

**Nathaniel Laager, Paradise Valley Community College  
Second Place, Short Story**

**P**ATTAYA, THAILAND WAS like nothing I'd ever seen. Open storefronts crowded together and silk robes and fake Rolexes and Levis spilled out into the road. Rank gas wafted up from open sewers below the sidewalks. Old women roasted rat-sized creatures on dirty rotisseries. Tired looking whores called to us from the stoops and bars, and junkies crowded together in allies, gray-eyed smoking yaba.

We stopped in at Nancy Won's Pattaya Beer Bar, a circular bar on the sidewalk, with no walls, shaded under a huge orange tarp. We each ordered a Sing Ha.

As we drank, we played games of Connect Four with the bar girls for tiny bets. They never lost.

As the day wore on we wandered up and down the main street, stopping in at dozens of different bars sampling local brews or throwing back shots. We stopped to haggle with street vendors over the prices of knives, watches, and cigarette lighters shaped like naked women. From time to time we ran into other guys from the platoon and greeted them like friends we hadn't seen in years.

Sometime after dark Flannigan and I and a couple of mortar men were sitting around another outside bar smoking cigarettes and drinking more slowly. One of the bar girls set a Connect Four board up in front of me. I put a couple dozen Baht down on the bar. The game didn't last long, I kept forgetting whether I was red or black. The girl smiled and took the money and poured me another couple inches of warm whiskey. She said it was "Yak Dannyool." Even in the state that I was in I knew that it wasn't. Eventually I clambered up off my stool and staggered out into the alley behind the bar to take a piss. I propped myself up against a wall to keep from falling.

I heard a commotion to my right about fifty yards down the alley, past a band of shadows. A man on a moped was arguing with a woman. A little girl, crying, clung to the woman's neck. She was maybe three or four years old. I couldn't understand what they were saying -it was all in Thai. The woman kept pointing at something the man held in his hand. The man reached out and grabbed the little girl's elbow. The mother pulled her away. The man said something and stuck the thing he had been holding up to the woman's face. She took it. It was money.

The man grabbed the little girl by the waist and pried her away from her mother. The little girl was hysterical. The mother made no move to stop the man but she was starting to cry too. The man plopped the girl down into a basket attached to the handlebars. He started the engine and began to ride away. The girl was reaching back towards her mother, grabbing handfuls of air, screaming, shrinking as the moped picked up speed.

She threw herself out of the basket.

She hit the ground hard and rolled across the dirty street. She stood up and ran towards her mother on wobbly legs. The mother started running too, waving the money in the air and shaking her head.

The man wheeled his moped around and raced back towards them.

The girl and her mother were feet apart. The girl running, sobbing, arms outstretched, knees and elbows scraped from the pavement. The mother, stumbling, trying to make her arms, her fingers somehow longer to reach the child first, to save her, to undo what she had done.

The man on the moped was gaining. Descending like a dragon, like an endless night. The mother bent down to scoop the girl up in her arms.

The man on the moped got there first.

Zooming up from behind, he grabbed the girl by the wrist and yanked her like a doll up across his lap. He wheeled the moped around again and gunned the engine and roared off, disappearing in a cloud of dust and blue smoke.

The mother collapsed in a puddle. Money floated all around her.

I stood blinking, stupid drunk and still hanging out of my pants.

