

At the Suvarnabhumi Airport

O Thiam Chin¹
Singapore

Colin is walking aimlessly among the stalls at the food court in Suvarnabhumi Airport, undecided what to order – he had his breakfast just two hours ago at the hotel, and it's too early for lunch – when he sees Gwen ambling towards him in the opposite direction, carrying a tray with a plate of Phat Thai, and invites her to join him and Kay at their table.

She hesitates briefly, looking at the table where Colin has indicated, smiles and tries to decline the invitation. No, no, join us, Colin insists. Gwen, tanned and long-limbed, looking much younger than her actual age of twenty-four, acquiesces and walks over to where Kay is sitting. From where Colin stands, looking at the two women, they come across, quite convincingly, like mother and daughter, with their large eyes, thick lips and shoulder-length hair. Gwen has graduated recently with second-class honours in Political Science from the university, and plans to spend a month backpacking from Singapore to Laos. Colin and Kay have met Gwen at the hotel in Sala Daeng where they had stayed. In their mid-forties, they have been married for fifteen years, and the one-week trip to Bangkok was something they had planned for a long time, to rebuild (Kay's choice of word) what was left of their marriage.

Colin, two years older than Kay, is considered by many of their friends, to be more level-headed, and friendlier, even kinder, though the last aspect is derived more from his looks than his actions. He wears the effects of his age well: thinning hair, faint wrinkles around his eyes, a pale, longish face smoothed out over the years. His attire is generally plain and austere: crew necks or polo shirts with khaki pants. Wearing an old pair of spectacles, his dark-hazel eyes project an unblinkingly firm intensity. The lines that bracket his mouth deepen into sharp creases when he smiles, and he has to always remind himself to smile, to “soften his look,” so that he appears more approachable, a common feedback he received regularly from his students and colleagues at the junior college where he has been teaching, since he graduated from the Institute of Education in the early nineties.

¹ O's stories have appeared in *World Literature Today*, *Asia Literary Review*, *Kyoto Journal*, *The Jakarta Post* and *Esquire*. Twice longlisted for the Frank O' Connor Short Story Award, he is the author of *Free-Falling Man*, *Never Been Better*, *Under The Sun* and *The Rest Of Your Life And Everything That Comes With It*. His latest collection, *Love, Or Something Like Love*, was published in 2013. He was an honorary fellow of the Iowa International Writing Program in 2010, and a recipient of the Young Artist Award in 2012.

Of the couple, Kay is the shorter one, with a wiry, petite physique, the body of a dancer, or a gymnast. She is often asked whether she is one or the other, and usually she would respond with a wry smile or a short reply that she is more of a runner, an outdoorsy person. She rarely breaks out into a laugh, though her smile has a charm-like quality that is gentle and assuring, and on the rare occasions she tells a joke, it's hard to tell whether she's being ironic, or mocking. Though she studied English Literature in the university, she hardly reads novels these days, much preferring newspapers and home-deco magazines which are easier to digest. She met Colin during an alumni gathering organised by the university, attracted by his height and take-no-prisoners seriousness. In time, a few years into their marriage, she has completely forgotten what had drawn her to Colin in the first place. She has outgrown what she had once desired, her tastes changed.

Now, looking at Kay and Gwen seated at the table, Colin sees the distance – unbridgeable and unending – that he and Kay have travelled in different directions, and thinks about what he would give up if he can take back the years, to seize back his youth again, even for just a short while; how he would then run off with Gwen to Cambodia, her next stop, instead of returning home with Kay, back to their bored, strait-jacketed lives. This random thought sticks to his mind like a splinter, and he finds himself taking long, deep breaths, to recover.

When the excitement has passed and his mind cleared, he chuckles over the embarrassingly juvenile idea – no, of course, this is ridiculous, this escape. What he has wanted, in fact, is something else, something simpler, uncomplicated: to hold Gwen, and to kiss her.

Colin's chain of dalliances started at the end of the courtship with Kay, just before he proposed marriage. At first, he thought it was just a slip of judgement, something that hadn't meant anything; he thought he would change after marrying Kay, but it wasn't so. Three or four students who had graduated from college (he knew well to stay away from current students), and who had kept in contact, mothers of students, even two ex-colleagues who had left the teaching field. Nothing serious, he told himself, just a form of companionship in times of loneliness, although two of his ex-students (no doubt, in their youthful, naive infatuation) had wanted something more, a more permanent "position" in his life. Kay knew about his last affair, only because the ex-student had turned up at the doorstep of their flat, and this had resulted in a long-drawn, painful series of confrontations and couple counselling, which left Colin and Kay emotionally drained and wary of each other. But they had continued to stay together, and Colin had remained faithful, restrained, for a few years, trying hard to rebuild his marriage. His resolve weakened over time, naturally, but he was more

cautious in his later affairs. He kept within safe, tested boundaries, and Kay didn't suspect anything, so far. If she did, she didn't create any ruckus.

Kay, in the wake of Colin's infidelity, also started looking beyond the confines of marriage, and sought for different experiences, not exactly affairs (she promised herself she wouldn't go so low, to Colin's level), more like harmless flings. She would go out for coffee, and sometimes dinners, with her clients; she works as an account manager in a local mid-size PR agency. At first, she didn't want to question the whys of her actions, but when she examined her motives, often during slippery moments of guilt, she would feel fleeting pangs of remorse. And even though she could reason and justify what she was doing (being on higher moral ground than Colin, she insisted), it did nothing to clear up the conflict in her, her sense of rightful self-righteousness. Plus she never felt the need to develop these dinner-dates into something else; they were already sufficient to meet what she wanted. At least, now, she was happier, which was more than what she had hoped for.

Kay never told Colin about these men she went out with, though she did slip them into their conversations, in nuggets of information, mostly about the projects she was handling for them. One of these men, Danny, whom Kay had the most dinners with, often cropped up in these conversations, a tall, well-groomed articulate man in his late thirties, whose account was the biggest that Kay had to manage at work. Danny, divorced with no children, was someone who Kay was comfortable with, with his easy charm and oily words. Sometimes, she would cancel dinner with Colin just to have it with Danny, and when the former asked about her whereabouts, Kay would tell him frankly.

"Does he have a thing for you?" Colin once asked, with thinly-veiled suspicion. "He's not into affairs," Kay replied without any hesitation. Colin, caught off-guard by Kay's reply, retreated behind a bland expression, and kept his silence, not daring to ask more questions.

Colin and Kay met Gwen when they checked in at Inn Sala Daeng a week ago – a cosy, no-frills hotel with an everything-goes deco that comprised of wingback chairs in pastel tones, photo-frames of flower cut-outs and narrow walk space. They had taken the early flight from Singapore, and before that, they had an unhurried morning of packing, breakfast and double-checking of details. So, when they were handed the keys to their double room on the fifth floor, they were more or less ready to begin their holidays, eager for a change of scene.

Their room was better than expected, with a slanted structural beam that served as a divider between the two beds, with sufficient, separate space for their individual luggage. Through their windows, they had an unobstructed view of the tall financial buildings in the distance and tight alleyways lined with food carts.

Before they entered the room, the door beside theirs opened and Gwen walked out, giving them a quick smile and offering a perfunctory greeting.

After they had freshened up and changed into their street clothes, Colin and Kay left the hotel and walked to the shop that they often frequented when they came to Bangkok, at the corner before the Silom thoroughfare. It was there that they chanced upon Gwen, who was paying at the counter. Seeing the couple, Gwen gave a longer smile and nodded her head in acknowledgement.

At breakfast the next day, in the low-ceilinged lobby of the hotel, they saw Gwen again, sitting by herself with an iPad, intense on what she was reading. As all the indoor tables were taken up, Colin and Kay sat outside, on garden chairs, facing out to the street. Gwen looked up when Colin came in for coffee at the pantry beside the reception; Colin returned her smile.

Later, when they were shopping at Terminal 21, looking into one of the women's boutiques, Kay spotted Gwen trying out a blouse and pointed it out to Colin. This time, Gwen wasn't aware she was being watched. They stayed for some time, looking at her, before moving off.

"She seems to be alone," Kay said, "Thought girls her age usually travel in groups."

"Her age? She can't be that young. Well, some girls are pretty independent these days, and travel alone. Not uncommon anymore."

"Isn't it dangerous to travel alone?"

"No, just need to take some precautions, I guess. Bangkok isn't that dangerous. A woman can travel alone safely, if she knows what she's doing."

On their third night, after a two-hour scrub and oil massage at a spa in Silom – Colin slept through the massage; Kay complained about a soreness in her calves – they were hungry, and checking out the food stalls in the street. Looking for an available table at a food stall that sold egg noodles with assorted meat, they saw someone waving at them. Gwen, the young woman from the hotel. "Here, you can share the table with me."

They exchanged introductions, and throughout dinner, under the guise of friendliness and curiosity, Colin was able to take in every detail of the young woman's features. Gwen – it was a name that suited the young woman, gentle and feminine, thought Colin, as he and Kay asked polite, generic questions. A shy, unguarded demeanour underscored Gwen's youthful, unblemished looks. Opening up to the couple, Gwen talked about her month-long backpacking trip – the beaches she had been to (Cha-Am, Hua Hin), a nasty bout of diarrhoea, where she planned to go next (Cambodia) – and when she heard that Colin was a teacher in a junior college and taught Literature, she mentioned her love for J.M. Coetzee, her dislike for Salman Rushdie. Colin nodded his head and listened as Gwen went on to summarise a few of her favourite books, though his mind was entirely somewhere else. He liked how Gwen's eyes lit up, when

he agreed with her on certain points she brought up, as if she were unconsciously seeking approval from him, an assumedly authoritative figure in books. Colin smiled, and went along with it.

“Perhaps I can pass you some of my books when you are back in Singapore. You will like them,” said Colin.

“Yes, of course, anything you recommend, I’m sure I’ll like.” A glint of light in Gwen’s eyes.

“Sure, they are taking up too much shelf space, anyway.” Colin turned to look at Kay while he was speaking, but she was busy cleaning the eating utensils with a wet tissue.

When they were leaving, Colin offered to pay for Gwen, and though she declined, Colin insisted, shoving the bahts into the hand of the food stall server. Together, the three of them walked back to the hotel.

Over the next few days, Colin and Kay saw more of Gwen – mostly unplanned – and grew more comfortable with her presence, which was disarming and pleasantly distracting. When Colin heard that Gwen was heading up to Ayutthaya for a day trip, he proposed the idea to Kay, who agreed. When they reached the place, after an excruciatingly slow two-hour coach ride, Gwen headed straight for the Wat Phra Si Sanphet, taking her leave from the couple. Later, resting in the shade of a Bodhi tree, Colin watched Gwen as she went up and down the rows of restored chedis, taking pictures of the stupas with her Canon. Her skin darkened considerably under the blisteringly hot sun, and the straps of her bra showed through her perspiration-drenched white t-shirt. At the Wat Phra Mahathat, among the headless Buddha statues, Colin offered Gwen a drink from his bottle of water, and she drank deeply, water spilling from the corners of her mouth. At one point, he caught Kay looking at him, and had to turn away to examine an inscription on a stone block.

In the last two days of their trip, the couple had their breakfast at the hotel, and Gwen joined them on both occasions. She brought them plates of peanut-butter sandwiches, biscuits and cut fruits, and got up to serve them second rounds of coffee from the coffee machine in the pantry. At their last breakfast, Gwen took out her camera and asked whether it was okay to take a picture with them, for memory’s sake. After the receptionist had taken their picture, Gwen showed them the preview image on the camera. With Gwen’s body leaning into him, her arm brushing his, Colin felt the maddening rush of lust stirring in him, which later tightened into knots in his gut, and he tried not to let the pain show on his face. When Gwen asked for their email, so as to send the picture to them, Colin wrote down his email on the back of a receipt, which Gwen slipped into a slot in her camera bag. After Gwen finished her coffee, she stood up to leave – *Time to seize the day*, she said – and in the quiet that followed her departure, an unexplainable sense of sadness and desperation crept over Colin, subduing him.

To prolong their conversation at the food court in the airport, Colin bought drinks for all of them – Thai iced tea for him and Kay, lemongrass soda for Gwen. Against the growing white noise of passengers eating and chatting, and children running and playing about, Colin strains to catch drift of what Gwen is saying, something about changing of currency, the lousy exchange rate at the airport. To any passer-by, they seem like a small family, enjoying a meal, waiting for their flight back home to their contained, orderly lives.

Checking her mobile phone for the time, Gwen says, “Well, it’s really great to know people like you when travelling overseas, to have someone to talk to.”

“Same here, we enjoyed your company,” Kay replies, a smile plastered to her face.

“Well, you guys have a safe trip back.” Gwen moves to take her backpack from the seat beside her. She takes a last sip of her drink, her cheeks hollowed in. “I think I better make a move first. Don’t want to miss the flight.”

Colin, half-rising from his seat, says, “Nah, it’s still early. No point waiting at the gate.” From where he is sitting, Colin has noted the boarding time circled in black on Gwen’s boarding pass that is protruding out of her passport holder. “Anyway, your gate is just round the corner, so you don’t need to rush,” he adds. Gwen sits down again, and for a few long seconds, none of them speaks as if they have suddenly run out of topics. Then Gwen breaks the silence.

“So did you guys enjoy your trip this time?”

“It was relaxing. Just what we wanted,” says Kay.

“Yes, it was,” says Colin, unwilling to meet Kay’s glance.

The second time Gwen signals her intention to leave, Colin and Kay don’t stop her; instead they stand up with her and walk her out of the crowded food court.

“Well, you have a safe backpacking trip. Be careful with your passport and money, and don’t talk to strangers,” says Colin. Gwen flashes a wide smile. And, as if on cue, she brings her hand to Colin’s, and shakes it hard. Then she turns to Kay and gives her a hug, which causes Kay to stiffen up visibly. The moving crowd of people flows around them, indistinct voices speaking half a dozen of different languages, breaking over them like waves over the rocks.

“Guess I’ll see you back in Singapore,” says Gwen, lifting her hand for a brief wave. Then turning her back to the couple, she walks away in long, purposeful strides.

Not knowing where to go, or how to move on, Colin stands like a man stuck in the swirl of a quicksand, the ground beneath him no longer able to support the immense weight of his body, giving way completely.

When Kay turns to look at him, Colin doesn’t look away. Kay studies his face for a long while, and then she, too, walks away from him.