

2nd Prize Mom Tri's Boathouse writing contest

A Matter of Face by Daniel Chen, Australia

The night is warm and humid, typical of Phuket at this time of the year. Despite having spent the last week here, the sweat that's making the shirt sticking to my back reminds me this is not California; and the seemingly endless stream of scooters and tuk tuks reinforces that fact. Not much changes at Patong, the bars, restaurants, discos and nightclubs, all humming with a vibrancy that is uniquely Thailand.

I walked into a small restaurant named My Kitchen and sat down heavily into a chair, facing the street, the shrapnel in my right leg reminding me of the horrific wounds I received from that Viet Cong landmine in '71, and of Jimmy, the diminutive Thai Lieutenant who carried me over twenty miles through enemy territory back to the company headquarters. All because of that courageous man, I was able to go home, be married, have a family, watch the kids grow up and have families of their own. How can one repay a debt like that? Well, I sighed as I mentally checked the various aches and pains that came with hitting 60 years of age; this job is Jimmy's wish, and I will carry it through, no matter what.

I gratefully accepted a chilled face towel from the smiling proprietor and ordered a Singha. I checked my watch discreetly, 7:11, and gazed across the road at a far larger restaurant. It's an impressive two storey building, with a large timber decked balcony facing the street, and my target is sitting at a table on the Southern corner of the balcony, to my left.

I received the cold beer from the waitress, smiled and engaged in the usual chit chat about my name, where I am from, how old am I and if this is the first time I have been to Thailand. All the while, my mind is racing through the information about the target and the additional specification that make this job especially difficult. But Jimmy had been adamant: "This job must be done in a public place, it must appear as an accident, no one must suspect anything!" I owe the man far too much to argue otherwise.

The target is a large man, tall for a Thai at 5'10", but at 295 pounds, he looks like a beer barrel with thick arms and legs. His name in English is Eddy, his family owns the Boathouse chain of restaurants, the Oasis hotel chain, the fashion label Regatta, as well as significant real estate holdings and banking interests. Eddy's father is the architect of this rags to riches fairytale. What began more than 30 years ago with a 6 room guest house on Patong Beach catering to American servicemen on R&R is now a multi-million dollar empire.

Eddy is the only boy in the family and, in a culture that favours boys far more than girls, he is the natural heir to the family business. He has been groomed for his role in life from an early age, the best international schools in Thailand, followed by university degrees from Australia and a MBA from Harvard. With hands-on training provided by his eminent father and the network of family connections, Eddy is on an assured path to success. He's 36 years old, married to a former Miss Thailand entrant, but still childless after 5 years of marriage.

The reason for the lack of heirs is sitting opposite him at the table. The young lady is stunningly beautiful, with a flawlessly smooth cinnamon complexion, alluring almond eyes that glowed hazel in the candle light, well defined cheekbones, high bridged nose, and a pouty mouth touched with the lightest hint of lip gloss. The emerald green Chanel dress clings to her body like a second skin, leaving her long graceful limbs in plain view, while accentuating the flat stomach and hourglass figure most women would kill for. Only her larger than average hands and the slightly protruding Adam's apple reveal that she is, in fact, a he, a Ladyboy. Eddy has been seeing this particular "lady" for more than a year now. While such liaisons may not be unusual in the Land of Smiles, it is still considered..... let's just say inappropriate, for such a prominent businessman, a pillar of the community, to be seen in public with such company while his wife remains childless at home. A Thai should always put the honour of the family first.

I glanced up to confirm two bodyguards were sitting at the table next to Eddy's. I know both are ex-military, both armed with pistols, and there is also a Mercedes sedan parked somewhere nearby with a similarly armed driver inside.

I checked my watch again, 7:18, I drained my beer, left two 100 baht bills under the bottle, politely refused the offer for another drink and walked towards the target. 7:19, and then it changed to 7:20, Jimmy should be making the diversionary call right about now! I looked up; Eddy was indeed answering his mobile, his expression quickly changed to one of alarm. He hung up after a short conversation and immediately made another call; this would be to the driver of the Mercedes. This is my signal to move. I crossed the street, dodging traffic while keeping my eyes focussed on the target. I also checked the weapon, a small syringe filled with 10ml of a light brown liquid, in my right pant pocket.

The only way up the balcony is a long straight metal staircase like the type one sees on ships or oil rigs, with brightly polished steel handrails either side. I know there are 18 well worn steps of steel in total, with the 19th being the balcony itself. I walked towards the staircase while one body guard stationed himself at the top and the other walked down to the bottom, effectively cordoning off the staircase, my kill zone. Perfect!

I walked up, nodding to the guard at the bottom of the steps; I can feel both pairs of eyes focussed on me, assessing the potential threat. All they would see is what I wanted them to see - older Caucasian male, beer belly, long sleeved shirt, long pants, loafers. All the clothing fairly tight fitting, no possibility of concealed weapons, both hands in the open, no unusual gestures. "Falang Retiree" would be the unanimous assessment. And the thinning grey hair and wrinkles would simply complete the picture.

I walked past the first guard, I can see in my peripheral vision that his attention has already moved to further down the street; and the second guard, at the top of the steps, was doing the same. I sprang into action, slow and deliberate action, for I have practiced the next sequence of events countless times in my mind. I walked up to the staircase, left hand on the outside rail, left foot first, keeping my right foot on the middle of the steps, right hand into right pant pocket, gripping the syringe.

Left, right, left, right One, two, three, four fourteen, fifteen, sixteen. My right thumb mashed down on the syringe, injecting the entire 10ml of deadly liquid

into a long thin tube sewn into the seam of my right pant leg, flowing downwards, filling the tube and spraying about 2ml of it onto the third last step from the top, right in the middle. The trap is set. Walking up the stairs, coming to the top, right hand out of the pocket, using it to scratch an imaginary itch on my temple, keeping everything natural. Smile at the girl, arch the eyebrows at the fat man, give him the message of “you lucky bastard!” He grins in acknowledgement at the attention paid to her and compliment paid to him. They walk past me and down the steps, the second bodyguard right behind like a faithful Labrador. I walked towards a smiling waitress holding a stack of menus.

I can picture clearly what happened next. She would walk closely to the left, left hand on the rail, and miss my trap entirely. Eddy always, and I mean always, would take his first step with the right foot; with his greater bulk, his right foot would step onto the middle of the steps. Right foot first, 18, then left foot, 17, then the right foot again – straight onto the olive oil. A shrill scream of sheer panic hits my ears, it belonged to him, followed by her scream, both cut off, as if by a razor sharp sword, by the series of thumps and thuds; a sickening crunch, like a bag of wet cement falling from a great height. Then..... stunned silence.

I paused for a moment, willing myself to hold still with a stupefied look on my face, just so that I'm not the first one to react, and followed the rest of the diners to ogle at the spectacle. No point doing anything out of the ordinary, plus I need visual confirmation of the kill.

Eddy was lying on the hard concrete floor, his right foot still on the last step of the stairs, his right arm is turned totally the wrong way, a splinter of bone is sticking out of his left leg. I know from experience a fall from this height onto steel steps and hard concrete is usually fatal. The girl was half covered by the elephantine body, only her right shoulder and above was showing, her neck was twisted at an impossible angle, she had cushioned his fall but is dead for sure. My eyes turned back to Eddy, his head moved, his left hand twitched, his head lifted and an inhuman scream arose from that bull neck. He's alive! Only by now did the bodyguards manage to react, they rushed to Eddy's aid. But he sent out a scream of pain as soon as the first guard touched his shoulder. The second bodyguard began calling frantically on his mobile, and the restaurant staff finally snapped out of their shocked immobility and rushed in, a mass of white shirts and navy blue pants obscuring my view, but I have seen enough already.

I stepped away from the railings and dialled a tailor shop just down the road. 25 years working for the CIA has taught me the importance of maintaining one's cover.

“Hello? Sivam's Fine Tailors” Jimmy answered in his heavily accented English, and we went into our pre-arranged code.

“Yes, Mr Smith here, is my suit ready?”

The job is done. And believe it or not, my name is actually Smith.

“Yes Sir, would you like to have it delivered to your hotel?”

Is it done to my specification? Did it look like an accident?

“Great, that would be fine.”

Yes. Had I not met the specification, I would have said wonderful instead of great.

A slight pause, one could almost feel the tension that came with the next question.

“Is it ok to send my son?”

Is my son alive?

I glanced at the bodyguards awkwardly lifting Eddy into the back seat of the Mercedes, he was crying pitifully. His body will recover in time, but no one knows how long it will take to mend his broken heart.

"Yes, he will be fine." then I added, sincerely, "I do hope you will have a grandson very soon."

"Thank you, Simon." The old man mumbled, and hesitantly: "You do understand, don't you? I had to, I must" "

Through the handset, I can feel the depth of shame in my friend's voice, and the enormous pain of doing what was necessary to protect the family's honour. I cut him short to save his dignity.

"Yes.....," I replied quietly, "It's a matter of face!"

In my mind's eye, I can almost see the smile that is now appearing.

"Good bye, Mr. Smith, and thank you."

I pressed the "End" button, and asked the manager for a table.