

## The Bangkok Masseur

1.

Celebrated on the 2<sup>nd</sup> weekend of April, Songkran is a three-day holiday befitting Bangkok, the city of rivers and waterways. The city returns to its true form: children with blue and red water rifles counterflow the gray pedestrian logic of the streets, laughter bubbles from the streaming alleys, jets of water crisscross and cloud the scrapers spiked to the earth. For many foreign gay men, the holidays are exciting opportunities to flirt with locals and fellow tourists. Siam Square becomes an open playground. The dynamics of Silom are a different case: wet the cute ones with your colorful phallic object, aim true, and do not forget to smear each other's faces with white chalk dust. These are blessings. Bless the body with the element of rebirth.

My companions simply wanted see how Bangkok would dissolve in its wet and wild carnivalesque of a basin on a Songkran weekend. I shared their excitement too, but there was an equally important goal for this trip.

When the story is not finished, return to the place.

2.

He was the finest twink in the set.

Outside and downstairs, the canned singing voice of Jennifer Lopez urged the denizens of the Christmas lights -draped streets of Silom to "dance the night away and stay young on the floor." Going to this place, an American grabbed my twig of an arm and pulled me to his table where his friends raised their beer bottles in my direction. I

freed myself from his tan-haired grip forcefully and bumped into a local who gave me a buck-toothed smile and a pinch on the cheek.

The masseurs, uniformed for fetish –white undershirt, schoolboy shorts, and sneakers lined up in front of us.. He was different. He did not have the same red-eyed tiredness that others had. His lips that curved into a bright red smile matched his ivory skin. An easy choice.

I did not plan to have sex, especially here in the HIV capital of Southeast Asia. We were here on a dare. The malls were closed, the clubs were crowded, our legs were beat from the shopping, and it was summer.

3.

Like all eldest children, I was the subject of my parents' experiments. Every possible theory on child rearing (milk brand, the color of the crib, the right preschool) they tried on me.

When I was five, they enrolled me in the Milo Best Basketball Summer Program at the old Ateneo de Davao Grade School building. On the very first day of the program, we were taught that masculinity had a hierarchy, determined by age, basketball experience, and leg hair count. First rule. In fact the only rule I remembered: whenever a coach would blow his whistle, all boys would have to stop, bend our knees, raise our open hands shoulder level, shout "Deeeeeeefense!" and stomp the ground several times – how that would have made me a better basketball player, I still do not know. All I remember was that I was terrible at dribbling the ball using fancy

maneuvers and converting shots at the freethrow line. I was so awful that the ever-smiling Coach Raldz demoted me from the freethrow line to the biodegradable trash can. Either my parents realized that I was truly hopeless or Coach Raldz who was my father's colleague at the high school secretly told my parents that the sport was not for me. I was not stirred to suit up for the culminating 5-on-5 exhibition game in the distant, uncharted land of the high school covered courts.

While freed from the ordeal, the hours of sleep and play I regained would eventually cost me my place in the inner circle of Alpha male coolness. Every recess, the boys would disappear to play downstairs while I had Butter Coconut biscuit chats with my girl classmates about *Land Before Time 2*.

I did try to be one of the boys. I started watching WWF in Grade 6 only because all the guys in the class did. While my classmates were fascinated with the fancy wrestling maneuvers, I was more interested in the storylines. Free periods were converted to Wrestemania main events. We pushed the armchairs to the corners of the classroom and started the match for the world championship. I insisted on playing the role of The Undertaker, the tattooed "dead man" with a penchant for smoke and mirror entrances. The boys did not agree with me, called me Mr. McMahon, the bullied boss of WWF, and made me the receiving end of their Stonecold Stunners.

Among the wrestlers in class, my nemesis was a short and feisty classmate named Rocky who coincidentally idolized and therefore played the cocky wrestler of the same name. As in all wrestling feuds, my rivalry with Rocky started a few months back - I defeated him in a class debate and he in turn outclassed me in the elocution

contest. After months of banter and passing snide remarks, The Rock challenged me to a one-on-one match. The fight did not last long: he tripped me with a leg swipe and schoolboy-pinned me to the floor and forced me to say “I Quit” in front of my then girl crush.

What hurt the most in that indoor playground brawl was not the desolation before peers and friends or the bruise that patched the side of my leg hours after; it was the experience of being pinned. With his shoulders and back on the ground, a young boy is emasculated. Pinned to the floor in muscled humiliation and forced to acknowledge defeat through eye contact and speech, it was my first bodied experience of frailty and of being feminized.

4.

“No extra service. No extra service,” I insisted as he led me up the stairs, holding my hand.

“Yes, yes,”

He laughed. My pale-faced plea must have amused him. Here we were in the central plaza of the flesh night market of Bangkok where white men sought solace from the work-then-play linearity of Western modernity and from the script of fatherhood. You go to Bangkok to lose yourself, a Thai friend told me as he led me to this alley of queer fantasies. Casual sex with a masseur, a temporal carnal relationship you would eventually lose to the sewers of urban oblivion, was one such way to lose yourself. And here I was insisting on not getting any.

I was not here to break away albeit temporarily from anything. In fact, my trip to this city was the fulfillment of a cinematic fantasy. Watching the film *Love of Siam* was an important rite of passage for many young Filipino gay men. The film is a story of childhood friends, Mew and Tong (played by pre-Penshoppe Mario Maurer) who are reunited after a decade of separation in the bustling streets of Siam Square. They eventually fall in love and their touchy-feely middle class romance is rendered against the backdrop of Bangkok during Christmas. To travel to Bangkok then was a pilgrimage, a homage to the Adam and Steve of Asian cosmopolitan kabaklaan. To be touched and if lucky kissed by a local twink was a corporeal culmination of this utopian narrative. The Bangkok of this masseur was gray, with the mixed scent of canal water, incense, and a puffed black blast of vehicular waste.

He had the occasional forceful tug of a playful child. His hand however was petals on my palm. He looked excited.

“Are you new?”

“Hmm?”

“Um. New in the job?”

“Hmm?”

I wished for subtitles.

“First time? First month?”

“Oh, oh yes, yes.”

The third floor felt like a different realm. The walls felt like cool jade. The harp instrumentals and the murmuring water from the artificial Zen fountain drowned the

carnavalesque screams and the Pussycat Doll songs outside. He led me to the farthest room and closed the door behind us. A white mattress rested neatly on an elevated platform corned by burning scented candles. I turned and looked at him, this masseur of Bangkok, in that virgin moment of intimacy.

“Okay, take off” he said

I unshirted and dropped my pants.

“That too” he said, pointing at my underwear. He was already naked.

“Okay, I lie down now?”

“No, no,” he unhooked a towel from the rack and held my hand. “We shower first.”

5.

After failing to build a successful marriage between my hands and height, my mother decided to rectify a childhood frustration through me.

“Because those who know how to play the piano are also good in Math!” my mother insisted.

I was introduced to two teachers who used the same text book: *John Thompson’s Easiest Piano Course*, a picture book with gnomes and dwarves pointing at notes with their sharp fingernails. Back then, the goal was to reach and open what I called Red Book, the second part of the “easiest piano” course. My first teacher Teacher Menchie was a tall, curly-haired woman whose owl-like eyes would grow bigger every time I missed a beat. Every Saturday morning, the long doorbell ring was a banshee’s shriek

that signaled the return of the owl to the house. If the piano book dwarves were alive, they probably would have joined Teacher Menchie in hitting me with their thorny fingernails. After spending one and a half sessions on “Mary Had a Little Lamb” and three on “The Chimes,” the owl decided that enough was enough; the Red Book was shelved.

In high school, my grandfather rounded up all his grandsons and dragged us to Conpinco. There were five small piano rooms and each boy was assigned one teacher for an hour of enclosed encounters with John Thompson’s gnomes. I no longer remember her full name; I simply called her Ybiernas because it sounded a lot like imbyerna. Ybiernas, like Teacher Menchie, had big eyes. She had a mole on her cheek and had a eureka moment way of saying “Yes!” every time I got a piece or a note right. I only learned one thing from her: *curve your fingers when you play*. We would spend more than ten minutes doing the warm-up exercises because my fingers would often slide down the keys.

The piano no longer interested me at that point; my hands were already interested in doing other things. Four years after Rocky pinned me to the floor, I avoided any physical activity that had to do with sweat and dirt. I joined the school paper team, read and wrote poems for my girl crush, and looked forward to doing and writing class plays. Writing for me became the opposite of drumming the keys; it was the pleasure of easy, quick finishes. The poem on fate and love and why you were the one meant for me was there immediately after an hour of sitting with a cup of 3-in-1 coffee. Playing the piano was about prolonged control – about the notes, the beats, and

Ybiernas telling me what I could do with my fingers; writing for me meant having my own stroked rhythm. Ybiernas released me a month later - an arrangement that satisfied us both. She said goodbye to one incompetent student and I was happily unshackled from the keyboard and from the land of black and white gnomes.

Living an intensely hormonal but cerebral adolescent life, I had forgotten that underneath the white polo and khaki pants was a body thinning with neglect. Schoolmates around me were losing their virginity, or at the very least, getting their first kiss. I courted two girls and failed miserably, losing them to two boys whom, in retrospect, I would have actually also liked had I came out sooner.

I did regret my aborted basketball and piano lessons. More than inscribing me into the mainstream narrative of masculinity, mastering the art of ball handling could have taught me how to hold shapes - curving the hand in communion and cooperation with what was familiar and different, and learning how to retract it back to its original, flattened state at the point of release. Music, I learned, was not just the language of notes and beats; the labor of bending one's fingertips meant recreating the cadence of the world's pulses . Obedience to the order of the pulsing world was grace. Had I stuck with these, I would have learned that dexterity was simply about familiarity with the body and how such familiarity would come to embrace the malleability of things.

6.

The bathroom was different. While dim like the corridor and the service room, it did not have the same smooth aura of comfort I found in the rest of the floor. The small

white tiles marked with the mildew of browned encounters reminded me that we were bodies in processed labor, herded to this room by a script penned by someone well-versed with the vocabulary and syntax of fleeting intimacies. A yellowing curtain smeared with polka dots of neglect partitioned the two showers. We entered the first cubicle and removed our threadbare towels. I stiffened and he must have sensed it as he reached for the hand shower.

It was only in my second encounter with him a year later that I realized that there was sincerity in the way he handled me. The fingertipped touches were indistinguishable from the spatter of cold shower water.

“Weh you fwom?” he asked.

“Philippines”

“Oh Filipin” he smiled as he soaped and fondled my crotch – the first time my penis was held by another man since I got circumcised.

“How long you stay in Bangkok?”

“Four days”

“Turn, turn, wash yoh back,” his feather voice drowned the moans, grunts, and what seemed like light spanking in the other cubicle.

I reached down and covered my ass with my two hands – how sure was I that he would not attack me from behind? He laughed.

“What’s yoh name?”

“Miguel”

“Hmmm?”

“Migs”

“Too complicated”

“You can say complicated, but not Migs?”

He did not understand.

“Yoh tuhn. Wash me.”

It was like a bad rehearsal for a porn film, if ever there was one anyway, with an amateur model playing the lead role: right hand trembling on the hand shower (accidentally watering his face and hair), my left one aimlessly soaping his enamel chest in awkward counterclockwise movement, marking him with water and erasing my awkwardness with each imperfect stroke.

“This okay?” I wanted to appease him by affording him with the same equal amount of gentleness he afforded me.

“Yes,” he replied as he knobbed the shower shut. “Come, come. Back to room”

7.

I was a late bloomer.

There was something about living two years in the university male dormitory and growing accustomed to the stink and clutter of men day in and day out - the flies that nest on that empty cup of instant noodles, the ecosystem that develops from the mountain of unwashed clothes, the sight of toweled men that accompanies the ringing of the alarm clock - that makes one want to partner with that kind of mess for the rest of his life.

A gay toddler at 19, I colored what was then a series of discreet desires with a creative kind of compartmentalization. I called it my Magical Rainbow of Men: The Blues were my favorite crushes (there was Simply Blue, Sky Blue, and Blue Plus – my ultimate crush!), the Reds were those whose faces turned red when they laughed or when they had too much to drink, the Greens were obviously the Lasallians, the Yellows were my Chinese crushes, there was one Indigo and one Orange, only because those was the colors of the shirt they were wearing when I met them. But rainbows I realized were not just signs of hope and symbols of beauty, but they were also exclusively visual and intangible things – one can only enjoy rainbows from a distance. Of the many colors that lived in the horizon of my fantasies, only two colors eventually knew about how I felt about them: Simply Blue who immediately turned me down by pulling out and playing everyone’s favorite rejection card: “We’re better off as a friends” and Orange who ran away with someone else after he brought me to Club Government. Simply Blue and Orange could not be blamed. I was truly still a young gay man. I still had to know the distinction between “top” and “bottom,” learn about notions like “versatile” and “discreet,” the chenelyns and the chorvas, the pleasure of having straight men making patrol.

Being gay also meant loving your body. Fabulous was not a word to describe the glitter and glamour of queer life. Neither was it a word you would simply assign to drag queens and their song numbers of planet-sized earrings and gold sequins. The purple-tinged impetus to be fabulous referred as well to the will to love one’s own body, to drape it with the necessary cloths of self-love that shields one from stigma and

the frequent boon and bane of impermanent desire. With only three pairs of pants, baggy shorts, hangers and hangers of large-sized shirts, it was not an issue of sporting branded things but one of disrespecting and neglecting the vessel of my desires.

Losing my virginity then was not a rite of passage; it was pathetically a creaturely desire to be affirmed. Here now were a set of trembling hands that remained untouched and an ass that wished to be entered only because it was the node to a body that desired that liberating rupture.

8.

Mattressed, I closed my eyes and drank the scent of tea leaves and incense, the fountain water whispering outside. There I was, flattened again like that grade school boy pinned to submission in a contest of playground manhood. On my belly, the initial sprawl-eagled fear gradually turned into a generous, corporeal utterance of supplication: *break me*.

He first minted my left thigh while kneading the lower part of my leg with his penis; his breath was gentle, his skin smooth, cool, even refreshing as milk tea on the street. He did the same to my right leg. His strokes, the streaming feel of white water, had their beautiful violence.

“Turn” he whispered.

I turned and faced him. The room was now soaked, drenched with the silver scent of oil. His palms glittered in the darkness; my body minted with every instant of his touch. He held my right hand – it was still – as he worked on my left. Without

meaning to, I closed my right hand and he responded by gripping it tight. We exchanged gazes for the first time since the start of the service. In that moment and perhaps only in that moment, he appeared ethereal, the singular white presence in the room, the summation of everyone I ever liked and even loved: the perfect twink, an imperfect chest, a pair of droopy eyes that bore the kind of everlasting melancholia I wanted to fill. He held my hand gently, caringly as he pulled me up to finish the service and to lead me to the rack.

“Shower again”

He led me out and back to the shower room, still holding my hand. No extra service.

9.

It was the eve of Songkran and we were there for drinks to welcome the Thai New Year. The alley was now familiar the second time around. It was still dark and orange, perfumed by cigarette smoke. The Christmas lights were still there. The invitations were the same; the doormen dragged us to see the nightly live show of blank-faced fucks. This time, my refusal was firm, polite, and for some reason, respected.

A surprise ice attack from the chalk-faced manager of the pub drenched us and before we knew it, our tipsy selves were pairing up and dancing with local and foreigner guests.

The massage parlor was just across the pub. My gaze bounced from one masseur to the next until it settled on the leader of the pack.

A year soured his face. His hair was no longer boyishly unkempt; it parted neatly to the right. A black and green tattoo slithered around his arms.

I approached him and asked, "Do you remember me?"

He looked puzzled.

"No, I don't believe so," he spoke in his improved English.

"Last year, you and me? Last March?"

"I have many."

10.

I slumped to my seat, the evaporating oil created an aura of dazed peace around me, the post-massage service tea cupped patiently on the table.

I felt someone tap my knee gently. I turned and smiled at him. He was once more wearing his schoolboy fetish costume. He reached out, gave me a tight hug and a kiss on the cheek, and proceeded to join his fellow masseurs downstairs for the next round.

"He like you." the manager said.

"How do you know?" I asked.

"He not do that if he didn't."

11.

"No, no, I already showered"

His tattooed arm stopped my hand as it reached for the shower handle.

“Oh, okay. Let’s go?”

“Yes.”

We were back in the same room. There were no more instrumentals, the fountain was muted. The whole thing was finished in less than the set hour. The ringing of his iPhone punctuated the whole thing. I read one message. It was in English: “Wer r u?” There were no streaming strokes this time, just careless slipping, sliding. The oil did no minting; it merely made my skin greasy.

“You still don’t remember me” I asked as he beat my back.

“Just a little. Okay, done.”

“Shower?” I asked

“No, we shower only if we did it. Like last year, remember?”

12.

When the story is not yet finished, return to the place.

What conclusion did I seek? The deed was done. The service was complete. The fees were paid. Still I saw his face plastered everywhere: drinking fraps by himself in coffee joints, a jolt of a disappointing surprise in UAAP basketball games, the passing grin in clubs, Mario Maurer suddenly having chinky droopy eyes and lips the color of fresh, raw blood.

Between that first encounter and this April weekend of wet festivities, I started lifting weights, got an iPhone and installed the Grindr app, hooked up with folks I met online, gained 15 pounds, and renewed my gym membership.

In the end, it became clear to me that the story was not his or even about our encounter; it was my story of being broken. The story was not incomplete; it only felt incomplete. In our second encounter, in his arms permanently stained by the marks of his city, I learned that the impermanence was necessary. The summer service was a paragraph of an encounter – each stroke was a syllable, each press and clutch, a word dependent on the next and the last, each bending a punctuation - one which culminated when I looked at the mirror the next day, saw myself and said, “I see you.”

13.

Still carrying his scent, I stepped out into the street. I passed the pack of masseurs who were now ready to call it a night.

I found him, tucked like a sleepy child in the corner.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

He told me.

“I will come back to Bangkok for you,” I said.

He gathered what energy he had left and stood up.

The alley was now quiet. The Christmas lights in summer started flickering off as I curled my fingers and curved them around his nape, closed my eyes, touched his lips with mine, as the streets of Silom prepared to dream.