

# Carnivora

a short story by Karin Luisa Badt

I am an anthropologist in South Asian studies, which sounds very respectable until you learn that to fund my studies, I was on an emergency squad that awaited accidents to scoop up the cadavers. My job was to hold the bag while the other people shoved in what could be found.

It was a job full of poetry. The heat of the sun in Thailand makes even nighttime a dank, warm affair, so I would smell the bodies of my fellow coworkers while we sat on the stoop, smoked our cigarettes, jangled our limbs. Our leader---“Victor”--was an excitable sort; he would look up at the moon and whistle between his teeth whenever a siren soared, his feet jumpy. He had a habit of rubbing his hands together and shaking them out by his sides.

My years as an anthropologist have successfully eradicated any sensation of spontaneity in my own body. I doubt I have any gestures that can be tabulated, as I tabulate those of others. Except perhaps a nervous habit since childhood of slumping my shoulders forward and then suddenly backwards, as if my mother were to scold me.

One particular night, it was me, Victor, Victor’s girlfriend—who joined us, bored--and three guys who told me they were Victor’s brothers.

Two of the brothers were twins---each bony and cold—and the third was a mildmannered hunchback. He was not really a hunchback. What made him seem malformed was a tendency to stroke his hand over his eye, so it seemed he was curving his entire body under an umbrella of a crooked-up elbow. He had a sharp look, never speaking, while Victor

chattered on and pointed at the moon. The hunchback’s eyes shot out from Victor to me. I had the distinct impression he admired my superior intelligence: the fact that I was an American scientist and all that could possibly mean for him.

He was intelligent too. When I caught a glimpse of his face under the moon---etched with scars and a violent furrow under his left eye—I was struck by something ferocious that, I must add, made my stomach rise in a challenge.

His name was “Nhu Barat”, which means, I was told, “Weasel”. Nobody else in Thailand had that name, because weasels are indigenous to the colder climates. Later I was told, by another source, that the word does not even exist.

“A name like any other,” said the Weasel when I asked. He crooked up his shoulders, and plastered my face with a look that said: ask more questions and I scoop you tonight.

I had overheard some discussion about his relationship with a local prostitute, and I assumed that his name had its roots in a malformation from some Western dialect. (I planned to check that with Linguistics on my return to the States).

My research consists in these kinds of questions: I trace how Western concepts of masculinity infiltrate traditional social networks: the contradictions between male identity as predator, and male identity as submerged in global capitalism.

A siren screeched out. The two sleepest members of our troop---the two

thin twins---lifted their heads and angled their legs over their mopeds.

Victor had already jumped onto his bike—making a show first of kissing his girlfriend. He gestured me to kick my legs over fast. If we were not the first, then a rival gang might come. Once Victor had hit a man over the head with a wooden club as he was about to scoop up one motorcycle victim before us. We were paid 1000 bahts a body, with the lion's share being mine. At the time I justified my percentage, as I was not only assisting, but doing a lot of mental work for my thesis in observing the configurations of relations between the rival scooper gangs. To keep track of Victor himself was difficult enough: he had this one girlfriend, and another one at the gas station, plus a wife and three children in the provinces.

Victor sped down the black highway where we were one of hundreds of mopeds driving crazily. A limousine passed with a white woman in the back of the car. She had a stiff look. Her face was square on her shoulders. I wondered if I would meet her later at one of the embassy parties, and figure out why her mouth seemed so tight.

She whizzed by us, but Victor caught up, so for a time, we were driving side by side.

She must notice that I am white too, I was thinking. I needed an ally sometimes because Victor was so strange to me, and after two years in the field, that could make you feel strange too. If Victor was not jumping about talking about bahts, he was pulling out a bag from his rucksack, yanking out tins of rice and fish and red spices and piling the stuff between his jumpy lips. After his lunch, he always turned to his girlfriend—bored on the stoop---and smacked her cheeks with a kiss. He would pretend to tumble her into

the ground, at which point she would laugh, pleased with the attention.

The two twins driving next to us looked so thin and pale, I worried that the slightest humidity of the road might cause them to slip and break..

The Weasel had his own bike. He charged up steadily behind us, keeping pace. He was watching me watch the girl in the limousine. I turned my head towards Victor's sweaty back.

The police were waiting outside the building. It was not a car accident this time. We were wearing our suits---grey stripes with a red circle on the back—so the fat police officer who sat guarding the front door waved us in with the crook of his index finger. He was eating a bowl of rice, and slobbering down some beer.

“Move on!” said Victor, pouncing up the stairs. He worried that the rival gang had already got there, and he clutched in his fingers a thin long knife. His fingernails were long and yellow, with one nail completely black, as if it had been jammed somewhere.

Upstairs, it was just an empty room with two bodies clumped on the ground.

At first, I thought that they were old people, what we found occasionally, the very old who would just slump over as if an enormous weariness had reduced them to gravity.

But no, they were two young girls, their heads close to each other, their hair intertwined. One wore a red bikini outfit with a red flared skirt raised high so I could see a blue bruise on her thin thigh. The other was dressed in polyester green. I would have preferred the red bikini one.

The eyes of both were still open, and I spied complicity as they stared at each other. There was something crazy in

the way one girl's eyes seemed to glow with a strange joke; the other's eyes---the red bikini---were more dull; the black seemed to be thinking something hidden that even I, for all my training, could not imagine. A memory of a family up north, which she was supporting? The crazy girl was more severe; a few teeth shone with blackened enamel. She had obviously begun smoking early.

I saw a plate with drops of white liquid on it, which I knew from other occasions meant "yaa baa"—the crazy drug. The drug is so precious that the initial vomiting it causes is usually collected on a plate to be ingested afterwards, collectively.

The Weasel had pulled out our plastic bags, and was carefully pulling the legs straight of the bikini girl. He was gentle as he pulled the arms straight too. I could tell he enjoyed touching her.

A siren spun wild outside. Victor jumped around the bodies, ordering the twins about. "Push her in, push her in!" I was instructed to hold the bag that the Weasel had laid down on the ground, as he managed one body with his hips, the head propped in his lap. I cracked the bag open so the twins could jam in the white feet. The feet were bare except for a circle of stones around one ankle, smooth white stones that must have come from a coastal province.

The other girl had white stones too on her ankle. This meant they were from the same family.

Finished with one bag, we left it open with the head out, the dull eyes. The bag would be closed soon, closing whatever memories this girl had had, her life in the countryside where she had doubtless played alone with old tires in the streets, or scavenged food for her parents.

The dullness of her pupils bespoke a solitude that she had made part of her membrane.

I understood something about her, being a bit of a loner myself.

The Weasel lifted his head, dropped the hand from his eyes and high-fived me in slow motion. He had a strange smile, happy with himself.

The other girl—the older sister, I ascertained—had a more clever look. Her hands shot forward out of the bag while the twins dutifully tapped her in.

The Weasel did not like handling her. Perhaps it was the green polyester feel. It is true that we men are aesthetic creatures and the wrong dress can turn us off, at any time.

It was Victor who had the idea to try to make more money with these bodies than we normally would get.

"You see, they're young, they're pretty. Big money over a the clubs. Come on, come on, quick, before they get too cold. Fresh, fresh."

He rubbed his hands and flailed them at his sides; he was imagining many bowls of rice.

This was excellent evidence for my thesis: the sense of control and power that comes from handling young women's bodies and selling them to a Western market. I could tell that what excited Victor most of all was the chance to have something to offer to Nick the Trick, the man who ran the bar/brothel that anyone who is part of the expat community in Bangkok knows. Sometimes new volunteers in the NGOs would go just to have a drink, to feel titillated knowing what went on behind the scenes.

Nick had been there for ages. Other anthro students before me had spoken of him. He was heavy, and smelled like beer, but he was likeable, always jovial at the tables, walking about and greeting newcomers. He ran a scuba diving outfit on the side. Rumours were that one peace corps volunteer had drowned.

I couldn't help comparing him to the Thai policeman at the door. Funny how capitalism keeps a man in shape. The Thai policeman looked sluggish, dull. Nick, despite the breeze of alcohol and fried odors about him, has a firm handshake.

The joint was blueish inside, the lighting most preferred in hot humid climates in the East. Nina—a prostitute I knew—greeted us at the door, the three of us.

The twins waited outside with the body bags.

She nodded as Victor told her our scoop; he had no respect for Nina so he did not worry that she could do him in on his deal. With most people, he kept a tight lip, almost paranoid, until the deal was done.

Nick the Trick saw Victor, and I could tell he despised the smaller man. Victor in his eyes was a low-class uneducated heap of nothing. Nick the Trick dealt with European businessmen, and to see Victor's over excited jumpy ways perhaps reminded him of something he did not like to admit. Nick the Trick had been a bus driver back in Ohio before he got the idea of taking his mother's savings and investing it in a bar in Bangkok.

I saw them negotiate for a while. Nick looked bored. He actually left Victor to go buy some cigarettes. This was staged stalling. The two girls could fetch a lot of

money, especially by an older clientele. Younger men would take anything, Nick the Trick had told me. But the older ones paid a premium for anything that could remind them that they were alive.

We had nicknamed the girls Betsy and Babs; the men reverted to English names to name their produce.

I was taperecording the entire event, so later would pay more attention to linguistic details,

Suddenly the Weasel came in anxious. He came up to me and said—his quiet voice a bit shrill---Betsy is gone!

I wanted to console him. His eyes were crazy black, and the furrow under his left eye had become a ditch of blue light. For him, it was not the profit that was important, but the fear that Betsy might have become a ghost.

Some Thai people believe that the ghost of a cadaver can inhabit you if you touch its inner liquids.

The Weasel stood there looking at me as if I—the Western scientist—could cure him of the haunting.

“Sit down,” I laughed, imitating the Dala Llama who I had seen at a conference the week before. I had noticed how he used laughter to make people feel at ease, in spiritual confidence.

“So she was stolen,” I said.  
“Tough luck. We still got Babs.”

Babs was the red bikini.

“We don't got her either,” said the Weasel. “Victor's already sold her---to that guy...”

I looked over to the table where Victor and Nick the Trick were exchanging

bahts with a blonde-haired gentleman I knew wrote articles for Business Week today. I had spoken with him at a cocktail party the week before; he had begun his journalism career as an adventurer in the Falkland Islands: he knew that if he wanted to make it, he had to get to a war and cover it; his articles were published by a small weekly in Detroit, and then eventually, he made it big. Normally he was stationed in Paris, he said, with his wife and three children. He had invited me to visit, whenever I wanted.

I did not raise my eyes to look at him, because if I did, perhaps the embarrassment would mean I could not have a place to stay when I did eventually go to Paris: I had never been to Europe, and his invitation had allured me, and I had already made plans to squeeze in a stop en route back to Harvard, where I would finish up my findings.

Don't think I mentioned Harvard to show off; it is a secondrate anthro program, and I personally feel like a failure when I think about this affiliation.

One day though I would teach at a number one institution. Who else went as far as I did? Who else found themselves right in the middle of a squabble between Victor the Cadaver searcher and Nick the Trick?

Ben—the businessweek guy—had already gone off to the back-room, a dirty pit with a red brocade bed and a golden tea pot on the nightstand----and I knew he was enjoying those dark eyes full of stories of brothers and sisters, and those feet that had scampered on the beaches of sand, and maybe he was licking each toe, and giving Babs one last pleasure before she disappeared.

Now it was Nick the Trick and Victor. I saw the pile of bahts on the table was quite low.

I wished my tape recorder was closer.

I almost pushed my chair closer, when I saw Vic's knife flash up and without even a pause, jab into Nick the Trick's torso, and slunk, plunk, Nick crashed onto his table, with a heavy sluggish sound .

I felt instant outrage: Nick was a compatriot! Victor was a rice eating madman!

I know those thoughts were unworthy of me—just trained brainwashing—so I resisted any urge to get up and help.

Besides Victor in action fascinated me. He fascinated as well the Weasel who crouched next to me.

“You see that?” he said. “It would take one big bag to get that Nick the Trick.”

He rubbed his hand over his forehead, and I wondered if he was thinking, like I, how we had just seen a human being shift from good unto evil.

“I wonder if we even got bags that big,” said the Weasel. “I suppose if I connected two together, and attached them with string. They must have string in this bar, no?”

Interestingly, the rest of the clients in the bar did nothing but stand back with a rather dazed look as we—dressed officially as body snatchers---went to work and got a bag for Nick the Trick. This is what a uniform will do.

The Rolling Stones continued to play in the background, while the television hung in the middle of the ceiling continued to flash soundless images of

MTV dancers. The bar was proudly Western, a mishmash.

The peace corps volunteers off to the side of room had banded together and were approaching us. I could tell who they were by their jeans and concerted wellmeaning look.

Their disadvantage was poor language training.

One—a bearded boy with a baseball cap—tried to make an alliance with me, as a translator.

“What just went on? Should we call the police? What’s going on here?”

I shrugged. This guy could blow my research. The police were useless anyway; it would mean Victor having to dig up the proceeds from Babs and turning it over.

Which would be interesting to watch, since it meant more male negotiations over prices and products, but I was more fascinated with how these men would treat a white corpse.

Victor’s eyes were shooting fire in a way I had never seen, as he instructed the twins to tie up the cords that dangled over the bag. I could tell he had more than rice on his mind.

They dragged out Nick, flat on his own floor, and created a sheen of a trail over the humid black tarmac. Blood seeped out in drops from the holes in the bag, so he left behind a final patchwork, a disorganized assortment of red.

The twins dragged the bag out and then there was a whole discussion with a pedicab about how much to pay to deliver the body to Victor’s home.

I smoked a cigarette. I suddenly became aware of something. It didn’t

matter much, really, what happened to Nick’s body. It was just important to be there, in the humid black night, and smoke that cigarette and hear those voices. I liked hearing those voices; it reminded me of being a child and hearing my parents’ voices, thinking how marvelous that my father had a male voice and my mother a female voice. At the time, it had made the world seem infinitely possible.

The pedicab driver was gone now, and Victor’s excitement seemed to have run down; under the moonlight, his face looked drawn and hollow, and I could tell he felt disappointed.

The Weasel stared around him.

“So where did that girl go?” he said.

We stood there in silence, waiting for a siren, anything, something to happen next. We were not hungry; we had already eaten..

I inhaled my cigarette and thought about how good Thai tobacco can taste, the rough chemicals in the salty humid air, and I thought about how Victor’s smell---an acute human smell—made me feel anchored to something.

I put my arm on Victor’s shoulder. In Thailand, to do that, means establishing a bond of brotherhood.

Victor laughed and spat at the ground. I could tell he was immensely flattered. He wished probably his girlfriend could see him there, with me. I had always been standoffish before.

I pulled out my pack and offered him my cigarettes.

Suddenly he jumped. A black shape had run inbetween his feet and was gnarling at them.

He kicked at it, but its long shape danced around and around his ankles. In the hazy humid night, it seemed like a shadow.

Victor kicked and laughed. “What fuck, what fuck!”

He finally just jumped on top of it, and squashed it flat.

I bent over. Even in the night, I could tell it was a dead weasel. The kind I had once seen in Ohio, on a summer vacation in boy’s camp.

What was strange was the look in the weasel’s eyes; they were open, and in them was a cruelty I had never seen in an animal before.