

# White Powder

*by Daniel Brockman*

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*“I don’t know why we are here, but I’m pretty sure that it is not in order to enjoy ourselves.”*

*—Ludwig Wittgenstein*

The assignment was straightforward enough that I should have been suspicious. *Travel + Leisure’s* editor—a woman named Patricia who signs her emails “Px” in a way that suggests she thinks this is charming rather than affected—wanted fifteen hundred words on the Muai

Thai scene in Phuket and the surrounding islands, with particular attention to how the ancient art form has adapted to, or been corrupted by, depending on your perspective, the influx of Western tourism and the influence of MMA cross-training methodologies. She offered thirty-five cents a word, which is actually decent in this era of content mills and AI-generated travel spam, plus expenses within reason, the definition of “reason” to be determined retroactively by accounting staff in ways that would inevitably disadvantage me. I accepted because I was in Bangkok anyway, having fled a situation in Chiang Mai that doesn’t need to be detailed here<sup>1</sup> but which involved a misunderstanding-

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<sup>1</sup> Actually it needs to be detailed a little bit because it explains why I had only one real shirt and no laptop, just my phone and a notebook I’d bought at a 7-Eleven that had Snoopy on the cover and horizontal lines that weren’t quite horizontal, creating a subtle vertigo effect when you tried to write in a straight line. The German woman—Katja, though she insisted on being called Kat “with one T because two Ts is too aggressive”—had taken the laptop as collateral for what she claimed was my share of a hotel room we’d shared for three nights in what she insisted was a romantic capacity and I maintained was a pragmatic cost-splitting arrangement between fellow travelers. The motorbike situation was separate, involving a small scratch on the plastic cowling that the rental company photographed from seventeen different angles with professional lighting, as if documenting evidence for war crimes prosecution.

ing about a motorbike rental deposit and a German woman's very specific ideas about polyamory.

The bus from Bangkok to Phuket takes approximately thirteen hours if nothing goes wrong, which means it takes approximately sixteen hours when things go as well as can be reasonably expected on Thai highways, where the concept of lanes is more aspirational than prescriptive. I sat in seat 27B, which had a window that didn't fully close and an armrest that had at some point been gnawed by what I hoped was a small dog but suspected was a large rat. Next to me was a Scottish man named Duncan who spent the first four hours of the journey explaining cryptocurrency to me in a way that made it clear he didn't understand cryptocurrency, and the remaining twelve hours sleeping with his mouth open, producing a whistling sound that roughly approximated C# and which began to feel, around hour nine, like a form of psychological warfare.

I arrived in Patong at 6:47 AM by my phone's clock, which I hadn't adjusted from Bangkok time—if that even was different—and wouldn't bother to try to adjust for the entire duration of what I still believed would be a one-week reporting trip. The bus station smelled like diesel fuel, frying garlic, and human desperation in roughly equal proportions. Outside, tuk-tuk drivers

descended like gulls on a dropped sandwich, each proclaiming that their vehicle was specifically the cleanest, fastest, and most reasonably priced, these three claims existing in obvious tension with one another but presented with such sincere conviction that I found myself nodding along, agreeing in principle that yes, this particular tuk-tuk did seem extraordinarily clean and also remarkably fast-looking and certainly the price being quoted—four hundred baht to go two kilometers—was the very definition of reasonable.

I negotiated it down to three hundred, which both of us knew was still about three times the correct price,<sup>2</sup> and we drove through streets that were just beginning to wake up: street vendors setting up carts, stray dogs completing their final rounds before the heat made activity intolerable, Russian tourists in Singha Beer tank

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<sup>2</sup> This is the kind of digression that Patricia would cut, and she'd be right to cut it, except that she's never going to see this version because by the time I'm writing this parenthetical I've already missed three deadlines and stopped returning her emails, and what I'm producing has metastasized so far beyond the original assignment that there's no path back to a piece about Muay Thai that *Travel + Leisure* readers—people who think Phuket is pronounced "Foo-ke't" and who describe experiences as "authentic" in inverse proportion to their actual authenticity—would find palatable or even comprehensible.

tops stumbling back to their hotels with the determined focus of people who have made terrible decisions but are committed to seeing them through to their conclusion.

The gym I was scheduled to visit first—Siam Boxing Stadium, recommended by three different travel blogs and one Reddit post from a user named MuayThaiDad69—didn't open until 8 AM, so I had time to find coffee and begin the process of pretending I was the kind of person who could produce fifteen hundred words of competent sports journalism about a martial art I'd watched exactly twice, both times on YouTube, both times while eating pad thai from the same restaurant in Brooklyn that I'm reasonably certain wasn't actually Thai-owned but which had achieved that perfect inauthenticity that makes it more satisfying than the real thing, in the same way that American Chinese food has transcended its origins to become its own legitimate cuisine.

The coffee shop was called "Wake Up Coffee" which is exactly the kind of name you get when someone who speaks English as a third language tries to communicate directness and clarity, and it worked, in that I did wake up, or at least achieved a state approximating wakefulness after two cups of something that tasted like coffee had been explained to beans via telephone. The barista

was a young Thai woman who watched TikToks on her phone with the sound on, not loudly but not quietly either, creating an ambient soundtrack of trending audio clips and viral sounds that should have been annoying but actually helped establish that I was very far from home and that the normal rules didn't apply here, which was exactly the psychological state necessary for what I was about to attempt.

At 7:53 AM I walked to Siam Boxing Stadium, arriving seven minutes early, which is the journalist's sweet spot—late enough that you're not desperately eager, early enough that you're reliably professional. The gym was in a building that looked like it had been constructed with grand ambitions and then abandoned halfway through, leaving exposed concrete and rebar in ways that might have been aesthetic choices or might have been structural failures, impossible to distinguish in the architectural vernacular of Southeast Asian tourism infrastructure.

A man was sweeping the floor of the main training area with a broom that had seen better decades. He was perhaps fifty, perhaps seventy, with the kind of weathered face that makes age irrelevant, just a marker of time spent outdoors in equatorial sun doing physical labor. He looked up when I entered, squinting at me

with an expression that I would come to recognize as the default Thai response to Western tourists: a mixture of mild curiosity, moderate suspicion, and complete uncertainty about whether I was about to do something normal or something that would require intervention.

“Hello,” I said, which exhausted approximately sixty percent of my Thai vocabulary, the remaining forty percent consisting of “thank you” (khop khun krap), “beer” (bia), and “how much” (tao rai), which collectively form the essential survival kit for the English-speaking traveler.

“You want train?” he asked, his English economical and purpose-built.

“No, I’m a journalist,” I said, which in retrospect was a fairly preposterous claim given that I was wearing shorts with a suspicious stain of unknown origin, the one shirt I’d managed to retain after the Chiang Mai incident, and flip-flops that I’d bought at a 7-Eleven for sixty-nine baht and which were already beginning to separate from their soles in a way that suggested their structural integrity was largely theoretical.

He processed this information with visible skepticism. “Journalist,” he repeated, as if testing the word for plausibility.

“I’m writing about Muay Thai,” I explained. “For a magazine. American magazine.”

This seemed to satisfy some requirement, because he nodded and gestured for me to follow him to a small office area that was really just a desk with a fan pointed at it and a wall calendar from 2019 that no one had bothered to replace, probably because the year didn’t matter much when every day was functionally identical: heat, training, fighting, heat.

His name was Somchai,<sup>3</sup> and he’d been training fighters for thirty-two years, first in Bangkok, then here in Phuket when the tourism money started flowing and gyms started proliferating like 7-Elevens, which themselves proliferate in Thailand with such density that you’re never more than two hundred meters from one, a fact that seems logistically impossible but which I

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<sup>3</sup> Or possibly Somsak. Or Somkid. I wrote it down wrong in my Snoopy notebook and the handwriting is ambiguous—the ‘c’ could be a ‘k’ could be an ‘s’ depending on the angle and the lighting and how charitable you’re feeling toward my penmanship, which deteriorated significantly over the course of what follows. For the purposes of this account I’m going with Somchai because it was the first name that came to mind when I tried to remember it later, which is how memory works despite what we pretend about accuracy and reliability.

would come to appreciate as I developed dependencies on specific products they stocked.

Somchai made instant coffee in two mugs that advertised a beer brand I didn't recognize, using water from an electric kettle and Nescafé crystals spooned directly from a jar with such thick buildup around the rim that it had achieved a kind of sedimentary archaeology, layers of coffee residue marking different eras of caffeination. The coffee was terrible, which I'm convinced is intentional in Thailand, a test of character. If you can drink the coffee without complaint, you can be trusted with more important things.

"What you want to know?" he asked, settling into a plastic chair that groaned under his weight despite him being a small man, maybe sixty kilograms soaking wet.

I had a list of questions in my notebook, carefully prepared during the bus ride during those periods when Duncan wasn't explaining blockchain technology or sleep-whistling. Questions about training methodology, about the differences between traditional Muay Thai and the modern sport, about how tourism had changed the economics of fighting, about whether young Thai fighters still saw it as a path to respect and financial security or whether it had become primarily a spectacle for foreigners with more money than understanding.

But the heat was already becoming difficult to ignore, even at 8 AM, and I was aware of sweat beginning to accumulate in places where sweat shouldn't accumulate, at least not this early in the day. The fan Somchai had pointed at the desk was moving air around without actually cooling anything, just redistributing the warmth more democratically.

"Maybe," I said, "before we start—is there a bathroom I could use?"

He pointed to a doorway that led to what I had optimistically hoped would be a bathroom but which turned out to be more of a concept of a bathroom, a space where bathroom-related activities could theoretically occur if you were flexible about your definitions and standards. There was a squat toilet, a bucket of water with a plastic scoop, and a small sink with a mirror so clouded with age and moisture damage that looking into it was like seeing yourself through heavy fog.

On the sink, among various bottles and containers whose purposes I couldn't immediately determine, was a white tin with elegant green and black lettering: Snake Brand Prickly Heat Cooling Powder.

I'd seen these tins before, in 7-Elevens and pharmacies, displayed alongside Tiger Balm and various mysterious ointments that promised relief from conditions

I couldn't quite translate. I'd never bought one because I'm generally suspicious of products that make cooling claims—in my experience, things that promise to cool you down either don't work or work by introducing other problems, like the time I used a menthol body wash that left me smelling like a cough drop and caused a burning sensation that the label probably warned about in text I hadn't read.

But I was very hot. Unreasonably hot. The kind of hot that makes you reconsider fundamental life choices, like why you'd agreed to travel to a tropical island during hot season to write about people punching each other when you could have stayed in Brooklyn and written about restaurants or hotel openings or literally anything else that could be researched without sweating through your only shirt before 9 AM.

I opened the tin. Inside was white powder, finer than baby powder, with a smell that was medicinal and vaguely mentholated and somehow both pleasant and aggressive at the same time. The label instructions were in Thai except for one phrase in English: "Shake powder onto body."

This seemed straightforward enough. I shook powder onto my body. Specifically onto my neck and chest, where the sweat was most concentrated. The effect

was immediate and disproportionate to what seemed physically possible from a simple powder. It was as if someone had opened a window in my skin and let a cool breeze blow through. The menthol sensation was intense but not painful, refreshing but not shocking, exactly the right degree of intervention for exactly this problem.

I stood there for a moment, experiencing this relief with an intensity that probably wasn't appropriate for what was essentially a basic cosmetic product. Then I shook more powder onto my arms. Then my back, contorting slightly to reach the space between my shoulder blades. Then my legs. By the time I was finished I looked like I'd been dipped in cocaine or anthrax or some other white powder that would alarm authorities, but I felt extraordinary. Cool. Dry. Capable of conducting a professional interview.

I returned to the office area where Somchai was scrolling through his phone, looking at what appeared to be videos of Muay Thai fights, though from my angle I couldn't tell if these were historical footage or recent matches or training videos or what.

"You okay?" he asked, looking up at me with an expression that suggested he'd noticed my transformation

into a powdered being but was too polite to comment directly.

“Yes,” I said. “Very okay. Let’s talk about Muay Thai.”

And we did. For the next hour, Somchai told me about the gym, about the fighters he’d trained, about a kid from Isaan who’d made it to Lumpinee Stadium in Bangkok, about another kid who’d had real promise until he discovered girls and marijuana and decided fighting wasn’t worth getting punched in the face anymore, a career trajectory that struck me as extremely reasonable. He showed me photos on his phone, fight posters, newspaper clippings that he kept in a folder that was falling apart, the paper yellowed and brittle like dried leaves.

I took notes, or pretended to take notes, filling pages of my Snoopy notebook with observations and quotes and reminders to follow up on specific points. But I was also intensely aware of the powder on my skin, of the cooling sensation that was gradually fading, and of the tin sitting on the bathroom sink like a green beacon of possibility.

Around 9:30 AM, fighters started arriving for the morning training session. Young men, mostly Thai, a few Westerners who had the lean, anxious look of peo-

ple who'd come to Thailand to find themselves and had decided that finding themselves required getting kicked in the legs repeatedly by people who'd been training since childhood.

Somchai introduced me to a few of them. There was Nong, nineteen years old, from a village north of Chiang Mai, who sent most of his fight earnings back to his family and who trained six hours a day and who answered my questions in monosyllables that suggested either limited English or limited interest in talking to me or both. There was Kai, twenty-three, covered in traditional Sak Yant tattoos that he explained were blessed by a monk and provided protection in the ring, a claim I wasn't going to argue with even though I suspected the protection came more from his evident skill and conditioning than from magical ink.

And there was James, a thirty-one-year-old from Leeds who'd been in Phuket for eight months and who was extremely eager to explain his journey to me, how he'd been working in insurance, how he'd been miserable, how he'd seen a documentary about Muay Thai and decided to completely change his life, how he'd sold his car and his furniture and bought a one-way ticket, how training had given him purpose and clarity and the best shape of his life.

I nodded along, writing down phrases that seemed important—"authentic experience," "warrior spirit," "mental toughness"—while James spoke with the slightly manic energy of someone who's made a dramatic life change and needs you to affirm that it wasn't insane. I didn't affirm or deny, just collected his story for potential use in the article, though even then I was beginning to suspect that Patricia would want me to cut most of it because *Travel + Leisure* readers don't really want to hear about people's existential crises, they want to know about good beach clubs and whether the pad thai is spicy.

The training session began. Fighters wrapped their hands with practiced efficiency, that ritual binding that transforms hands into weapons while also protecting them, a paradox that seemed important but which I couldn't quite articulate into anything usable. They hit heavy bags with combinations I couldn't follow, kicks that made sounds like gunshots, elbows and knees and a constant rhythm that was part violence and part dance.

I watched, taking notes, trying to seem knowledgeable, trying to understand what made this different from boxing or karate or any other martial art I'd seen in movies or that one time I took a kickboxing class in

Brooklyn that was really just aerobics with light punching.

But mostly I was hot again. The powder's effect had completely worn off, and I was back to swimming in my own sweat, my shirt clinging to my back, my hair plastered to my forehead. The gym had fans running but they just moved the hot air around, creating wind without relief, like being blow-dried on high heat.

During a water break, I excused myself and returned to the bathroom. The classically beautifully typeset white tin with the snake with the arrow through its neck (I hadn't noticed that before; it felt ancient and meaningful, perhaps symbolizing the murder of heat and sweat) was still there, waiting. I applied more powder, liberally, perhaps too liberally, until I looked like a ghost or a mime or someone with a severe case of some dermatological condition that manifests as total body whiteness.

The relief returned, that same disproportionate wave of cooling pleasure. I stood there, enjoying it, probably for longer than was socially acceptable to spend in a bathroom that wasn't technically mine.

When I emerged, Somchai glanced at me but said nothing. One of the fighters—I think it was Kai—looked at me and then at Somchai and then back at me, and I

could see him processing the situation, trying to determine if this was normal Western behavior or something he should be concerned about.

“Powder good,” I said, gesturing vaguely at myself in a way that I hoped communicated that I’d found a solution to the heat problem and wasn’t having some kind of medical emergency.

Kai nodded slowly. “You use too much,” he said. “Little bit enough.”

This seemed like good advice that I would immediately ignore.



I should pause here to note that I was still, at this point, fully committed to writing a straight article about Muay Thai. I had notes, I had quotes, I had observations about technique and tradition and tourism. If I’d left Phuket that afternoon, caught a bus back to Bangkok, found a coffee shop with wifi, I could have turned in a perfectly serviceable piece about the Muay Thai scene that Patricia would have edited for house style and published without incident. That I didn’t do this, that instead I stayed for what would become six weeks of increasingly bizarre and obsessive behavior, is something I’ve tried

to analyze and explain and justify, but the truth is probably simpler and more disturbing than any complex psychological narrative: I liked the powder too much, and I couldn't leave until I understood why.

The rest of that first day proceeded according to plan. I watched training, conducted more interviews, ate lunch at a nearby restaurant that served a curry that was so spicy I momentarily forgot about the heat because my mouth was on fire in ways that made environmental temperature irrelevant. I visited another gym in the afternoon, this one more tourist-focused, with Western instructors and air conditioning and a smoothie bar that offered protein supplements and açai bowls and prices in both baht and dollars for convenience.

The contrast was stark enough to be interesting, potentially even the core of the article I was supposed to write: how Muay Thai in Phuket existed on a spectrum from "authentic" gyms where Thai fighters trained in spartan conditions for actual competitions, to "boutique" gyms where tourists paid premium rates to learn basic techniques while staying in comfort, both legitimate in their own ways but serving completely different purposes and populations.

I took more notes. I bought a coconut from a street vendor and drank it while sitting on a curb, watching

tourists stream past in various states of sunburn and intoxication. I felt like I was doing journalism, or at least a convincing imitation of journalism sufficient to justify the expenses I was racking up.

But I was also thinking about the powder. Specifically, I was thinking about how I'd used probably half the tin at Somchai's gym and hadn't thought to ask where to buy more. The sun was setting, the heat was finally becoming tolerable, but I was already anticipating tomorrow's heat and the day after that, and I realized with something approaching anxiety that I needed to secure my own supply.

I found a 7-Eleven—which took approximately ninety seconds because there was one every two blocks in Patong, a density that seemed to violate some principle of market saturation but which the locals apparently supported through sheer volume of purchases. Inside, under fluorescent lights that made everything look simultaneously clinical and dingy, I found the powder section.

There were options. Snake Brand, which I recognized. Hacks, which had similar packaging but different branding. Prickly Heat Powder from various manufacturers whose names I couldn't pronounce. Some claimed cooling effects, some claimed anti-bacterial prop-

erties, some had pictures of babies suggesting they were gentle enough for infant use, which seemed relevant though I wasn't sure how.

I bought three tins of Snake Brand, figuring redundancy was better than running out. The cashier was a young woman who looked at my purchase with an expression that might have been judgment or might have been complete indifference—impossible to tell. She scanned the tins, told me the price, bagged them in a plastic bag that seemed excessive for three small tins but which I accepted because refusing plastic bags in Thailand feels like swimming against a tide so strong that resistance is pointless.

Back at my hotel—a place called “Sunshine Resort” that was neither particularly sunny nor resort-like, just a three-story building with rooms that smelled like mildew and air conditioning units that rattled ominously—I showered off the accumulated powder and sweat and applied fresh powder afterward. The cooling sensation was even better after a shower, my skin still slightly damp, the menthol hitting harder, more immediate.

I lay on the bed, feeling the powder work, staring at the ceiling where a gecko was hunting insects with the calm efficiency of a predator that knows it owns this territory. I should have been writing up my notes,

organizing thoughts, beginning the outline of the article. Instead I was thinking about the powder, about the green tin with its yellow lettering, about the fact that I'd bought three tins when one would probably last a week, about how that math suggested something about my relationship to this product that I wasn't quite ready to examine.

I slept well that night, better than I had in weeks, powder-cool and comfortable despite the humidity and the gecko and the air conditioning unit's death rattle.



Day two began with good intentions. I had a plan: visit gyms in the morning, watch training and evening fights, maybe take a boat to Ko Phi Phi the next day to check out the scene there, gather enough material to write a comprehensive piece about how Muay Thai existed across different contexts and price points in Phuket's tourism ecosystem.

But first I needed coffee, and then I needed powder, and by the time I'd applied what Kai would have certainly told me was too much powder, I'd already spent forty minutes of my morning on product application and another ten minutes standing in front of the mirror

admiring how white I looked, how ghostly, how completely covered in what I was beginning to think of not as powder but as Solution.

Somchai's gym again, because I'd established rapport there and because Somchai had mentioned that a real fight was scheduled for that evening at a nearby stadium, local fighters, actual competition, not a tourist show. This seemed like essential research.

The morning training session was more intense than the previous day. Sparring, full contact, fighters working through combinations with partners who blocked and countered and occasionally landed shots that made sounds I felt in my chest. I watched, taking fewer notes than I should have, distracted by the heat and by the fact that I was already beginning to feel warm despite having applied powder less than two hours ago.

During a break, I asked Somchai if he used prickly heat powder.

He looked at me with an expression I couldn't quite read. "Sometimes," he said. "When very hot."

"Do you ever use... a lot?" I asked, gesturing vaguely at myself.

"Little bit enough," he said, which was exactly what Kai had said, which suggested this was established wisdom I was ignoring.

“But does it work better if you use more?” I pressed.

Somchai considered this. “Maybe work too much,” he said. “Make you cold.”

This seemed impossible—how could you be too cold in Thailand?—but I filed it away as information that might become relevant.

That afternoon I visited two more gyms, conducted more interviews, watched more training. At each location I found bathrooms and applied more powder. By evening I’d gone through approximately one and a half tins, which even I recognized was excessive, but the heat was relentless and the powder was effective and I’d developed a kind of ritual around the application that felt increasingly necessary and increasingly difficult to skip.

The fight that night was in a small stadium that seated maybe two hundred people, though only about seventy showed up. The fighters were local, mostly young, fighting for purses that Somchai told me were between three thousand and eight thousand baht depending on experience and negotiation, which translated to roughly one hundred to two hundred and fifty dollars, which seemed simultaneously like a lot of money and no money at all depending on whether you thought getting punched in the face should pay more than that.

I sat ringside, notebook open, pen ready. The first fight began: two teenage kids, maybe seventeen, slim and nervous and ferociously skilled. They danced and kicked and clinched and threw knees, all while traditional music played from speakers that distorted the sound into something between melody and static.

I should have been taking notes about technique, about the crowd's reaction, about how the fighters' styles differed from what I'd seen in the gym. Instead I was thinking about the powder in my bag, about the tin I'd brought with me just in case, about whether it would be weird to apply powder during a fight or whether the social situation demanded I wait until between rounds or until the whole thing was over.

By the third fight I'd excused myself to the bathroom and applied more powder. By the fifth fight I'd done it again. The staff at the stadium were beginning to recognize me as the white guy who kept going to the bathroom, and I could see them exchanging glances that suggested theories were being developed about what I was doing in there.

After the final fight—a brutal affair between two experienced fighters that ended with a knockout so clean and sudden that the crowd gasped in unison—I found Somchai and asked him questions about what I'd seen,

about judging criteria and betting culture and whether the kids who'd fought in the early bouts would continue training or whether most of them would quit after a few years when the punches added up and the purses stayed small.

He answered patiently, generously, providing information that would have been perfect for the article I was supposed to be writing.<sup>4</sup> But I was distracted, already thinking about getting back to my hotel, about showering, about the pure pleasure of applying powder to clean skin, about how the cooling sensation had become the highlight of my day, more satisfying than the fights or the food or any of the things I was supposedly here to experience and document.

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<sup>4</sup> I emailed Patricia that night with a brief update: "Research going well. Lots of good material. Will send draft soon." This was technically true—I did have material—but also fundamentally dishonest because I was already beginning to sense that whatever I was going to produce wouldn't be the article she wanted or expected. She responded the next morning: "Great! Looking forward to reading. Reminder that we need this by end of month for the summer issue. Do you have photos?" I did not have photos. I'd barely even taken my phone out except to check the time and look at pictures of Snake Brand powder I'd photographed for reasons I couldn't quite explain, the green tin from different angles and different lighting conditions, as if documenting evidence of something important.



Day three was when things began to shift in ways I didn't recognize until much later. I woke up thinking about powder. Not about Muay Thai or the article or the interviews I needed to conduct, but about whether I'd applied enough powder the night before, about whether I should apply more right now or wait until after breakfast, about the optimization of application timing for maximum cooling effect throughout the day.

I applied powder immediately, standing naked in my hotel room, shaking it liberally over my entire body until I looked like a sculpture of myself carved from chalk. Then I got dressed, careful not to disturb the powder layer too much, though some inevitably rubbed off on my clothes, leaving white streaks that made me look like I'd been doing drywall work or cocaine or both.

Breakfast at a café that served disappointing croissants and excellent Thai iced tea. Then a tuk-tuk to a gym on the other side of Patong, one that several fighters had mentioned as being more traditional, less tourist-focused, where serious training happened.

The gym was in a neighborhood that tourists didn't really visit, down a side street that required the tuk-tuk

driver to navigate around chickens and dogs and an old woman selling som tam from a cart. The building was concrete block, open-air, with a ring in the center and heavy bags hanging from chains that looked like they'd been there since the 1980s.

The head trainer was a former fighter named Wanchai who'd competed in the 1990s and who had the flattened nose and scarred eyebrows that testified to a career of being punched in the face professionally. He spoke better English than Somchai, with a directness that I found refreshing after days of polite Thai indirection.

"You want train or watch?" he asked.

"Watch," I said. "I'm writing about Muay Thai for American magazine."

"Which magazine?"

"*Travel + Leisure*," I said, which sounded increasingly ridiculous every time I said it out loud, as if I'd made it up.

He nodded. "You pay to watch?"

This hadn't come up at the other gyms, where my presence as a journalist seemed to grant implicit permission to observe. But Wanchai was clearly a man who understood that nothing was free, including observation.

"How much?" I asked.

“Five hundred baht.”

I paid, which seemed fair, and which probably should have gone on the expense report but which I knew would be questioned by Patricia’s accounting department, who would want to know why I needed to pay to watch training when I could have just watched for free at the tourist gyms.

The training was different here. Harder, faster, more technical. These weren’t kids who’d just started; these were fighters with records, with experience, with real skills. Wanchai corrected form with a running commentary in Thai that sounded like music, rhythmic and tonal, occasionally punctuated by the slap of his hand on someone’s shoulder or leg to indicate where they’d dropped their guard or thrown a sloppy kick.

I watched, genuinely absorbed, taking actual notes about technique and training philosophy and the difference between how fighters moved here versus at the more commercial gyms. This was good journalism, or at least competent journalism, the kind of thing Patricia would be happy with.

But I was also very hot. The gym had no fans, just open sides that let in whatever breeze existed, which on this particular morning was none. Sweat was rolling

down my back, pooling in places where powder had been but was now just wet paste.

I excused myself, found what passed for a bathroom—really just a toilet and a bucket in a concrete room with no door—and reapplied powder. Then I returned and watched more training.

Fifteen minutes later I was hot again. I reapplied.

Fifteen minutes after that, same thing.

By noon I'd gone through an entire tin. Wanchai had definitely noticed my frequent bathroom trips but said nothing, which I appreciated but also found slightly concerning. Was this normal? Did other people do this? Was I having some kind of reaction to the heat that required medical attention?

But I felt fine. Better than fine. I felt cool and dry and capable, or at least I felt that way for about fifteen minutes after each application, which meant I needed to apply every fifteen minutes to maintain the feeling, which meant I was essentially mainlining prickly heat powder at this point, using it not as an occasional treatment but as a constant necessity.

During a lunch break, I walked to the nearest 7-Eleven—about ten minutes away, which I timed—and bought six more tins of Snake Brand. The cashier, a

different woman than at the other 7-Eleven, looked at my purchase and then at me and then back at the tins.

“You sell?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “Personal use.”

She nodded slowly, skeptically, and I realized how that sounded, like I was buying Sudafed or lighters or any other product that in large quantities suggests illegal activity.

“It’s very hot,” I explained, gesturing outside at the heat, which was indeed very hot but probably not six-tins-of-powder hot for a normal person.

She bagged the tins without further comment, and I walked back to the gym, already opening one of them, applying powder as I walked, not even bothering to hide it anymore, just shaking it onto my arms and neck in full view of motorbike drivers and street vendors and dogs and anyone else who cared to observe a white man dusting himself with powder in the middle of the day on a side street in Patong.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This is the point where I should have recognized something was wrong, where any reasonable person would have thought “perhaps I’m developing an unhealthy relationship with this cosmetic product” and adjusted accordingly. But I didn’t recognize it because it didn’t feel wrong. It felt like problem-solving, like I’d found a solution to the heat and was simply implementing that solution

That afternoon I took a boat to Ko Phi Phi, which required advance planning but which I'd managed to arrange through my hotel's front desk, a twenty-three-year-old named Porn<sup>6</sup> who had excellent English and a deep tolerance for confused farang guests asking for help with basic logistics.

The boat ride took ninety minutes through water so blue and clear it looked fake, past limestone cliffs that rose from the sea like something from a fantasy movie. Other tourists on the boat were taking photos, exclaiming about the beauty, experiencing wonder. I was thinking about whether I'd brought enough powder for a day trip, whether there would be 7-Elevens on Ko Phi Phi, whether I could find a bathroom on the boat to reapply.

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with appropriate frequency. That the frequency was increasing, that I was now carrying multiple tins with me everywhere, that I was planning my day around access to powder and application opportunities—none of this seemed like cause for concern because the alternative was being hot, and being hot was intolerable, and anything that made being hot tolerable was therefore not just acceptable but necessary.

<sup>6</sup> This is a common Thai name and I'm not making it up for comedic effect, though every Western tourist has the exact same reaction when they hear it, which Thai people are aware of and find either amusing or tiresome depending on their mood and how many times they've had this exact interaction.

I could not find a bathroom on the boat, or rather there was a bathroom but it was occupied for the entire journey by someone who was either very sick or very committed to avoiding other passengers. By the time we docked at Ko Phi Phi I was hot and uncomfortable and desperately in need of powder, which I applied immediately in a public bathroom near the pier, emerging white and ghostly and significantly more comfortable.

Ko Phi Phi had gyms, smaller ones, more explicitly tourist-focused. I visited three that afternoon, conducting brief interviews, watching training sessions that felt more like fitness classes than fight preparation. The fighters here were almost all Western tourists, taking a week or two to train, posting about it on Instagram, living out some fantasy of transformation through martial arts.

I should have found this interesting from a journalistic perspective—the complete touristification of a traditional martial art, the way capitalism and social media had transformed eight-limbed combat into a wellness retreat—but I was distracted by the heat and the powder and the increasing frequency with which I needed to apply it.

By evening I'd gone through two more tins. I'd also started noticing something strange: the cooling sensa-

tion was becoming less intense, or rather it required more powder to achieve the same effect. The first time I'd used it, a light dusting had produced extraordinary relief. Now I needed to apply it heavily, coating my skin thoroughly, to get even moderate cooling.

This seemed like a tolerance issue, like my body was adapting to the menthol, requiring increasing doses for the same effect. But that seemed impossible—how could you build tolerance to menthol? It wasn't a drug, it was just a topical irritant that stimulated cold receptors. There was no mechanism for tolerance.

Except apparently there was, because I was living through it.

I caught the last boat back to Phuket, arriving around 9 PM, tired and sunburned despite having spent most of the day in gyms. Back at the hotel I showered for the second time that day and applied what had become my evening ritual: a thorough, full-body coating of powder, so much that when I exhaled I could see powder particles floating in the air like snow.

I lay on the bed, feeling the cooling effect, which was still present but diminished, like hearing a song through a wall instead of directly. The gecko was back on the ceiling, or a different gecko, impossible to tell. I thought about calling Patricia, updating her, maybe

admitting that the article was taking a different shape than expected.

Instead I opened my laptop—I'd bought a cheap one at a mall in Patong, an Acer that was already showing signs of heat damage—and started writing notes. Not the article, just observations about powder, about its effects and application and the economics of purchasing it in Thailand. About how the tins cost between forty and sixty baht depending on where you bought them, about how that translated to roughly \$1.20 to \$1.80 USD, about how this was cheap enough that you could theoretically use unlimited amounts without financial constraint.

I wrote about the different brands and their subtle differences in texture and scent, about how Snake Brand was superior to Hacks in terms of cooling intensity, about how some brands left a residue while others absorbed completely. I wrote about application techniques, about how shaking directly onto skin was less efficient than shaking into your palm first and then rubbing it in, about how post-shower application was optimal but not always practical.

I wrote for two hours,<sup>7</sup> producing about three thousand words about prickly heat powder, none of which would be useful for an article about Muay Thai but all of which felt important to document.



Day four through seven blur together into a sequence of gym visits and powder applications and increasingly detailed note-taking about products and sensations that had nothing to do with Muay Thai. I visited gyms in Patong, Kata, Karon, Chalong. I interviewed fighters and trainers and Western tourists. I watched sparring and pad work and clinch training. I accumulated material that would have been sufficient for not just one article but several, enough to write a comprehensive guide to the Muay Thai scene across southern Phuket.

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<sup>7</sup> Patricia emailed again: "Just checking in! How's it going? Do you have a rough draft you could send? Even just an outline would be helpful so we can start planning the layout." I responded: "Making great progress. Draft coming soon. Need a few more days to wrap up research." This was week one. I had five weeks left before everything would fall apart completely, though I didn't know that yet.

But I was also using approximately six tins of powder per day, a rate of consumption that seemed to alarm the various 7-Eleven cashiers I'd started rotating through, each location learning to recognize me as "the powder guy" or whatever they called me in Thai when I left.

I'd also started carrying powder in my pockets constantly, loose powder in ziplock bags I'd bought specifically for this purpose, so I could apply it anywhere without needing to carry tins. This meant my pockets were always white, my shorts and shirts permanently powder-stained, my phone and wallet coated in a fine layer of menthol-scented dust.

People were noticing. Somchai asked if I was okay. Wanchai suggested I might want to see a doctor. A Western trainer at one of the tourist gyms asked directly: "Mate, what's going on with you? You're always covered in powder. It's fucking weird."

I didn't have a good answer except that I was hot and the powder helped and wasn't that reason enough? But even as I said it I could hear how it sounded, how it didn't actually explain why I needed to apply powder every fifteen to twenty minutes, why I was carrying multiple tins and bags everywhere, why I'd started setting phone alarms to remind me to apply powder at regular intervals.

On day eight I discovered coconut oil.



This happened because I'd developed a skin problem. Specifically, my skin had become incredibly dry, flaking and cracking in places, itching in ways that powder made worse instead of better. The menthol that had initially provided relief was now irritating compromised skin, creating a cycle where I needed powder for cooling but powder made the skin worse, which made me need more powder, which made the skin worse still.

A pharmacist at a Boots pharmacy—a chain that existed in Thailand the way CVS exists in America—suggested coconut oil. “For dry skin,” she explained. “Very good. Natural.”

I bought a bottle, small, organic, extra virgin, cold-pressed, all the qualifiers that make a product seem virtuous and expensive. At the hotel I applied it experimentally to my arms, rubbing it in until it absorbed, leaving my skin looking healthy and moisturized in ways I hadn't seen since before the powder regime began.

The effect on powder application was transformative. The oil created a base layer that the powder adhered

to more effectively, creating better coverage with less product. It also intensified the cooling sensation, possibly because the oil kept the powder in contact with skin longer, possibly because of some interaction between coconut oil and menthol that I didn't understand but which produced results I couldn't deny.

Within two days I'd completely restructured my routine: oil first, then powder, reapplying both at intervals that I was constantly adjusting and optimizing. I bought larger bottles of coconut oil, then started buying it in bulk from a store that catered to restaurants, getting liter containers that I'd decant into smaller bottles for portability.

The oil and powder combination required more maintenance but produced better results.<sup>8</sup> I was cooler, more

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<sup>8</sup> James found me one afternoon in a 7-Eleven, buying my eighth tin of powder that day. "You need help," he said. Not aggressively, just stating a fact. "Whatever you're doing, it's not healthy. You're not writing about Muay Thai anymore, are you?" I told him I was writing about Muay Thai constantly, which was technically true—I wrote the words "Muay Thai" frequently in my notebooks—but also fundamentally dishonest because those words were surrounded by paragraphs about powder application and coconut oil viscosity and lottery number theory. He looked at me with something between pity and disgust and walked away, and I bought two more tins of powder and a bottle of water I didn't drink.

comfortable, less itchy, and more thoroughly coated in products than at any point in my life. I looked like I'd been glazed, shiny with oil, white with powder, moving through the world as a walking advertisement for tropical skin care taken to illogical extremes.

Fighters started commenting on it directly. "Why you so shiny?" one asked. "You look like ghost," said another. James, the insurance guy from Leeds, pulled me aside after a training session: "Listen, mate, I don't know what's going on with you, but you need to sort it out. You're making people uncomfortable."

This struck me as unfair. I was making myself comfortable. That other people found my comfort uncomfortable was their problem, not mine.



Around day twelve I started noticing patterns in the lottery tickets.

This happened accidentally. I'd been buying lottery tickets from a vendor near Somchai's gym, an old woman who sat on a plastic stool under an umbrella with hundreds of tickets clipped to a board, organized in ways I didn't understand. I'd bought them initially as souvenirs, something to send to friends back home as a

joke, evidence that I'd been in Thailand doing Thailand things.

The tickets cost a hundred baht each, or 120 on Ko Phi Phi—everything was 20% more expensive there—which was a bit more than the official eighty-baht price, but that was standard for street vendors who factored in convenience and location and the fact that tourists didn't know better. Each ticket had a six-digit number printed on it, and twice monthly there were drawings where you could win prizes ranging from a few thousand baht to several million, depending on how many digits matched.

You could also buy 10 tickets for 2,500, which I tried to make sense of many times but nobody could explain it. It seemed to just make sense to Thai people that one ticket costs 100 but ten costs 2,500. I decided that I didn't need to understand this logic for the purposes I had in mind.

I bought five tickets the first time. Then I bought ten. Then I started buying them daily, twenty or thirty at a time, studying the numbers, looking for patterns that I was certain existed but couldn't quite identify.

The numbers seemed random initially, but the more I looked, the more I saw connections. Certain digits appeared more frequently. Some number combina-

tions showed up across multiple tickets. There were sequences that seemed to follow mathematical progressions—not obviously, but subtly, like hidden messages in noise.

I started keeping the tickets, all of them, organized in a notebook where I'd track numbers and frequencies and patterns. I'd lay them out on my hotel bed, arranging them in different configurations, trying to see the system that I was increasingly convinced governed their distribution.

This was insane behavior and I knew it was insane behavior even as I was doing it, but knowing something is insane and stopping doing it are apparently different skills, and I only had access to the first one.

The lottery vendor—her name was Yai, which means grandmother—started recognizing me, saving tickets she thought I'd want, based on criteria I never explained and she never asked about. Sometimes I bought every ticket she had, sixty or seventy at once, spending five thousand baht on lottery tickets in a single transaction, which was more than most people spent on rent.

I'd bring them back to the hotel and analyze them, applying oil and powder at regular intervals, writing notes about number patterns and cooling sensation op-

timization,<sup>9</sup> two separate obsessions running in parallel like train tracks heading toward an inevitable collision.



By week three I'd stopped conducting formal interviews. I'd visit gyms but only to use their bathrooms for powder application. I'd watch training but only while analyzing lottery tickets I'd brought with me, spreading them out on benches, comparing numbers, making notes about patterns.

Somchai eventually asked me to leave. Politely, respectfully, but firmly: "You come here but you not watch training. You sit and look at paper and put powder on yourself. This not good. Other people think you strange. Maybe you need to go."

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<sup>9</sup> James found me one afternoon in a 7-Eleven, buying my eighth tin of powder that day. "You need help," he said. Not aggressively, just stating a fact. "Whatever you're doing, it's not healthy. You're not writing about Muay Thai anymore, are you?" I told him I was writing about Muay Thai constantly, which was technically true—I wrote the words "Muay Thai" frequently in my notebooks—but also fundamentally dishonest because those words were surrounded by paragraphs about powder application and coconut oil viscosity and lottery number theory. He looked at me with something between pity and disgust and walked away, and I bought two more tins of powder and a bottle of water I didn't drink.

He was right. I was strange. I'd become strange in ways that I couldn't fully see but which were obvious to everyone around me.

I moved my base of operations to a coffee shop called "Happy Coffee" that had wifi and air conditioning and a staff that was too polite or too tired to tell me to leave even though I'd been sitting at the same table for six hours applying powder and sorting lottery tickets and occasionally ordering a drink I wouldn't finish.

My hotel room had become a shrine to powder and oil and lottery tickets. Tins stacked in pyramids on the desk. Bottles of coconut oil lined up on the windowsill. Lottery tickets covering the floor in patterns that made sense to me but which would have looked like chaos to anyone else. The gecko had either left or died or been buried under paper.

I was using approximately ten tins of powder per day now, applying it so frequently that I'd developed a rash that the powder both soothed and aggravated, creating another vicious cycle. The oil helped with the rash but made me look perpetually wet, like I'd just emerged from swimming but had somehow also been dusted with cocaine.

Patricia stopped emailing. Or rather, she sent one final email: "We're going to have to reassign this piece.

Please submit an invoice for expenses incurred through last week. We won't be able to reimburse anything beyond that point." She didn't ask for an explanation and I didn't offer one.



Week four was when I discovered the pattern.<sup>10</sup> Or thought I discovered it. Or wanted to discover it so badly that I convinced myself I'd found it even though it was almost certainly just pareidolia, the human tendency to see patterns in randomness because our brains are pattern-seeking machines that can't tolerate chaos.

The numbers on lottery tickets corresponded to Muay Thai scoring zones. The six digits could be mapped onto the six primary striking points: fists, elbows, knees, shins, body, head. The frequency of certain digits correlated with the point values of different strikes in traditional scoring. The sequences encoded information about timing and combination and strategy.

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<sup>10</sup> My visa was expiring. I had approximately one week left in Thailand before I'd need to leave or do a visa run to Cambodia or Malaysia. I had no plans for either option. I had no plans at all except to apply powder and buy lottery tickets and decode the pattern that I was certain existed beneath the surface of everything.

This was completely insane. I knew it was insane. But it also felt true in ways that truth usually feels: inevitable, obvious, undeniable once you see it.

I started buying lottery tickets based on fight outcomes, using the results of Muay Thai matches to predict which numbers would appear, which numbers would win. This required attending more fights, which I did, but not to watch the fighting—to record the outcomes, to note which techniques scored, to translate combat into numbers and numbers back into tickets.

I bought hundreds of tickets. Thousands. I'd lost track of how much money I'd spent, how many baht I'd converted, how far into my savings I'd gone. I told myself I'd win it back, that once I cracked the code I'd win a major prize and everything would be justified, all the powder and oil and obsession would be revealed as necessary preparation for this moment of insight and victory.

I did not win. Not major prizes, not minor prizes. I won once, about eight hundred baht, which I immediately spent on more powder and oil and tickets, feeding the system that was now feeding me.



The final week is harder to recount because it exists in my memory as a series of disconnected images rather than a coherent narrative. Me in a 7-Eleven at 3 AM buying powder, the only customer, the cashier looking at me with something beyond concern into territories of genuine alarm. Me in my hotel room with lottery tickets arranged in concentric circles, powder covering everything, oil bottles empty and knocked over, creating puddles that reflected ceiling light.

Me at a fight, not watching the fight but staring at tickets, whispering numbers, applying powder between rounds until security asked me to leave because I was disturbing other spectators. Me on a beach at sunrise, covered in powder that the wind kept blowing off me, looking like a chalk outline of a person, buying more tickets from Yai who had started refusing to sell to me until I offered double the already-inflated price.

At some point—I think day thirty-seven but the timeline is unclear—I ran out of money. Credit cards maxed, Thai baht depleted, unable to get more without admitting to my bank that I'd spent roughly eight thousand dollars on powder and coconut oil and lottery tickets.

I called my sister in California, who I hadn't spoken to in four months. "I need money," I said. "I'm in Thailand. I'm doing research. I need money."

“What kind of research?” she asked, reasonably.

“Muay Thai,” I said. “And powder. And lottery tickets. It’s all connected. There’s a pattern.”

Silence on the line. Then: “Are you okay? You sound... not okay.”

“I’m fine,” I said, which was manifestly untrue. “I just need money. Maybe two thousand? Three thousand? To finish the research.”<sup>11</sup>

She said she’d call me back. She didn’t call back. Or she did and I didn’t answer. Or I answered and said things that made her more concerned rather than less. Memory unreliable here.



Day forty-one I woke up and couldn’t remember applying powder the night before. I looked down at myself—

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<sup>11</sup> I should mention that through all of this, I was still taking notes. Not about Muay Thai—I’d completely abandoned that pretense—but about powder and oil and numbers, filling notebook after notebook with observations and theories and increasingly frantic handwriting that deteriorated from legible to barely comprehensible over the course of the month. These notes are what I’m working from now, trying to reconstruct what happened, trying to understand how a straightforward journalism assignment became this, became whatever this is or was.

white, coated, normal—but had no memory of the application. Time was becoming slippery, events out of sequence. Had I applied powder this morning or was this yesterday's powder? Was yesterday yesterday or was it last week?

My phone was dead. Or not dead but close to it, 3% battery, and I'd lost the charger or pawned it or left it somewhere. I couldn't remember which.

I walked to the nearest 7-Eleven—not to buy powder, because I had no money, but because I needed to be somewhere that wasn't my hotel room. The cashier saw me coming and locked the door. Just locked it, flipped the sign to closed even though it was 2 PM and the store was clearly open. She didn't make eye contact.

I walked to another 7-Eleven. Same thing. Either they were communicating with each other or I'd become such a recognizable problem that all the convenience stores had been told to refuse me service.

This should have been a moment of clarity, a bottom where I recognized the situation had become untenable. Instead I felt offended. I was a customer. I had money. Except I didn't have money. But in principle I had money, or had access to money, or would have money soon once my sister called back or Patricia paid the expenses or the lottery tickets finally won.

I found Yai at her usual spot near Somchai's gym. She saw me approaching and started packing up her lottery board, folding her chair, clearly preparing to leave.

"Wait," I said. "I need tickets."

"No," she said. Just that. No explanation, no apology, just refusal.

"I have money," I lied.

She looked at me—really looked, maybe for the first time in weeks of transactions—and shook her head. Then she said something in Thai that I didn't understand but which I knew was about me, about my condition, about how I'd become someone it was better to avoid than to help.

She left. I stood there in the heat, covered in powder that was no longer cooling me, holding lottery tickets that I couldn't afford to buy more of, searching for patterns that didn't exist in a system that was completely random.

This was the moment. This was when I should have stopped, reconsidered, called my sister back and accepted help.

Instead I walked back to my hotel, used what was left of my coconut oil to reapply powder one more time, and laid out every lottery ticket I'd bought over the previous

month—maybe three thousand tickets total—arranging them in what I was certain was the final pattern, the ultimate configuration that would reveal everything.

I stared at them for hours. Days maybe. Time had become negotiable. The gecko was definitely dead now, lying in a corner, desiccated, though I couldn't remember when that happened.<sup>12</sup>

And I saw it. Or thought I saw it. Or needed to see it so badly that I projected it onto random numbers: a pattern, a structure, a meaning hidden in the chaos. The lottery tickets weren't just random numbers, they were encoding something about heat and relief and desire and the way human beings convince themselves that suffering means something if only they can decode it properly.

The numbers corresponded to nothing. The pattern was imaginary. The whole thing was just a lottery—random numbers sold to people who wanted to believe

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<sup>12</sup> I left Thailand two days later. Borrowed money from my sister, who made me promise to get help, which I said I would and eventually did but not for several more months. Flew back to the US with two remaining tins of Snake Brand powder in my luggage, which I told myself were just souvenirs but which I continued using, rationing them, making them last, unable to fully let go of the thing that had consumed me.

in luck or destiny or some organizing principle that would transform chance into meaning.

I laughed. Or cried. Both maybe. I gathered all three thousand lottery tickets and threw them out the hotel room window, watching them flutter down onto the street below like paper snow, like white powder, like everything I'd been chasing falling away into nothing.



I never wrote the article about Muay Thai. Patricia never paid me for the work I'd done, which was fair because I didn't actually do the work I'd promised. *Travel + Leisure* published something else in the summer issue, a piece about boutique hotels in Tulum that was exactly the kind of content their readers wanted and expected.

I kept the notebooks, though. Hundreds of pages about powder and oil and lottery tickets and patterns that didn't exist. Kept them because throwing them away felt like admitting it was all meaningless, and I wasn't ready to admit that yet. Kept them because I thought maybe I could salvage something, turn the obsession into material, transform the breakdown into a story that would justify what happened or at least make it comprehensible.

This is that story. Or an attempt at it. An attempt to take what happened—a journalist who went to Thailand to write about Muay Thai and instead became catastrophically addicted to prickly heat powder and convinced himself that lottery tickets encoded secret messages—and turn it into something that makes sense, that has structure and meaning and some kind of resolution.

But the truth is messier than that. The truth is that it still doesn't make sense, not completely. I still don't understand why the powder gripped me the way it did, why something so mundane and trivial became all-consuming, why I spent eight thousand dollars and six weeks chasing patterns in lottery tickets instead of just writing the fifteen hundred words I'd been paid to write.

What I do understand is that obsession doesn't need to make sense to be real. That you can look at your behavior from outside and recognize it as irrational while still being unable to stop. That the gap between knowing something is wrong and actually changing is wider than any distance you'd travel to chase the thing you think you need.

I still think about the powder sometimes. The white tin with beautiful lettering. The cooling sensation that

felt so disproportionate to what it should have been. The way it transformed from solution to problem to obsession without me noticing the transitions.

I still think about the lottery tickets too. The numbers that seemed to mean something. The pattern I was so certain existed underneath everything. The way I'd convinced myself that if I just looked hard enough, long enough, I'd find the code that would make it all make sense.

There was no code. There was just heat, and powder, and a person trying to make meaning out of chaos, failing, and continuing to try anyway because the alternative—accepting that it was all random, that there was no pattern, that the powder was just powder and the tickets were just tickets and the whole thing was just what happens when you break down in public over the course of six weeks in a tourist town in southern Thailand—that alternative was somehow more unbearable than the continued failure.

So I kept going until I couldn't anymore, until I ran out of money and stores refused to serve me and even the lottery vendor wouldn't take my business. Until the bottom revealed itself not as a dramatic moment but as a slow series of doors closing, options narrowing, the

world gently but firmly indicating that this had to stop now.

And it did stop. I left Thailand. I came home. I got help, eventually. Talked to someone about whatever had happened, about obsession and control and what it means to break down slowly enough that you don't notice until you're already broken.

But I kept the notebooks. And I kept two tins of powder, unopened, in a drawer in my apartment. And sometimes, on particularly hot days, I think about opening them, about applying just a little bit, about how good it would feel, that cooling sensation that I remember as transcendent but which was probably just menthol doing what menthol does.

I don't open them. But I think about it. And I think about the pattern I thought I saw in lottery tickets, the code I was certain existed, the meaning I was trying to impose on randomness because the alternative was accepting that sometimes things just happen and there's no deeper reason, no hidden structure, no pattern to decode.

Maybe that's the real story. Not about Muay Thai or Thailand or powder or lottery tickets, but about what happens when you can't accept that chaos is just chaos, that heat is just heat, that sometimes you go somewhere

to write about one thing and end up consumed by something else entirely and there's no lesson or meaning or redemption arc, just the experience itself and whatever understanding you can salvage from it afterward.

Or maybe that's me still trying to find patterns where none exist, still trying to make this mean something when it doesn't have to mean anything at all.

The powder is still in the drawer. The notebooks are still on my shelf. And somewhere in Phuket, I imagine, Yai is still selling lottery tickets to tourists who think they might win, and Somchai is still training fighters who think they'll be champions, and the 7-Elevens are still stocking Snake Brand powder for people who are just hot, who just want to cool down, who haven't yet crossed the line from solution to obsession but who might, if they're not careful, if they apply just a little too much, just a little too often, until they can't remember what it was like before the powder, before the pattern, before everything became about the white tin with beautiful lettering and the numbers that seemed to mean something but didn't, couldn't, because that's not how any of this works.

That's not how any of this works at all.

