

The Sweetest Little Thai Girl

by
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The sweetest little Thai girl runs everywhere. She rarely walks or goes by a motorized vehicle. She has no bicycle. No scooter. Thirty-five pounds, maybe 36 when soaking wet, Narakron is her first name. Narak means cute in Thai. Her nickname is Fem. No one knows if that word has any meaning, or how she got her nickname. Fem is thin as a twig. Despite her tiny size, attributable to a premature birth and ongoing undernourishment, she is strong as a Golden eagle and possesses never-ending energy and curiosity.

Fem is an adorable little Thai girl. No one knows her last name. No one cares. A love child. When she was a baby, Fem's teenage Thai mother abandoned her. Fem's Thai dad knew nothing about being a dad. He knew nothing about anything, other than that when he got drunk and took yah-bah pills, a Thai stimulant and good-feel drug, he wanted to have sex with young and beautiful Thai girls. Fem's mother is one of them. She ran away.

Fem comes from Issarn—a region in the northeast of Thailand. Fem is such a delight. Alone since birth, happy and free as a lark. She attends the local school. It has a new metal roof over the soccer field. The boys like soccer. The classrooms are cozy. The curriculum

focuses on rote learning. All the teachers were born nearby. Students are served a simple lunch each day at exactly noon. Fem eats quickly, always happy to satisfy her hunger, regardless of what the cooks prepare. Every meal includes white rice. Usually, a clear soup is served, too.

After school, Fem can be found scurrying about the village of Ban Charoen Swimno. She floats like a ballerina. Given her tiny size and athletic prowess, she could be a marvelous dancer, if a benefactor finds her a coach in time. She has seen traditional Thai dance. She likes to rock and sway. When Fem smiles, she delights, but also breaks your heart. No one ever taught Fem how to care for her teeth, or mentioned that teeth need care.

The little Thai girl has a marvelous purity and innocence. Without parents, Fem is an independent child. Granny makes a modest effort to look after dear little Fem, but Fem darts about here and there unrestrained—always running effortlessly. Her lack of parental supervision allows her to flow and blend in with nature without any fear of breaking some rule. Once she gets moving, nothing can stop Fem. Nothing at all. No one tells her what to do or instructs her. Fem finds her own way in the world. She does an excellent job.

Fem has a sweet tooth. She gobbles up brownies, ice cream, and Thai sweets. Her teeth are horribly black and crooked and falling out. Without daily access to fluorinated water, Fem's teeth are decaying rapidly. Hopefully, by the time her baby teeth prematurely fall

out, someone will have given her a tooth brush and instructed her how to brush. Her smile is so gentle and lovely.

Letting Fem's adult teeth rot and drop out would be a great shame and lead to premature health issues. No one in the village knows about periodontal disease, and the type of breathing problems that it might cause Fem in the future. The villagers suffering from shortness of breath who constantly hack up sputum never linked their issue to poor dental care. Bad breath is the norm in Fem's area. People accept it.

Many people in the village know Fem. Few of them give her a second thought. They've grown accustomed to the little dynamo's unusual and remarkable energy level. Half the farmers in the village work the fields planting rice all day, and they suffer from sore backs. Others wake up at midnight to go scratch rubber trees. The trees give off more milky-white sap, latex, if scratched when humans should be sleeping. In and around Fem's village, most people are either sleeping or relaxing during the day. Many drink too much lao khao (Thai rice whiskey). Fem doesn't really notice that she's different. Other people do. From their horizontal positions, they see that little Fem is always on the go.

What Fem enjoys most about her life is her freedom, but she doesn't know that and doesn't think about it. She loves to run and jump and play. When Fem gets hot, she likes to submerge in water. It does get extremely hot in Fem's village. No one has ever taught Fem how to swim. There is a local pool, but that costs

a few cents to enter. No one has any spare change. Fem doesn't own a swim suit. She likes to dip her toes in water. Any water will do, even the murky, Thai-tea-colored water in the ponds in the rice fields. There is nothing that Fem fears. She hasn't learned to worry yet.

Occasionally, a foreigner visits Fem's village. Her region in Issarn is famous for beautiful women. Many of them grow up dreaming about marrying a foreign man—a vehicle to provide them the opportunity to escape the region—to lead a more materialistic life. The villagers believe that all foreign men are wealthy. The women spend a great deal of time grooming themselves to attract foreign men. They style their hair, use creams to lighten the color of their skin, apply makeup to enhance their appearance, paint their finger- and toenails in elaborate designs, and dress in sexy clothes. Fem knows nothing about these practices. She doesn't care.

Fem has no fear of foreigners. She doesn't play a game to win their favor. To Fem, all people are equal. No one is different. She doesn't judge anyone, and to this point, she doesn't care if anyone judges her. She wouldn't know if they did. In fact, the concept of judging someone isn't something that Fem even understands yet, bless her little beating heart.

Unlike other village children, who are afraid of foreign men, Fem quickly races up to the foreign visitor when he comes to the Tuesday afternoon fresh market. She presents him with a precious gift—her beautiful smile. Her disarming smile melts his heart. They talk rapidly in Thai. They smile and giggle and nod in

unison. Other children listen, but don't get involved. They fear the large foreign man. Fem doesn't understand the concept of large. She doesn't know that she's considered small. They're equals: same, same. Fem continues to flash her smile throughout their conversation. Other villagers look on puzzled and amazed. They see that the foreign man likes Fem. They don't understand why. They scratch their heads.

A girl selling Thai custard cakes calls to Fem. She races over to the seller, splashing through mud puddles along the way. Fem doesn't notice that her feet get wet and her legs dirty. She doesn't understand the concepts of clean or dirty. No one has taught Fem to avoid puddles, and on her own, she certainly sees no reason to. Puddle jumping is fun. Fem smiles. Her mouth begins to water.

The girl peddling Thai custard longs to hear Fem's melodious singing voice. Fem sings a beautiful song. The foreign man listens too. He almost cries at Fem's gentle voice. She's a talented singer. Fem demonstrates amazing potential. She's a little Thai angel. As a reward for her song, the seller gives Fem a yellow cake. After flashing her disarming smile again, the happy seller smiles back. Fem devours the cake, providing the seller with an even greater joy. She rewards Fem with a second cake. And, Fem quickly chews it up in her tiny mouth, making good use of her remaining teeth. Crumbs trickle down Fem's ragged shirt; she doesn't notice. She's happy. Her tiny stomach is full.

The cakes have provided Fem new fuel. The sugar causes her to dash about here and there, going so fast that few people even notice who is whizzing by. They all know that only one child in the village runs that fast. They subconsciously realize that it's Fem. They don't think of her. They just expect her to be there, always racing here and there, fast as the wind, and sometimes even faster. Swoosh! There goes Fem.

Fem's mother never thinks of Fem, well almost never. Once in a while, she wishes that Fem were never born. Fem's father never thinks of Fem, well almost never. Once in a while, he hopes that no one finds out that he's Fem's father. Granny thinks of Fem, but one minute Fem is there, and the next she's gone. Poof! Granny can't really keep up with spritely little Fem. Granny is only 29 years old.

The foreign man thinks of Fem. He sees enormous possibilities for her. The villagers only know one existence. They don't see Fem's power, flair, and prospects. The man wants Fem to have the opportunity to become whatever she wants to be in life. Fem doesn't understand the concept of time. Most of the villagers seek immediate gratification. They don't plan or think about the future. They don't let themselves hope, other than religiously playing the lottery.

The man wants to become Fem's secret benefactor in an effort to give her a chance to succeed. He'll find someone to assist and nurture Fem. But, he decides to wait for now. Fem's innocence and purity is something

so special, he doesn't want to spoil her beauty. It's almost as though she was never influenced by people. She has no bad habits or thoughts, and only kind words emerge from her smiling face. The freedom she enjoys is something that makes living worthwhile.

Thailand's oppressive heat is troubling to the locals. The high temperatures and humidity are stifling. Due to Fem's tiny size, she isn't bothered too much though. She creates her own breeze by racing about like the wind. A splash of water on her face, and she feels refreshed. The heat has dizzied a couple of village kids, and they've come over to take Fem for a swim in one of the man-made ponds in the rice paddies. Thailand suffers from drought for half the year. Deep pools assure there's always some water available for farming.

Granny can't keep track of Fem, and Fem has never needed permission to do anything. She just does things that seem natural and fun. So, wearing her second-hand clothes and that unforgettable smile, Fem hustles away with the pair. When the kids race off on another adventure, Granny doesn't notice Fem's gone. Granny reclines in her hammock drinking her lao khao, mumbling to herself about her misfortune of not winning the lottery this week.

The foreign man, the future benefactor of Fem, eschews technology. Like little Fem, he prefers to live in the real world rather than the virtual one. Nevertheless, while cycling around Thailand, he finds it necessary to receive occasional correspondence. And, when his phone buzzes, he senses an issue. Only a handful of people know his number, and they only message him in emergency situations. Concerned, he stops pedaling and retrieves his mobile. There is a message from a respected woman in the village.

“My return home back after noon. There accident. Me see 3 ambulat. Flashen light. Siren. Many people. Me not know what happen. Me worry. Wery.”

The foreign man is well aware of the dangers on the roads of Thailand. He assumes that the woman witnessed a traffic accident near the village. He hopes that no one is seriously injured, but he knows that many accidents in the area result in death. It wasn't too long ago in fact that a pretty village girl, named Gin, crashed on her motorcycle and ended up face down in a pool of water beside the road. Gin's screams and thrashing went unnoticed. Although she put up a tremendous and courageous struggle, water gradually filled her lungs. Trapped underneath her motorcycle, Gin drowned. Her wedding was scheduled for the next day.

The foreign man sends a response back. “I hope no one is seriously injured. Please let me know what happened.” He continues down the winding and narrow road, hugging its left edge even more tightly now. Pickup trucks race by at exorbitant speeds. Despite a

failing economy and having nowhere to go, everyone seems to be in a rush and driving far faster than is safe. No one is concerned about safety. The man thinks about what might have happened on the road near the village, but lets it go. While concentrating and moving straight ahead, his feet continue to turn circles.

Several hours later another message arrives on the man's mobile: "There accident. A girl die. You know her, 2 alive. Them rush hospital when me see them." The man says a prayer for the two who are fighting for their lives. It must have been a terrible crash. He figures a pickup truck probably slammed into a motorbike with three young kids riding on it. In the village of Ban Charoen Swimno, parents boast of their kids driving motorbikes at extremely young ages. Some kids who are riding at age five make their parents very proud.

The foreign man and the village woman have a dialogue on their mobiles.

"Who died?"

"The girl name Fem."

"Oh, no. Noooo ... That's terrible news. What happened?"

"2 old kid take Fem swim in 1 of pond, 1 part 3 meter dept. They not no how 2 swim."

"Nooooo ..."

The man slams a fist into his bicycle seat and yells, "Fuck." He realizes that his theory about the pickup

truck slamming into three kids on a motorbike was wrong. Fem drowned in the pond.

Heartbroken, the foreign man eventually remounts his bicycle. He begins pedaling furiously. His anger at the loss of Fem erupts inside. In a rage he needs to pedal. He cycles faster. He needs to think. He asks, “Why? Why Fem?” He needs to be alone. He needs someone to hold him. He needs Fem to be alive. He needs to see Fem’s lovely smile—her tiny mouth, half full of black teeth. Why didn’t anyone watch over Fem? Why didn’t they teach her to swim? No one in whole village knows how to swim. Where was Granny? Where is Granny? Why did the older kids let her go into deep water? Why did this have to happen? He could have saved her. No, he couldn’t have. Dammit! He wants to see Fem’s smile again. He stops to vomit and then remounts.

“Fem, I miss you. Fem, I’ll always think of you. What could have been? You’re so beautiful, Fem. Far too beautiful for this world. You never had a chance. Your damn mother and irresponsible dirt-bag father, Fem. I hate them. I hate those assholes. I hate the kids who took you swimming. I hope they’re okay. This makes me so fucking angry,” the man rambles.

He feels terribly sick. His stomach hurts. His eyes are wet. He can't see. He needs to slow down.

"I just saw you, Fem. I see your smile. Now you're gone. Oh, Fem. Oh, Fem. I'm not going back there. When I go back, I want to see the pagoda with your ashes. It better be beautiful, really beautiful. I'll remember you always. Your memory will live on, Fem. What about those older kids? I pray they're okay. Oh, gentle Fem. I miss you! Oh, beautiful Fem. You're so precious. Oh, petite Fem. Oh, innocent Fem ...," the man continues my babbling out loud. He forgets that he's riding a bicycle.

The foreign man is distressed and nauseous. A pickup truck just misses him. He doesn't give a shit. "Fuck you, asshole," the distressed man shouts at the reckless driver. A great deal of the foreigner's hope has disappeared, along with part of his future. He must continue pedaling. He must ride. He borrows some of Fem's strength. The man plans to find out what her name means ... "Oh, God," he screams, as tears blur his vision. He finds himself racing like the wind.

The sweat drips off Fem's brown forehead, and a few drops slip into her tiny mouth. She licks at the salt. Fem doesn't know it's salt that she's licking. She doesn't know what salt is. The older kids encourage Fem to enter the muddy little pond. Its sides are vertical. They giggle. Fem doesn't understand that she's alive, and she

doesn't understand the concept of death. No one ever explained these things to her. She laughs. She doesn't think about anything, except how good the cool water feels.

Fem squeezes her toes in the muddy bank, raking up a small amount of sand. It feels good to her feet. She stoops down. Her tiny shoulders get wet. The dirty water feels freshening. The other kids watch and giggle. Fem plays. She delights in how the water moves about when she hits it with her disappearing hands. She walks out a bit farther, balancing on one tiny tippy toe. Suddenly, Fem feels free, floating. Both her feet are off the ground. She splashes about in the opaque water. There is no worry. Fem hasn't learned to worry.

Fem's breathing increases, and her tiny heart beats faster. She feels excited. Fem takes one last look at the cloudy sky and then she dives under. She shuts her eyes. She relaxes and take a big drink. Fem swishes the sandy water around in her mouth. She swallows. Things began to slow down and get dark. Fem feels herself going somewhere. It's a new place and a new adventure and a new home ... she learned to hug herself on her lonely nights at home ... she hugs herself one more time ... innocent and pure Fem lies down ten feet below the surface ...