

Private Dancer

Also by Stephen Leather, published by Hodder & Stoughton

Pay Off

The Fireman

Hungry Ghost

The Chinaman

The Vets

The Long Shot

The Birthday Girl

The Double Tap

The Solitary Man

The Tunnel Rats

The Bombmaker

The Stretch

Tango One

The Eyewitness

Hard Landing

Soft Target

STEPHEN LEATHER

Private Dancer

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BANGKOK 1996

The Year Of The Rat

PETE

She's dead. Joy's dead. Joy's dead and I killed her. I can't believe it. I killed her and now I don't know what I'm going to do. I don't know what I'm going to do without her and I don't know what's going to happen to me when they find out she's dead. They'll know it's my fault. I trashed the room, my fingerprints are going to be everywhere. The manager of the building saw me storm out. The guy in the room, he'll remember me, too. Her friends knew that we were always arguing, and they know where I live.

The taxi driver keeps looking at me in his mirror. He can see how upset I am. I have to keep calm, but it's difficult. I want to scream at him, to tell him to put his foot down and drive faster but we're sitting at a red light so we aren't going anywhere for a while. Ahead of us is an elephant, swinging its trunk at a guy carrying a basket of bananas. A group of tourists give the guy money and he hands them fruit so that they can feed the elephant.

"Charng," says the driver. Thai for elephant. I pretend not to understand and keep looking out of the window. A typical Bangkok street scene, the pavements lined with food hawkers and stalls piled high with cheap clothing, the air thick with fumes from motorcycles and buses. I see it but I don't see it. All I can think about is Joy.

It's as if time around me has stopped. Stopped dead. I'm breathing and thinking but everything has frozen. She's dead and it's my fault. They'll see my name tattooed on her shoulder and they'll see my name carved into her wrist and they'll know that it's all my fault. I'm not worried about what the police will do. Or her family. There's nothing they can do that can make me feel any worse than I do right now as I sit frozen in time at a red traffic light, watching overweight tourists feeding bananas to an elephant with a chain around its neck. I know with a horrible certainty that I can't go on living without her. My life ends with her death because I can't live with the guilt. Joy's dead and I killed her so that means that I have to die, too.

BRUCE

I always knew it was going to end badly. Joy was a sweet thing and whether or not she'd been lying to Pete, she didn't deserve to die, not like that. Sure, she was a bargirl, but she was forced into it, she'd never have chosen the life for herself, and I know she wanted Pete to take her away from the bars. I was in shock when I heard what happened. Now I don't know what's going to happen to Pete. It's like he's on autopilot, heading into oblivion. I've got a bad feeling about it, but it's out of my hands. He's going to have to come to terms with what he's done, her death's going to be on his conscience for the rest of his life. To be honest, I don't know how he's going to be able to live with himself.

BIG RON

Joy's dead, huh? Can't say I was surprised when Bruce told me. Do I care? Do I fuck. I'm not going to shed any tears about a dead slapper. It's not exactly a long-term career, is it, when all's said and done, what with the drugs and the risks they take. Slappers are dying all the time. Overdoses, suicides, motorcycle accidents. And the way Joy fucked Pete over, I'm surprised he didn't top her months ago. She was a lying hooker and she deserved whatever she got, that's what I say. As for Pete, I don't know what'll happen to him. If he's smart he'll get on the next plane out of Bangkok.

PETE

I don't know if it was love at first sight, but it was pretty damn close. She had the longest hair I'd ever seen, jet black and almost down to her waist. She smiled all the time and had soft brown eyes that made my heart melt, long legs that just wouldn't quit and a figure to die for. She was stark naked except for a pair of black leather ankle boots with small chrome chains on the side. I think it was the boots that did it for me.

I didn't know her name, and I couldn't talk to her because she was already occupied with a fat, balding guy with a mobile phone who kept fondling her breasts and bouncing her up and down on his knee. She was a dancer at the Zombie Bar, one of more than a hundred go-go dancers, and between her twenty-minute dancing shifts she had to hustle drinks from customers. I kept trying to catch her eye, but she was too busy with the bald guy and after an hour or so she changed into jeans and a T-shirt and left with him. They looked obscene together, he must have been twenty stone and old enough to be her father.

I was with Nigel, a guy I'd met in Fatso's Bar, down the road from the go-go bars of Nana Plaza. Nigel was a good-looking guy with a shock of black unruly hair and a movie-star smile and a pirate's eye-patch. First time I met him I thought he was wearing it as a joke and I kept teasing him about it, but then it turns out that he lost an eye when he was a teenager. Stupid accident, he says, climbing through a barbed-wire fence on his parents farm. He's got a false eye but he still wears the eye-patch.

Reckons it gives him an air of mystery, he says. Makes him look like a prat, if you ask me.

It was Nigel's idea to go to Zombie. It was one of the hottest bars in Bangkok, he said. It was my first time, I'd only been in Bangkok for two days, and I hadn't known what to expect. It was an eye-opener. Two raised dance floors, each with more than a dozen beautiful girls dancing around silver poles. Most of them naked. Around the edge of the bars were small tables, and waitresses in white blouses and black skirts scurried around taking orders and serving drinks.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" I asked Nigel as the girl walked by holding the bald guy's hand.

"They're all beautiful," he said, winking at a girl on the stage.

"No, that one's special," I said. "And I don't just mean the boots."

Nigel drank his Singha beer from the bottle and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Pete, let me give you a bit of advice. From the horse's mouth. They're all hookers. Every one of them. Pay their bar fines, take them to a short-time hotel, screw your brains out, then pay them. But whatever you do, don't get involved. Trust me, it's not worth it."

I watched the girl and her customer disappear through the curtain that covered the exit to the plaza.

I asked Nigel how it worked, how you got to go out with one of the girls. He explained how the bar fine system worked. You paid the money to the bar - it varied between 400 baht and 600 baht depending on which bar you were in, and the girl was then free to leave with you. What you did was pretty much up to you, but usually a customer would take the girl to one of the numerous short-time hotels within walking distance of the plaza. How much you paid the girl depended on what she did and how generous you were, it could be as little as 500 baht, as much as 2,000 baht, more if you wanted to spend the whole night with her.

Nigel waved at the two stages, crammed with girls. "Go on, pick one," he said.

I shook my head. There was no one there I wanted.

NIGEL

It's funny watching the faces of the first-timers when they walk into a go-go bar. Their mouths drop and their eyes go wide, then they try to be all cool as if it's the most natural thing in the world to be confronted by dozens of naked girls. Pete was no exception. He sat drinking gin and tonic, his eyes flicking from side to side, trying to take it all in. I've been in Thailand for more than five years so I'm pretty blasé about it. I've seen pretty much everything here. Full sex, lesbian sex, homosexual sex, sex with a German Shepherd once, and now nothing shocks or surprises me.

Pete seemed a nice enough guy. Bit quiet, a bit serious, but a few months in Bangkok would loosen him up. He'd been sent to Thailand to update a travel book, one of those guides you always see in the hands of backpackers looking for a cheap place to stay. It was his first time in South East Asia, so I took it upon myself to show him around the sleazier parts of Bangkok.

There are three main red light areas - Nana Plaza, Patpong and Soi Cowboy. The Plaza's my favourite. Soi Cowboy is too quiet, the girls are almost never topless and they don't do shows. Patpong is full of tourists: the shows are good but there are too many touts trying to pull you into their bars. Nana Plaza is where the expats go. It's more relaxed and, in my humble opinion, the girls are prettier. There are a couple of dozen bars on three floors, all overlooking a central area where there are outdoor bars. The outdoor bars are good for a quiet drink, but the real action takes place inside. Zombie is the best, but I'm a big fan of G-Spot and Pretty Girl, too.

As soon as we sat down, Pete started eyeing up this girl. She was dancing naked, except for ankle-length boots. Nice body, lovely long hair. Face was okay, too, but I never look at the mantelpiece while I'm stoking the fire, if you get my drift.

I could see he was keen but he couldn't even get eye contact with her. She was working a big German guy, smiling and flashing her tits to keep him interested. It was driving Pete crazy. He was practically grinding his teeth when she left with the German. I figured he'd get over it. I mean, there are plenty more fish in the sea, right?

PETE

I went back several times to Zombie but she was always busy, usually with overweight Germans. They'd sit next to her, paw her, buy her drinks, pay her bar fine and take her off to a short time hotel. Eventually, on my fourth visit, she was free. I smiled at her while she was dancing, and she smiled back. She wasn't a particularly good dancer, she just stood by a silver pole, holding it with her right hand, the little finger extended as if she were drinking from a tea-cup. From time to time she'd reach up with her left hand and brush her long hair away from her face. When her dancing shift finished she scuttled off the stage and wrapped a leopard-patterned shawl around her waist. She came over to me, glancing down shyly and extending her right hand. We shook hands, the formality almost ludicrous considering that she was still topless. "Hello," I said. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, thank you," she said. "And you?"

I smiled at her stilted English and patted the seat next to me. She sat down, her leg pressed against mine.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Joy," she said.

I asked her what she wanted to drink and she said "cola." I nodded and she pulled my chit from its holder and went over to the bar, returning with a small glass of Coke. The chit kept a running total of the drinks I'd bought.

"Cheers," she said, and we clinked glasses.

Her English wasn't good, but it didn't seem to matter. We sat together for almost an hour, watching the dancers. Then she stood up. "I must dance now," she said.

"How about I pay your bar fine?" I offered.

"You want go short time with me?" she said.

It wasn't what I'd meant - I'd just wanted to keep her next to me for a while - but I didn't argue with her. Besides, if I didn't pay her bar fine, I was pretty sure someone else would. "Okay," I said.

She held out her hand and I gave her 600 baht. She went over to the cashier, handed over the money and then mimed putting on a shirt and pointed to a door that I guessed led to the changing rooms. Ten minutes later we were in bed.

To be honest, the sex wasn't that good. I mean, it was great being with her, she was drop dead gorgeous, and she did everything I asked, but she wouldn't initiate anything. It was all too passive. I shouldn't really have been surprised, I suppose, because I'd only known her for an hour or so and there we were, naked in a short-time hotel.

The hotel had been her idea. It was on the first floor of the Nana Plaza complex, less than a hundred yards away from Zombie. I was staying at the Dynasty Hotel in Soi 4 but I didn't want to take her back there as I knew that the staff would only gossip. There was an old guy at reception reading a Thai comic book and he charged me four hundred baht for the use of the room for two hours and ten baht for a condom. He didn't even look up as he took my money. Joy took the key and went straight to the room. She'd obviously been there before.

Afterwards, when it was all over, she rushed into the shower, and when she came out she was wrapped in one of the two threadbare towels that the hotel supplied. I wanted to lie with her, to hold her in my arms and talk to her, but she seemed more interested in getting back to the bar. I could understand why - she was working and I was a paying customer - but I wanted to be more than that. I wanted her to care about me, the way I cared about her. I asked her about her family, about where she went to school, how long she'd worked in the bar, but her English wasn't good and my Thai was virtually non-existent, so mainly she just smiled and nodded, or smiled and shrugged.

She sat on the bed and waited until I'd showered, and we went back to Zombie together. I didn't want to go inside the bar, so we sat outside and I bought her a cola. I explained that I was going to Hong Kong the following day. I had to see the regional editor of the book I was updating. She looked suddenly concerned. "So I not see you again?"

I was touched. Maybe she did care, after all. I told her I'd be back in a week or so.

She shrugged. "I not believe you," she said. "I think you not come back."

I had an idea. I took off the gold chain I was wearing around my neck. It was worth about a hundred pounds. I put it around her neck. "There," I said, "now you know I'll have to come back, to get my gold."

She grinned and threw her arms around my neck, and gave me a Thai kiss. Not with her lips, that's not the Thai way. She put her nose close to my cheek and sniffed. She smelled fresh and clean, like she'd been out in a field, but I knew that it was the cheap soap that had been in the bathroom.

"I hope you come back to me," she said.

JOY

To be honest, I never thought I'd see him again. He was a bit drunk, I think, and even though he gave me his gold chain I thought he'd forget about me as soon as he left Bangkok. A lot of farangs are like that: twenty minutes after they've met you they start saying they love you and want to marry you. They say it but they don't mean it. A Thai man would never say he loves you that quickly. I don't think my father ever told my mother that he loved her, right up until the day she died. I'm not saying he didn't love her, he did, but he never actually said the words. Farangs are the opposite. They say it, but they don't mean it.

He looked okay, I guess. He said he was thirty seven but he looked younger. He wasn't fat like most farangs who come in the bar, and he wasn't losing his hair. He wasn't especially good looking but he had a kind face and really blue eyes. It was his eyes I remembered most, I think. They were blue and soft.

He was a bit drunk when he left, and I guess I figured he'd forget about me as soon as he got on the plane. I remember being disappointed that the chain wasn't bigger.

The sex? I don't even remember doing it with him. I try not to think about what I'm doing when I'm in bed. I blot it out, just think about the money. It's not making love, it doesn't even feel like sex, if you know what I mean. I'm there, on the bed, and there's a farang with me, but I just let them do what they want. Tender or rough, it doesn't make any difference to me, I just want it to be over. Ten minutes is the most it usually takes. Some of the girls moan and groan, they reckon that makes a man come quickly, but I don't do that. I don't want to do anything, I want it all to be their doing. Usually I just lie on my back. I hate it when they want me to go on top because then they expect me to move, to do the work, and I don't like that.

He didn't ask me how much he was supposed to pay, and before we left the room he gave me a thousand baht. I told him it wasn't enough. He looked confused. I suppose one of his friends had told him that a thousand baht was the going rate. Most of the girls will do it for a thousand, some will even go short-time for five hundred, but I never do it for less than fifteen hundred. And if they want me to stay all night, that's three thousand. Anyway, I told Pete that he had to pay me fifteen hundred, and he did.

ALISTAIR

Pete's been working for the company for more than five years, and he's a good operator. Fast, reliable, and accurate. He did our London guide and assisted with the guides to France and Spain. I've known him since he joined the company; in fact I was on the panel that interviewed him. He used to be a journalist on a small paper in the West Country, then got into travel writing and he was freelancing for some of the nationals when we hired him. I get on well with him, professionally and on a personal level, too. When we were looking for someone to revamp our South East Asian editions, I had no hesitation in putting Pete's name forward.

His predecessor had a bad experience in Thailand. For a start, he'd gone a bit native on us. His name was Lawrence and he was an Australian. He'd been working for us at our head office in Perth, and about ten years ago he requested a transfer to Bangkok. Initially he worked well, did a great job on the third edition of our guide to Thailand, but he soon began missing deadlines and turning in shoddy copy. He was called back to Perth for an arse-kicking and he was okay again for a few months but then he married a local girl and he started getting slapdash again.

Lawrence was sent a couple of written warnings but it didn't make a blind bit of difference. The company asked me to fly over to have a word with him. He was living in a tiny house near a foul-smelling canal, no air-conditioning or hot water, with a girl about half his age. She was a pretty little thing and it was obvious that Lawrence loved her to bits. From what I could gather, he did everything for her. Cooked, cleaned, took care of the baby. They had a son, I think he was six months old when I saw him. Cute as a button, though to be honest he looked completely Thai. Lawrence doted on the kid, though, so I didn't want to burst his bubble by telling him that there wasn't much of a resemblance. "Don't you think he has my nose?" he kept asking.

Anyway, a couple of months after I went over to give him a character reading, Lawrence went up to the Golden Triangle to check out a new casino complex that had just opened. He got bitten by a mosquito and caught Japanese encephalitis. Almost died. They rushed him into hospital in Chiang Rai and had him on a life support machine. His wife came up to see him, had a word with the doctors, and vanished. He never saw her or the kid again. She sold the house, took everything that wasn't nailed down, and went back to her village.

Lawrence's parents flew over and took care of him. They got him back to Australia as soon as they could. He's still in a wheelchair and he can barely speak. Last I heard was that the doctors had done all they could and that brain damage was irreversible. A real sad fuck. And no sign of his missus or the kid.

Not that I think Pete's going to go the same way. He's too level-headed for that. Plus he's already been married. He got divorced just before he started working for the company, amicably by all accounts. They sold the house, split the profits and divided up the contents. I think the only argument was over who should keep the cats, but as Pete was travelling a lot that wasn't a serious problem. Anyway, I didn't think that he'd be keen to rush into marriage again, so he was the perfect choice for Bangkok.

Pete came to Hong Kong for a few days so that we could work through the chapter headings of the new Thailand guide. We wanted to jazz up the format to appeal to the younger crowd, more photographs, more info on the nightlife, stuff like that. Head office had also decided to maximise the use of the information we already had by producing a series of city guides. In Thailand that meant Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Udon Thani, Pattaya and Phuket. They'd also come up with an idea for a totally new book, a sort of cookery book crossed with a travel guide so that people could cook the dishes they'd eaten on holiday once they got home. I'd asked Pete to edit the book and he was enthusiastic. He'd obviously have to compile the Thai recipes but that wouldn't

involve much extra work because part of his brief was to visit as many restaurants and cafes as he could, so all he'd have to do is collect recipes as he went around. Our correspondents around the region had been instructed to do likewise, and then Pete would collate them and then intersperse them with travel tips and hotel stuff which we already had. It would be an upmarket book at the top end of the spectrum to our backpacker's guide to the region and I was sure Pete would make a real go of it.

He stayed with me and we had a couple of nights on the town but Pete's mind seemed to be elsewhere. I think he was just keen to get started.

PETE

I got back to Bangkok early evening, dropped my stuff off at the hotel and rushed around to Zombie. Joy wasn't wearing the gold chain, or anything else for that matter, just the boots. She grinned and waved when she saw me and I ordered a gin and tonic and waited for her dancing shift to come to an end.

She wrapped the leopard-print shawl around her waist and rushed over, giving me a big hug and kissing me on the cheek. I bought a cola and put my arm round her.

"I not think you come back, Pete," she said.

I couldn't stop myself grinning. She'd remembered my name. "I said I would."

"I think I not see you again."

I asked her where the gold chain was and she averted her eyes. She looked like a schoolgirl who'd been caught with her hand in the cookie jar. "I sorry, Pete," she said. "I no have money."

My heart sank. The gold had no sentimental value, but I'd hoped that by wearing it she'd be thinking of me. "Did you sell it?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Not sell," she said. She made a gesture with her thumb, pressing it down. Nigel had told me that bargirls often pawn their gold and they leave their thumb print instead of their signature. She'd pawned it. She smiled brightly. "If you give me three thousand baht, I get back for you."

She glanced down, suddenly shy, and my heart melted. There was no way I could be angry with her.

"Okay," I promised, "I'll give you the money."

She grinned and gave me a quick kiss on the cheek. Her bare breasts brushed against my arm. Some of the girls danced naked, like Joy, while others wore full bikinis. Some wore bikini briefs but danced topless. I asked her why she took off all her clothes when she danced.

She explained that girls who kept their clothes on were paid less than those who took their tops off, and the best paid were the ones who danced naked. Joy needed the money, she said. She said she had to send it back to her family. I felt suddenly protective. It wasn't fair. Joy was bright, she was smart, yet she was reduced to taking her clothes off and sleeping with men because that was the only way she could earn decent money. It was a form of economic rape: if Joy had been born in Europe or America she'd probably have been at university or working in an office. I paid her bar fine. I hadn't liked the short-time hotel we'd been to before, so I asked her if she knew

of another place we could go to. She suggested one called the Penthouse, a short taxi drive away from Nana Plaza.

It was a hotel used by Thais, a sort-of drive-in place where you could park in front of a room and the staff would pull a curtain around your car, shielding it from prying eyes. The room was clean enough with large mirrors on the walls and ceilings. A Thai teenager switched on the aircon and told me that it was three hundred baht for short-time or five hundred for all night.

"All night, okay?" I asked Joy.

She smiled and nodded. I paid the guy and he left us alone. We showered and made love and then she fell asleep in my arms.

In the morning I gave her 1,500 baht. She shook her head. "All night, three thousand baht," she said. My heart fell. I'd sort of hoped that she felt that I was more than just a customer. I gave her the extra money.

"What about your gold?" she asked. I gave her another 3,000 baht.

She put her hands together as if she were praying and pressed her fingertips to her chin. It was a 'wai,' a Thai gesture of respect or thanks. Any annoyance I felt at her demands for money evaporated. She looked so cute, so childlike, that I just wanted to gather her up in my arms and protect her from the world that had forced her to sell her body.

JOY

I was quite surprised to see him again. Actually, I'd forgotten all about him. I'd pawned the gold chain the day after he gave it to me and used the money to pay the month's lease on the motorcycle I was buying. Luckily I was dancing when he walked into the bar because I'd forgotten his name. I asked a couple of my friends if they knew who he was but they didn't. I had to wrack my brains but eventually remembered. Pete. He was a writer or something. Anyway, as soon as I was finished dancing I ran over and made a fuss of him. I made sure I used his name, that always makes farangs feel special. He noticed right away that I wasn't wearing the gold and I told him I didn't have it any more. I told him I could get it for him if he gave me 3,000 baht. He did, too. And he gave me another 3,000 baht for staying all night. He obviously earned a lot since he didn't argue about the money.

He kept saying that he liked my hair. Most farangs do. I reckon that eighty per cent of farangs like long hair. I'm always surprised at the girls who cut their hair. Working in the bar is all about attracting farangs: you can't make enough money just dancing, they have to buy you drinks and pay your bar fine. My sisters Sunan and Mon dance in Zombie and they both have hair down to the waist. Farangs like to see us dancing naked, too. We get paid more for dancing naked, but that's not why I do it. The thousand baht extra a month means nothing, what's important is that they're more likely to pay your bar fine if they see you naked. I reckon eighty per cent of farangs prefer girls who dance naked. It starts them thinking about sex straight away. Some

girls are too shy to take off all their clothes, but I tell them they're stupid not to. Once a guy sees you naked, he wants you. Eighty per cent of them anyway.

The other thing farangs like is for you to laugh at the stupid jokes and to flirt with them. They like their girls to be cute. Not too cute, because then it looks like you're acting, but you have to keep smiling at them, put your hand on their leg, look them in the eye when they talk to you, that sort of thing. And you have to keep smiling at them when you're dancing, let them think that they're the most important man in the bar. Some of the girls, they just slouch in the corners when they're not dancing, or they smoke or they go into the locker room and chat. They don't seem to understand that they're in the bar to work, and working means getting the farangs to like you. To want you.

Sunan's the best at it. Her English isn't so good, but she has a way of making men want her. She looks at them, she really looks at them, deep into their eyes, and even though she doesn't always understand what they're saying she knows when to laugh and when to smile. It's like being an actress. We're all actresses, and the bar is our stage and the farangs are our audience.

NIGEL

It's the Pretty Woman syndrome, that's what it is. Remember the movie with Richard Gere and Julia Roberts? He's a rich guy, she's a Los Angeles hooker, they met on the street, they fall in love and live happily ever after. Yeah, right. Never happens. Hookers hook, that's what they do, and they don't fall in love with the clients. Period. If the guy pays the girl for sex the first time, the relationship can never be anything other than on a hooker-client basis. Every time he looks at her, he's going to remember that she was a hooker when he first saw her, he's going to imagine the faces of all the guys she went with. And whenever she looks at him, she's going to remember that he was looking for a hooker when they met.

The movie was a fairytale. An urban myth, a work of fiction. It never happens. It doesn't happen in LA and it doesn't happen in Thailand. It certainly doesn't happen in the go-go bars. That movie's got a lot to answer for. It raises expectations that you can find love with a prostitute. Well you can't. I never have, anyway. And I don't know anyone who has. I do know dozens of guys who've married bargirls. Some of them took the girls back to the UK, some of them set up homes in Thailand. Without exception it's ended in disaster. Not just broken hearts, but major financial losses, too. You can't trust them, you really can't. You can't leave them alone for a minute: they'll sell you out without a second thought. There isn't a Thai bargirl alive who can't turn around a piece of land or a property within forty-eight hours. I've warned Pete countless times but I can see it's going in one ear and out of the other. I wish there was some way I could explain to him how dangerous it can be getting emotionally involved with a bargirl, but like all of us he's gonna have to learn from his own mistakes.

PETE

The thing I really liked about Joy was that no matter what she was doing, no matter who she was talking to, as soon as I walked into *Zombie* she'd come over and hug me. All the time I was in the bar I had her undivided attention. I suppose she was still being bar fined by other guys, but I never saw her. Out of sight, out of mind, I suppose. Sometimes when I went to the bar she wasn't there. The other girls would say that she hadn't come in that day, but I think they were lying to save my feelings. I never asked Joy. It wasn't my business. She was a bargirl, I understood that, and she had a living to make. It wasn't as if she was my girlfriend or anything. I mean, I know she liked me, and I certainly had feelings for her, but at the end of the day I still had to pay. I bought her drinks, I paid her bar fine, and if I took her to a short-time hotel I gave her 1,500 baht. Sometimes more if she had rent to pay or she wanted to send extra money to her family in Si Saket. Even if we didn't go to a short-time hotel, I still gave her money. I guess I thought that if I gave her money, she wouldn't go with other farangs. I never said that to her, that would have been pathetic, but I sort of hoped that she'd realise for herself that she could get everything she needed from me, that she didn't have to sell her body.

A couple of days back I was sitting with her in the bar when a guy went around offering to take pictures with a Polaroid camera at forty baht a go. Joy asked me if I'd get a photograph of the two of us together, then she went to a lot of trouble to pose the two of us, my arm around her, her hand on my knee, both smiling at the camera. She went around the bar, showing the photograph to all her friends. Today, when I went to the bar, she made a big thing of putting her wallet on the table, something she'd never done before. Then she opened it so I could see what was inside. The photograph was there. I looked slightly drunk, Joy was smiling at the lens, her hand on my leg.

"I want everyone know I love you," she said.

One of her friends came over to borrow a hundred baht from her and Joy showed her the photograph. I sat there, stunned. It was the first time she'd said that she loved me, and she did it in such a matter-of-fact way that it sounded totally genuine, completely uncontrived.

Extract from CROSS-CULTURAL COMPLICATIONS OF PROSTITUTION IN THAILAND by PROFESSOR BRUNO MAYER

Estimates vary as to the number of prostitutes in Thailand. The general consensus appears to be that at any time there are between 300,000 and one million women engaged in the activity, which has been illegal in the country since 1960. It is difficult to ascertain a more definite number as there is a high degree of transience in the activity, with girls moving into prostitution for a short time as and when they require money. A high proportion come from the north east of Thailand, the region known as Isarn, forced from their villages by a depressed labour market and low wages. Many come to the capital, Bangkok, in search of work, often in the hope of supporting their families back in Isarn, but find that employment prospects in the city are not much better than at home. Prostitution offers relatively large amounts of money, particularly for those women who are able to work with tourists.

The girls who work in the farang bars are in effect the elite of the country's prostitutes. Their standard of English is generally better than that of the girls who service the Thai clientele, and because they are paid more for each sexual encounter, they tend not to have as many clients. A prostitute in a Thai massage parlour or bar could service as many as a dozen men in a day. A girl in a go-go bar might only go with one or two men a week, or perhaps even latch on to a particular customer who would pay her bar fine for the length of his stay in Thailand. The girls become a temporary girlfriend, where the line between prostitution and holiday romance becomes blurred. The girls very quickly become adept at convincing the men they meet that the encounter is more than just a pecuniary one, that they care about them and not just the money they give.

Obviously, the girls do not arrive in the city with the necessary skills to begin working with foreigners. These have to be acquired, and there is a learning process which can take several months. The older girls instruct the new intake in how to apply Western-style make-up, how to dress in a manner deemed to be attractive to Westerners, and enough basic English to be able to converse with foreigners. Those girls who are not able to acquire the necessary skills either return to their villages, or, more likely, seek employment in the massage parlours, cocktail lounges and karaoke bars frequented by a Thai clientele.

PETE

One evening as we were having dinner, Joy asked me what Chinese horoscope sign I was. I told her I was a monkey. She was a rabbit. She frowned. "Big problem," she said solemnly.

I asked her why.

"Rabbit and monkey always have big problem," she said. "Rabbit is very soft. Likes things gentle. Quiet. Not changing. But monkey always changing. Never the same. Rabbit cannot trust the monkey."

"Because the monkey will pull the rabbit's ears?"

She nodded. "Big problem, Pete. Really."

There was no doubting her sincerity. I asked her what farang star sign she was and she was a Libran, same as me. Our birthdays were only ten days apart so I suggested that we had a joint birthday party. She seemed thrilled by the idea, and said she'd get her family to come down from Si Saket, a ten-hour bus ride. I wasn't sure where to hold the party, so she said she'd book the VIP room at the Chicago Karaoke Bar. That was where Joy had worked when she'd first arrived in Bangkok. I'd been there with her a few times. It was in a district called Suphan Kwai, literally Buffalo Bridge, a down market entertainment area frequented by Thais. Joy was an excellent singer, she'd sit next to me, gazing into my eyes as she sang, and even though I couldn't understand all the words, the sentiment was clear. The karaoke bar wasn't doing that well so there usually weren't more than a few people there, but her singing always generated applause and cheers. She'd only worked there for a couple of months because the money wasn't good. She was paid two thousand baht a month as a hostess and hardly anything in the way of tips. She told me that she didn't go with customers, so she barely earned enough to live on. Sunan and Mon had persuaded her to join them in Zombie, but she liked to go back to see her friends there. Having a birthday party there would give her lots of face.

It was a great party, as it turned out. I arranged for a big cake, with Garfield and "Happy Birthday to Joy and Pete" written in pink and blue icing. I went to Zombie with Nigel and I paid bar fine for Joy, Mon and Sunan. I gave Joy her birthday present, a gold bracelet made of interlinked hearts that had cost almost ten thousand baht. She was so pleased, but she gave it back to me and told me to give it to her at the party, so everyone could see.

There were already a dozen or so people in the VIP room when we got there, mainly Thai men in their twenties. Two of them were Joy's brothers, the rest were cousins, she said. They were introduced to Nigel and me, but they seemed more interested in the bottles of Johnnie Walker Black Label that Joy had ordered. I was older than all of them but none waived me and I wasn't sure if that was a sign of disrespect or because they thought that as a farang I wouldn't expect it. Joy's father arrived after an hour and I waived him. He seemed surprised and I got a half-hearted wai in return. Joy had said that he was sixty but he looked older, a thin, wizened man with bony arms. He sat in a corner and one of Joy's cousins handed him a tumbler of whisky.

A waitress came in with a menu and Joy ordered food for everyone. Lots and lots of food. There was Tom Yam Gung, the hot spicy shrimp soup that's Thailand's most famous dish, shrimps in batter, spicy beef salad, omelette stuffed with pork and vegetables, catfish curry, deep fried oysters, steamed crab claws, the food just kept on coming. So did the booze. By the time midnight came we'd gone through half a dozen bottles of whisky and a couple of crates of Heineken. More and more of Joy's friends kept turning up. Most of them didn't even acknowledge Nigel or me, the only two farangs in the room. Not that it mattered, Nigel was fondling Mon most of the time,

and I was getting quietly drunk. Joy was as attentive as usual and kept singing love songs to me. Mon had brought her daughter, Nonglek, three years old and as cute as a button.

At midnight Sunan lit the candles on the cakes and Joy and I blew them out. Joy kissed me. "The bracelet," she whispered. "Give my bracelet now."

I took the gold out of my pocket and gave it to her. She held it above her head so that everyone in the room could see it, then made me put it on her wrist. Mon cut the cake up and everyone had a piece. I'll tell you what was weird, though. There was only one piece left at the end of the night. The piece with my name on it. I asked Joy why they hadn't eaten it and she shrugged. "I don't know," she said. Later I asked Nigel what he thought. He reckoned it could have been a sign of respect. Or contempt. It worried me for quite a while.

At two o'clock in the morning there were no signs of the party breaking up. Bottles of whisky kept coming and everyone was taking it in turns to sing. People kept coming and going, friends of Joy and her sisters, but no one offered to pay for drinks - I guess Joy had told them that I was paying for everything. I wasn't annoyed, it was a joint birthday party after all, but it would have been nice if they'd brought a bottle with them, some indication that they were prepared to contribute. And no one had a present for Joy. No presents and no cards.

Nigel said he had to go because he had work in the morning. I was tired and fairly drunk, so I said I'd go with him. I paid the bill. It came to more than ten thousand baht. I got up to go. No one said goodbye. No one said thank you. Joy took us outside and helped us find a taxi. Nigel got into the taxi first. Joy kissed me on the cheek. "Thank you for everything you do," she said.

I gave her a thousand baht so that she could buy more whisky for her family and friends. Her face fell. "What's wrong?" I asked.

"Whisky very expensive," she said. "My family drink a lot."

I gave her another five thousand baht. She waived me. I got into the taxi. "Great party, Pete," said Nigel.

"Yeah," I said. We drove off. Joy stood on the pavement, waving until we were out of sight.

JOY

We all had a great time and I had a hangover for two days afterwards. We didn't finish until seven o'clock in the morning, and that was only because we ran out of money. We switched to Thai whisky after Pete and Nigel went because that's cheaper, but we ordered more food because everyone was hungry again, and Bird had some marijuana and we started smoking that. Everyone loved the gold that Pete had bought for me and made jokes about the fact that it was made up of hearts. They reckoned I'd stolen Pete's heart and they thought it was really funny that he'd gone so early. They wanted

to know how much money the party had cost, and how much money Pete earned. I said he earned millions of baht every year and I showed them the bill. They were all impressed, even Sunan, and Sunan has a lot of money.

Park waited outside until Pete and Nigel went. I saw him sitting on his motorcycle when I went out to get a taxi for the farangs and he started pulling faces, trying to make me laugh. I met Park the first week I worked in Zombie. He's one of the DJs, he's twenty-five and he comes from Udon Thani. His sister works in Spicy-a-go-go and she's become quite a good friend of mine. Park's really good-looking and he's got a great body. He and his friends work out at a gym during the day and they're always comparing muscles. It's really funny when they get competitive about their looks, they're as bad as girls sometimes. His stomach is really hard, like a turtle's shell, and his skin is really smooth. He was going out with another dancer when he met me but he chucked her and said he wanted to go out with me instead. At first I said no but he kept after me, pestering me until I said okay. The reason I said no was because he had a bit of a reputation. Mon warned me about him, she said that Park made a bee-line for any new girl if she was pretty and young, but he told me that I was different, that he really liked me. He didn't try anything on the first time we went out, either. We went for a meal after work. He didn't have any money so I had to pay, but I didn't mind that. The DJs earn even less than the waitresses, and besides, I'd been short time with an old Swiss guy and he'd been really generous so I had two thousand baht.

Park made me laugh a lot, he told me lots of stories about the crazy things that happened in the bars, and he told me about his family.

I didn't sleep with him until the second date, and it was amazing. He was so gentle with me, not rough like the farangs, he'd kiss me all over and whisper stuff to me until I'd go all tingly.

Anyway, Park went up to the VIP room with me and we sang duets together and everyone applauded. He saw the piece of cake with Pete's name on it and made a big thing about eating it. I fed it to him and then kissed him in front of everyone. I showed him the gold bracelet that Pete had given me and he wanted me to give it to him to sell. Every month he had to pay five thousand baht for his motorcycle and he was behind in his payments. I told him that I couldn't sell the gold because Pete would get angry, but I promised that I'd give him the money the following day and he said that was okay. He'd bought some yar bar tablets with him and I swallowed a couple because I was starting to get tired. They perked me up a treat.

After we left the karaoke bar, Park and I went back to his room and passed out. It was a great night, my best birthday party ever.

PETE

Let me give you an example of the sort of girl Joy is. A month after the birthday party, I walked into Zombie to find her bursting with happiness. She was grinning from ear to ear, giggling, and bouncing up and down in her seat. I bought her a cola and asked her what she was so happy about. She held out her hands and showed me a gold chain. She told me it was almost two thirds of an ounce of Thai gold, 23 carat, and worth about 10,000 baht.

Joy explained that she'd had a customer who'd paid her bar fine so that he could take her to dinner.

"Are you sure it was only dinner?" I interrupted.

She raised her eyebrows and sighed in mock annoyance. "Pete, why I lie to you? Only dinner, okay?"

She started grinning again, and continued her story. After dinner the man realised that he didn't have enough money for the one thousand baht tip he'd promised her. She held up the chain. "But he had this around his neck and he gave it to me. He said he wanted to sell it, but didn't know how. Pete, he said I can sell it and keep half. He's coming here tomorrow for the money." She leaned forward, her eyes wide. "Pete, I can keep five thousand baht."

She spent the rest of the evening showing the gold to all her friends and relating the story of her good fortune. She was like a little kid who'd been told that Christmas was coming early this year.

The next evening I went back to Zombie and found her sitting in a corner, her eyes red from crying. She grabbed me tightly and put her tear-stained cheek against my neck. "Why farang lie?" she asked me between sobs.

"What do you mean?" I asked. She felt so small in my arms, small and soft and vulnerable.

"Gold not real," she said, hugging me around the waist.

She'd taken the chain to the gold shop and the woman there had laughed in her face. It was fake, not worth more than fifty baht. It wasn't even gold-plated.

"Why farang lie?" she kept repeating between her sobs. I paid her bar fine and took her out for dinner at the German restaurant in Soi 4 and kept telling her silly stories until her smile returned. I didn't take her to a short-time hotel that night because I could see she was still upset, so I gave her two thousand baht and let her go back to the bar and her friends.

I went back to the Dynasty Hotel to work on the book. It was going really well. During the daytime I was visiting hotels and getting their details, checking rooms, facilities and prices, and in the early evenings I was checking out restaurants, usually eating in one and getting menus from several others. Then I'd go and see Joy. Most evenings I'd pay her bar fine, but we didn't always go to a short-time hotel. Sometimes we'd just sit at one of the outside bars and talk, or go for a late-night Thai snack. She was introducing me to all sorts of dishes I'd never had before, the real hot, spicy food that most farangs don't get to experience.

I still hadn't taken her back to the Dynasty. Joy was very pretty, but she dressed like most of the girls who danced in Nana Plaza - tight jeans, high heels and a T-shirt - and she had just a bit too much make up. To put it bluntly, she looked like a hooker, and I didn't want the staff at the hotel to see me taking a hooker back to my room. She didn't seem to mind.

JOY

I should have known better than to trust a farang. I'm not the first girl to be conned and I won't be the last, but I learned my lesson, that's for sure. He was from Switzerland, an old guy, big and fat like they all are, and he smelled like he hadn't showered for a week. He had a thick gold chain around his wrist and the big one around his neck, the one that he gave me, so I figured he had money. He bought me five colas and when I put my hand on his crotch I could feel that he was hard already so I knew he'd want to pay bar for me. I figured Pete wouldn't be around until ten and it was only eight so I gave him a couple of rubs and asked if he wanted to go short-time.

We went to Uncle Rey's Guest House, it's only a five-minute walk from Nana Plaza. He wouldn't shower or anything, just stripped off and lay down on his back like a huge beached whale. He was covered with hair, grey and curly, and he lay there playing with himself while I undressed. His prick was huge, and thick, and it seemed to get bigger and bigger as he played with it. I wanted to shower but he said he didn't want me to. He said he wanted me to suck him. I shook my head and said I didn't do that and I tried to get on top of him. He pushed me down and tried to force me, but I kept turning my head away. It stank, like old fish. He kept trying to force me, but I wasn't having any of it. Eventually he sat up and took off the gold chain. He told me that he wanted to sell it, and that if I sold it for him I could keep half. It looked real enough, and it felt real, so I put the chain around my neck. It wasn't as bad as I thought it would be, but I kept my eyes closed and concentrated on not being sick. He started to thrust himself in and out and I almost choked. I could feel him start to come so I tried to pull my head away but he put his hands on the back of my head. I actually didn't resist too hard because I figured I was getting five thousand baht. Anyway, he came in my mouth and then held me there until I swallowed.

I dressed and rushed out of the room while he was still on the bed because I didn't want him to change his mind and ask for his gold back.

When I got home that night I gave the chain to Park. He put it on and made love to me all night. He looked really good in it and I suggested he keep it but he said that no, we needed the money. I wanted to keep it all but Park said it would be better to play the Swiss guy along, give him his five thousand baht share and then get him to keep paying my bar fine and taking me short-time. We'd get the five thousand baht back within a week, with more to come. The old ones are the easiest, they're so quick to fall in love. All it takes is a few sweet words.

Park went to the gold shop first thing in the morning, and when he came back he was furious. He slapped me, hard, and said that the woman in the shop had threatened to call the police. She thought he was trying to con her. Park punched me in the stomach and threw me to the ground, then spat at me, calling me a stupid whore and a bitch and water buffalo, then he kicked me until Sunan came in from next door and told him to stop.

I was sore, but there were no bruises. Park was good at that, at hitting without leaving a mark. Sunan helped me up and Park stormed out. He didn't come back for two days, and that hurt a lot more than the beating.

We got our own back on the Swiss guy eventually. I told all my friends what had happened and a month or so later I got a phone call from a girl in the Suzie Wong Bar in Soi Cowboy. Park and five of his friends went around on motorcycles and waited until he came out. They attacked him with pieces of lead pipe, broke both his arms and knocked out most of his teeth. Park stole the man's wallet and we all went to the Chicago Karaoke Bar and drank three bottles of Black Label between us. It was a great night.

PETE

One night when I arrived at Zombie, Joy had three red slashes on her left wrist. I could see them from more than ten feet away, and Joy made no move to conceal them. She smiled and waved and as soon as her dancing shift was over she rushed down from the stage and sat next to me. I held her arm and looked at the cuts. They were deep gashes, a vibrant red against her brown skin. She smiled.

"Why?" I asked.

She shrugged as if a suicide attempt was of absolutely no importance.

"Come on, Joy. What happened?"

"My brother crashed motorcycle," she said.

"Was he hurt?"

She shook her head.

I nodded at her mutilated wrist. "Why did you do that?"

Tears brimmed in her eyes. "Motorcycle hurt a lot," she said. "Very expensive."

"How much?"

She sniffed. "Six thousand baht," she said.

I was astonished. "You cut your wrist because your motorcycle needed repairing?"

"Pete," she said. "I have no money."

I put my arms around her and hugged her and her tears fell on to my jeans. I couldn't make sense of it, why on earth would she cut her wrists because of a bike? Besides, she'd said the bike was still up in Si Saket.

"How did you know what had happened?" I asked.

"My brother telephone me. He say he very sorry but he have no money." The tears started again.

"Joy, don't worry," I said. "I'll give you the money."

She sat up and looked at me in astonishment. Then she threw herself at me and wrapped her arms around me. She stayed like that for several minutes, her soft, wet cheeks pressed against my neck.

I bought her a cola and then went down the road to the Bangkok Bank ATM. I withdrew seven thousand baht on my Lloyds Visa card and gave six thousand to Joy.

She dashed off to her locker and didn't come back for ten minutes. When she did return, she'd redone her make-up and the tears had gone. She squeezed up next to me and put her hand on my thigh. I was happy that I could make such a difference to her life. A relatively small amount of money to me, but to Joy it was a month's wages. It was worth it to see her smiling and laughing with her friends.

I took her arm again and looked at the cuts. There were no stitches, but they weren't as deep as they'd looked at first sight. Next to the fresh cuts were three old scars. I ran my finger along the raised scar tissue. "When did you do this?" I asked.

"When I fifteen," she said.

"Why?"

"I not happy," she said.

I smiled at the simplicity of her reply. Her honesty was sometimes so childlike that I had an overwhelming urge to protect her from the world. Of course she'd been unhappy, why else would she have tried to kill herself?

"Why weren't you happy?"

"My mother die. I want to be with my mother," she said.

"Why did she die?"

Joy patted her own stomach. "Something wrong inside," she said.

"Cancer?"

She frowned, then nodded.

"Wow," I said. "I'm sorry." I put my arm around her shoulders. A stocky Thai guy with pockmarked skin thrust a bunch of roses in front of me but I shook my head.

"My mother died when I was young," I said.

She looked at me, horrified. "What happened?"

I tapped the side of my head. "A brain tumour," I said.

"I not understand," she said.

"Brain tumour," I said. "Something wrong, in her head."

Tears brimmed in her eyes again. "Pete, I sorry for you," she said.

I paid bar fine for her, and we went for dinner. She came back to the apartment, but all I wanted to do was to hold her in my arms, to show her that I cared.

Extract from CROSS-CULTURAL COMPLICATIONS OF PROSTITUTION IN THAILAND by PROFESSOR BRUNO MAYER

Self-mutilation is a common phenomenon amongst the girls involved in prostitution. Many have scars on their wrists, not from serious suicide attempts but from superficial cuts, usually carried out in a rage under the influence of drugs or drink. For much of their lives the girls have little or no control over their environment or their relationships. Women are generally subservient to men in Thai culture, and throughout their childhoods they are under strict control as to where they can go and what they can do. In the poorer areas of the country, especially in rural communities, sexual abuse is common. Many are abused by their brothers or fathers or by male relatives, actions over which they

have no control. Often the girls themselves are unwilling to complain of the abuse, accepting it as the norm.

Even when the girls leave the environment of their village and move to Bangkok, the family continues to exert control on them with requests for financial assistance. No matter how much the girls earn, they are often unable to save because of the family's ever-increasing demands. In an effort to establish some sort of meaningful relationship, the girls often become involved with Thai men working in the bar environment - DJs, waiters, and touts. Often these men have been working in the bars much longer than the girls and tend to be older and more experienced. As a result, they are adept at getting the girls to give them money and early on in the relationship they begin to exert control over them. The girls then find themselves trapped between the demands of their family and the demands of their newly-acquired boyfriend.

To aggravate the situation, the Thai boyfriends usually refuse to wear condoms, which frequently results in pregnancy. If the girl keeps the baby, as many do, she has yet another demand on her, emotionally and financially. All through her life, the girl has little or no control over her surroundings, and as a result anger and resentment builds up until it cannot be contained any longer. But when it is finally released, it is often directed inwards, at herself. The girl feels that she is worthless, that in some way she is responsible for her own predicament, and as such she tries to hurt, to punish, herself.

JOY

Pretty much all the girls in my family have cut their wrists at some point or another. Except Sunan, she never loses her temper. Everything Sunan does is thought out in advance. Me, I'm totally different, I do all sorts of crazy things on the spur of the moment, especially if I've been drinking or taken a yar bar tablet. Like the time I got back to the room early and found Park in bed with Daeng. Daeng's a little slut, she's only seventeen but she'll have sex with anything in trousers. She's a nymphomaniac and she's bar fined every day that she works, sometimes two or three times a day. But twenty-odd farangs a week isn't enough and so she decides she's going to seduce my man. Pete had come into the bar just before eight and had paid my bar fine. We'd gone to dinner, but he wasn't saying much. I did my best to lift his spirits but there was something wrong with whatever book it was that he's working on - to be honest I was having trouble understanding him because his Thai is awful - but I nodded and sympathised and tried my best to make him feel better.

He didn't want to go short-time so he gave me a thousand baht and we got into a taxi and I dropped him off at the Dynasty Hotel. I thought about going back to Zombie but it was Park's day off so I thought I'd go home and surprise him. Take him out for a meal, or maybe go and see a movie. He was surprised all right. He was lying

on his back with Daeng on top of him. She was screaming so much that they didn't hear me open the door.

I could have killed her. In fact, I almost did. I took off one of my high heels and belted her across the head with it. Park didn't notice at first because his eyes were closed and she was making so much noise in the first place, but I slapped her again with the shoe and this time I almost broke her nose. I started calling her all the names under the sun. Park leapt off the bed, throwing Daeng against the wall, but it wasn't him I wanted to hurt, it was her. Park should have known better but when it comes down to it he's a man and men think with their dicks. If it's offered to them on a plate they're not going to turn it down.

I kept hitting Daeng until she ran out, stark naked. I threw her things after her and told her that if she set foot in my room again I'd kill her. Park was laughing, so I started shouting at him, waving my shoe and threatening to hit him with it. He just laughed in my face, said that she wasn't important, that it was only sex and what did I expect, I was out working, he was a man with needs, what else was he to do? I really lost it then. I threw my shoe at him and told him what a lazy, ungrateful pile of buffalo shit he was. Who did I give my money to? Who paid for his clothes, his drugs, his motorcycle? He earned five thousand baht a month as a DJ, that wasn't enough to pay for his booze. I paid the rent on the room, I paid for everything we had. The more I shouted, the more he laughed, and eventually he walked out.

I went into the bathroom and cut my wrist, three times. I'd done it before just after my mother died, and no, I wasn't trying to kill myself, I just wanted to show how angry I was. There was a lot of blood so I wrapped a towel around it and held my arm up in the air.

Sunan had heard the noise and she came around and helped bandage my wrist. She told me how stupid I was, that Park was a good man, that I had to understand that sometimes men strayed, that was their nature. She said that Park cared about me, that he loved me, loved me a million times more than the farangs who paid my bar fine. The farangs would come and go, farangs would always lie to me, but Park was Thai, Park was my man.

Park didn't come back for two days. When he did he had a red rose and he gave it to me and said he was sorry, that Daeng had led him on, that he didn't know what he was doing and he'd never do it again. He made love to me so tenderly that I started to cry, and he kissed my bandaged wrist and told me that he loved me and that I was never to hurt myself again.

PETE

I bumped into Nigel in Fatso's Bar, nursing a Singha beer. I told him about Joy cutting her wrist and he was really dismissive about it, said that bargirls were always cutting themselves, usually after they'd had too much to drink.

I wanted to tell him that Joy was different but I could see that he was drunk so I didn't bother. She was a bargirl, but she wasn't a bargirl from choice: the life had been forced upon her by circumstances. She was making the best of a bad job, that was the way I looked at it.

The one thing I wasn't sure of was what she thought of me. In many ways she behaved like a girlfriend. She telephoned me pretty much every day, just to chat, to ask what I was doing, how I was getting on with the book. I'd found a copy of the guide to London that I'd written a few years earlier and I'd given it to her. She'd been thrilled and had gone through it, looking at the pictures and asking me questions. My picture was at the front and she'd giggled at it, telling me that I looked much younger in real life. She kept asking when the book on Thailand would be finished and if I'd be writing about her.

Sometimes we'd go out together during the day, usually to one of the Robinsons department stores. She never asked me to buy her anything, but I always did. Usually clothes, or a music tape. Once I got her a CD player. She never pestered me, though, she wasn't like some of the girls I saw with farangs, dragging them by the hand to the jewellery or perfume counters. Sometimes we'd go and eat ice cream together, and a couple of times we went to the movies. But she always had to leave by 5pm because she had to go home and shower and get ready for work. If I didn't want her to go to work, I had to pay her bar fine. Always. Joy explained that if her bar fine wasn't paid, the mamasan would take the money off her wages. I knew she didn't earn a great living working in the bar, and it didn't seem fair that she should be penalised for going out with me, so I paid. I didn't feel good about having to pay her each time I made love to her, but I knew that she needed money. That was why she was in the bar in the first place. I kept asking her if she loved me or my money, which was a stupid question, right? She'd laugh and she'd say "I love you number one, Pete, but number two I love your money." I really do believe that if I stopped giving her money she'd still see me, but I knew that that wouldn't be fair. It'd be the equivalent of me writing and not getting paid. I mean, I might do it for a friend, but I'd still have to work, I'd still have to find someone to pay me for what I did. So I guess I justified it to myself by thinking that if she was working as a prostitute, it was better that it was me who was giving her money and not a succession of strangers.

The thing is, it didn't feel like prostitution. It didn't really feel like I was paying for sex. Well, I mean I was, but it was never as if she demanded money, or withheld sex if she didn't get it. But I'd always give her money after we left the short-time hotel. Sometimes two thousand baht, sometimes one thousand, but usually fifteen hundred, the amount she'd asked for the first time I'd slept with her. When I gave her less than fifteen hundred baht she never complained, but she always seemed extra pleased when I gave her more.

I'd never paid for sex before I went to Thailand. The thought had never crossed my mind. It's not that I'm against prostitution, because I'm not. I believe it should be legalised everywhere, legalised and regulated. There are plenty of men around, the crippled, the old, the ugly, who probably have a tough time finding a sexual partner, so doesn't it make sense that such people should be able to purchase sexual gratification from medically-examined professionals? And wouldn't it give potential rapists and the likes a safe outlet for their urges? That's what I believed, though I never thought that I'd be the one to be paying for sex.

With Joy, I didn't feel as if I was going with a prostitute, it felt as if I was helping a girlfriend who didn't have as much money as I did. I'd helped out girlfriends in London, paid their dental bills if they were short of cash, picked up the bill in

restaurants and so on. I'd lent money to a couple - one had needed money to attend an interview in Glasgow, another never told me why she needed the money but said it was a matter of life and death - and both times I'd handed the cash over not expecting to see it back. Sure, I'd never handed them money after sleeping with them - God, I could only imagine what an English girl would do if I did that - but then they weren't as strapped for cash as Joy.

And Joy never made me feel like I was a customer. She didn't hustle me for drinks, in fact sometimes when I offered she'd refuse. Generally I'd buy her three or four because part of her earnings came from commission, and obviously if she was sitting with me she was giving up the opportunity of earning money elsewhere. She never pestered me to pay her bar fine, either, though she was always pleased when I did. I guess on average I bar fined her twelve to fifteen times a month. Often we'd just go and eat, or visit another bar so she could see her friends. Sometimes I'd go and have a drink in another bar before going to Zombie, usually if I was with one of the guys from Fatso's - Jimmy, Rick, Nigel, Bruce or Matt. Whenever I did, girls would always come over and wag a finger at me and accuse me of being a butterfly, of being unfaithful to Joy. I'd always laugh and deny it. I knew better than to bar fine another girl in Nana Plaza - there was an underground communication system that worked at something approaching the speed of light. Early on in our relationship I'd gone into Spicy-a-go-go and bought drinks for a girl called Mai. She had the longest hair I'd ever seen, longer even than Joy's, and I guess I was thinking about paying her bar fine, out of curiosity more than anything, but before I could take it any further, Joy appeared in the bar with her friend, Apple. Joy was wearing a long green cocktail dress that she often wore to work. Apple saw me and said 'sawasdee ka' but Joy didn't seem to notice me. Actually, I was pretty sure she was pretending not to see me. She did a quick circuit of the bar and then left. I paid my bill, said goodbye to Mai and hurried over to Zombie. As soon as I went in Joy came over and hugged me. She'd already changed into her dancing gear. I bought her a drink and asked her what she'd been doing in Spicy-a-go-go.

"I go see my friend," she said and smiled sweetly. She'd known all right, someone from Spicy-a-go-go had called her and told her that I was getting friendly with another girl and she'd moved to protect her interests. I was flattered. If she was jealous, it showed she cared.

I was jealous, too, but I didn't know what to do about it. I liked her, I liked her a lot. It was more than like, it was almost love, but I was holding myself back because of what she did, of what she'd done. She was a hooker, for God's sake, and whenever I felt myself falling in love with her I tried to pull myself back to reality. The guys were always telling me horror stories about farangs who got involved with bargirls. Most of the girls had Thai husbands or boyfriends, they said. Most spent their money on drugs or gambling. And no matter how much you thought you could trust them, they'd rip you off eventually. I'd look at Joy and I'd think no, she was different, but at the back of my mind was always the worry that maybe she was lying to me, that I was only a customer and it was only my money she cared about.

Part of me wanted to ask her to give up work, because I hated the thought of her going with other men and I hated the fact that she danced. Early on in the relationship I'd started paying her a thousand baht a month to keep her knickers on while she was dancing. Sunan and Mon still danced naked, and I know Joy was happy that I'd made the gesture. I knew she'd be even happier if I gave her enough money to not have to work at all, but that was going to cost me tens of thousands of baht a month and I was still wary of making that sort of commitment.

I was pretty sure she didn't take drugs. I'd asked her several times and she'd always denied it vehemently, and there were no needle marks on her arms. She said she didn't have a Thai boyfriend. She said she'd had one in Si Saket, but that had ended when she'd moved to Bangkok. I guess I believed her. She was in the bar working for eight hours a night and she didn't finish until half past two in the morning, and she telephoned me most days so I couldn't see how she'd have time for a boyfriend or a husband. Plus she always had my photograph in her wallet and I couldn't see how a Thai boyfriend could put up with that.

One thing that did worry me was that she'd never let me see her room. She said it was in Suphan Kwai, not far from the Chicago karaoke bar, and that it was a slum. Sallah is the word in Thai. Almost the same. She said to get to the building where the room was, she had to walk down a narrow alley and that it would be dangerous for me. And she said the room was small and dirty and that she was ashamed of it. "I not have money, Pete," she said. "I not have nice room. I shy, Pete."

I told her time and time again that I didn't care, that I wanted to see where she lived, but she always refused. She said there was no phone in the room, so I couldn't call her there. There was a phone in the building, though, and she used that to call me sometimes, but I couldn't use it to contact her, she said.

I asked her why she didn't find herself a room in a nicer part of town if where she was staying was so bad. She'd shrug and say that she didn't have any money. I could never understand that. I'd been taking Thai lessons at the American University Alumni School and I knew that the teachers there earned less than Joy, but they all seemed to have quite a high standard of living. They earned about twelve thousand baht a month and all were well dressed, lived in decent apartments, and several had cars and mobile telephones.

Joy's salary was about five thousand baht a month. Six thousand including the money I gave her so she didn't have to dance naked. The bar gave her a hundred baht each time I paid her bar fine, so that was another thousand baht a month, minimum. She normally got five or six drinks a day, so that was another four thousand baht a month. That meant that from the bar alone she got eleven thousand baht, almost the same as the teachers earned. But I gave Joy another fifteen thousand baht a month. Even if no one else paid her bar fine, Joy was earning twenty six thousand baht a month, more than a nurse, several times more than a policewoman, not much less than a doctor. So where did the money go?

Asking her just resulted in shrugs and shakes of the head. She didn't know. Bangkok was expensive. She had to get a taxi to and from work, and each journey cost more than a hundred baht. Six thousand baht a month in taxi fares? That was crazy, I said. Why didn't she get the bus? She said a bus would take too long, and it would be dangerous at night. I asked her why she didn't get a room closer to Nana Plaza and she said that all her friends were in Suphan Kwai, and so were her sisters. She had to pay for a motorcycle, she said. Five thousand baht every month. And she had to send money back to Si Saket to help her family. Discussions about money always seemed to go around in circles, getting nowhere. One thing was for sure - she never had enough, no matter how much I gave her.

JOY

I don't know where my money goes, I really don't. It slips through my fingers like water. I tried explaining to Pete, but he doesn't understand me. How could he? He's a rich farang, he can't know what it's like to be from a poor family, to have nothing. How much did he have to pay for his ticket from England? Twenty thousand baht? Thirty thousand? And it costs him a thousand baht a night to stay at the Dynasty Hotel. That's thirty thousand baht every month. And he spends money in the bars every night. Hundreds of baht. One night he sat down with a pen and paper and asked me to tell him how much I earned and how much I spent, like he was an accountant or something. I was really offended but I didn't say anything, I tried to make a joke of it. He told me that I'd be better off if I lived closer to Zombie, but that would mean I wouldn't be near my friends. I think he wants me to sit in a room all on my own, waiting for him. He's crazy. He kept asking me why I wasn't saving money. Saving what? I have to pay for my room, I have to pay for taxi fares. There's food, make-up, shampoo, clothes. Bangkok's an expensive city.

And Pete doesn't understand my family commitments. I've three younger sisters, all at school. They need money for clothes and for books. My father owns a little land but it's not good land and not much grows there. My father makes charcoal from the trees that grow there but it's hard work and he doesn't make a lot of money. My grandmother's old and she needs medicine and my brothers don't work, they've always been lazy and they won't lift a finger to help my father. If it wasn't for Sunan, Mon or me, my father would have to sell the house or the land.

The other thing Pete doesn't understand is that when you've got money, people are always asking you for it. Friends who can't pay their rent, a few baht for food, a pack of cigarettes, maybe. My friends know that Pete is giving me money and so when they're short they'll ask me to help them out. What's a girl to do? They'd help me if they had money and I didn't, we always do, we help each other. We have to. When I first moved to Bangkok, friends would let me sleep on their floor, they'd share their food, their cigarettes, they lent me clothes and make-up until I could start earning enough to take care of myself. Last week Apple was sick and couldn't work and her landlord put a padlock on her door and wouldn't let her back in until she paid her telephone and electricity bill, almost two thousand baht. She didn't have the money so she asked me. Of course I helped her. She's my friend. But if I told Pete that, he'd get angry. He keeps saying that he wants to help me, not my family and friends. I don't know if or when Apple will pay me back, but that's okay. What goes around comes around. The day might come when she's got a rich boyfriend and I haven't, then I'll be able to ask her for money.

I wish I was more like Sunan. Sunan saves a lot of her money, and she's got a really nice room and a television and a stereo. Next month she's going to buy a Toyota pick-up and Bird is going to be driving us around. Sunan works really hard. She goes short-time every night, and sometimes she goes with farangs several times a night. She doesn't play cards like a lot of the girls, and she doesn't smoke or drink. I smoke a pack of Marlboro a day and sometimes I drink beer. Sunan's older than me, she's twenty-six, and she's been working in Zombie for about two years. She used to send money to me when I was in Si Saket, and she bought our father a motorcycle. I've got

a motorcycle, too, it costs me five thousand baht a month. It's up in Si Saket. Pete keeps trying to get me to sell the motorbike, he says I don't need it because I'm working in Bangkok. He doesn't know what my house is like, it's miles from Si Saket and even the nearest village is tiny. What does he expect me to do? Walk?

Sunan has a farang who sends her money every month. His name is Toine, from Denmark. He met her last year and he said he didn't want her to work so every month he sends forty thousand baht to her bank. He gave her a mobile telephone, too, and that cost ten thousand baht. Toine has a wife in Denmark and he only comes to Bangkok twice a year. Sunan's so lucky, I wish I had a farang like that. Toine keeps saying he's going to divorce his wife and marry her, but Sunan doesn't believe him. All farangs lie, she says.

PETE

I got a call from Nigel saying that he wanted to get together for a drink. He had an early meeting at an office in Silom Road so he suggested Patpong. There's a bar he likes in Patpong One called Safari. It's a ground floor bar so the girls aren't allowed to dance naked and they play good music, lots of Sixties stuff. The one snag is that the ceiling is really low over the two dance floors so the go-go dancers are virtually midgets. Nigel was already there when I arrived, sitting with a small bald guy with a bushy grey beard who looked like an elf out of uniform, sharp pointy features and mischievous eyes. He wasn't much taller than the go-go dancers. He was a nice guy and I liked him almost immediately. His name was Bruce and he'd been in Bangkok for eighteen months, running a leather handbag factory for a Thai businessman. He and Nigel had obviously been there for a while because there was a thick wad of blue chits stuffed into the plastic mug in front of them.

We stayed in Safari for an hour or so, then Bruce suggested we go to one of the upstairs bars. Patpong One is a narrow road linking two major Bangkok thoroughfares, Silom Road and Suriwong Road. I could never work out why it had remained as a red light area. All around it were high rise office buildings and up-market department stores so I would have thought it would have made economic sense to demolish the bars and redevelop the area.

There are bars on either side of the road, filled with stalls selling fake watches, cheap clothes and tacky souvenirs. The bars on the ground floor are mainly go-go bars, each with at least a hundred girls. The first floor bars have dancers too, but they also put on shows. The girls in the upstairs bars danced topless or naked, which strictly speaking is illegal but the bars have lookouts on the ground floor. Whenever the police pass by the lookout hits an alarm button and red lights start flashing in the bar, signalling to the girls that they're to rush off and get dressed.

The shows are what pull the punters up to the first floor bars. They have girls pulling razor blades out of their fannies, bursting balloons with darts fired from

blowpipes in their fannies, writing with felt tipped pens stuck into their fannies. They have shower shows, candle shows, where the girls drip hot wax over their bodies, and full sex shows. The first time I went into one of the upstairs bars I was amazed by what I saw, amazed at the sort of things girls would do to their bodies for money. Now I hardly even notice what's happening on the stage. Even the full sex show is a disappointment. According to Nigel, the same guy's been doing it for at least ten years. He's tall and thin and not particularly well-endowed, and he makes love to his wife five times a night at five different bars. He starts at ten o'clock and performs every thirty minutes, usually with the same woman, his wife. I once saw him do the business with a different girl and was told that it was his wife's sister. Apparently his sister-in-law's happy to step in when the guy's wife doesn't feel up to it. A real family business.

Bruce stopped outside a bar I hadn't noticed before. There was a sign saying "Dream Bar" and a flight of stairs leading up to a closed door.

"What do you think?" asked Bruce.

"Never been before," I said.

"Give it a go?"

"Sure." There were two Thai teenagers standing at the bottom of the stairs holding laminated cardboard signs. One of them shoved the sign in front of us. It was a menu of sex shows.

"Have you got the wine list?" asked Bruce, but the teenager didn't get the joke.

"Fucking show," said the teenager.

"Fucking great," said Bruce, in his broad Newcastle accent. "Lead on MacDuff." He twisted around and beckoned to Nigel. "In here, mate!" he yelled.

"Any cover charge?" I asked the teenager.

He shook his head. "Come inside," he said, pointing his sign towards the door.

"How much for a Heineken?" I asked.

The teenager pointed at his sign. A Heineken was eighty baht.

I nodded at Bruce. "Seems okay."

"Pete, you worry too much," he said, slapping me on the back and running up the stairs two at a time. Nigel and I followed him in.

Bruce had ordered two beers and a gin and tonic and was sitting at a table close to the raised dancefloor where two girls were gyrating unenthusiastically to a Thai pop song.

"Quiet, isn't it?" said Nigel. There were only half a dozen other drinkers scattered around the bar.

"It's mid-week," said Bruce.

The dancers scurried off the stage and were replaced by two girls who went through the motions of a lesbian act.

"Where's our chit?" I asked. Normally the waitress would put a beaker containing a running total of the bill on the table.

"It's coming," said Bruce. "Relax."

Nigel began bitching about his job. He sold advertising space for a company that produced trade directories and most of his wages were commission. He hated the work and I got the impression that the only reason he stuck it was because he couldn't get anything else.

The lesbian act finished and a middle-aged girl with horrific cellulite climbed onto the stage. She began to pull a string of plastic flowers from between her legs.

"I'm getting a bad feeling about this, lads," I said.

Two heavy-set Thai men were standing by the door. They kept looking over at us.

"What do you mean?" said Nigel.

"It doesn't feel right," I said. "There are hardly any girls. And too many Thai guys. And where the hell's our bill?"

"What are you getting at?" said Bruce.

"I don't know. But let's go somewhere else."

"You just want to go to Nana," said Nigel. "You're missing Joy."

I gestured at a waitress. She ignored me.

One of the men at the door came over. He had a tattoo of a leaping tiger on one of his forearms. "Yes?" he said.

"The bill," I said.

He pointed at the far end of the bar. "Over there," he said. He went back to stand by the door.

"We're in trouble, guys," I said.

Nigel and Bruce exchanged looks. "What, come out without your wallet, did you?" said Bruce. "Anyway, it's my round."

He and Nigel started giggling like a couple of schoolboys. They were drunk. They really didn't seem to appreciate the spot we were in. I went to the end of the bar. I didn't see a cash register or anything, but then I noticed that there was a corridor leading off to the right, out of sight of where we'd been sitting. At the end of the corridor was a group of five Thai men standing around a cash register. I walked towards them. They were big men for Thais, and most of them had tattoos or scars. My heart was racing. This was like no other go-go bar I'd ever been in.

I asked them for the bill and I was given a slip of paper. Two beers, 160 baht. One gin and tonic, 90 baht. Three shows, three people, 1,800 baht. Total, 2,050. About fifty quid, and we'd only been in the bar for ten minutes. I turned to go back to the bar but a hand gripped my shoulder.

"Where you go?" asked the biggest of the men.

I smiled. You always have to smile in Thailand, no matter how angry or scared you are. "I'm going to speak to my friends," I said.

The five heavies followed me back to the table. I showed the bill to Bruce and Nigel. "Bloody hell, we're not paying that," said Bruce, getting to his feet.

The heavies moved apart.

"Two thousand baht!" said Nigel. "They're trying to rip us off!"

"Gosh, really?" I said. "Get a grip, Nigel."

Bruce began speaking to the men. I was surprised at how good his Thai was. The men shook their heads then one of them went off to fetch another man who I guessed was the manager.

Bruce spoke to him for several minutes, occasionally nodding at Nigel and me. Eventually he handed over three hundred baht and we were ushered out of the door.

"What happened?" I asked as we made our way down the stairs.

"I told him that we weren't tourists, that we worked in Bangkok. He wanted to know what we did, how long we'd been here. Chit chat."

"And he let us off the bill?"

"He knew I knew the score," said Bruce. "If push had come to shove I'd have just paid and then come back with the Tourist Police. They're not here to rip off locals, they just want to screw tourists who don't know any better. All I had to do was smile and tell him it wasn't fair. Eventually he asked me how much I'd pay in a normal bar and I said three hundred baht, max. He said he'd be happy with that."

"Speaking to him in Thai probably helped," I said.

"Let me tell you about Thais, Pete," said Bruce, patting me on the back. "Sometimes you think you're in trouble when you're really not. And sometimes when you think everything is hunky dory, you're in so much shit they'll need a submarine to find you. Nothing is as it seems, grasshopper."

BRUCE

I meant what I said about Thais. They're easy to rub up the wrong way, but if you handle them right, they're genuinely nice people. Take taxi drivers, for instance. The first time I came to Bangkok, I was always getting into arguments with them. They'd either get lost or not want to take me or they'd refuse to use the meter. Now I can speak a little Thai and I understand them a bit more. For one thing, Bangkok's huge, with twice as many people as London, and for another, the road naming and numbering system is crazy. Roads meander all over the place and at times the numbering of houses seems almost random. It's not like England where the houses on one side are consecutive odd numbers with the even numbers on the other side. In Bangkok the numbers relate to the plot of land, so unless you know exactly where you're going, it's dead easy to get lost. And maps aren't part of Thai culture, either. Most people haven't a clue how to relate a map to their surroundings. You never see Thais using them. Now I almost never get into confrontations with taxi drivers because I know how to handle them.

Take last week for example. My car was in for a service so I was using taxis to get around. I was on the outskirts of the city and it was close to rush hour and the first four cabs I stopped just didn't want to go to Sukhumvit. I knew why: at rush hour it can lock up solid. Anyway, I got into the fifth taxi that stopped and told him in English where I wanted to go. Then I sat looking out of the window, ignoring his protests. Okay, so eventually he starts driving. Half an hour later, the car judders to a halt. He starts up again, we drive a few hundred feet, and we shudder and stop again. "Car no good," he says.

I lean forward and watch as he starts the car again. The engine stalls. Why? Because the bugger's slipping his foot off the clutch, that's why. I don't say anything, because Thais hate criticism. Loss of face and all that. He gets out of the car, muttering to himself, and lifts up the bonnet. Stands looking at the engine and shaking his head. I tell you, this guy was the Robert De Niro of taxi drivers. Oscar material. He fumbles with the battery leads, mutters again, then slams the bonnet shut. He opens the passenger door for me. "Car no good," he says, sincerity dripping from every pore. "I get new taxi for you. Sorry."

So I get out of the taxi and he walks to the back and starts trying to flag down another cab. Now, I know full well what's going on here. He plans to get a taxi to stop, then he'll tell the driver to keep me talking while he drives off. Then taxi driver number two will refuse to take me, and he'll drive off as well, leaving me stranded. I

know this is what he intends to do, but I don't argue with him because I know that's not going to get me anywhere. I just smile and nod, and then when he's not looking I climb into the driver's seat. The silly sod had left the keys in the ignition. I start up the car, put it in gear and drive off.

This is where I played it just right. If I'd made off with the car he'd have got together with some other taxi drivers, beaten the shit out of me and then handed me over to the cops. So I drive off real slowly, just above walking pace, watching him in the mirror. He sees what I'm doing and comes haring after me, waving his arms and shouting. I let him run for a hundred yards or so, then I pull up and wind down the window. I smile. A big, big smile, Thai style. I give him a thumbs up. "Car okay," I say. "I car doctor. I fix."

He looks at me. He smiles. He knows that I know. I know that he knows that I know. But I don't confront him with it, I don't rub his face in it. "Car okay?" he says.

"Oh yes. No problem now. I fix."

I get out of the driver's seat, and move into the back. He gets into the driver's seat, puts the car in gear and drives off. He smiles. "Okay now," he says, nodding approvingly.

We drive all the way in without any more hassles. Now, the guy was right, of course: we hit traffic and it took us more than hour to cover three miles. And when he did finally drop me off, I gave him a huge tip. He smiled. I smiled. Face was saved on both sides. A situation that could have turned really nasty became an object lesson in how to get what you want in the Land of Smiles.

Anyway, I liked Pete. He was a pleasant change from the expatriates you normally run into in Bangkok. Face it, most of the guys who choose to come to Thailand are thinking with their dicks, not their heads. It's different if they're sent here, then they come on a full expat package: accommodation, flights home, all the perks. But anyone who chooses to live here has to work on local terms, and that means shit money. Guys like Nigel. He pretends he's a wheeler-dealer, he's always on the verge of setting up his own company that's going to make him a fortune, but when all's said and done he's just here to get laid. I doubt he has much luck with women back in the UK because of his missing eye, but out here he can get laid every night of the week for the price of a decent bottle of Scotch. Pete was sent out by his company and that makes all the difference. You can see from the way he behaves in the bars, he barely notices the girls, he's more interested in what I have to say. Nigel can't sit down without shoving his hand down some bird's bikini and he spends more time fondling them than he does drinking.

I'm the same as Pete. I was running a handbag factory in Newcastle, and we'd started subcontracting some of our manufacturing to a couple of suppliers in Thailand. One of the Thai guys came over to see us and we got on like a house on fire. Saravoot his name was. Before he went back, he offered me a job running one of his factories outside Bangkok. I was divorced and the kids were grown up, so I thought what the hell.

I'm still not sure how things are going to work out here. Saravoot's a nice enough guy, but sometimes he's a bit strange. I'm not quite sure how to explain it, but I can give you an example. His factory was way overstaffed. There's a feeling out here that the more people you have working for you, the more important you are. Staff equals status. So Saravoot would take great pride in the fact that he had almost five hundred people working for him, even though the same amount of work could have been done by half that number if they worked efficiently. Now, one of the reasons that Saravoot brought me over to Bangkok was that he'd seen how we operated in Newcastle, and

one of the first things I did was to draw up a proposal to restructure the sewing side that would pretty much double productivity. We had to let thirty people go, all of them women, and it was like pulling teeth. I had to keep pressing Saravoot for months until he agreed to put my proposal into action.

So then he goes to see a fortune teller, and the fortune teller tells him that I was good for the company, but that I shouldn't be involved in the day-to-day running of it. The fortune teller used my date and place of birth in his calculations, but it sounded like hocus pocus to me. Anyway, it effectively meant that I was on sabbatical for six months, and when I went back we had even more staff than before. And things he promised just didn't materialise. He said I'd get a BMW, but the delivery date kept changing and I had to make do with an old Toyota. Then a Beamer arrived, but Saravoot said it was for his wife and that he'd ordered me a Range Rover. I'm still waiting.

And he told me I'd be getting business class flights home. But whenever I get tickets, they're always economy. There's always an excuse: they booked too late, the travel agent made a mistake, but that's bollocks. There's no point in confronting him because that doesn't work with Thais, they pretend not to understand or they just walk away. So I just grin and bear it.

The business in Dream Bar was typical Thailand. It was a rip-off joint, but by adopting the right attitude, by not showing aggression, everything was sorted. If we'd shouted or sworn at them, they'd have got violent, guaranteed. And you can't win a fight against Thais because they never fight one on one, they're always mob-handed. For a start there were half a dozen of them in the bar, but even if we'd got past them, there'd have been another ten outside, probably tooled up. There's no shame in Thai culture about ganging up on someone, no Queensbury Rules or anything like that. But fighting is always a last resort. Handle yourself properly, show the requisite amount of respect, pay a little money, smile a lot, and you can talk your way out of any situation.

Anyway, we walked out of Patpong and caught a taxi in Silom Road. The guy wanted two hundred baht at first but I spoke to him in Thai and he agreed to use the meter.

Pete wanted to go to Zombie in Nana Plaza - he'd mentioned it two or three times while we were in Safari. I'm not a big fan of Zombie, I prefer Spicy-a-go-go on the opposite side of the plaza. As soon as we walked into the bar, Joy came running over to Pete and practically threw herself at him, hugging him around the neck and kissing his cheek. She was a pretty thing, long hair, quite curvy, terrific breasts. She sat next to Pete and he introduced her to me. She shook my hand. That always makes me smile. There they are, sitting there topless but holding their hands out like we were at a business meeting. Come to think of it, I suppose it was a business meeting at that. Pete had to buy her drinks and she wanted him to pay her bar fine, so it was all about money.

It's practically impossible to know if the girls in the bars really like us or not. They are working, after all. But I think there's a difference between the way they treat us long-term residents and the way they act with tourists. They know we're going to come in week after week, so I guess they know they can't get away with stinging us. But did Joy love Pete? Tough call. She was very attentive, hanging on his every word, pouring his tonic into his gin, rubbing his leg, leaning her head against his shoulder, but those are standard bargirl tricks. I'm sure she'd act exactly the same way with any other customer. Pete was definitely infatuated with her, though. He couldn't take his eyes off her. And we'd only been there a few minutes before he asked her to go off

and put on a bikini top. That was funny, because when we went in she was stark bollock naked, except for a pair of black ankle boots. Must be love, huh?

Joy's two sisters came over to join us. Sunan and Mon. Sunan was a hard-faced girl in her late twenties, tall with a tight body but cold eyes. She sat next to Nigel and almost immediately asked him to buy her a drink. I hate it when they do that. I don't mind offering, but I don't want to be pushed into it, you know?

Mon was different. Actually, she looked a bit like Joy. She was older, she said she was twenty seven but I think she's probably about thirty. You could tell from the stretch marks on her stomach that she'd had at least one kid, but she had a beautiful face and a great figure. She was cuddly, you know. A bit like my ex-wife. She didn't hit me for a drink but I bought her four colas and we had quite a decent conversation. Her husband had cleared off not long after her daughter had been born, she said, and she'd had no choice but to work in the bars. She was saving like mad and as soon as she had enough money she was going to go back to Si Saket. I felt sorry for her and when I left I gave her a thousand baht. Pete stayed on. He'd paid Joy's bar fine and she'd gone off to change. I went along to Fatso's Bar for a nightcap.

BIG RON

I get to see all sorts in Fatso's Bar. The works. That's one of the reasons I enjoy running the bar: all human life is here, and a fair sprinkling of sub-human specimens, too.

There's the tourists: they come here for a couple of weeks, screw themselves stupid and then head back to England or Denmark or Germany or wherever they're from and dream about the wonderful time they had. Most of them reckon it's a sexual paradise, they can't believe what's on offer here. They sit at the bar with stupid grins on their faces, get tanked up and then head on down to the Plaza. The ones I feel sorry for are the ones who fall in love. They meet a girl the first night and they think it's the real thing. They spend every night with the same one, and by the middle of the holiday they're hooked. They fall for whatever line the girl gives them - the sick mother, the younger sister's school uniform, the bank foreclosing on the family farm, the dead water buffalo, there's a million sob stories and I've heard them all. Sometimes they bring the girls here, like they're on a date or something. They sit at the bar, all lovey dovey, holding hands and making eyes at each other. God, it's enough to make me puke. I've given up saying anything. They don't want to be told, they want to believe that they're a knight in shining armour and that the girl doesn't want to work in the bar, that she's only doing it to help out her family. Bollocks. They're hookers and they know exactly what they're doing. I see the same girls in here week after week with different farangs.

The mainstay of Fatso's Bar are the regulars, though. We serve good, solid English food in the restaurant upstairs or at the bar. Fish and chips. Roast chicken dinners.

Gammon steak and chips. None of the Thai crap. Food you can get your teeth into. Our breakfasts are a big puller, too. We've plenty of regulars pop in for a feed before heading off to the office.

I don't encourage tourists, to be honest. It's all about repeat business so I want guys who live in Bangkok, guys who'll come in four nights a week or more. The guys who have been here, done that and got the fucking T-shirt. Guys like Jimmy. Been here for more than fifteen years now, runs a chain of furniture shops by fax. You won't catch the likes of Jimmy falling in love with a Thai girl. Same with Rick. Been here almost ten years. Sells condom-making machines, does a roaring trade. Doesn't believe in them himself, none of us do. I've fucked more than two thousand women and a fair amount of katoeys too, and never got anything more serious than NSU. Well, there was the genital warts, a bugger to shift they were, but I don't really count them.

Rick's the same as Jimmy and me: we go to the bars, choose a girl, and screw them. No attachments, no relationships, they're slappers, pure and simple. That's the only way to treat them.

In fact, the longer a guy stays here, the more he's likely to go with katoeys, because you know where you are with a katoey. A katoey's a transsexual. But don't get me wrong, it's not like going with a guy in a dress. They're fucking lovely here. Drop dead gorgeous some of them. They take hormones to grow breasts, or have implants, and then they have their dicks cut off. Sex with them is something else, I can tell you. For a start, they give the best blow jobs. That's a fact. You've never had a blow job until you've had a katoey go down on you. You see, a guy knows what a guy likes. You don't have to fuck them, though Jimmy and Rick do it all the time, whether or not the geezer's got a dick. I don't screw them much, what with me being thirty stone and all, but I always fuck one up the arse on World Aids Day. Point of principle.

The ones who get into real trouble are the ones who fall between the tourists and the guys like Jimmy and Rick. They've been here for a few months, maybe longer, and they think they know it all. They think they understand Thais, they probably learn to speak a bit of the language, and they let their defences down. That's when they get fucked. There was a Jap guy we knew, came over to work for Toyota. Fell in love with a Thai girl, bought her a house and some land up near Chiang Mai. Gave money to her family, even bought them a pick up truck and a couple of motorcycles. The girl must have been the screw of the century because the Jap decides he's gonna marry her. He goes up to Chiang Mai, and there's a huge wedding party. Food, booze, the works. The whole family gets legless, a great time is had by all. In the middle of the festivities, a Thai guy goes up to the Jap. "You can go now," says the Thai.

"What do you mean?" says the Jap. "This is my wedding."

"No," says the Thai. "This is my house. On my land. And that's my wife. Now you can fuck off."

And that was that. The Jap came running back to Bangkok with his tail between his legs. Went back to Japan a few months later, a broken man. He'd been ripped off from Day One. I've heard a million stories like that. And they're all true.

PETE

Every night at eleven o'clock, all the girls in Zombie, those who hadn't had their bar fines paid, had to go up on one of the two stages and dance for about ten minutes. It was a hell of a sight, more than a hundred girls, most of them naked, dancing so close together that they were almost touching. It was a way of showing the customers what was available, I guess. I used to hate it. It was like a cattle market. Joy always used to stand next to her sisters and if I was there she'd grin and wave, but I never felt comfortable watching her. And if I didn't go to the bar, I always had a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach at eleven, knowing that she was up on the stage and that guys were ogling her.

After the mass dancing, there were a few shows. Nothing to compare with what went on in the upstairs bars in Patpong - a lesbian show and a show where one of the girls would paint another with luminous paint.

One night, as Joy sat next to me watching the lesbian show, she put a hand on my thigh. "What you think, Pete?" she asked, nodding at the stage. Two girls, both friends of Joy, were writhing on a blanket. On the other stage, two girls were doing a similar show, trying in vain to synchronise their movements with a slow Thai love song.

"It's okay," I said, not sure what she meant.

"Mamasan want me do," said Joy.

"The lesbian show? Why?"

Joy beamed. "She say I very pretty. Farangs want to see girl with long hair do lesbian show. She want me do with Wan."

"What does Wan think?" I asked.

"She need money. She want to do."

"How much do they pay if you do the show?"

"Ten thousand baht."

I was surprised. That was a lot of money, more than a good secretary would earn in a month working for a multinational company in Bangkok. "How many shows?" I asked.

"Lesbian show every night. Then go upstairs to G-spot for shower show. What you think, Pete? If you not want me do, I not do."

She looked at me earnestly, waiting to see what I'd say. I felt flattered because it was clear she was serious. It really was up to me. I watched the two girls on the stage. One was lying on her back while the other licked her breasts and fondled her between the legs. "You can do that?" I asked Joy.

She nodded. "Easy," she said.

Two fat Germans were leaning forward, leering at the girls. I didn't like the idea of Joy performing, but it was just a performance. Acting. And I figured that the more money she earned from 'legitimate' work, the less incentive there'd be for her to let someone pay her bar fine.

"What you think?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," I said. I explained my reservations about farangs watching her with another girl.

"Same dancing," she said.

I wasn't sure if it was. When she was dancing she was always with other girls, often more than a dozen. Doing the lesbian show put her centre stage.

"Do you want to do it?" I asked.

"Up to you," she said.

The girls on the stage changed position, one squatted over the other, balancing herself by holding one of the silver poles, and began to moan with simulated pleasure as the other used her tongue. The Germans leered and leaned forward for an even closer view.

"You wouldn't be shy?" I asked.

She shrugged. "It not real," she said. "Same movie star." She was right. It was acting, a show for the tourists.

"Okay," I said. "Why not try it? See if you like it."

Joy nodded. "Okay, Pete. I do for you."

Two days later it was Joy's first appearance as a 'special artist'. Her new role also meant that her bar fine had increased - before midnight it now cost a thousand baht to buy her out because if she wasn't there someone else would have to be found to take her place. After midnight, her bar fine dropped to seven hundred baht.

The lights dimmed and Joy and Wan skipped up onto the stage. Wan was a cute nineteen-year-old with shoulder length hair and an upturned nose that had cost her twenty thousand baht from one of Bangkok's top plastic surgeons. She was one of Joy's closest friends and they often arrived at Zombie together.

Wan spread a tartan blanket over the dancefloor, then the two girls took off their leopard-print sarongs and bikinis to hoots and cheers from the farangs. The slow music started and Joy and Wan went into an unconvincing clinch. Joy reached up and held on to two of the silver poles, while Wan began to plant small kisses over Joy's breasts. Joy looked across at me and began to giggle. In fact she giggled throughout the show. Wan did, too. They knew all the moves, but it was clear that they weren't taking it seriously. At one point the mamasan, a fifty-something old bat with a hairy mole on her left cheek, shouted something to the girls and they began to fake orgasms, but after a few minutes they both collapsed into giggles again.

When the show was over, Wan gathered up the blanket and Joy pulled on her bikini and shawl and scampered over to where I was sitting. "What you think?" she asked.

"You kept laughing," I said.

"Jug ga jee," she said. Ticklish. "You can come to G-Spot with me?" she asked. "I have to do shower show and I shy go alone."

G-Spot was one of the upstairs bars. Along one wall was a glass panel behind which were a number of shower heads. I'd been up a few times to see the shower shows, but basically all you're looking at is a line of girls getting wet. It wasn't much of a turn on, though tourists and first-timers seem to get a kick out of it.

I paid my bill and Joy took my hand and led me out of Zombie. Several heads turned to watch us go. Joy was one of the sexiest girls in Nana Plaza and in her green bikini top and with her leopard-print sarong tied around her waist, she was drop-dead gorgeous. I was proud to be seen with her, and even prouder that she wanted me to go with her.

Joy stood by me while she waited to be called for the show. I bought her a cola and she sipped it through a straw. G-Spot wasn't an especially popular bar: most men preferred to stick to the ground floor. I don't know if it was because they couldn't be bothered with the stairs but for most visitors to Nana Plaza, the upper floors were undiscovered country. As a result, the prettiest girls tended to work on the ground floor where the bars were busier. I could tell from the way Joy was preening herself that she thought she was a cut above the girls who worked in G-Spot. Maybe that was

why she'd brought me with her, to show to the girls that she had a farang boyfriend, another sign of her status.

Several guys tried to make eye contact with Joy but she pointedly ignored them. She leaned against me, then turned and kissed me on the cheek. "Sorry," she laughed, wiping away the lipstick with her thumb.

Half a dozen girls made their way to a curtained door. Joy patted me on the thigh. "Okay, I go now," she said. She tottered across the bar on her impossibly high heels. She turned and waved before disappearing through the curtain.

A few minutes later the main lights dimmed and spotlights came on, illuminating the showers. Water began to spurt out of the shower heads, then one by one the girls came out in single file. There was laughter all around me. Guys were pointing and shaking their heads and the bargirls were jumping up and down and shrieking. Joy was wearing a shower cap. The girls took bars of soap and began lathering themselves. Joy followed their example, but did her best to keep her head out of the water.

The farang manager of the bar went over to the shower screens and rapped on the glass. He pointed at Joy and mimed for her to take off her cap. She smiled and did as she was told to a round of applause.

After the girls were all covered with soapy suds, they paired off and simulated lesbian sex. Joy was with Wan again. This time, though, Wan leaned against the wall while Joy kissed her all over. At one point she got soap in her mouth and she stopped what she was doing to rinse her mouth out. She grinned at me and gave me a small wave. Ten minutes later, it was all over. Joy came back through the curtain, towelling her hair dry. "What you think?" she asked.

"I think you were great," I said. "The prettiest girl there."

She smiled. "You sure?"

"I'm sure," I said.

We went back down the stairs to Zombie. "My hair take long time to dry," she said.

"I know. That's why you wore the cap."

"No, that was for fun," she said. "I know the manager go crazy. Funny, huh?"

I hugged her. She was funny. Cute, too. She sat by me in Zombie until it was time to dance again and made such a fuss of having to dry her hair that I paid her bar fine so that she didn't have to work.

She only stuck at being a showgirl for ten days. Joy hated getting her hair wet and didn't like having to redo her make-up. She decided that the extra money wasn't worth the trouble. I didn't argue. I hated seeing the way men grabbed at her when she came off stage. The lesbian show was a turn on, more so than straight-forward dancing, and guys were always offering to pay her bar fine, and wanting to take Wan along, too. Every man's fantasy, I guess, two beautiful girls at the same time.

One night, about a week after she'd started doing the shows, I'd popped into Zombie late at night, just before closing time. I'd been over at Fatso's Bar with Bruce and the lads and decided to say hello to Joy before going back to the hotel. She was there all right, sitting with Wan at the bar, wearing a black wraparound skirt and a T-shirt. She saw the look of surprise on my face. "Farang pay bar for me and Wan," she said hurriedly. She'd been drinking beer, from the bottle, and was grinning lopsidedly. She pushed the bottle away as if it wasn't hers.

The news hit me like a sucker punch. She'd always insisted that no one else could pay her bar fine, that she was my private dancer. "Why, Joy?"

"No, Pete, you not understand. Farang have birthday, he want see me and Wan do lesbian show. He pay two thousand baht to me and two thousand baht to Wan, just for show."

"Where?" I asked. This didn't sound right.

"We go Penthouse Hotel."

The Penthouse was one of the short-time hotels I went to with Joy. Mirrors on the walls and ceilings, blue movies on the television, condoms by the bed. "Come on, Joy. Why go to a short-time hotel? If he wanted to see the show, he could see it here."

Joy waved Wan over and spoke to her in Khmer. That was something I'd noticed before. Joy could speak reasonable English, certainly enough to make herself understood, and my Thai was good enough to talk to her. She and Wan usually spoke to each other in Thai, but whenever there was something she didn't want me to know, Joy would use Khmer. It had a totally different vocabulary to Thai but with many similar sounds, so there was no hope of me eavesdropping.

When Joy finished speaking, Wan smiled at me. "Farang have birthday today. He say he want private show, he want see me and Joy do lesbian show for him. He just watch and drink beer."

She looked across at Joy for approval and Joy nodded. Joy raised her eyebrows at me as if she'd proved her point.

"Joy, you said no one could pay your bar fine. How do you think I feel?"

"I don't know," she said, lowering her eyes.

She looked so sad I wanted to put my arms around her and hold her. I guess she was only trying to earn a little extra money, and if a guy wanted to pay her to see what he could watch for free in Zombie, I suppose she'd be a fool not to take advantage of him.

"You angry at me?" she asked.

"No, I'm not angry at you," I said. I wasn't, either. But I was still glad when she decided to quit doing the shows.

JOY

Some of the girls in Zombie won't work with another girl. They're too shy, they say they don't want someone else to see them having sex. Think of the money, that's what I tell them. You're having sex with one guy, right, so if there's two girls, it's half the work. Half the time, too. Most farangs come really quickly with two girls, they can't control themselves, especially if you know what to do. Sunan showed me, once. A French guy paid bar fine for Sunan and me a few days after I started work in Zombie - he was turned on by the idea of making love to sisters. He paid bar fine and gave Sunan and me two thousand baht each. We went to Uncle Rey's Guest House, just around the corner. Fifteen minutes later, we were back dancing in the bar. With the farang's money.

Sunan made me get on top and then she kissed him while I had sex with him. He wanted to pull out and have sex with Sunan, but before he could, Sunan began to moan and groan. "You fuck my young sister," she said, then she reached behind me and started playing with him. He came like a rocket. Easy money. He started saying he wanted to do it again, but Sunan said he'd only paid to come once and we left.

Once I started doing the lesbian show, farangs were always asking to bar fine me and Wan together. Wan was up for it because she needs the money: her boyfriend has a major heroin habit and she's just bought a pick-up truck for her father. I knew I was taking a risk, because if Pete found out, he'd hit the roof. If Pete had already been then I was reasonably sure I'd be okay, but if he hadn't popped in I had to brief the girls to say that I'd just gone out to get something to eat. I only got caught once and that was Wan's fault. She'd talked me into having a couple of beers before we did the show, then a farang bought me and Wan another beer each before asking if he could pay our bar fines. Now, I knew it wasn't a good idea because I had a feeling that Pete was going to pop in, but I was feeling a bit tipsy and he was offering more money than usual. Three thousand baht each. The lesbian show had really turned him on. Anyway, Wan talked me into it, but I said we'd have to be quick. It got me out of doing the shower show, and he had to pay the extra bar fine because they had to find two more girls to go upstairs to G-Spot. We changed and went to the Penthouse Hotel. I wanted to go somewhere closer, but the farang insisted on the Penthouse because the rooms have mirrors everywhere.

The farang was a bit drunk and it took almost an hour before we could get him to come. Wan and I did the full lesbian show, then he got on the bed with us. I tried to make him come quickly but he'd obviously done it with two girls before and he knew how to control himself. He'd ordered more beer from the boy who let us into the room, and by the time we'd finished I was really drunk. And sore.

When we got back to Zombie I had another beer and that's when Pete came in. He wasn't happy but I think I managed to convince him that nothing had happened. Sometimes farangs can be so stupid.

Stephen Leather writes: If you enjoyed that extract and want to know what happens to Pete, Joy, and the sad bastards at Fatso's, Private Dancer is now in print, published by Three Elephants in Thailand. It's on sale at all good shops there, including Bookazine and Asia Books, priced at 350 baht, which is about £5 or \$9 in real money.

If you live outside Thailand and want to know how the story ends, you can buy the book on-line at www.dcothai.com. Danny at DCOTHAI delivers to anywhere in the world.