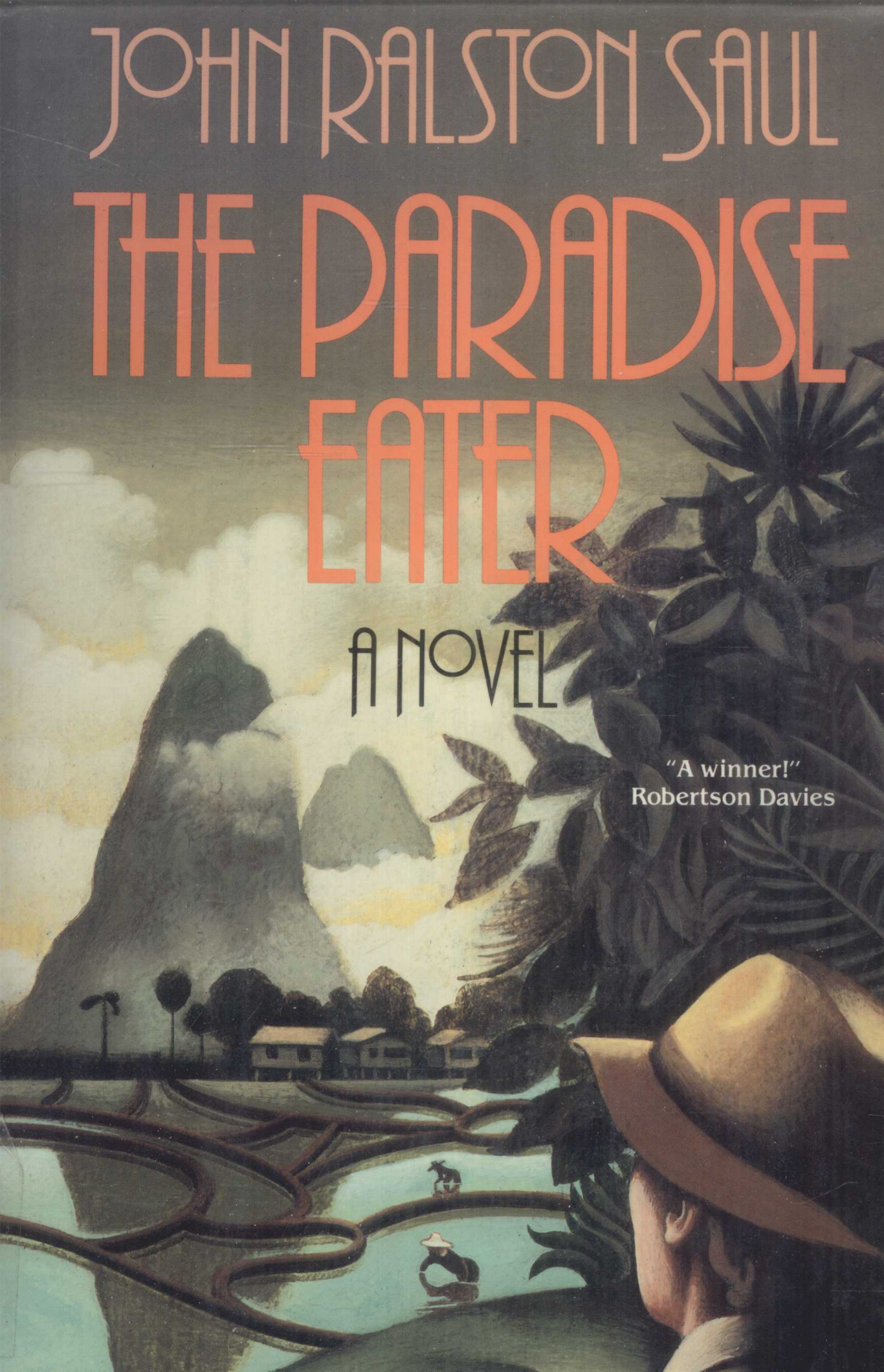
JOHN RALSTON SAUL

THE PARADISE EATER

A NOVEL

"A winner!"
Robertson Davies



THE PARADISE EATER

John Ralston Saul

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THE PARADISE EATER

By the same author

The Birds of Prey
Baraka
The Next Best Thing

For

John McBeth
who uncovered the Lao story

Sulak Sivaraksa
radical royalist

Father Joe Maier
of Klong Toey slum

Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

Coleridge

CHAPTER 1

'Schizophrenia is merely a state of mind.' Dr Michael Woodward's voice was raised over the uneven heaves of the air conditioner jutting out behind him. 'Chemically based, in general. In my case, not.'

Known to the Thais as Dr Meechai Wuthiwat, he might have avoided joking about his own character had he not been with a foreigner – a *farang* – who was also a friend, John Field. The smell and the weight of the East, creeping through the walls and surging in with the mechanically cooled air, insinuated themselves as a reminder that, outside his own office in the Bangkok Nursing Home on Convent Road, Woodward would have been even less likely to discuss such a thing.

The Home had been Bangkok's first western hospital. It curved through two acres of garden with a nineteenth-century colonial air of long, low, slanting roofs covered by red tiles. The white stucco façade rose to an upper floor of ceiling fanned rooms open on to large verandas. These were furnished with wicker sofas and writing desks. The patients lived little in their rooms – unless chained by tubes to machinery – and much on their verandas, gazing in minimal or great agony out across the tropical, almost botanical collection of trees and flowers that were clipped constantly back into severe controlled shapes. Nature in Bangkok was still something to dominate or be dominated by.

Even lying down, the patients could pick out through their picket railings the cars carrying patients – if not friends, certainly known faces – as they weaved up through the trees towards the great porch, designed to protect them during the

rainy season. This ability to identify the newly sick was central to Bangkok gossip. Between the porch and the hall there were neither doors nor walls. The Nursing Home had been built before fans and so everything which could be left open was, in the hope that air might be encouraged to move.

Along the street, just beyond the garden, lay Christ's Church, Anglican and Norman in style. In the other direction was, first, St Joseph's, a French-founded convent school for the rich, and then the Swiss Guest House, patronized largely by Baptist missionaries, down from the hills and in from the paddies. The Carmelites hid across the street behind a stone wall, recently raised still higher with corrugated plastic sheeting to preserve the nuns' isolation from the city growing taller around them. Convent Road was thus an island, one block long, crowded with devotion to God and to health. At either end, a sea of iniquity in concrete broke upon its shores.

From across Sathorn, the wide cutting avenue beyond Christ's Church, a five-storeyed massage parlour the width and depth of a department store, its façade decorated with Christmas tree lights, stared down the length of Convent Road. At the other end, beyond the Swiss Guest House and Silom Road, a hundred or so bars and smaller massage parlours jumbled against each other along Patpong, Patpong 2 and a series of other little lanes.

The Bangkok Nursing Home had lost its position as the city's only source of modern medicine decades before. The Thais had better hospitals and, for that matter, better doctors than the general expatriate variety. Still, the European community lent a great deal of importance to familiarity, even if it meant risking death. Familiarity was a form of religion: the Expatriate's Faith. Dr Woodward, in both his English and his Thai incarnations, was a good doctor, but it was his English half that earned the bread and butter by pandering to this faith.

'Don't be verbose, old man,' he added, ending the conversation, 'and pull down your trousers.'

Field focused on the neat figure before him; there was a spare elegance about it that could only have been Thai and must therefore have been inherited from Woodward's mother. Outlined as it was by a dark and very English suit, this Siamese half receded towards invisibility.

'You should know it by now,' Field complained.

'I have no particular desire to see your remarkably ordinary and diseased sexual organs, old man. You tell me the discharge has not cleared up. In that case I need a specimen. In which case I need to see the thing. The jewels, old boy. To hold them, in fact, distasteful though that is to me.'

Field didn't listen and let his friend slip out of focus. He didn't want to do what he was told. As to the doctor's needs, they were the furthest things from Field's mind. His eyes slipped up to the wood ceiling, down to the indifferent blue shining walls, soft with humidity and too many coats of paint, and round to the left of the doctor's silhouette where a group of photographs hung.

Woodward's father was there in the uniform of a captain of the Siamese Navy. The print was dated 1914. He had left England in 1912, having gradually realized that his Jewish blood, though apparent in neither name nor physique, was a hindrance to his career in the Royal Navy. A discreet hindrance. Nothing had ever been said; not within his hearing, not even at school. No one had ever called him Jew-boy or made him consciously feel an outsider. And yet he had felt precisely that. Curiously enough, the photograph made him look Thai, perhaps an effect of the photographer's style, because if ever a sailor had been cast in the Admiral Beatty tradition, Woodward was the man. In August 1914, immediately upon the outbreak of the war, he had renounced his citizenship, ceasing to be a subject of King George V, changed his name to Wuthiwat, a direct translation of Woodward, and had married a Thai from a good family. The girl had been immediately impregnated. The resulting first daughter was his real declaration of independence. He would not go back to England for the war. They hadn't wanted him when they didn't need him. He was now unavailable.

Field put his hand to his fly. The metal of the zipper was ice cold; like a pin puncturing his hot skin. Everything was hot. The air conditioning only made it hotter. The gusts of cold air, belching out from the rudimentary old machine which took up half the window, were little better than deodorant applied over old sweat. He looked down at his own hand. The nails were

cut in perfect quarter moons. Although a particularly clean man at all times, his standards of cleanliness rose still higher whenever he was infected.

'For God's sake, John. Get on with it.'

Field grunted – it was a form of laugh, indicating assent – and yanked both his trousers and his underwear down in one move. The rush of air against his genitals relieved the pain for a brief second. It was more the illusion of relief. He looked straight up at Woodward to watch him prepare a swab on a stick, then move forward. Field let his eyes slip back to the wall.

There was a second photograph, in a frame as baroque as that of 1914. It showed the father as an admiral, in 1942. His first wife had already died and so, with Thailand's entry into the Second War on the side of the Axis, he had married again, again a Thai, and had immediately shot out the seeds for Michael, the last of his nine children and the only son. The admiral was still alive – now ninety-five – and still strong enough to terrorize his married daughters and their husbands.

Two other photographs showed Michael in the robes of a Buddhist monk during his teenage retreat to a monastery and the same Meechai in a pin-striped suit at the University of Edinburgh medical school. Michael and Meechai both meant strength.

Field felt his penis seized firmly, pulled out and the stick twisting up inside. He managed to ask, 'How much pleasure would you think this equals on a weigh scale?'

'What a Catholic thought.' Woodward was too absorbed in twisting the swab to say more for a moment. 'I had enough trouble clearing you up last time. I want a bloody good specimen.'

'Nobody says bloody any more, for Christ's sake! I've told you that, Michael. Nobody! Not even the English.'

He went on talking to deflect the attack of white flame which the scraping produced within him. On the doctor's face there was the expression of a man baiting a hook. Field hadn't been fishing in thirty years. Not since his childhood. And certainly not since he'd left Montreal for Bangkok twenty years before. You don't fish in the Far East, he thought. People fish for you.

People do everything for you. Catching VD is one of the few things you can do for yourself; that and choosing the girl to help you catch it.

'You ever go fishing, Michael?'

'Whatever for?' Woodward asked this with the innocence of an educated Thai. He twisted the swab out and turned away to smear it on a circular glass plate six inches across.

Field looked down past his flat stomach; taut, he remarked to himself, but then muscle was neither a compensation for nor a protection against his problem. The penis appeared quite normal. A little red perhaps. He replaced the stained Kleenex in his underwear and thought about the three girls he had slept with the week before; that is, the week before the usual dripping and fishhook pains had started. Perhaps all three girls had made a contribution. Perhaps it was that miraculous combination – a meeting of germs never meant to meet – which had made the infection impervious to the first attack of antibiotics. He considered putting this theory to Woodward, but thought better of it.

'What did you give me last week?'

Woodward glanced up. 'Kanamycin. Two grams, last Wednesday wasn't it? A gram a day – Thursday, Friday, Saturday.' His voice took on a marginally reassuring tone. 'Now don't worry, John. I have been seeing a fair number of resistant cases. You're quite certainly not alone with the problem. And on the positive side, there are twenty-four antibiotics smeared around this plate. One of them will strike it dead. No. No. Keep your trousers down. Let's take advantage of the buttocks being bare to have a go at your little case with some Spectinomycin; fill in the time, so to speak, while the others are fighting it out on the plate. Why not? Think of it as Russian roulette.'

'What?'

'Except I pull the trigger while the germ waits to be shot dead.' He covered the dish and put it away in a cooler before searching through a medicine cupboard. 'Two shots of two grams each, one per cheek, straight away. A gram a day for the next three days, right or left buttock, your option. Marvellous. I'll see lots of you. You, I mean, not your lower parts in

particular.' He paced over to his desk, lifting his shiny, heavy, black shoes with care. Field's file lay open. 'This is your second gonorrhoea of the year.'

'The other was last year.'

'I'm afraid not. You came calling here on January tenth. The incubation period being less than two weeks, except in rare cases, you most certainly caught it this year. Now last year was quite a different show. Chlamydia was the star. Four infections.'

'One, Michael. They were all the same one. You know that. I couldn't shake it. Come on, for Christ's sake, give me the shots, eh, so I can get my trousers up. There's a wind in here. Why don't you get rid of that antique?' He was talking about the air conditioner. 'My fees alone would buy you a new machine.'

'No.' Woodward didn't move. 'Not by my calculation. You see, each infection counts separately if separated by a month. There was also a non-specific urethritis.'

'Nothing.'

'Almost nothing. And a gonorrhoea that ran over from '83.'

'You can't count it twice.'

'I'm not. Good grief, no. Wouldn't dream of it. Now . . . you have been in Bangkok twenty years. I, however, did not see you until May seventh, 1969; an emergency visit occasioned by an out-of-control gonorrhoea. You had been stuck in the hills for two weeks with no drugs. However, there were girls.'

'There are always girls.'

'I believe you had lost your previous records, leaving me ignorant regarding your first four years. However, as of today, you are up to eight gonorrhoea, one syphilis – '

'That was bad luck.'

'Extremely, I agree. You must have got it from a European. Six chlamydias. Five assorted non-specific urethritis. And that's it. There are at least eight infections you haven't even tried. Peyronie's disease, for example. I'd like to see one of those.'

'Would you?'

'Induration of the corpora, that's what you get. Swelling on one side of the penis. It can become very large and distorted

. . . quite a trial, I understand. Requires patience. Or Reiter's Syndrome . . .'

'Give me my shots.'

'No cure really. You have to starve it out. A bit like chlamydia, only this one inflates the surface of the bone. Little spurs. It might also damage those blue eyes of yours.'

Field ran a hand with frustration through his hair, thick and blond. Woodward noticed this gesture.

'Not the scalp. No. It doesn't affect the scalp, though I can understand why you might think the opposite. We treat it with steroids, which eventually make you moon-faced. Rather like a Chinese eunuch, if you see what I mean.'

Field swivelled round and bent over, presenting his backside as an encouragement. This drew Woodward's attention from the file.

'Oh, good. You're ready.' He got up to prepare the needles. 'You are not top of the list as yet. I've two patients running ahead, though you're closing fast.'

'Crappe and Sweetpie.'

'No. As a matter of fact, not. Henry Crappe is surprisingly careful and Sweetpie, as you call him, is very lucky. Here we go.' He jabbed in the first needle. 'Of course, you are only forty-four. You'll have lots of time to catch up once we've beaten this one.'

'I should write Wojtyla.'

'Wojtyla?'

'The Pope. Look, when I'm not sick, what do I want? Sex. Not voraciously, no more than most, but I want it when I want it, how I want it. That desire has got to be the most natural, irresistible and permanent thing in the world. Then I catch one of your drips and snap, I don't want sex any more. Snap. No desire. And that without moral questioning. Pain deadens desire. That's even a Christian concept. So VD is a friend to chastity. It conquers the temptations that make chastity difficult. Give every priest the clap and the priesthood's weakness for sins of the flesh would vanish. I should know, a Montreal lower town Irish boy. We're priest breeding stock.' Field never dwelt on the fact that only his mother had been Catholic and Irish. His father had been a Protestant Anglo.

'Except the pain doesn't last, John. You get the desire back and you're still sick. Now bugger off! Go and see the old duck outside. She'll give you some pills to build you up while the shots are dragging you down.'

'I'll buy you lunch.'

'No. They're waiting for me at Klong Toey.'

'I'll come with you.'

'Don't. My clinic lasts all afternoon. It's exhausting enough without your company.'

'St Michael among the poor, eh? I'll drop you off there.'

'No. Don't you have anything to do?'

'Not when I feel this way. I'll pay the taxi.'

'No. I've got to change.'

'Quite right. Savile Row in the swamp. Not the right image.'

'Get out, John!' He pushed the neatly-dressed blond figure towards the door.

The old duck – she was scarcely thirty and had long black hair – gave Field his pills and sent him off down the stairs. He ignored the pain in his groin as he moved, his legs marginally wider apart than in normal times, and paused at the bottom to examine the names on the patient board. All *farangs*. Mostly Anglo-Saxons. The board was lacquered white with thirty-five polished brass card holders fixed upon it in four rows; a white card had been slipped into each, the patient's name inscribed in an elegant black script. The whole thing was reminiscent of the seating plan for an embassy dinner. No. There was no one he wanted to visit.

As no wall divided the pillared hall from the garden and the drive, so a strong heavy smell of grass and flowers drifted in to mix curiously with the medical odours. There was a woman climbing from the rear seat of a BMW. A servant followed her, carrying a sick child. The driver came last with a small suitcase. Field didn't know her. The humidity and the heat reached to where he stood. He could sense these elements building up as they wove their pattern across the day towards the afternoon rain. Field stepped out into the sun. Curious. After all his years in Bangkok, he still felt a conscious pleasure each time the sun and heat and humidity struck him violently with a single blow.

This pleasure was not devoid of masochism. He could sense blood rushing out to the surface to protect him and his eyes shrinking in to escape the glare and his lungs measuring their expansion carefully to avoid exertion. Yes, it was pleasure he felt. Pleasure beneath a clear, hot sky. Revenge upon a childhood of winters and marginal poverty. Had the sun wanted to strike him dead, he would have been quite happy to accept its judgement. He had always imagined that one day it would. Field walked gingerly along the drive, focusing on the narrow space directly ahead of him.

A voice called out from a balcony behind. 'John. Hello, John.'

He recognized it as belonging to a woman who checked in twice a year for a two week rest, her reason being that the Home was the best old fashioned hotel cum social centre in Bangkok, providing you had your food cooked outside and brought in. Field waved a hand over his shoulder without looking back or breaking stride.

On Convent Road his eyes automatically shifted away from the traffic and down to the pavement, or rather to the jumble of shattered cement slabs, sewer openings and refuse piles. He turned right and began to pick his way on the sunstruck side of the street. It was a three-hundred-yard walk to Patpong and to Napoleon's. There he would inevitably find someone to cheer him up while he ate a steak. Across the road a Chevrolet Impala, 1959, began to follow while still allowing the taxis and *tuc-tucs* to rush by. It was pale green and white and enormous, gleaming, and outlined by a mass of chrome that reflected the light with the force of a solar heating device. The rear window wound down and a woman's warm, husky voice called out.

'John. John. Come over here.'

Field continued as if he had not heard.

'John. Oh, stop!' She tapped her driver on the shoulder. 'Stop.'

The car eased up to the kerb like a galleon and an old Thai, dried on the bone, climbed out from behind the wheel to open the rear door. Mrs Norman A. Laker emerged as if from a stretch limousine on Park Avenue. The Carmelites' wall, with its corrugated plastic top, rose behind her to provide shade. Her hair was teased up into a stiff but perfect mountain of

white. A deliberate layer of make-up emphasized her bone structure, with a black line around the outer edges of the lips to accentuate their fullness. The face lifts were sensed without being concretely observable. She wore a pale linen suit and walked out into the sun in a highly articulated manner, though without adjusting her step. Even her pupils seemed impervious to the glare, scarcely bothering to contract. The overall result was a highly personal interpretation of beauty. A three-wheeled *tuc-tuc* screeched its brakes to avoid her, then swerved in an arc, honking as it passed.

'John!'

Field stopped and turned back, changing his focus as he looked straight into the sun. 'Good morning, Catherine.'

'What's the matter with you? Are you ill?'

'Nothing serious.'

'Then don't go into that place. You could catch something. You've been in there forever.'

'Had I known you were waiting . . .' He saw that she was insensitive to irony and so broke off. 'I was wasting Michael Woodward's time.'

'Stay away from him, John. He spends too much time in the slums. Diseases are very communicable. And what are you doing on foot out of doors? Come over to the car.' Her manicured meccano fingers beckoned. 'I want to talk to you. I've already been to your house. That dirty old woman you pay to do what? . . . I can't imagine what . . . sent me here.'

'She's not so old.'

Field allowed himself to be dragged across the road and pushed into the back of the car. Mrs Laker followed behind so that he was forced to slide the full distance to the other side of the tooled leatherette seat.

He patted the yellowing surface, 'When's the richest *farang* in Bangkok going to get herself a new car?'

'Norman ordered this Chevrolet!' She appeared to regret her outburst and looked down at the seat's intricate Mexican saddle pattern before continuing in a more intimate tone. 'It arrived, I thought it very strange, exactly sixty days after his death . . . in that place.' Without turning, she raised her right hand and pointed a finger through the back window towards