

Sukhumvit Road

A photograph of a utility pole on Sukhumvit Road, Thailand, with a dense network of power lines against a blue sky. A street sign is visible on the pole.

สุขุมวิท
Sukhumvit
(ซอยเลียบ)

5
(Soi Loet Sin)

David Young

Sukhumvit Road

by David Young

Sample Chapter:
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7:59 a.m.

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He wasn't supposed to be here.

The man was standing in a field of eggs. Not regular eggs, but large, black-speckled dinosaur eggs. The sky was a pale, Halloween orange, swarming with Nazi fighter planes. A symphony by Wagner echoed in the distance. Was it the Ride? It was probably the Ride. It was the only piece by Wagner that he knew and he always associated it with Nazi fighter planes. He wanted to run but running was impossible. All he could do was stand stiff as a board and think: I'm not supposed to be here.

And then a new noise. A sort of crick crick crack. The eggs were hatching. Plus, cannibals were approaching. See? A whole tribe of them. Each one had a long white bone through his nose and razor sharp teeth. But he couldn't think about the cannibals. Not with all these eggs hatching. Here was a claw, here was a fang, Holy Jesus, here was a dinosaur. Did he have his gun? He had his gun. A single bullet lay in the chamber. Should he take out a Nazi, a dinosaur, or a cannibal? And then, just like that, it came to him. The answer to his problems. He raised the gun to his temple and closed his eyes. All he needed now were the guts to squeeze.

"Hello?"

Phineas McIntyre sat up in bed and looked around. He wasn't standing in a field of dinosaur eggs. He was in a third floor hotel room just off Sukhumvit Road, Bangkok. There were no Nazis, no orange clouds, and the music of Wagner was no more than the electronic beeping of a woman's cell phone. Dee dee dee dee DEE DEE! He breathed a sigh of relief, then reached for his cigarettes while the girl spoke into her tiny handheld phone.

"Hah? Arai na? Roley, lauh? Why you phone Bami now?"

Yes, yes, Bami hear you.”

His watch said eight o'clock, though the bathroom fluorescence lighting the girl's dressing ritual made it seem like the middle of the night. Phineas took a drag on his cigarette and exhaled before the smoke could reach his lungs. The air conditioning had been blowing a stale, chilly wind into his throat all night. His Adam's apple felt sore. He didn't have enough spit to wet a stamp.

“Arai na?” said the girl. She was returning her eye shadow and make-up piece by piece into a small pink purse. It seemed impossible that so much stuff could fit into such a small space. “A rat? Bami never see. Where you see a rat? Under the what? Mai na cheua!”

Something was scratching his ass. Something had been scratching his ass all night. Phineas reached beneath the covers and felt around. It was an empty condom packet. He folded it in half and set it on the bedside table. If memory served correct, there should be another lying around as well.

“OK, Bami go to store before go home. Don't afraid! Rat want to eat cookies. Rat no want to eat you!”

She pressed a button on her cell phone and dropped it into her purse along with her lipstick and other womanly things.

“Rat,” she said. “I must to buy rat goo.”

“I'm sorry?”

“Rat goo to kill the rat.”

Phineas tapped his cigarette in a bedside ashtray and let the mystery pass. The girl was wearing the same outfit she had on the night before: a black mini, an aqua blue top that left her shoulders exposed, and shoes that were already leaking sawdust from a hole in the right heel. Her body was lean and unbelievably smooth. Her bellybutton hypnotizing. Her touch gentle.

“Is Roley your boyfriend?”

She laughed. “Roley is a drunk. And you?”

“And me what?”

“Do you have a pretty girl who wait for you at home?”

“No,” said Phineas, trying to sound nonchalant. “I haven’t got one of those.”

“Bami think you must be lonely.”

“Well, I’ve got you for another five or six minutes. Would you like me to order something before you go? A little breakfast?”

“No thank you,” she said. “Bami no eat breakfast.”

Phineas nodded. He didn’t push. He had already pegged her as a smart one. Up before eight, out the door before he could finish his first smoke. While nights might have been all passion and fire, mornings were a broken clock. Her line of work didn’t call for love and without love, there could be no morning. She knew. And the men who designed the hotel room knew it too. That’s why every hour of the day felt like 4 a.m. in that place.

“If you’ll hand me my pants –”

Bami removed his pants from the edge of a chair and held them at arm’s length. Phineas took out his wallet and handed her two one-thousand-baht bills. She placed her hands together and bowed before accepting them.

“I like you,” said Phineas. “I mean that. You seem like a very nice person and I hope things work out for you.”

She folded the bills once and slid them into a pocket of her skirt. “You want phone number of Bami?” she asked.

Phineas smiled, then broke into a short, halting laugh when he spoke. “I don’t think so,” he said. “I’m not supposed to be here.”

The girl stopped abruptly and looked at him unblinkingly. The intensity of her gaze caught him off guard.

“What job you do?” she asked.

Phineas hesitated. When asked what he did for a living, his usual tactic was to make up a company and fit himself in the mid to upper echelons. Head of Sales, Plant Manager, Chief of Production. Titles like these served to impress without sparking an interest to “know more.” There in bed, however, he saw no reason to lie to a girl he’d most likely never see again.

“I’m what people in the business call a tough guy. Hard to believe isn’t it?”

His words sounded like bad acting. There’s the truth for you, he thought.

“I’m sort of like you,” he tried again. “I do jobs for other people. For example, if your neighbor’s dog is keeping you awake at night and your neighbor won’t do anything about it, you call me. I’d take care of your neighbor and your neighbor’s dog. I’d see to it that every house within a four-block radius would be afraid to own another pet.”

Phineas habitually extended his thumb and index into the shape of a gun as he explained.

“You kill dogs?” asked the girl.

“If that’s the job,” he said assertively, then quickly softened his tone. “No, I don’t kill dogs. I love animals.”

“Bami think you a good man. Why you do this job? Why no fireman or engineer?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I’m not even so tough if you want the truth. My friend Bertie is the one that handles most of the dirty work. I just come up with the brilliant ideas.”

The girl raised her eyebrows and turned away. She found a piece of hotel stationery on the desk and wrote down a nine-digit number. Phineas watched her from the bed.

“Never you know,” she said. “Maybe someday we friend together.”

“Sure,” he replied, more from politeness than actual belief. “Maybe.”

He gave her his number so as not to be rude and waited for the last of her footsteps to disappear before reaching for his cell phone. He pressed a button and checked his messages. No messages. Bertie and Stan were still sleeping. Which is what he would be doing if he had any sense.

He buried his face in the pillow and hoped for more than a single bullet when the nightmares started again.