

# Another Etiquette Lesson from the Jungle

by Kurt Opprecht

Excerpt from the novel/memoir, *Playing With Fire*  
by  
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After we eat, we move to another hut where a couple of young guys are setting it up on a mat on the woven floor. There's a surprising amount of paraphernalia involved, and it's all wooden and metal, like the instruments of a back country Victorian botanist.

The goop they get from the poppy pods is a sticky brown paste they keep in a little pot about the size of a matchbox. One of them takes a little metal dish and smears the inside surface of it with the opium paste. Then he puts the dish over a lamp cooks it a little, then he adds some water and rubs the inside of the dish until the residue comes off into the water. He heats the water and this residue over the flame again, and then adds headache powder.

God knows why they add headache powder. I heard about it earlier at the store where we stopped on the way up from Chaing Mai. I'm in there looking at blankets, and Detlev holds up a little green paper packet with a picture of a fifties kind of lawn-mowing guy. He looks a lot like Fred MacMurray, but with his forehead stretched out so his head is three times as long as it should be. Detlev says, "You see this, it is head ache powder. They use it for smoking opium. I'm going to buy some in case we need it where we go." He buys ten packets.

**I like to think they made that picture of the man with the rubber head just to make sure we all know exactly which stuff to buy for opium. I can see some farmer seeing that head and thinking, "I don't know what this stuff is, but I like the looks of that guy."**

**He mixes this headache powder in with the first level of opium soup and cooks that a bit. Then he takes a handful of curly bamboo shavings, which are about as fine as rough steel wool, and toasts them over the fire. Then the fellow takes the wad of shavings and puts some water in his mouth and sprays a mist from his mouth onto them and then toasts them in the fire some more. Why spray it with water if you're just going to toast it in the fire? Who knows? I figure he's cooking off some of the volatile oils from the bamboo that probably aren't as fun to smoke as the opium, he's getting it down to just the innocuous straw.**

**Finally, he takes the shavings and soaks up the stuff in the little metal dish with them, wiping the dish clean. These gummy wood shavings are what they put in the pipe for us to smoke.**

**The Canadians smoke first again. It is Mike's birthday, so we let them get away with it. Bengt the Swede is into doing it tonight, I guess he observed us today and noticed that we didn't seem much worse for the wear. He goes after them because it's his first time. Then Detlev, and then me, because I went before Detlev last time. Pascal, Nils and, of course, Per, abstain.**

**This time the guys who are preparing the opium for us have some when we're all done and Tip has some too, which surprises me. Last night the guides had acted like they were above that kind of thing.**

**Since everyone has to smoke several bowls, there's a lot of time to kill. We use Tip as a translator and ask what happened to that abandoned village back down the trail.**

**They talk about it for a while, back and forth, and then Tip says that these people here used to live in that other place but the shaman of the village died and they had to move to avoid bad spirits. His son is 30 years old and he's one of the three Karen men in this room.**

**That gives us all something to think about. The whole world must be a scary place for them, at least some of the time, full of spirits and ghosts and evil.**

**Sitting here in the dark house with them, I think we're all feeling the pull of that world. The yellow glow of the lamp light glinting off the metallic surfaces and highlighting their faces draws us all in closer. It must have been a strong pull that possessed them to pack up, leave, and build all new houses. How freaked out were they?**

**You never know. Maybe the old guy was pissed off about how he died and he was coming back and giving them shit. And maybe the opium boys didn't tell us the whole truth. Maybe they just got fed up and killed the old man and then they realized they couldn't live in the same place anymore and still be reminded of that and everything. Maybe one of them won the lottery and bought the whole village and moved them out, then he decided he wanted a place on the Amalfi coast and left.**

**By now we're all pretty much relaxed and laying around and the guys who didn't smoke are already asleep. The opium guys talk with Tip some more and then Tip says that they've only seen eight white men before, ever. Also, the next village is three days' trip away.**

**I'm not sure how I feel about going two nights without a village. The macho man in me loves the idea of being out in the middle of the jungle for a couple of nights. But the wuss in me doesn't really want to go without decent food for that long. And no one has a tent. It's surely going to rain at least part of the time. It'll be more like a survival trek than an adventure trek.**

After we've all smoked as much as we want, there's still some raw opium paste left, and since I coughed up more than my share of the money for it this time, they give me the little pot of it. Tonight again Detlev has to puke, and then a little bit later Mike gets up and says, "Well, my turn." And he goes out to puke. It's kind of a joke, to know you're probably going to get sick, and then you do, but you don't even mind. It's really not so bad if you have partners in nausea.

I lie on the floor of the hut and for some reason I start to think about the Harvest Days carnival and that game where you have to toss a dime in a dish to win a stuffed animal. Next thing you know I'm a little tiny guy in there in that world of plates and cups and goblets and saucers and bowls. Around me the stacks of china rise up like a castle with turrets and towers and courtyards, shiny and clean.

Dimes are floating down in their arcs, slow as feathers, and I'm watching them, spinning and shining and I'm skating around in my socks on the porcelain and flying from dish to dish like a skateboarder in the most awesome skate park ever. And each time a dime hits a dish it rings like a church bell. I'm having a very good time.

It's not like a dream. It's completely lucid. I know that all this is in my head and I'm thinking, "Wow, this is so cool. What a neat little world." But it doesn't go away just because I see it that way. It stays as real as anything right there in front of you. In fact, it takes some effort to get back to the real world.

I'm looking out through all the china and the raining dimes and the giant people are out there at the edge of the dime-toss tent, leaning up against the barrier, trying to get the best angle. I can see their faces, smiling and concentrating, lit up in the flashing red and yellow and green and purple carnival lights. I can see the bits of light blue cotton candy in that girl's hair and the official Padres' insignia on that guy's cap

and the little unicorn birthstone pendant around the neck of that old lady who's not playing the game but she's standing back and watching the kid do it, I guess he's her grandson.

So I'm having a blast in there, shredding the place like a sk8r boi that escaped from a Rimbaud poem, looking out at these people in the carnival and one of them spots me there in with all the dishes and dimes and saucers and things. A cowboy type with a hat, about seventeen. He goes, "Hey, there's a little dude in there! Fuckin' A, check it out."

And they all look and they see me skating around and so they start to try and hit me with their dimes.

I don't care, because I'm in my own special time-speed world. I'm fast like a fly. And it doesn't even feel fast to me. The whole world is laughably slow. It's no trouble getting out of the way of the dimes. It's fun, in fact. It's like dodgeball. I always liked that game.

They're really whipping them in there and more people are coming and changing dollars for dimes and throwing them at me by the handful. And a handful of spinning sailing dimes is a beautiful thing to see from a fly's point of view. It's so much fun I wish I could do it every night. And the sound it makes is just wonderful beyond belief, like cathedral bells on armistice day or something.

At some point during my opiated carnival scenario I get a feeling in my stomach, friendly like. It says, "Hey, howzabout we just empty me out?"

The feeling isn't rude. It doesn't really want to interrupt the movie. It just sort of taps me on the shoulder.

I'm not rude, either. I pay attention, and slowly turn around.

"Hey buddy, let's throw up," the feeling says.

"All right, sure, if you say so."

"Yeah, I hate to interrupt, but I think we should."

**“OK, let's do it,” I say, but then another voice comes in and says, “You can't just puke anywhere.”**

**Oh yeah, I say, “Where are we anyway?”**

**This question puts a final fade-out on the fantasy scene, but it's especially hard to get a grip because it's all dark in the house. It's like when you wake up in a strange bedroom and you don't remember where the hell you are at first and you don't know what way your head is facing or where the door is or anything. But the opium makes it take much longer to sort things out and remember you're in Thailand and you're in a bamboo house in a little village, and then to figure out that you need to stand up first and be careful not to step on anyone in the dark on your way out.**

**Luckily an opium puke isn't a really urgent puke. It's just something that needs to be done, that's all. I work my way in the dark down the steps of the house out onto the ground, which is a little slippery in my bare feet, and then carefully down away from the houses.**

**It's a cloudy night and there's less than half a moon so it's really dark. This village is in the middle of high trees and it's on a slope, so it's not so easy.**

**I don't want to wander off into the jungle just to puke and then get lost, but I don't want to leave a mess right in the middle of where everyone will be walking either, so I make my way around to the other side of this big mountain-range shaped rock and do my business.**

**Just as I'm finishing up, something shifts. It appears the rock moves, but I'm not clear enough about anything to be sure. At first I'm thinking it's the opium talking. But the rock is pretty big. Something's going on for real. I focus and concentrate. Trouble is, there just aren't many available photons. I wipe my mouth and stare as hard as I can into the darkness. I lean forward and blink a few times.**

**Slowly at first, and then suddenly, a picture forms out of the black. Big eyes, eyebrows, nose, horns. Buffalo. That's it, the**

**head of a water buffalo. I've never seen one from this close before. Horn-to-horn he's pretty much filling up my field of vision. I guess someone puking right next to his ass woke him up. He lifted his head and here I was.**

**I should be shitting bricks, but thanks to the opium, the alarm bells are soft and quiet.**

**He's not saying anything. He's not upset. He has that look that people give you when you've woken them up and they're not too happy about it, but it's not the end of the world and they really just want to go back to sleep.**

**"Shit, I'm sorry," I say. "I'll just be moving along now."**

**I back away and head up to the house.**

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