

Honourable Mention Mom Tri's Boathouse Writing Contest

Lek by Michael Moreton, Thailand

When I learnt that Lek had never been to my favorite place in Bangkok, a waterfront bar-restaurant on the river, I invited her to meet me there for a drink. She arrived all breathless and eager, business suit, matching accessories, leather laptop case; a poster girl for the new female entrepreneurs who are driving the economies all over Asia. She was excited to see the view that I had promised her and was delighted that I found such pleasure in her city. We sat at a table on a patio outside the restaurant and as we had arrived before the crowd, we found seats close to and facing the river, an oasis of peace in the heart of the city. We ordered beer and bar food and settled down to enjoy the evening.

Lek worked for a European pharmaceutical company and always looked poised and confident. She spoke remarkably good English with a distinct British-type accent and had the characteristic that many people exhibit when speaking a second language, a breathtaking directness.

"Michael" she asked as she took her first sip. "Is this a date?" I fumbled for an answer and none came. "I looked it up on the web" she continued "and I think that it is."

"That's interesting my little one, and what are the criteria that are used to label our riverside rendezvous as a date?" I enquired. She took out her laptop, booted up and read from her source.

"It is a mutually arranged meeting at which two people, usually of the opposite sex, spend time together, share personal information, become comfortable with each other and explore their feelings. I'm a little worried about the last item," she said, showing obvious concern, "especially with so many people watching us."

"As always Lek, your natural reserve and good taste have helped us prevent what could have been a rather uncomfortable scene and I can assure you that any exploration of feelings will be kept for another time," I said.

"Oh, thank you Michael, that makes me feel so much better." She sank back into her chair, relaxed, took a drink and smiled at me.

She stared at the river, the lights of the buildings on the opposite shore were beginning to be reflected in the water, adding a shimmering, sparkling effect to complete the beauty of the scene.

"This is such a nice place, so relaxing, do you always bring your dates here?" she asked.

"Yes, of course, if you had been here when I arrived you would have realized that this table is reserved for me every night and only released on the occasional night that I don't bring some lady here for a little sharing, comforting and exploring".

"That's what I thought" she said "My room mate told me that western men are not respectful of Thai girls and that I will lose the respect of Thai people if I am having dates with you. I am not sure about saying this, but can I ask a favor?"

"Certainly, anything" I replied.

"If we are making a date and I see an old friend, perhaps I will pretend I am not with you. Will that be OK?" she asked.

"Better than OK. Its a great plan Lek, but I think we need a special signal. When you give me the signal, I will fade away, dive under the table, pretend to be a waiter, a wandering drunk or gay guy. It will give our dates a great new excitement that I don't remember ever having before" I replied.

"My room mate says that people will laugh at me for making a date with an old man like you, and that you are too old to make a baby."

"Can we break that one up into two parts " I replied.

"That I'm a joke-date is undeniable, as for my ability to make a baby, that question can only be addressed *after* the exploration of feelings business, not before, that's the rule. However I must inform you that the purpose of inviting you for a drink this evening was not to start a family in the near future. Perhaps I'm old fashioned but that would need a little more planning than we can manage in this bar tonight.

We watched the boats on the river, the up-stream and down-stream boats weaving between each other. An ocean freighter charging down the center lane and the squat flat river barges gliding smoothly in the quieter water close to the shore. A pleasure boat, like a lady-of-the-night, all lit up with colored lights, its music systems blaring and the decks full of tourists. This entire urban maritime regatta being played out in front of us.

"I am not sure what to call you, boy-friend is not a good word for a man in your position" she said.

"You are right, Lek and yet man-friend, senior gentleman friend, old farang friend, don't quite capture it."

"When I speak about you, I will call you Michael," she said.

"Damn it, Lek, you are so smart, why didn't I think of that?" was all I could say.

Even though the restaurant had become busier, there was a certain tranquility at the water's edge. The sounds of the city were muted. The humidity of the summer seemed less oppressive and the gentle breeze off the Chao Phraya was soft and cooling. The band in the restaurant was starting up with their usual repertoire of golden oldies. I am not sure whether there is a law that all bar bands have to start their first set with 'Hotel California' but they all feel it necessary. It is the equivalent of a national anthem for bar bands.

Out on the patio a group of not so golden farangs were drinking, shouting and chinking glasses with beautiful Thai girls. The men looked overweight, sweaty and were full of noisy bonhomie, the girls looked slim, cool, tranquil and bored. They must have thought that drinking with the boys after work was a good career move. I hope that they were right; it couldn't be that much fun for them.

Lek kicked off her shoes, put her feet on an empty chair, unbuttoned her jacket and smiled at me.

"Just one more thing" she asked "if we are making many dates and then I meet a nice Thai boy from good family with good job, can I say bye-bye to you?"

"Lek, you are a very foolish girl" I replied, "If such an opportunity should arise do NOT under any circumstances waste precious moments with an elaborate farewell

to me, such prizes are difficult to find; get after him. You are twenty-eight years old, the menopause is looming only twenty years away and your mother is demanding grandchildren. If you see a good prospect, don't waste a moment with such niceties. Put all your energies into hunting him down. Maintaining a current relationship while searching around for a more attractive opportunity is a cornerstone of good business practice, and you as a member of the new business elite have to be congratulated on such farsighted strategic planning. A short text message to me will be quite adequate."

She pulled up her legs, hugged her knees, laughed out loud and said "Michael I am so happy, we have come to this beautiful place, exchanged personal information and become comfortable with each other. I think that this is a very good date."

"Lek, my love, it's just going to get better and better" I replied.

I saw her many more times. She shared her love of her city and country with me. We spent Sunday afternoons exploring the city, the sois, the temples, and the neighborhood of her childhood. We watched fireworks, we even ballroom-danced with the seniors in a Chinese teahouse. We browsed and shopped in street markets and she introduced me to wonderful hole-in-the-wall shops, bars and restaurants. We spent a weekend in Phuket, staying at the Boathouse and had dinner with Sean, a friend of mine, who is a celebrated retired diplomat. We walked, we swam, we ate, we drank and most of all, we explored our feelings for each other.

She did find a nice young man from a good family with a good job and prospects. By her account he was totally infatuated with her and she with him. In spite of that, being a graduate from a prominent business school she approached the matter in a serious professional manner. She prepared a portfolio about him detailing his attributes. She showed it to me and asked me for my opinion. After appropriate discussion, I added my approval to that of her parents, family and friends. She married him later that summer; I chose not to attend.

I saw them at a New Year's Ball. She was smiling, laughing, jumping, hugging, and dancing. She was wearing a white delicate floor length dress and looked breathtakingly lovely.

She waved to me across the room. I pretended to be a drunken, gay waiter.