

Christopher White

The Falang (The Man from the West)

The Falang coasted into Noke's village on his giant blue bicycle, weaving slowly, peering into yards and houses. A Saturday morning, Noke was still in her nightclothes, hanging the laundry out to dry while Yai Pui, her grandmother, swept the dirt yard. The Falang stopped and leaned on their fence, still sitting on his bicycle, more like a movie star than a teacher in his sunglasses, striped t-shirt, and slicked-back, receding hair. Noke crouched and pulled a long, navy skirt, dripping, from the wash basin. She held it up to veil herself, her sheer pink top and shorts, exposed thighs and knees. The Falang smiled but didn't seem to recognize her—and why should he? She wasn't even his student, just one of thirteen hundred at Tong Fa. He'd been teaching English and living at school for a semester already, but Noke had never seen him in the village, and no one in her family had ever really talked to him.

He addressed Yai Pui. "Excuse me, Ma'am," he said in Thai. "Do you know of any houses for rent?"

Yai Pui threw her head back in laughter, turned to Noke and said, "A Falang speaks Thai? Sounds like he bites the words from his nose!"

Noke giggled, and the Falang laughed nervously.

"I speak a little bit," he said, "but you have to talk slowly."

"Don't worry about my grandmother," said Noke.

He turned and smiled at her, relieved. She felt silly hiding behind her skirt, but it was better than the alternative.

"No, don't worry about me," said Yai Pui. "It's your lucky day."

She shuffled across the yard, and, leaning her broom on the fence, took the Falang by the arm.

"My son rents his farmhouse," she said. "You'll like it—it's new."

She winked at Noke and led the Falang to the path through the cracked dirt of the unplanted fields. As Noke watched them—her scrawny little grandmother and the tall, sturdy American, blue bicycle between them—she wished that she was wearing something more presentable or at least had something to change into so she could go along and show him the grounds. Their shapes got smaller and smaller, blurred by waves of heat. Noke wrung out the skirt and pinned it to the line.

After that morning, the Falang was all that Yai Pui could talk about. How he'd clapped his hands when he saw all the trees, the fruit hanging from branches. Like a little boy, she said. She kept telling Noke how lucky they were that he was renting from them, how people would look at them with more respect once he became associated with their family.

The farmhouse rose like an island of green to meet the Bua Loy road. Throughout the year, Noke's Uncle Woot pumped water from the bordering pond for his flock of fighting cocks and the fruit trees—coconut, papaya, mango, banana, and lime. From the center of the yard, a tamarind tree shaded the house, a cement box with sparkling bars over tinted windows. At the insistence of school officials, Uncle Woot had spent an afternoon screwing the welded metal into frames in preparation for his new tenant.

On the evening that the Falang moved in, Noke set a pot of water to boil on the farmhouse stove. Boxes in various stages of unpacking cluttered the kitchen area, and *maw lum* blared from the portable cassette player set up on a bench. Noke laughed at the traditional music and wondered if the teacher could understand the words. As she adjusted the gas flame, she watched him talk with her grandmother on the cement patio. She wished she could hear what they were saying, but by the time she stepped outside, their conversation had lulled. The Falang nodded pleasantly to greet her, and she bowed slightly in return. Yai Pui's dentures clenched in a death's head grin as she squeezed his upper arm.

"You're going to be like my son," she said, tightening her grip. With a smile, he looked across the yard, where Uncle Woot was parking his motorcycle near the gate. They waved to each other.

Hours after a rare downpour, the air smelled of mud and chickens. It was hot season, and the trees had needed the rain. Uncle Woot passed under the low-hanging branches of the tamarind and paused before the patio in a pink checkered sarong, flip-flops, and his red beret. His beard hung nearly to his belly. Noke withheld a laugh and glanced at the Falang. She saw her uncle every day and he still looked funny to her. She wondered what the Falang thought, but his smile told her nothing.

"Aha! Falang ma laow!" Uncle Woot said, commenting on the American's arrival. "Dome gai!" he exclaimed and pointed at a rooster, over by itself near the back corner of the house. He dashed off, flip-flops slapping mud up his calves, his arms poised like pincers.

The Falang laughed heartily, as if he already felt at home. Noke watched his belly jiggle, smiled at the crows' feet by his lapis eyes. As his laughter subsided, she wanted to make a joke, but she wasn't sure that he'd understand her if she did. If only she spoke English, she could keep him laughing.

Across the yard, Uncle Woot's arms grabbed, pinning the bird's wings to its sides. He lifted and shook it triumphantly over his head, then started back towards the house. Noke ducked into the kitchen, poured the hot water into a metal wash basin, and carried it back to the patio just as he returned, the bird squawking in his hands. Since he'd taken Buddhist vows, he couldn't kill animals himself, so Yai Pui took the rooster and held it against her side.

With a grimace and a turn of her head, she twisted the life from its neck and handed Noke the body. It continued to twitch, and the feathers felt both soft and prickly as she sat on the edge of the flower box and began plucking them in the warm water. The men relaxed on a straw mat, cross-legged, and her grandmother poured short glasses of pink *Eleven Tiger* whiskey.

"It's medicine. Makes you strong!" her uncle said, flexing his muscles. The Falang's cheeks dimpled as he laughed, and the setting sun reflected off the bald spot near the back of his head.

Before long the rest of the party arrived—Uncle Woot's wife, Ba Neng, and three village women, mothers of the Falang's students. Noke's mother did not come; she was living with another in a long string of boyfriends a few villages away. Usually Noke accepted her parents' absence as part of life, but in times of festivity the pain of loss returned. She forgot the party and focused on the bird, pulling quills from reluctant skin.

She hardly remembered her father. A respected tailor in Bua Loy, he had died in a bus crash when Noke was three. Unable to find work, her mother had moved back to Yai Pui's house, to the dependent life of a mistress, first for a local rice baron, then for other relatively wealthy men. Noke remembered her as an elegant woman, dressed in purple or red silk, dancing and laughing with her sharply dressed dates, kissing her dolled-up girl. As the years passed there were always new lovers, and no longer rich sophisticates. Her current man drove a motorcycle taxi from bus stops to remote villages. The last time Noke had seen them, in the Bua Loy market, they were eating noodles, an empty pint of Maekhong whiskey on the table. Her mother had looked right at her with no recognition.

Noke was fifteen years old when the Falang came to teach at Tong Fa Wittaya School, one semester before he moved into her uncle's rental house. She had passed through puberty earlier than some of her classmates, and she frequently walked with a self-conscious slouch so boys wouldn't tease her about her breasts. Other times, though, like on the few occasions when she had met the Falang, she stood up straight, wishing for her mother's height, wanting to look as womanly as possible. She'd seen the way men looked at her mother's breasts and knew they could be an asset as well as a burden. As for her round, soft face, Noke didn't like it. Her nose was too flat and wide,

her nostrils too large, and it made her look Lao, like her mother. If she ever got rich, she'd get it fixed, she'd decided. Get it cut sharp and button-like, like a miniature of the Falang's.

When Noke finished plucking the bird, she took it into the kitchen. As she chopped the meat for *dome yam* soup and minced its innards for *larb* salad, she thought of the first time she'd met the Falang.

He liked to wander the school grounds, trying to speak with students, and he had sat down at the table where she was reading comic books with a friend during a free period. It was morning, in cold season, and the wind whipped dust across the playground, blew flowering leaves from the *feung fa* bushes in a rain of purple and red. Noke could feel her breasts pressing against her blouse as she sat up and bowed her head in respect.

"Are you girls cold?" the Falang asked in his choppy Thai.

"Freezing," said her friend, shivering for effect. "Is it cold in America?"

With a chuckle, he said, "At my home it's so cold that horse pussies fall from the sky!"

The girls howled and blushed. Noke looked through tears of giddiness at the confused expression on his face.

"*Hemaht doke*," her friend corrected. *Snow falls*. "Not *Hee maah doke*."

They couldn't stop laughing. Horse pussies fall! The Falang was laughing too, but he reddened and mumbled something about having to prepare lessons. Noke watched him push himself up from the table and walk slowly across the playground, waving to students and swinging his bag, trying his best to appear nonchalant. When she caught her breath she looked at her friends and wished that they hadn't laughed, that they'd tried to be more understanding. He must be lonely, all by himself in the countryside.

As she cooked dinner, she still knew very little about him. Only that he spoke funny Thai, that he was thirty-two years old, from America (therefore, rich), and single. All the village women talked about him, even the older ones.

"They like young girls, Falangs do," Yai Pui had said. She said she remembered from Vietnam, when there were soldiers everywhere. "Short girls with big breasts and dark skin. Like Noke."

By the time Noke had ladled the food into serving dishes, the sun had set. Gnats and green fleas swarmed beneath the fluorescent bulb on the patio, so the party moved inside to mats spread over the living room floor, away from the light. Noke sat between her grandmother and the Falang and served each guest a plate of rice. The dishes were arranged in the center of the mats, and everyone took turns reaching over, taking a spoonful at a time. Steam rose from the food, scents of chicken broth and lemon grass, corian-

der and lime leaves. The sounds of spoons scraping against metal plates kept time with the conversation. The Falang ate with avid concentration, and the village women chuckled approvingly to each other, commenting that he could eat spicy food better than some Thai people. Yai Pui turned and asked if he liked the food. "Ah-roy, ru-plau?"

"Ah-roy, ching," he said, rubbing his belly. "I wish I could have Noke cook for me every night."

"You should come to our house for dinner," said Yai Pui. "Whenever you're free. Noke will be happy to fix you anything you like."

Noke looked down at the half-finished plates of food and replenished his rice, letting her hair conceal her smile.

After dinner, after the women had washed the dishes and piled them up to dry, Uncle Woot shouted for dancing. He waddled over to the tape player and put on Siliporn.

"This song is Lao," said Yai Pui. "The woman wears a black ribbon in her hair to show the world that her love has gone bad."

The Falang nodded, but Noke couldn't be sure whether he had understood or not. They danced a circle around the living room, the village women with each other, Woot with his wife, the Falang with Noke and Yai Pui. Nobody touched, but they swirled their arms and twisted their wrists, mirroring their partners' movements, retractions and extensions of arms, hands flicking from hips. When Noke and the Falang danced, her skin tingled, and the tiny hairs on her arms stood up. His white face seemed suspended above hers, like the moon.

Later that night, when she lay in bed, Noke remembered that radiance and wrapped her arms tightly around her breasts. She smiled in the darkness.



Over the following months, the Falang became like one of the family. He hired Noke to do his laundry and came over most nights for dinner. Sometimes he'd linger in the evenings to watch TV upstairs or help Noke with her homework. Yai Pui was giddy around him and clung to his elbow; she told everyone who stopped by that she'd adopted him, and she talked to Noke about marriage.

At first Noke thought the idea was crazy—why would an American teacher more than twice her age want to marry her, a poor village girl? But Yai Pui told her that Falangs liked Thai women, and really it wasn't uncommon for there to be a difference in age.

Sometimes in the afternoons Noke would stop by his house on her way

to fill water jugs for the dishes and wash. Usually he sat in a canvas sling chair, reading or writing letters home. She liked to tease him that he wrote to his girlfriend, but he had denied it so many times that she guessed he must be telling the truth. She liked the way he talked, even if his pronunciation was usually funny—his subdued voice, the corners of his mouth always verging on smiling. His laughter seemed reserved, not the brash animal guffaws of her uncle or the high-pitched whinnies of her classmates. There was a calmness about him that reminded her of the monks at the temple, and he always seemed eager to listen to her stories about school, especially gossip about the other teachers. She couldn't believe he hadn't heard about some of their love affairs, but he said they never told him anything. It excited her to think that she might be his most intimate Thai friend, and she began bragging about their relationship to the girls at school and around the village.

Yai Pui encouraged Noke's visits to the farmhouse, advising her to make every excuse to spend time alone with the Falang. He never brought girls home, and word had it that he'd never gone to the brothels with the male teachers or villagers, so it would only be a matter of time before he gave in to temptation.

"Maybe he's a *toot*," Noke argued.

Yai Pui shook her head no and said, "He showed me pictures of himself with old girlfriends. Pretty girls with long brown hair. The look of love was in his eyes, that same look that he gets when he eats your cooking."

The Falang must like her, her grandmother would insist, otherwise he'd return to his former habit of eating at school.

So confident was Yai Pui that when they visited the village shops or went to market in Bua Loy, she'd tell the merchants and cooks that the Falang was going to marry her granddaughter. If the people laughed, she'd explain how he came for dinner every night and how he'd sit upstairs and watch TV, sometimes alone with Noke. If that didn't convince them, she'd tell how Noke visited him in the afternoons. Noke could only nod when they looked at her with questioning eyes. Though misleading, her grandmother spoke the truth.

More and more, dinnertime conversations became opportunities for joking about marriage. Yai Pui would tell the Falang that he needed to bring Noke home with him or he'd waste away. All of her good cooking was making him look healthy. Sometimes Noke would chime in with her own flirtations, claiming that he'd promised to take her skiing or sailing, ideas she'd gleaned from his photo albums.

"Your parents want to meet me," she'd say. "Remember?"

She knew she quoted him out of context, but he did refer to Noke and

Yai Pui as his Thai family, and he had said he would like to introduce them to his parents when they came to visit.

He laughed at their joking and countered with lines of his own like, "Noke would freeze in America. I'd have to send her back in a refrigerator," or "Americans are black-hearted. They don't have time for girls who can't speak clear English." He smiled as he spoke, but his eyes always looked hard, and nobody found him funny.

Sometime late in the school term, the Falang stopped coming for dinner as often, and he never stayed afterward anymore. He would stop by in the evenings with some excuse, usually his vast amounts of lesson planning, but Noke guessed it was the joking that kept him away. Maybe some of the market gossip had filtered back to him, she wasn't sure. She wished they could talk about it, that he really was direct the way Americans were supposed to be, but he was too Thai. His face a smiling mask, she could never tell how he felt or what he really meant.

Now that he was drifting away, Yai Pui hit upon a new, desperate plan.

"You have to seduce him," she said. "He can't say no if you're pregnant."

What did her grandmother expect? That Noke would just waltz into his house and take her clothes off? It sounded simple enough, and part of her wanted nothing less, but she had never slept with anyone before. She dreamed of losing her virginity to the Falang, his big, gentle hands, free of callouses, but even if she could figure out what to do, it was hard to get any time alone with him now that he claimed to be so busy. Then there was her reputation to consider. People were already talking, playfully for the most part, but she knew it would get nasty if they really thought she was a loose girl.



On Noke's sixteenth birthday, the Falang passed by in the afternoon to drop off his laundry and give her a present—a key chain from his home state of Vermont. It was heavy and pretty, an enameled scene of cows grazing under mountains, next to a red barn. After she smiled and thanked him, he apologized that he'd have to miss her party—he had to write his final exams. As he turned to go, Noke gave him a hard look, hoping he felt guilty.

But secretly she was relieved. Uncle Woot's daughter, Joi, was home for a few days, and Noke was afraid he might like her. Yai Pui, too, was worried. "She's dangerous, that one. Don't let her get too close to him."

Joi was a sexy twenty-five and sang in a karaoke bar in Pattaya. She

never talked about her job much, but she said it was better than field or factory work. At least she could choose her dates. She got paid for singing too, so there wasn't as much pressure to provide "special entertainment." It was her fate, she'd say, and it could be a lot worse.

After dinner, Joi took Noke out to the *sala*, across the rice fields where the bus stopped near the Falang's house, and introduced her to Maekhong Whiskey. They drank the liquor with Coke, arm in arm in the cool, humid night. Through the clouds, a half moon tried to show itself, and the air smelled of rain. In the heart of the monsoon, it had poured for two weeks.

Noke liked the looseness of the whiskey. She hugged herself tightly and danced around, singing a pop song into the night. Joi giggled and lit a smoke. "What if we went to see that Falang?"

Noke laughed so hard she had to sit down on the floor, wiping tears from her eyes, but when she looked up to her cousin's face, illuminated by the cigarette's cherry, her joviality turned to fear. Visit the Falang at night? Yai Pui would be proud, but Noke couldn't do that. What if other people found out? Everyone would call her a whore.

"Come on," Joi said. "He likes to drink, right?"

Noke looked at the bottle, then back to her cousin, trying to read her shiny black eyes. She couldn't think of anything to say, her thoughts jumbling together. Yai Pui was right. Joi knew how to act around men and was so sexy, how could the Falang not want her? On the slim chance that he didn't, he'd be angry at Noke for disturbing him. She held her glass out for a refill.

"I won't touch him," Joi said, pouring her another drink. "I've been with lots of Falangs in Pattaya. This is your chance, Noke. I'll teach you what to do on the way there."

The farmhouse shed the only light on the road, a pale yellow bleeding into the darkness. They closed the gate behind them and passed under the tamarind, leaning against each other to walk straight, stifling drunken and nervous giggles. The Falang was writing when they approached, his desk strewn with stencil papers for the duplicating machine, and he drew pictures with a metal-tipped pen next to typed passages. It was unlike any test Noke had ever taken. She laughed and wobbled against her cousin, but the Falang didn't look up. Joi knocked and opened the door.

The teacher snapped up from his work, his pen clattering to the cement. Noke swayed into Joi, laughing at his surprise, but he recovered himself without even blushing. He leaned against the desk and silenced them with a smile that looked more teacherly than cheerful. After his introduction to Joi, he asked Noke what they wanted.

"I told her how you like to dance," she said.

With a smile, Joi walked past him, to the kitchen area.

He looked at Noke and said, "I have to finish these exams."

Joi returned with a full glass of whiskey. She placed it on his desk. He glanced at the drink but didn't reach for it. He gave a sigh.

"You can put on some *maw lum*, but I have a lot of work left," he said, sitting down.

As he turned back to his test, Noke rummaged through his music collection. She knocked tapes crashing to the floor in her haste, searching for Siliporn's *The Black Ribbon*, the first song she'd danced to with him. Joi laughed at her eagerness.

"Sing it yourself, Noke," she said. "It'll be quicker."

Noke gave her a look. Finally she produced the tape and clicked it into the machine. With a nudge, Joi murmured, "Remember what I told you."

Noke danced with Joi and called for the Falang to join them, but he repeated his work excuse. He did take a gulp of whiskey, though. Joi nodded and whispered that this was a good sign.

"Now," she said.

With a deep breath, Noke walked behind him and laid her hands on his shoulders. He felt warm, and she couldn't believe she was actually touching him. Her head spun, a surge of excitement. He sipped his drink, then turned and faced her.

"What?" he said.

She looked down at the wispy hairs of his balding head and squeezed her fingers around his shoulder and neck muscles. "Can't I just give you a massage?"

From across the room, Joi met her eyes and winked encouragement.

The Falang shrugged, and Noke dug into his flesh. Soon his head lolled. He sighed. She leaned closer, her breasts rubbing against his shoulders as she massaged his arms. Her entire body seemed to quiver, and she felt as though her consciousness floated above her, looking down. He was going limp. What had Joi said to do next? She bent down and covered his ear with her mouth.

With a jerk of his head, he pushed away from the desk, the chair's back digging into her belly. He whirled around and barked, "What are you doing! You're just a little girl!"

Her mind felt clogged as she stood dumb before him, her jaw loose. Near his fly, his pants bulged, and she stared as he hastily arranged himself. His eyes seemed to penetrate her, and she felt transparent and small, like a chunk of ice. He turned without speaking and looked at the door.

Joi rose from the couch and blew smoke in his direction.

"What's the matter with you, Baby," she said in English, opening the door.

Noke fled past her into the night and kept running until she reached the *sala*, where she collapsed, sobbing, gulping air. Knees hugged to chest, she told the black rustling fields how the Falang hated her, and that she never should've gone there, never should've gotten drunk. Everything would be different now. She could hear her cousin's footsteps on the wood. Joi held her and buried her nose in her hair, shushing her.

"You can always come to Pattaya with me," she said. "There's any kind of Falang you want down there-American, German, whatever. A lot cuter than this one, too."

Noke continued weeping, and Joi wiped her cheeks with her thumb.

"You have a nice voice, Noke. I could get you a job."



Teachers came to Noke's house the first week of October vacation. She was hanging laundry in the side yard when Ajaan Malee, the English department chair, and Poochuey Soang, the director of discipline, parked the silver pick-up in the driveway and stepped out in school uniforms. Yai Pui sat twisting thread from silkworm cocoons in the open living room. She looked up when Poochuey Soang's gruff voice greeted her.

"Yai Pui, we must talk about your granddaughter."

Noke froze, and for a moment thought about running, but she came inside when her grandmother called, as if her voice had a magnetic pull. With a sinking feeling in her belly, Noke dried her hands on her shorts. The Falang must have told of her advance. She bowed as she passed the teachers, then sat down next to Yai Pui. She had been in trouble before, but no one had ever come to the house. Her pulse slammed her temples and she moved closer to her grandmother.

The teachers ignored her and addressed Yai Pui.

"Your granddaughter has been telling stories about the Falang," said Poochuey Soang. "Telling lies about his love for her. Students report that she's trying to seduce him, force him to marry her."

Yai Pui snorted, her eyes narrowing. "That's ridiculous."

"You will wait to speak!" Ajaan Malee snarled. She took a step forward. "We know your part in this."

"The Falang is our teacher, and he remains in our care, even if he rents your son's house," said Poochuey Song. "We must protect him. This behav-

ior of the girl cooking for him, doing his laundry, *visiting him at home*, cannot continue.”

Noke opened her mouth to protest, but Yai Pui grabbed her arm. “The Falang is like my son. He eats with us because he lives alone in the farmhouse. He needs a family.”

Ajaan Malee crossed the dirt courtyard, and Noke drew back behind her grandmother, bracing for a blow. She remembered her last whipping, with a bamboo switch, for cheating on a test. Ajaan Malee hissed, “Don’t bother lying about your intentions, Mother-of-the-Snake-Head-Fish!”

Yai Pui leapt to her feet, crossed the floor to the kitchen area, and snatched a cleaver from the wash pan.

The teacher continued, “Everywhere we hear stories—‘Yai Pui says the Falang is sleeping with her granddaughter.’ ‘The girl Noke says the Falang loves her’—but listen: there is no way our Falang will marry a *village* girl!”

Weapon raised before her, Yai Pui charged the teachers, shouting at them to leave, words she normally hurled at chickens and pigs. “Bai hu! Bai lote!”

Villagers passing on the street stopped to watch, and the teachers retreated to the truck. Noke stepped back, leaving her grandmother shaking her cleaver in the air. She breathed a sigh of relief. They hadn’t mentioned the kiss at least, so maybe the Falang hadn’t told anyone. No, they surely would’ve beaten her for that.

Poochuey Soang laughed, and the confrontation was over. Yai Pui had lost her temper. The director of discipline opened his truck door and fired a parting shot. “I will expel the girl Noke if we hear one more rumor about her and the Falang.”

Later on, Yai Pui told Noke that she would never forget the smug grin on Ajaan Malee’s face. “No one in my family will study at that school as long as she teaches there.” She spat in the dirt.



On the first day of the new semester, Noke rose an hour earlier than normal to cook breakfast for her family in the dark. It was six-thirty when she trudged across the rice fields and caught the public bus at the *sala*. Her new school was twenty kilometers east of the village, in Bua Loy, a half-hour ride if the bus driver didn’t stop for breakfast or gas. Noke had made the trip many times to go to the market, the movies, and to buy school supplies. The sky was just beginning to brighten, a hazy gray, as she passed Tong Fa school. She missed her friends already and wondered if the Falang would teach their classes.

She hadn't seen him in over a month, though she knew he had returned from his beach vacation nearly a week before. She had never been to the ocean and wished that things were different, that he'd taken her with him. She dreamed about waking to the sounds of waves crashing on the beach, his breath on her shoulder, the sun rising over the hotel balcony. Out the bus window, the fields of rice, tall and green from monsoon rains, were almost ripe, with harvest only a month away. Noke wondered if the Falang was still angry with her. Did he know about the teachers' visit or that she had transferred to a new school? Would he ever eat dinner with her again? Yai Pui was certain he'd be back—he was just getting ready for the new semester, she said. But she didn't know what Noke had done.

At the edge of Bua Loy, the rice fields ended abruptly. The bus passed general stores, an ice cream parlor, and the town market where Yai Pui went to sell her silk and Woot sold their rice. This morning, when her grandmother had given her money for the week's groceries, she had told Noke to buy some catfish there, the Falang's favorite. As Noke went over the week's shopping list in her head—shrimp paste, fish sauce, chiles, pork, vegetables—the bus turned into the station, an open cement room with wooden benches and exhaust-blackened walls. She stepped down to the pavement. In red paint above the ticket window, city names were written in Thai and English—Korat, Bangkok, Pattaya, Rayong. Vendors lined the parking lot, selling grilled chicken and sticky rice, sausages and noodle soup.

Noke walked down the sidewalk, past a motorcycle repair shop and an appliance store. She recognized the wall around the school, blackened cinder block with broken glass fixed into the upper edge. Inside, the school looked similar to Tong Fa, but more run down. There were more buildings, but even from a distance, Noke could tell they were in disrepair. The gray morning light washed their chipping blue surfaces. The playground looked like a construction site rather than soccer fields, more mud than grass, and all of the trees had been recently pruned, hacked off right where the limbs branched from the trunks, leafless and black, man-high stumps.

Since her bus had gotten in early, she walked around back to the canteen and ordered a small bag of phad Thai noodles. Students pushed and yelled, kicked at the mongrels that begged for scraps. Others sat in groups of three and four at tables, finishing their homework. Everyone had at least one friend. They made Noke miss her group, her old morning rituals of copying homework, gossiping about boys, and trading comic books or pop tapes.

The noodles tasted dry and flavorless, barely salty, and if there was any pork in them, she couldn't find it. She wished she could go back in time to

before the Falang came to school. As angry as she was with the teachers and as humiliated as she was by how she'd ruined their relationship, she knew that she was to blame. She *had* bragged about him, maybe even believed it when she told her friends that he loved her. Yai Pui had always said that she could get anything if she wanted it enough. She had wanted to believe her grandmother's logic—that if they could get the Falang to love her cooking, they could get him to love her. But he didn't love her at all, and that one drunken kiss had driven him away forever. Noke worried that her heart would never mend as she listened to the music over the school loudspeakers. "We don't want to love those who don't love us...." the new hit by Beau. She ached for someone to care for her, to hold her fingers and tell her how beautiful she looked. Someone with enough money to support her so she wouldn't have to bend over and plant rice, chase chickens, turn thread from silkworm cocoons in her old age. In the Falang's easy smile and American wealth, Noke had read the potential for that romantic future, and as she looked around the school canteen at boys running in packs, she doubted that she could ever settle for one of her own people.

It seemed like the morning would never end. Without friends to joke with and copy from, Noke felt lost. Math seemed especially opaque, and she still couldn't twist her tongue around English sounds. The girls all sat in cliques and always seemed to be giggling at her. She guessed it was just that she was new and alone, but she was afraid that someone would recognize her from a party or volleyball game, that someone would know why she had transferred to Bua Loy Pittayakhom School. She kept her head low, her hair veiling her face. Despite her efforts to hide, a lanky boy with slicked hair and sharp features stared at her constantly. The first few times she had glared at him, but he hadn't turned away. By the third class, Noke had gotten used to the feeling of being watched and no longer looked back at him. From the way he remained aloof as his friends wrestled and joked, she thought he must be the leader of the cool boys' clique. He made her skin creep.

At lunchtime, Noke used the bathroom, pausing only briefly to tuck in her blouse and fix her hair before the grimy mirror. Two seniors smoked out the window, smirking at her. She washed her hands quickly, avoiding their eyes.

"You like to smoke," one of them said. Noke faced them, and they exhaled in her direction. The taller one laughed.

"No thanks." Noke turned and walked towards the door.

"That wasn't a question," followed the voice. "The girl Noke likes to smoke the Falang."

Laughter echoed through the cement room. Noke ran until she reached the canteen. She could feel the blood in her neck, sweat on her forehead. She bought a plate of rice and garlic pork, sat down behind the building and forced herself to concentrate on eating. For a minute she questioned whether she'd actually seen the girls, but the sound of laughter rang too clearly in her ears. Her hands shook the way her mother's had after she'd been drinking, and she could hardly maneuver the spoon from plate to mouth.

Just as she was settling down, the cool boy clique turned the corner. They surrounded her before she could stand up, eight of them. The leader sat down across from her.

"My cousin goes to Tong Fa," he said.

Noke stared at his black eyes, saw that the whites were bloodshot. They hadn't been, during class. She could smell smoke and chemicals—glue?—on his breath.

"What class is he in?" She took a bite of pork, trying to bluff.

"I like your milk." Two of his friends held her, and he reached across the table and squeezed her breasts. She struggled and gasped for breath. Blood throbbed in her arms and neck, and all she could think about was breathing. Air in, air out.

"Is it true what they say about Falangs?"

All she had to do was scream and the boys would scatter. Someone would hear her, the teachers at the canteen would come to her aid. Hundreds of people were eating nearby. She told herself to open her mouth, to force sound from her throat, but nothing responded; her jaw was locked.

"They say Falangs have big *kuay*." The boy stood up and unzipped his fly, still smiling. "As big as this?"

Her cry seemed to come from outside her body. The hands released her arms, and space opened up around her, but she screamed until her voice gave out. She opened her eyes and looked down at her blouse. It was still buttoned, and she was still sitting where she'd been, though her plate had been flung to the ground, a mangy dog finishing her food. Nobody had come to her rescue.

From all points in Noke's field of vision, students laughed and pointed. Ravenous teeth and eyes. Only the group of boys moved, walking casually away from her. The leader turned and blew her a kiss. She glanced out the gate and across the street to the row of shops and, eyes downcast, walked straight out the driveway as though in a nightmare, through the sounds of students jeering, "*Fan Falang, rak Falang, see gap Falang!*" Nobody obstructed her path, and she focused on her feet moving along the dirt.

The bus station was virtually deserted when she arrived. An old woman

sat nodding into sleep on a bench, and a mother with three small boys waited near the ticket window. Two of the chicken vendors argued about the upcoming rice harvest. The air smelled of exhaust and cooking meat, and the loudspeakers blared *maw lum*.

Noke took a handful of bills from her pocket, two hundred *baht*, money she was supposed to use for groceries. She pushed eighty through the ticket window and said, "Pattaya. One way."

The agent flashed a creepy smile, his eyes groping her face and chest, and she turned quickly away. As she crossed the room and sat down in the far corner of the station, *The Black Ribbon* warbled from the speakers, and Noke stared at the cement floor. Images of Uncle Woot's beard and Yai Pui's dentures flashed through her mind. Soon they'd be harvesting the rice, working longer days to make up for her absence. For a moment she wanted to cry, but she clenched her jaw and looked up the highway for the bus. Nothing but the empty road and dark rice fields stretching to thunderheads on the horizon. The fields waving in the wind looked like a picture Joi had shown her of the ocean, and she imagined herself in a cafe near the beach, the water keeping time with music as she sang to crowds of Falang men, all with eyes like the teacher's, lapis reflections of the sea.