



downpours of such intensity as to sluice one off the streets. Once the rain had stopped the air would be suffused with the characteristic odor of moist teakwood.

We took up residence on the outskirts of the city in a villa rented from a gentleman of Filipino origin, whom we knew as Mr. Sai. The house lay off the main road on a secluded alley, which I soon found to be a veritable “Lane of the Baskervilles”<sup>4</sup> patrolled at what seemed all hours by a pack of vicious dogs equipped with slavering jaws and bloodshot eyes. Reaching the main road on foot thus being tantamount to a suicide mission, I would leap on my bicycle and pedal furiously down the driveway of the house, trying desperately to build up sufficient velocity before reaching the alley so as to enable me to elude these hellhounds, a number of which would inevitably be snapping and growling at my rapidly revolving heels before I had covered scarcely fifty yards. Eventually I felt sufficiently practiced at running this gauntlet to take my brother Pete (who must have been about three at the time) out for a spin on the back of my machine. This led to misfortune for poor Pete—not at the jaws of the hounds, which we successfully outran—but through dislocating his ankle by accidentally sticking his bare heel into the spokes of the bicycle’s rear wheel. This must have been terribly painful, but since there was little external sign of injury, at first it did not look serious. But his ankle soon began to swell up alarmingly, and my parents had to rush him to hospital where the dislocation was confirmed by X-ray. I was very upset at having been indirectly responsible for Pete’s injury (which, mercifully, had no permanent effects): inevitably I was reminded of the Rome “coffee table” incident, even though the circumstances were essentially different in that case.

There was, sadly, another occasion on which I accidentally caused my poor brother to sustain injury. I had opened a can of, I think, potato sticks, unthinkingly leaving the lid—inner face uppermost—on the dining room table. Soon after, hearing a cry issuing from that room, we rushed in to find Pete weeping with pain and shock, his upper lip bleeding profusely. Once again he had to be rushed to hospital, this time to have several stitches inserted in his lip. It transpired that, while teetering on the edge of the dining-room table directly above the lid of the can I had so carelessly left lying around, he had slipped, falling directly on it and cutting his lip on its razor-sharp rim (I am ashamed to admit that he still bears the scar). Thus “Big Brother” had succeeded in notching up yet another injury: my family were coming to regard me as a positive menace.

Now and then I would injure myself. Still vivid in my memory is the occasion when, on a visit to a friend (whom I recall had a pet gibbon—a

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season from November through February. Its mean relative humidity rarely falls below 60%.

<sup>4</sup> Actually it was called *Soi Nailert*.

creature of remarkable agility), I wandered alone into the garden adjoining his house. Seeing a swing there, I proceeded—perhaps in some absurd attempt at emulating the gibbon—to suspend myself upside-down by my knees from the swing’s horizontal bar, and started to rock back and forth. Somehow I lost my grip and plummeted head-first onto the grass, a distance of perhaps three feet. I was fortunate to have landed more or less on the top of my head, for I would probably have broken my neck had it been bent. Even so, the wind was totally knocked out of me and my lungs seemed to be paralyzed. I would, I suppose, have cried out for help had I been able to do so, but this was one of the rare occasions when my larynx could not be engaged. So I lay on the grass for several minutes gulping for air like a landed fish, all the while cursing myself for a fool. When at last I was able to take a few shuddering breaths, I got to my feet and slunk back into the house, too ashamed to confide to anybody my ludicrous near-escape from death.

Bangkok nights not being appreciably cooler than Bangkok days, my parents had installed an air conditioner in their bedroom to enable them to sleep in comfort. Fundamentally, I was interested less in the device’s actual function than in the multicolored array of buttons with which it was studded. But that function was unquestionably uppermost in our minds when, impatient with the feeble efforts at revolution of the overhead fans in our own rooms, my sister and I crept into our parents’ room at night and bedded down on the floor to bask blissfully in the luxurious coolness of the atmosphere there. Outside this sanctuary one was baked by the heat and plagued by swarms of mosquitoes bent on battening on one’s blood, an activity which neither net nor liberally applied insect repellent seemed to impede. But the evening air also harboured a number of harmless phototropic moths and flying beetles which would cluster in appealing varicoloured clouds around exposed lights. With the fall of night the local crickets initiated a chorus which continued ceaselessly until dawn. Their stridulations came to haunt poor Lynette. We had been to see the science fiction film *Them!*<sup>5</sup>, in which a swarm of atomically mutated giant ants<sup>6</sup> emerge from the Los Angeles sewers and proceed to menace the population. Unfortunately for Lynette, on the film’s soundtrack the monster ants happened to communicate with each other through a stridor very similar to that of our crickets. Its horrifying associations reduced her to a state of terror<sup>7</sup> each night, providing an additional reason for taking

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<sup>5</sup> Made in 1954, it starred Edmund Gwenn, James Whitmore and a number of twelve-foot ants. One of the earliest movies of the post-nuclear monster cycle, its director Gordon Douglas made effective use both of the desert and the Los Angeles sewers.

<sup>6</sup> Many years later to be amusingly elided to *gi-ants* by my erstwhile student Adam Rieger.

<sup>7</sup>Lynette’s terror must have been compounded by the fact that the film begins with a little girl of about her age wandering around the desert, terrified into speechlessness by an attack on her family by the ants. Her aphasia is broken, interestingly, not by hearing the

refuge in our parents' bedroom. Despite the best efforts to comfort and reassure her, the trauma did not subside until our return to California.

Ants of normal size also figured in Bangkok life. To begin with, if after a meal one failed to polish off every crumb, within five minutes several black trails of the creatures would converge on the spot to finish the job. These were harmless, but, as I discovered, such was not the case for the red leafcutter ants inhabiting globular nests of their own striking construction in the branches of the trees bordering the driveway of our house. These fearsome red insects had pinpoint black eyes and menacing pincers between which a droplet of formic acid would gather no matter how gingerly I attempted to pick one up and hold it between my fingers. Under normal conditions they tended to mind their own business. Curious to see how they would respond if disturbed, one morning I clambered onto the garage roof and shook some of the tree branches from which their nests hung. This failing to have appreciable effect, I redoubled my efforts. At that point the insects, goaded beyond endurance by my crude myrmecological experiment, erupted wrathfully out of their nests, dropping down onto the garage roof, from which I made a speedy exit, narrowly avoiding becoming an instant victim of my own mischief<sup>8</sup>. The agitation spread rapidly to the remainder of the ant population of the tree I had shaken, and then, to my consternation, to that of nearby trees. Within an hour the driveway was submerged in red ants whipped up into a fury by my foolishness: on his return that evening my father remarked that this was the sort of "red carpet treatment" that he could happily have forgone! It was not until the next day that the ants' rage subsided and they withdrew to their customary habitat. I vowed (but failed) to give ants' nests a wide berth in future.

Houses in the tropics normally harbour a wide range of creatures in addition to human beings (and ants); in that respect our house was no exception. I recall in particular the small gecko lizards known locally as "chinchoks" which could be seen clinging decorously, if precariously, to the walls and ceilings of every room. Most of the time they would keep perfectly still, infrequently darting off in pursuit of flies or other prey. Every so often one would give up the ghost, causing it to lose its grip and fall: this occurred in ludicrous fashion at dinner one evening when a chinchok suddenly fell from the ceiling and splashed directly into my soup! The harmless presence of these small creatures was accepted as a normal feature of the Thai domestic scene. This was not the case, however, for larger lizards, which were greatly feared by the local population: I recall our *amah* frantically driving out with a pole

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ants' stridulations, but by the smell of formic acid, which causes her to cry out "Them! Them!"

<sup>8</sup> It would have served me right if I had: one should not be able to upset the balance of nature with impunity.

one such lizard which had had the temerity to venture into the house, presumably in search of food. While it did look quite ferocious, this may simply have been the result of human provocation.

In addition to an *amah*, or maid, my parents had engaged a Chinese cook who fancied himself an expert on the preparation of the proper “English” breakfast with which, he was sure, the typical barbarian Occidental began the day. In his view, bacon only became edible once incinerated, and no egg could be considered properly fried until its yolk had been hardened to the point of vulcanization. Discreet attempts were made to indicate to him that we did not actually require a cooked breakfast, but, not wishing to injure his pride, my parents did not press the point. As a result these unappetizing repasts continued to appear in unbroken succession throughout our stay in Bangkok.

While in Thailand my father was employed by USOM, the United States Operations Mission, whose ostensible purpose<sup>9</sup> was to provide aid and “advice” for technical projects such as roadbuilding, sewer construction, etc. As an engineer my father had an inventive streak. For instance, his way of dealing with the nuisance of having to boil our drinking water was to construct a filter in the form of a metal cylinder packed with porous material which could be attached to the kitchen tap. The sole drawback of this clever device was that water flowed through it so slowly that boiling up a kettle was the quicker option! I also recall my father describing to me his ingenious design for a domestic garbage disposal system. Based on the “House that Jack Built” principle, it involved feeding garbage to beetles which would in turn be consumed by carp, etc. My response to this ecologically admirable idea was the facetious suggestion that a goat be added to consume the tin cans: I do not recall my father finding this puerile attempt at humor particularly amusing.

Although I undoubtedly went to see various movies while in Bangkok, the only one I actually remember seeing is the unforgettable *Them!*. But I can recall a few measures of the Thai national anthem<sup>10</sup>, a pentatonically flavored piece appended to each film performance, accompanied by the projection on the screen of a photograph of the bespectacled young king, Phumiphon Adundet. At the first strains of the anthem the audience would struggle to its feet and stand resignedly

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<sup>9</sup> Behind this was the larger U.S. political strategy of ensuring that Thailand, as a “democratic” state, did not fall into the hands of the communists. Since becoming a constitutional monarchy in 1932, Thailand had suffered a series of civilian and military coups-d’état (as well as Japanese occupation during the Second World War), the latest in 1951 just before the return from Europe of the young king Phumiphon Adundet. In this connection it is of interest to note that Thailand is the implied setting of the film *The Ugly American* (1962), in which American foreign policy in South-East Asia is criticized, if in somewhat muted fashion.

<sup>10</sup> As I was to discover many years later through listening to recordings, classical Thai music is exquisitely beautiful.

to hear it through. But just as the composition lurched into what one took to be its terminal cadence, a sudden little flurry of notes would signal a disheartening return to the beginning. I do not recall how often this *da capo* was repeated, but we seemed to have to stand interminably before the music finally ground to a halt.

Before coming to Thailand I had regarded swimming as no more than an unpleasant way of wasting time, but in the tropics immersion in water is an agreeable way of escaping the infernal heat, and so even I learned to swim naturally. My family often whiled away the afternoon at a British “club” where one could wallow happily in the swimming pool, emerging at intervals to consume ice creams and cold beverages which had to be purchased with the appropriate number of “chits” .

Having learned how to execute no more than a simple crawl I was astonished by my mother’s breaststroke whose formality struck me as somewhat comic: perhaps because her arm motions reminded us of the flap of a seal’s flippers Lynette and I would irreverently shout “York, York!” as soon as my mother began to swim. The club’s pool was equipped with a group of diving boards set at increasing altitudes. Having acquired some measure of confidence as a swimmer, I began to enjoy flinging myself off the lowest of these boards, later diving in head-first, and even venturing the occasional roll, although most of my attempts at this led to stinging “backflops.” Gradually ascending through the series of boards, I acquired sufficient confidence to think nothing of jumping feet-first off the highest of them (today the very idea fills me with acrophobia). But the instinct of self-preservation (i.e., cowardice) made me leery of diving *head-first* off a platform sitting thirty to forty feet above the water. I would like to be able to claim with certainty that I finally succeeded in screwing up sufficient courage actually to have done this, but after the passage of so many years, I cannot be sure.

We also occasionally visited a beach on the Gulf of Siam a few miles south of Bangkok. Immersed in the warm tropical water, rocked by its gentle waves, one was suffused with a wonderful feeling of tranquillity, a sense of returning to the womb. But while at the beach one had to be extremely careful to avoid being burnt to a crisp by the ferocious sun, as I discovered to my cost. Once I spent the whole afternoon there, having already acquired a mild sunburn during a session at the “club” the previous day. By nightfall my back was a suppurating mass of blisters, including a particularly spectacular specimen reminiscent in shape of an observatory dome. It was to be weeks before the burns finally healed and I was able to rejoin the corps of “mad dogs and Englishmen” sizzling in the midday sun.

I have only an indistinct impression of the International Children’s Center, the American school I attended in Bangkok. To avoid the afternoon heat, classes began early in the morning, and finished by

mid-day—thus leaving the afternoon conveniently free for wasting time. I had been placed in the seventh grade, whose pleasant teacher Miss Morley provided instruction in all subjects. One incident in her science class I recall vividly. She had mentioned that the moon always presents the same face to the earth, “and so,” she continued, “the moon does not rotate on its axis.” I realized that this could not be right, and, jumping to my feet, gave way to the urge to show off my insight. With wild gesticulations, I attempted to demonstrate to the whole class that, on the contrary, the apparent nonrotation of the moon as viewed from the earth meant that the moon must rotate on its axis at the same rate as it revolves around the earth. In this way I am afraid I began to acquire the reputation of being a “know-all.”

From an early age I had been attracted by the appearance of the symbols and formulas in my father’s engineering handbooks, and I had shown a genuine liking for mathematics in the various schools I had attended. At some point I got hold of an algebra book (possibly one my father had bought to refresh his own knowledge) and started to teach myself the subject after school during the long hot Bangkok afternoons. What, I now ask myself, were my motivations? Curiosity? Overcoming boredom? Impressing my parents? Outshining my contemporaries? Narcissism? All, surely. In any event self-instruction led to self-definition: I began to regard myself, absurdly, as a brave autodidact, an independent thinker pushing himself to the limits of his abilities—and beyond<sup>11</sup>. Being knowledgeable beyond my years—and taking refuge in words—thus became a major constituent of my self-image. Behind all this was, I now realize, the fear of mediocrity—which even then I regarded as an abridgment of my sense of self-worth—accompanied by the desire to protect myself from the feelings of inferiority which in some obscure way I had already anticipated would result from direct competition with my contemporaries, especially in the classroom. But if indeed I did take up mathematics as a means of defending my ego it was because I found mathematics beautiful—and I still do.

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<sup>11</sup> Many years later I came across William Faulkner’s words, which express the unarticulated ideals of my youth with precision:

*Always dream and shoot higher than you know you can do. Don’t bother just to be better than your contemporaries and predecessors. Try to be better than yourself.*