacking on a final "Don't forget letter, Mister *Farang*." She and her family melded with the crowd.

I was amused by her persistence. She was like one of the little terriers that dogged mailmen, only in Thailand the custom was reversed and it was the postal customer who was set upon by a zealous employee. I had certainly hounded her for the past two weeks, but I didn't appreciate her making me feel guilty. Perhaps I would sacrifice my niece's letter to the bonfire.

Like ink shrinking back from a waxy resist, the crowd drew back from the temple of kindling. The tumult of voices grew deafening. Four athletic young men in billowing silk pants bore

lit torches to the temple, one to each of its four sides. To the gonging of a deep bass bell, the young men set their torches at the base of the wooden temple and tumbled back into the crowd.

The flames leapt skyward like the ghostly afterimages of the spires they would shortly consume. The light grew in intensity until the pale bellies of the clouds reflected the pinkish glow. The heat blasted forth as though from the opening of an oven door. I turned away, watching the flames dart and waver in the dark eyes of the transfixed onlookers, and found a more comfortable vantage at a further remove from the searing heat. I hoped for another soaking.

It was a clean fire, sending up plumes of white, smudgeless smoke. The aromas of the burning herbs and flowers entwined like smoky tendrils with that of the soft, fragrant wood.

As the fire retreated from its first voracious surge, more of the crowd approached the fringe of now charred grass. They tossed small mementos onto the licking, glowing tongues. I reached into my rear pocket and took out my niece's letter.

I knew I couldn't consign her missive to the flames without first reading it, yet I was afraid of what news she might impart. I again turned my back to the fire and unfolded the three pages of her letter. The fire, reduced from roaring to crackling, illuminated the pages with a soft, steady glow.

My niece was adept at filling both sides of each sheet of paper with her small, cursive script. She began as though that had been her intention, but broke off several times in the middle of a page and started her letter all over again on the other side.

She excoriated me, as I expected, for allowing myself to be taken in by the smooth-talking, messianic Turner. While I couldn't have revealed the nature of my mission to her, I needn't have

departed in such haste, leaving her just a short note and the number of my post office box in Bangkok. She scolded me for that, too.

Then, on the second side, she was more conciliatory, but that, apparently, wasn't the tone she wanted either. On the second sheet, Melanie announced her engagement to Rick. I had been dreading this news even as I prepared to leave for Thailand. Her tone was pleading; she tread lightly on my feelings. But she must have sensed her inability to convince me. On the other side, she conveyed the same news, but in the harsh tone of a statement of fact about which I could do nothing. My lectures on the improbability of love had fallen on deaf ears.

On the last page, dated three days after the rest of her letter, Melanie resorted to simplicity.

Dear Uncle,

I love you.

I miss you.

Please come home.

Love,

Melanie

P.S. We'll wait with the wedding until you can give me away with proper ceremony.

My hands shook. I let my arms fall to my sides and spun around to face the fire, feeling a chill spill down my spine as my back turned into the cool, shaded lee of the flames.

Melanie was savvy enough to know the difference between love and passion, between fucking and making love. If she said she loved this guy Rick, I had to believe her. But could he love her? That's what was so improbable about love: that two people should feel affection for one another in nearly the same way at the same moment.

I had told Melanie my history and her mother's. I introduced her to all our idiotic, hurtful relatives. I insisted she read the papers and watch the news. I wanted her to have no illusions about what people really did. I wanted her to lose faith in love, so she wouldn't be hurt. But I let her love me, and I dared to love her. That was my greatest mistake: I lectured one way and behaved another: I lacked consistency. I told her love was not possible, and then loved her. No wonder she was confused.

I stood holding the letter, staring into the fire. The temple collapsed into a heap of glowing rubble, the coruscating, opalescent embers lying at its heart. A group of boys goaded one another into flinging packets of firecrackers onto the coals, jumping back and laughing with delight as the strings of fireworks sputtered and crackled, shooting hot embers onto the blackened ground.

An old man grabbed one of the boys by both arms and shook him, shouting into his face. Even without understanding a word of Thai, I would have known he was telling the boy how stupid it was to play with a pocketful of fireworks so near a fire. I had been trying to tell Melanie much the same thing.

Like any adult entrusted with a child's education, I tried to spare Melanie life's harsher lessons. I disabused her of the illusion of an orderly, caring universe; I tried to make her see the world as a hostile place. I succeeded only in perpetrating against her what had been done to me: I'd

placed my lenses over her eyes. Now she was rebelling, telling me she had to find out for herself. I'd raised her well after all.

It was a lesson I couldn't help extending, for it was so obvious. I, too, had sought answers, sitting like a child in Paige Turner's lap while he consoled me with his own desperate notions on a world hopelessly lost. Like Melanie, I, too, needed to rebel: not only against Turner, but against the emptiness and pain that had brought me to him and made me believe in him.

I folded Melanie's letter and tucked it back in my pocket. I slipped the travel bag off my shoulder and, holding it by its long strap, twirled it over my head like a sling. The whooshing noise sliced the stagnant air. I let go of the strap and the bag flew into the fire, the flasks tumbling out and crashing onto the bed of coals.

"Fuck Paige Turner!" I yelled.

Those nearby laughed and applauded. Here was a strange *farang* ritual, an American ritual, in which they could take part. They took up the refrain. "Fuck Paige Turner!" they chanted.

"Fuck the apocalypse!" I hollered.

"Fuck apocalypse!" they screamed.

One of the crowd hurled his Coke bottle onto the blazing embers. A volley of Coke bottles crashed into the fire.

"Fuck Coca-Cola!" I shouted.

"Fuck Coca-Cola!" they yelled.

The crowd was mine.

And the world was theirs.