Candy

by Daniel Brockman

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The world is full of obvious things which nobody by any chance ever observes.
—Arthur Conan Doyle

The man who tried to kill me in Burger King believed I was Israeli because I was wearing fox ears. This was at approximately four in the morning, although in Patong four in the morning is not a sufficiently exact description of the social hour. It can mean the end of the night, the beginning of the morning, the final drink, the first coffee, the moment at which a person goes home, or the moment at which a different person decides not to. The Burger King was brightly lit and doing ordinary business. I was eating a Whopper. The fox ears were on my head, where they

had been for long enough that I no longer experienced them as information.

The man had been looking at me from elsewhere in the room. I did not know him and, so far as I was aware, he did not know me. At first he asked whether I was Israeli. Before I had answered in a manner that satisfied him, he had reached a firmer conclusion and begun shouting, "Yehudi! Yehudi!" He pointed at me while saying it. The ears had apparently supplied the missing evidence. I told him I was Swedish. This did not help. I told him I hated Israel. This also did not help. I said, "Bro, what is wrong with you? I have no idea what you are talking about." This was accurate but failed as an intervention.

He began throwing things. Drinks went across the floor. A glass bottle struck something behind me and broke. He turned over tables, not in the efficient way one turns over a table to clean beneath it but by taking hold of the edge and putting the tabletop where the legs had been. The room changed very quickly from a restaurant in which several people were eating hamburgers into a room organized around preventing one man from throwing another bottle. He spat on me and punched me in the face. I moved away from him. The staff came out from behind the counter and

placed themselves between us. More staff joined them. Customers moved to the walls or toward the door. My Whopper remained on its paper, partly eaten.

It was possible to understand his intention without understanding his reasoning. He had seen the fox ears, identified me as Israeli, converted Israeli into Jew, converted Jew into the Gaza Strip, and converted the Gaza Strip into the particular Burger King in which we were standing. The sequence had happened entirely inside him but had acquired tables and bottles by the time it reached the rest of us. I continued trying to correct the first step while the staff attended to the final one.

There was a second difficulty. Several people naturally wanted to call the police. Under ordinary conditions, a man throwing glass bottles and punching strangers in a restaurant is an appropriate subject for police. I did not have a passport. The arrival of the police would therefore have introduced a separate line of inquiry which, though less violent, could have lasted longer. I was consequently trying to persuade everyone that the situation was both extremely serious and not serious enough to require any official attention. I wanted the man restrained, the bottles removed from his hands, the tables restored to their proper orientation, and the entire matter concluded locally.

"No police," I said.

Someone asked me whether I was sure.

"Yes," I said. "No police. It is okay."

It was not okay in the ordinary sense, but there are circumstances in which "okay" means only that the presently available alternatives appear worse.

The staff eventually got him outside or far enough away that he ceased to be the central fact of the room. I do not remember the exact mechanism. Several people were holding him, and then he was no longer inside. What remained was the result: chairs pushed aside, drinks spreading in slow islands across the tile, broken glass, a table upside down, another table on its side, staff breathing hard, and the people who had been eating looking at one another with the solemnity of passengers after turbulence.

I asked one of the staff, "What the fuck was that?"

She said, "I have no fucking idea."

This seemed to be the complete explanation. There was nothing further to establish. I gave 1,000 baht to each of the people who had intervened. The money was not payment for damage, since I had not caused the damage, and it was not exactly a tip for service, since nobody had ordered the service they had just performed. It was a recognition that they had spent part

of their shift physically containing a stranger's theory of the Middle East. They accepted it. Someone began putting a table upright. Someone else found a broom. I left the Whopper behind.

Outside, my face hurt where I had been punched, and there was still spit on some part of me, although I could not determine where without giving the question more attention than it deserved. I had been tired before the incident and was more tired afterward, but the fatigue had become too complicated for immediate sleep. My hotel was in the direction I was walking. McDonald's breakfast opened in one hour and thirty minutes.

That fact gave the remainder of the night a structure.

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There is a period in Patong between the final events of the night and the first events of the morning during which nothing is closed in a decisive way. Some doors are down, some doors are halfway down, and some businesses remain fully illuminated but have altered their understanding of what business they are conducting. The people who have been working all night are preparing to leave. The people who work in the morning have begun to appear. Tourists walk with the slow purpose of people who have nowhere left to

go but are not prepared to concede the point. Street cleaners inherit the same pavement from drinkers who have not yet surrendered it. Food changes category. Beer remains beer, but rice becomes breakfast.

I had ninety minutes to occupy. This was too long to stand outside McDonald's and too short to make going to bed feel rational. I had not had a massage in a long time. A massage shop was open on the way to my hotel, or at least open enough that a girl near the entrance asked whether I wanted a massage. I said I wanted a very hard Thai massage, especially my back and neck. She said okay. Her name was Candy.

The shop had the light particular to businesses that operate after the surrounding city has stopped pretending to be daytime. It was neither dark nor bright. Towels were stacked. Bottles of oil stood together. There was a lobby with chairs and a room farther inside with mattresses. Candy led me in, told me where to put my things, and began the massage without requiring the night to explain itself.

She was extremely strong. A hard massage can mean that the masseuse presses firmly enough to produce a useful sensation, or it can mean that she has identified an adversarial relationship between your muscles and her professional reputation. Candy belonged to the sec-

ond school. She pressed her thumbs into my back until the separate discomforts of the previous hour became organized beneath a larger discomfort. She used her elbows. She moved my arms into positions they had apparently been avoiding for several years. She placed a knee where a knee was required and used the leverage of her whole body. When she asked, "Hard okay?" I said yes.

The answer remained yes even when it was no longer completely descriptive.

My back had accumulated the ordinary consequences of living through a phone. I held the phone too low. I lowered my head toward it. My shoulders followed. The body adapts to whatever small task is repeated most often, and mine had slowly adapted to the posture of a person reading something very important near his stomach. Candy found the result immediately. There were muscles beside my neck that had become ropes. She pressed one of them, and pain traveled to a place behind my eye. She pressed the other, and I felt it in my jaw.

"This bad," she said.

"Yes," I said.

She laughed, not because the condition was funny but because the degree of it was. I laughed too. We

talked intermittently while she worked. She was funny in the practical way of someone who has spent years meeting people after midnight and has learned that nearly all of them can be improved by a direct observation. She did not ask for a coherent account of why I had arrived at four in the morning wearing fox ears with a sore face. This was not unusual enough to require an interview.

The massage went on for a long time. My sense of its length was measured less by minutes than by successive regions of the body being discovered and corrected. She worked down my back, returned to the shoulders, pulled my arms, turned my head, pressed along the base of my skull, and then returned again to the same point in my neck as though annoyed that it had survived. The pressure was so severe that it produced a kind of calm. There was no room to continue thinking about Burger King while someone was using an elbow to persuade my shoulder blade to move.

By the end I felt both damaged and repaired. This is often the proper result of a Thai massage. I sat up slowly. Candy asked whether I wanted a special massage.

I considered the question. I had not planned to have any kind of massage until several minutes before I entered the shop, and I had not planned the evening

before entering Burger King either. Planning had not demonstrated much authority over the night.

"Yes," I said. "Actually yes. Why not?"

"Hand job or blowjob?" she asked.

"Blowjob."

"Two thousand baht."

"Great," I said.

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Candy gave me a very good blowjob. We continued laughing at first, although eventually both of us had to concentrate. The distinction between laughing and concentrating was not dramatic. The room simply became quieter. She was skilled and unhurried. I came in her mouth.

Afterward she sat back and looked surprised. This was not the theatrical surprise used to reassure a customer that some routine aspect of him is exceptional. She seemed to be evaluating a result that had contradicted previous observations.

"Wow," she said. "You taste good. Like candy from 7-Eleven."

"Wow," I said.

"You drink coconut?"

"No."

"Pineapple?"

"No."

She considered other possible causes. Fruit had evidently been the leading theory.

"Beer," I said.

"Beer?"

"Yes."

This did not resolve the matter scientifically, but it was the only dietary information I could provide with confidence.

She reached for the money and gave me 60 baht back.

"Here," she said. "I owe you. I suck people off but they don't taste like this."

I accepted the 60 baht. It would have been discourteous to dispute an adjustment made by the person possessing the relevant comparative experience. The original price had been 2,000 baht. She had named it clearly, I had agreed, and the service had been completed. The return of 60 baht was therefore not bargaining. It was a correction entered after the transaction because some unpriced fact had emerged during performance.

The amount mattered. One hundred baht might have been ceremonial. Five hundred would have suggested a revision of the whole arrangement. Sixty baht was exact enough to indicate accounting. It was the

amount by which, in Candy's judgment, the balance had shifted. I had paid her to give me a blowjob. She had enjoyed the taste sufficiently to owe me 60 baht. Once she had reached this conclusion, leaving the account uncorrected would have been improper.

Patong depends on prices because prices permit an enormous number of brief relationships to occur without requiring the participants to invent a future for them. The price says what is happening, how long it is happening, and where responsibility ends. This can appear impersonal from outside. In practice it creates a small enclosure inside which people are free to be personal in whatever ways arise. A massage has a price. A blowjob has a price. The fact that somebody notices the way you hold your phone does not. Neither does a beer selected according to the size of your dick. These things enter through a different system.

Candy asked whether I wanted something to drink.

"Do you have beer?" I asked.

"I give you big Heineken," she said. "Big because your dick is big."

She went to get it. The bottle she returned with was not the small Heineken that can be held unobtrusively between two fingers but the large bottle intended to remain present in the situation. It was cold and wet with

condensation. She gave it to me with the satisfaction of someone whose choice had been governed by a sound principle.

I thanked her and opened it. The first drink was very cold. I still had the 60 baht in my hand.

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We went into the lobby. I sat in one of the chairs and drank the large Heineken. The shop was quiet. The street beyond the entrance had begun to lose the density of night without yet acquiring the confidence of morning. Candy stood behind me and resumed massaging my neck.

This second neck massage had not been discussed as part of the arrangement. It did not have a duration or a price. She simply returned to the muscle that had offended her earlier and pressed it with her thumbs while I drank. The large bottle rested against my leg between sips. My face still hurt from the punch, but this had become a secondary item.

At some point I picked up my phone. I held it in the usual position, low in front of me, and lowered my head toward it. Candy stopped what she was doing.

"No," she said.

She moved the phone higher and closer to my face. She straightened my head with one hand and placed the phone with the other so that I could look at it without folding my neck.

"Like this," she said. "You do like this. Better."

I tried the position. It felt exaggerated because the correct version of a long-standing habit often feels exaggerated. The phone was close enough that I was conscious of holding it. My head remained above my shoulders. Candy pressed the muscle beside my neck again to indicate the connection between the posture and the evidence she had found there.

The advice had unusual authority because she had spent the previous hour physically examining the consequences of my failure to follow it. Many people can say that phones are bad for the neck. Candy knew exactly which part of my neck was bad, how bad it was, and what angle I had repeatedly used to make it that way. Her instruction was not general wellness advice. It was a repair note attached to a particular body.

I held the phone higher.

"Yes," she said.

She continued the massage. I continued drinking the Heineken.

There are kinds of care that announce themselves through sacrifice, and there are kinds that appear as small corrections after the principal business is finished. The latter are easy to miss because they occupy little time and do not resemble a declaration. Someone moves your phone six inches upward. Someone returns 60 baht because fairness has acquired a new variable. Someone chooses the large beer. The acts are minor, but they have the density of attention. They establish that, for the moment, one person has not only seen another but made a few practical decisions on the basis of what she saw.

The man in Burger King had also seen me. He had looked at the ears on my head and produced an entire identity, history, religion, nationality, and war. Within seconds I had become the representative of a state I was not from and a policy I did not support. Candy had looked at the way I held my phone and concluded that it was hurting my neck. Her conclusion was less ambitious and more accurate.

The two encounters had occurred within a short walk of one another. This did not make them opposites in any grand moral design. Patong does not arrange its events for that purpose. It places people close together and remains open while they do whatever they are go-

ing to do. One stranger may spit on you because of the Gaza Strip. Another may correct your posture while giving you a Heineken. The street contains both without explaining the transition.

I told Candy I would come back the next day.

"I bring you real candy from 7-Eleven," I said.

She laughed and said yes. The promise was simple because 7-Eleven was nearby and candy was available in many forms. I did not yet know which candy would qualify as the real one. Presumably she would recognize it.

I drank more of the beer. She kept working on my neck. The bottle, which had seemed excessively large when she handed it to me, had become proportionate to the time remaining before breakfast.

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Eventually I said I was going to McDonald's.

"Breakfast," I said.

Candy immediately understood.

"Yes," she said. "McDonald's sucks ass but the breakfast is just chef's kiss."

She put her fingers to her lips and opened them outward. The judgment was exact. It did not express a general affection for McDonald's, which would have

been difficult to respect, nor did it dismiss McDonald's completely, which would have required sacrificing the breakfast. It preserved the necessary exception. The institution could suck ass while the breakfast remained chef's kiss. There was no contradiction because the categories had been properly separated.

We agreed with unusual completeness. Agreement about a favorite thing is common and often uninformative. Agreement about the precise boundary of an exception is rarer. It means that two people have not merely reached the same conclusion but have drawn the same small map around it. Candy and I disliked the same restaurant in the same way and exempted the same hours for the same reason.

This was enough for us to recognize that we had found a tiny soulmate.

A large soulmate is supposed to share a life. A tiny soulmate shares a jurisdiction: one song, one joke, one food, one hour of the morning, or one exact opinion about the point at which a bad restaurant becomes good. Nothing outside it is promised. For the period in which it exists, that narrow portion of the world no longer requires explanation.

Our jurisdiction included the McDonald's breakfast exception, large Heinekens for large dicks, the possi-

bility that beer makes semen taste like candy from 7-Eleven, corrected phone posture, and a 60-baht refund when a blowjob proves unexpectedly pleasant for the person giving it. It did not include the Gaza Strip. That subject had received enough attention for one morning.

I finished enough of the beer to leave. Candy reminded me to hold the phone higher. I said I would return with candy. She said okay. I had arrived because I was tired and had ninety minutes before McDonald's breakfast. She had been at work. The massage and the blowjob had been excellent. The beer was cold. My neck was better. These were sufficient facts.

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I stepped outside. Morning was beginning in the incremental Patong manner, not with silence or birds but with one set of lights becoming unnecessary while another set of businesses prepared to turn theirs on. The air had the used quality of the end of the night. People were washing sections of pavement. Motorbikes passed. Someone was arranging chairs. Someone else was still drinking. The city had not slept, but it had changed shifts.

In my pocket I had the 60 baht Candy had returned. My face was sore. My back felt opened and tender. The

geopolitics of my fox ears remained unresolved. McDonald's was opening breakfast.

By the time I arrived, the breakfast menu was available. I ordered and sat down. When I checked my phone, I held it closer to my face, exactly as Candy had shown me.

