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Fieldwork

Mischa Berlinski

WHEN HE WAS A YEAR out of Brown, my friend Josh O'Connor won a Thai beach vacation in a lottery in a bar. He spent two weeks on Ko Samui, decided that Thailand was home, and never left. That was at least ten years ago, and since then, Josh has done just about every sort of odd job a foreigner in Thailand can do: He taught English for a while, and was part owner of a nightclub in Phuket. He was a stringer for one of the wire agencies, and he took a few photos now and again for Agence France-Presse. Josh played the trumpet in the marching band in high school, and he parlayed the experience into a few years as the frontman for a Thai ska band called the King's Men. He founded a dating agency.

He worked for a time for an environmental group attempting to stop construction of a large dam across the Mekong, and when the effort failed, he wrote publicity materials for a cement exporter. He hinted that many years ago, in a moment of real financial desperation, he smuggled a pound of hashish in his belly back to the States. I'm not sure that I entirely believe the story, but it was consistent with everything I know about Josh. Yet to see him, one would have no idea of his adventurous spirit: he was neither tall nor short but decidedly round; he was chubby cheeked, curly-haired, and round-nosed, with bulging eyes and an oversized head. He had thick lips and a gap between his two front teeth which whistled very slightly when he spoke and made his speech nervous and breathy. His body was pear-shaped, with an enormous, protruding posterior: when he walked, he waddled like a duck; and when he laughed, as he did often, his whole body shook.

"I'm attractive," Josh once told me, "to a lady who likes herself a big man."

As it happened, there were a lot of little Thai ladies who did like themselves a big man, and Josh was never lonely. He was one of the happiest men I've ever met. It was Josh's conceit that he could order a meal better than any other farang in the kingdom.

I first met Josh when I was on vacation just out of college and backpacking through Malaysia and Indonesia, long before Rachel and I moved to Thailand. Josh and I were staying at the same hotel in Penang.

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He was on a visa run, down from Bangkok. Within about five minutes of spotting me in the hotel bar, Josh had sat himself down next to me and, in admirably direct fashion, informed me of his plans to start a pornographic production company in Vietnam. He had the funding, he said, contacts in the government, and an unbelievable star. These plans, like so many Josh O'Connor plans, eventually came to nothing, but his account was sufficiently compelling that whenever I'm in Bangkok, I always give him a call.

Now I was down from Chiang Mai, writing an article for a Singaporean arts magazine about an up-and-coming Thai sculptor, and Josh and I agreed to meet just after sundown in front of the Ratchawat market.

I spent a long, sultry afternoon teasing a few good quotations out of my sculptor; then, just as the streetlights across Bangkok were flickering on, a motorcycle taxi deposited me in front of the 7-Eleven opposite the market, where Josh was already waiting for me, a goofy smile on his chubby face.

Plastic tables packed the narrow sidewalk. The sting of frying chilli peppers made my eyes water, and from the market, now closing for the day, the sweet smells of jasmine, lilies, incense, and lemongrass mingled with the smells of rotting fish, molding durian, sweat, car exhaust, and garbage. On the corner, two competing noodle men served up bowls of guoy tieo in a ginger-and-coriander sauce; a little farther down the road, the curry lady had set up shop with huge vats of green curry and red, a jungle curry, a panang curry, and a spicy fish soup. A pretty girl cut up fresh mangoes and served them over sticky rice in a coconut sauce.

There was somebody who grilled skewers of chicken over a small open flame and which he served with a peanut sauce.

But we were there for the fish family. All of the other vendors were ordinary, Josh said, nothing special, run-of-the-mill, the kind of stuff you'd find outside the market of any two-bit town from Isaan to the Malay border. But the fish lady and family, boy howdy, they were something else. "The prime minister's nephew told me about this place," Josh said, gesturing at the fish stall. Rows of silvery fish sprawled on a bed of ice, black-eyed, rainbow-gilled, and healthy-looking, as if they had just swum up minutes ago and were only resting; and below them massed ranks of clams, mussels, oysters, and ominous black anemones. "It's better than the Oriental Hotel."

We sat down, and Josh ordered for us. Twice our waiter walked away from the table, and twice Josh called him back to order still more food. Josh was at ease in his domain, leaning back in his chair like a pasha. It was August, the trailing end of the rainy season, when everything oozes.

Josh pulled a piece of toilet paper from the roll on the table and gently blotted his face and hands, then opened his satchel and pulled out a half empty bottle of Johnny Walker Black.

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Josh was a natural raconteur, but he wasn't much for the old give and-take of normal conversation: he asked after my day and listened to my reply with a distracted air, nodding occasionally, until he could be patient no longer. "That's just great," he interrupted. He took another slurp from his drink. "You know, I'm glad you're in town. I need someone who really knows the up-country."

This was Josh's subtle way of forming a segue from conversation to monologue: in all his years in Thailand, Josh had come to know the north far better than I did. There was hardly a corner of the kingdom that Josh didn't know, where he wouldn't be greeted by the abbot of the Buddhist temple—or by the madam of the best bordello—with a huge smile.

I waited to hear what Josh had to say. He paused for a second, as if gathering his strength. He leaned his heavy forearms on the plastic table.

He pouted his heavy lips and flared his nostrils. He strained his round neck from side to side. Then he launched his story. There is no other way to describe it: a Josh O'Connor story is like a giant cruise ship leaving port, and when you make a dinner date with Josh O'Connor, you know in advance that you are going to set sail. It's part of the deal. It's a design feature, not a bug.

"Do you remember Wim DeKlerk?" Josh began.

He didn't wait for me to reply. In any case, I did remember Wim: he was a functionary at the Dutch embassy, and a drinking buddy of Josh's.

The last time I was in Bangkok, I took Josh and Wim home from Royal City Avenue in a taxi, both of them singing Steely Dan songs at the top of their lungs. They were celebrating a stock tip that Josh had passed on to Wim from the prime minister's nephew. Apparently, Wim had made a killing.

"Well, about a year ago, I got a call from Wim. Some lady in Holland had called him, asking if he knew anybody who would go and visit her niece up at Chiang Mai Central Prison. This woman—the niece, not the lady in Holland, the niece is named Martiya, her aunt is Elena, both of them are van der Leun, are you following all this?—her uncle had just died, and the niece, Martiya, has inherited some money. Wim tells me the aunt wants somebody to go up there and take care of the details, you know, look this Martiya in the eye, explain what happened, make sure she understands everything. The aunt is about a zillion years old, doesn't want to travel, the niece won't reply to her letters, so she wants somebody to take care of this in person. Wim asks if I want to do it."

The story didn't surprise me: I remembered Wim telling me about his job at the embassy. Every day, he had told me, a worried parent called him from Amsterdam looking for a detective to help track down a child lost in the island rave culture; or a textile importer from Utrecht would call, asking him to recommend a crackerjack accountant to go over a potential business partner's books. Offering advice to Dutch people on how to get things done in Thailand was his specialty. Once, he told me, he had even helped a circus in Maastricht get an export permit for an elephant.

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"Of course I said yes," Josh said.

That's why I always call Josh when I'm in Bangkok. Things like this really happen to him.

"So I give this woman in Holland a buzz before I go up to Chiang Mai," Josh continued. "She doesn't know anything. Last time she saw her niece, the niece was a little girl. Hadn't spoken to her in years. She hadn't gotten a letter from her in over ten years, not since she went to prison. In any case, she was from a distant branch of the van der Leun family. The niece grew up in California, had been there since she was little and was now an American. Before she went to jail, she lived in a village out near the Burmese border. You know that area? Southeast of Mae Hong Son?"

"Not really," I said.

"Nobody lives out there but the tigers. What was she doing out there? The aunt in Holland, she doesn't know. I figure she's one of those kids, got caught up in drug smuggling. 'How long was she up there?' I ask.

Turns out the niece's been in Thailand since forever. Maybe since the seventies. And she's no kid, the woman's over fifty years old. Strange, I think. 'When's your niece getting out of prison?' I ask. Long pause on the phone. 'Fifty years,' the aunt says. 'So what's your niece doing in prison?'

Long pause on the phone. Like she doesn't want to tell me. 'She is a murderer,' the woman finally says, in a thick Dutch accent. What do you say to that? I said, 'Who'd she kill?' Long pause on the phone. She doesn't know. That's all this Elena van der Leun can tell me. She wants me to go and tell her niece that her uncle is dead."

Josh paused as the waiter arrived at our table with a steaming cauldron of tam yam guum. The young waiter lit a paraffin candle under the tureen, and Josh served me and then himself. The soup was, as Josh had promised, delicious, delicately flavored with lime, cilantro, ginger, and lemongrass; the shrimp, which that very morning had been frolicking in the Gulf of Thailand, were huge and tender, with an explosive touch of sea salt. Josh ate the very hot soup with vigorous splashing movements of his spoon, and only when he had finished his first bowl and was reaching to refill it did he pick up the story again.

Several weeks after his talk with Elena van der Leun, Josh found himself in the waiting room of Chiang Mai Central Prison. Josh told me that he had been in Chiang Mai for three or four days, enjoying the luxury of his expense account, before he finally steeled himself to the task at hand: Josh was a generous man, but he did not like to be presented too directly with the misery of others, a squeamishness which made him regret having accepted Wim's offer. He had dreaded the visit, and day after day had done no more than note the location of the prison on the map, then distract himself from his unpleasant chore with a stiff drink, then another, after which the days dissolved into a blur. The morning of his prison visit, realizing that he could put off his errand no longer, he had awakened early and dressed himself

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neatly. He wore linen slacks and a white shirt, which when he left the hotel was crisply pressed but by the time he arrived at the prison was damp with sweat. A low sky like wet cement hid the hills which ring Chiang Mai.

"Oh man, I did not want to be there," Josh said. "I got out of that tuk-tuk, told the driver to wait for me, and it was like they were going to lock me up inside, that's what I felt like. Like I was never going to get out of there. Bang! The first gate closes behind me. Bang! The second gate closes behind me. Bang! That's the third gate."

Josh thumped hard on the table with every bang, and the other diners turned their heads.

"You ever been in a Thai jail?" Josh asked.

"No."

"The one here in Bangkok, it's a real shithole," Josh said knowingly.

"Not a nice place. But this one in Chiang Mai, it wasn't bad. It wasn't what I expected."

Indeed, he said, the room in which the guards installed Josh could have been the waiting room for any provincial government ministry.

Only the bars on the windows and the guard behind the heavy wooden desk betrayed the purpose of the place; that and a pervasive smell of urine and vomit. A large portrait of the king in full military regalia hung next to a clock whose loud ticks echoed through the room with impossible slowness. There were a half-dozen round metal tables, and at each table four plastic stools. Josh settled his tremendous bulk onto a stool much too small for a man of his size.

"I was the only farang in the room," Josh said. "There were just a couple of other people. A few hill-tribers, I don't know, maybe they were Hmong, or Dyalo, I can never remember all the costumes. They had that scared look people down from the hills always have. I remember one of them asked me if I had a cigarette, so I gave him one. There was some guy with tattoos up and down his arms, Buddhist sutras—you know, the way the gangsters have. Scary-looking dude. And some women, Thai women, chatting with each other, but looking around like they didn't want to be there. I guess nobody wants to be there."

Josh sat in the waiting room, which if not as horrible as he had imagined was certainly not cheerful, and reflected on the woman he was to meet. How was he to inform this stranger that her uncle was dead? Was this her last link to the world of the living? Josh wondered: What had brought Martiya van der Leun to this pass? A quick Internet search had revealed nothing about Martiya, and again, Josh thought it strange that anyone could have disappeared so thoroughly; even Josh, hidden as he was in Bangkok, turned up on the Internet if you Googled him, associated with articles he had written, photos he had taken, and the results of a couple of races he had run with the Hash House Harriers in much leaner days.

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In the dossier of papers which Elena van der Leun had sent Josh, there was a photograph of Martiya as a young woman. While he sat in the waiting room, Josh pulled the picture out of the dossier and looked it over. The photograph, the only one that Elena could provide, was almost a quarter century old. It showed a slender, small-breasted young woman holding a long knife and leaning over a birthday cake. She was of indeterminate ethnic origin: her cheekbones were high and Asian, but her long black hair was curly and fell over her shoulders and neck. She was not looking straight at the camera, but it was nevertheless possible to see that she had keen, mischievous eyes, light blue and enormously round.

Her lips were full and red, and her skin china-pale. It was not a beautiful face, Josh said, but expressive, intelligent, and curious.

"Do you still have the photo?" I interrupted.

"I sent it back to the family," he said. He refilled my drink, and his own.

With thoughts of the woman he was to meet, Josh occupied a half hour until the prisoners were allowed to enter. Then the iron doors of the antechamber swung open, and one by one the women who had been waiting on the other side wandered into the room, where they paired hemselves with their guests. In other Thai prisons, Josh knew, the prisoners would have been made to enter the room on their knees as a sign of humility, but not here. The first woman to walk into the room was no older than a girl, a delicate-featured girl who might have been pretty but for the bruises. Wearing light-blue cotton prison pajamas, she spotted the man with the tattoos and raised her hands to him in the traditional Thai bow and nodded slightly. Because he did not rise from his stool, as she approached his table she was forced to bend over to keep her head below his, as good manners demanded. Without a smile or a hint of tenderness, she sat beside him and the two began to talk. Then two women came out hand in hand. They regarded the waiting room with wary eyes. Josh heard a burst of speech in some alien language from the tribeswomen behind him, and the two prisoners replied in the same strange tongue. The visitors and the hosts embraced unabashedly and settled themselves on the plastic stools, sitting cross-legged. They spoke to one another in low, urgent voices.

"She was the last one to come into the room," Josh said. "I knew her from the photo—but she looked bad. I think she must have been in her middle fifties—she was my mom's age. But this was an old woman."

Many years in the northern Thai sun had destroyed that delicate skin which Josh had admired in the picture. The dark hair had turned gray, and the once-sensual lips were cracked and thin. Yet the woman who approached Josh still had the faraway air of a handsome woman.

She was not dressed in prison pajamas, like the others, but in a handwoven tunic in the tribal style. She had white string tied tightly around each of her wrists; this was her only ornamentation. Martiya carried herself straight-backed and head-high. Josh had not expected such a small woman.

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Seeing Josh, and realizing quickly that he was the anonymous stranger who had summoned her from her cell, Martiya came over and sat down, not waiting for an invitation. Had he doubted the woman's identity, her eyes would have resolved all doubts: How many women in a prison in northern Thailand could have had such striking blue eyes? She glowered at Josh, and Josh for once was at a loss for words under her intense stare.

"Ms. van der Leun . . ." he finally said.

The woman interrupted him straightaway. She spoke very slowly.

"Christ, can't you people just leave me alone?"

Josh had prepared for this interview carefully, but this was not a reaction he had anticipated. He said, "Ms. van der Leun, I think you might have made a mistake."

Again, Martiya interrupted him. "I'm not the one who might have made the mistake here, buddy. You people are driving me nuts." She looked at Josh with open contempt. She took in his large body, his damp shirt, his uncombed hair. "My God, you are disgusting," she said.

Josh looked at me. "I had figured she might have gone a little, you know, cuckoo, from her time in prison, or maybe she'd beg and plead with me to take her home. I'd already decided how to handle that. I was going to be gentle but firm, and give her the name of a friend of mine who's a lawyer. But the way this woman was staring at me, I was pretty glad there was a table between us."

To Martiya, he said, "I'm sorry, but just who do you think I am?"

"They sent you, didn't they?"

"They?"

"You're not a missionary?"

Josh was not without a certain sense of irony, and suddenly the tension of the visit, the heat of the day, and now this furious but intensely proud little woman all seemed to him absurd. He began to laugh. He couldn't help himself, he told me.

"Oh no," Josh said. "You got it all wrong, sister. I'm here to give you money."

He said this with such enthusiasm that Martiya smiled back, despite herself. She ran a hand through her gray hair. The fight left her. In a mildly embarrassed voice, she explained to Josh the source of her confusion.

One of the evangelical societies working in the north of Thailand had conceived the project of converting the prisoners to Christianity.

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Who needed the Lord's blessing more? Twice a year, every year for the last ten years, she had been summoned to the visiting room, only to find the same bearded, middle-aged man—"the same bozo," she said—informing her that the Lord had forgiven her for her crimes and sins, if only she would accept Him. She had asked the issionaries to leave her alone, she said, but they were relentless. "I thought you were one of them."

Josh shook his head. "No," he said.

He had decided beforehand to be direct. He told her that her aunt, Elena van der Leun, had hired him, and that her uncle had died. Martiya had inherited some money, Josh said, and he was there to arrange the details of the bequest.

Martiya was silent for a minute. She looked around the room. "I haven't seen Uncle Otto since I was nine years old," she said. "He knew how to ride a horse. He was a wonderful horseman. He promised he'd buy me a horse when I was twelve. I guess he just did."

Martiya sat quietly for a long while. She picked idly at the string tied around her right wrist. Then she spoke. The vast bulk of the money—not much by occidental standards, a small fortune in a Thai prison—was to be given to a charity which aided the hill tribes, the rest deposited in her prison bank account. Then, with all the authority of a corporate executive late for a tee time, rather than a prisoner condemned to life, Martiya rose from her seat and extended her hand. The appointment was over.

Josh had one last thought. "Would you like me to call your lawyer?" he asked.

"Money can change a lot of things here. Maybe he can . . ."

Martiya smiled at Josh. "I can't leave now. I'm only beginning to understand how it really works around here. And where would I go?"

She thanked Josh for his time and walked back through the metal door into the dark prison hallway.

"It's a true story," Josh said. "It happened just like that."

By now, the sidewalk where we were eating was full. All of the tables had been taken, families eating together. A tuk-tuk painted with a picture of an elephant passed on the street, then another with a picture of a blue-skinned Hindu god. A pineapple vendor strolled by absentmindedly, leaving behind him a dark trail of melting ice, the bell on his little cart ringing out a cheerful tune. A few old ladies sat on the stoop, chewing betel and spitting black on the sidewalk, and inside one of the Chinese shop-houses, I could see a half dozen young men in tank tops working late, stripping down motorcycle engines.

The prime minister's nephew had been right: the meal was spectacular.

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Josh had ordered thin delicate noodles for us, which came to the table draped in a sweet peanut sauce, and a steaming yellow crab curry with saffron. We had clams stir-fried with the tiny roasted chilies the Thais call "rat-shit peppers." We ate until we thought we would burst.

Then an enormous whole fish arrived at the table, bathed in a caramelized orange sauce. I groaned, but when Josh flaked the fish off the bone with a surprisingly dexterous motion of his plump wrist and feathered it onto my plate, I ate the fish too. "Here, you've got to have the cheek, it's the best part," Josh said.

I wanted to know why Josh had told me this story, but he was incapable of conversing and eating at the same time. Only when he had scraped the last grain of rice off of his plate, sighed contentedly, and refilled his glass did his attention return to the interrupted narrative.

His work at the prison completed, Josh returned to Bangkok by the night train. He wrote the family in Holland, and made the appropriate arrangements for the dispersal of the inheritance according to Martiya's wishes. He had done his job.

"But I couldn't stop thinking about her," Josh said. "So I did some looking around. I went to the library and looked through back issues of the Bangkok Times. I couldn't find anything. I thought about her all the time."

Josh told me that Martiya remained on his mind for almost a month after his visit to Chiang Mai. Then slowly, his visit to Chiang Mai Central Prison was assimilated into his stock of drinking stories. He regularly won a healthy round of laughter as he recounted her saying, "My God, you are disgusting." I had laughed at that point in his recital also. It was hard to imagine that anyone could confuse Josh with a missionary. That he knew so little of this wry old murderess only added to the drama of the tale.

Then Martiya came back into his life.

Almost a year after his visit to the Chiang Mai prison, Josh received another call from Wim at the Dutch embassy. Now the story was approaching the present time: this was only several weeks before our dinner.

A package had arrived for him at the embassy; the return address, in neat Thai lettering, M. van der Leun, c/o Chiang Mai Central Prison, etc. Josh asked Wim to send it over. He supposed it was something to do with the inheritance. But when the envelope arrived, it was larger than Josh had expected. He opened the package cautiously and found two small manuscripts, each about fifty handwritten pages, densely covered on both sides of the page. The manuscripts had been bound with white twine. The first one was entitled "Notes Toward a Political Anthropology of Prison Life in Northern Thailand"; the second, "The Economic Organization of a Thai Women's Prison."

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There was also a cover letter. Josh fished around in his bag, brought out an envelope, extracted a folded piece of paper, and handed it to me.

I unfolded it.

Chiang Mai Central Prison
Chiang Mai

Dear Mr. O'Connor:

I have never properly thanked you for your visit, or apologized for my anger. Please accept my gratitude now, and my apologies.

Paper! Pens! Stamps! What is a would-be scholar's life without them? Your assistance has made it possible for me to complete my research. I have been penniless for such a long time, and I can not tell you the frustration I suffered not being able to complete the attached manuscripts, for lack of these basic necessities. Now I must call on you one more time. I would like to see both of the attached manuscripts published. They must, of course, be properly typed, which is impossible for me in my present circumstances, as you can imagine. The "Notes," etc., are intended for the Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science; the paper entitled "Economic Organization," etc., I'd like to see sent to Ethnology. It will be necessary to explain the conditions under which the papers have been written as they both lack a scholarly apparatus. If the papers are accepted, please keep whatever modest fees may result as a token of my appreciation.

I thank you, in advance, for your time: I have no one else at all to whom I might entrust these documents. It is a melancholy thought.

Yours most sincerely,
Martiya van der Leun

I read the letter, and then I read it again. Bangkok, the noisy street, the market stench, the passing cars—all these faded away for a moment. I looked at the signature on the letter. It was a messy, almost violent scrawl, the only unclear words on the page. Otherwise her handwriting was a series of fluid, graceful loops.

"That's really something," I said.

"Isn't it?" Josh agreed.

"What were the manuscripts like?"

"That's the thing. They were terrific. I opened up the envelope and I spent the whole evening reading them. When I was in college, there was this girl, she was an anthropology major, you know? and anyhow, I ended up taking a couple of anthropology classes—just Anthro 101, and then a seminar on the Hindus of the Himalayas—but the point is, even I could see right away that this woman—Martiya,

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not the girl in college— Martiya was a serious anthropologist. I mean, I don't know if she was a professional, but I thought what she wrote was excellent."

"So tell me already, who is this woman?" I asked. I was still waiting for the punch line to the story.

"That's the thing," Josh said. "That's just it. The next morning, I decided to find out more. I was just curious, I'd been curious all year. I called up the prison, and I figured either I would talk to one of the prison administrators or I'd go back up to Chiang Mai and see her again. But when I got the warden on the phone, he hemmed and hawed for a minute and then he told me that Martiya was dead."

"She was dead?" I still had the letter in my hand, and I looked down at it. The ink was light blue and sharp against the page.

"Yeah, that's the thing. The warden told me that she was dead. She killed herself. She ate a ball of opium and killed herself."

"Wow," I said.

Josh nodded. His face was creased in a gesture of unexpected dignity.

Josh looked at me over his glass of whiskey. He thought that there was a good story here, he said, something for somebody who lived in the North. He didn't have the time to pursue it himself, but he knew that I did. He was offering me the story as a gift. "Maybe you can write it up for the Times."

"Maybe you're right." I had one more question for Josh. "What did you do with the manuscripts?"

"I did just what she asked. I sent them off a week ago."

Josh had nothing more to tell me about Martiya van der Leun, and I had no more questions. He didn't say it, but I think that he had been troubled by the news of Martiya's death. Martiya's letter remained on the table between us, and from time to time I glanced at it.

A little later, the bill arrived at our table. Josh offered to pay, but looked very relieved when I insisted.

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