

Behind The Smile

The Story of Lek,
A Bar Girl in Pattaya

Book Three: Maya - Illusion



Owen Jones

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«Tektime S.r.l.s.»

Jones O.

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Lek begins to wonder whether everything that she had hoped for for fifteen years was all worth it now that she had achieved her goals. Lek was born the eldest child of four in a typical rice farming family. She did not expect to do anything any different from the other girls in her class in the northern rice belt of Thailand. Typically that would be: work in the fields for a few years; have a few babies; give them to mum to take care of and get back to work until her kids had their own children and it would be her turn to stop working to take care of them. One day a catastrophe occurred out of the blue – her father died young and with huge debts that the family knew nothing about. Lek was twenty and she was the only one who could prevent foreclosure. However, the only way she knew was to go to work in her cousin's bar in Pattaya. She drifted into the tourist sex industry. The second book, 'An Exciting Future', tells of Lek's attempts to settle down and this, the third book, picks up the story of Lek's life six or seven years after that. At forty-ish, it is time to take stock of her life. She looks back on her past and wonders whether it was all worth it. Should she feel bitter about what has happened to her or should she move on and try to forget her past? Should she just try to erase it, whitewash it out, like so many women did or should she feel proud of what she has accomplished? Lek is plagued by mixed emotions and tries to seek an explanation that she can live with for the rest of her life.

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MAYA - ILLUSION

Book Three in the Series

Behind The Smile

The Story of Lek, a Bar Girl in Pattaya

by

OWEN JONES

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Maya – Illusion

Behind The Smile: The Story of Lek, a Bar Girl in Pattaya

by Owen Jones

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<http://facebook.com/owenjones.welshauthor>

http://twitter.com/owen_author

owen@behind-the-smile.org

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Behind The Smile: Full Circle

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my wife and her family, who have always taken care of me in the most wonderful manner, affording me the time and space to take up this career of writing. No-one could have made me feel more welcome and part of the family than they have. I have loved every minute of my life in Thailand and the reason for that lies largely with them.

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The cover girl's name is Chalita.

Please send any queries about work to me and I will forward them to her.

Owen Jones

1 A BOLT FROM THE BLUE

Lek was waiting in Craig's study.

She had been building up the courage for this moment for days and at the precise moment that she had chosen to do it, he had gone to the toilet. She knew that if he didn't get back soon, she would be in tears before she could tell him her news.

She heard the flush go, so she steeled herself, but then the shower started. He would have to pick just this moment to have a shower too, she thought, but to be fair, he didn't know that she wanted to speak to him. They spoke so seldom to each other these days.

Lek started to dust his desk with her handkerchief and tidy his bits and pieces for something to distract her, but she could feel the tears welling up in her eyes already. What the Hell was he doing in there?

She went into the kitchen and poured Craig his second daily cup of coffee, took it back into the office, cleared a space for it among the clutter on his desk and carefully put it down.

Clack! The bolt was thrown on the bathroom door with the sound of a rifle being cocked.

As he came into the office moments later, he was surprised to see Lek standing there – she would normally have left the house hours ago to embark on her quotidian routine tour of friends for coffee and then lunch.

“Hello, telak, how are you this morning?” He kissed her on the temple and sat down. “Thanks for the coffee. Just what I need.”

That was it, she was crying. Tears flowed down her face although unaccompanied by any sounds of sobbing at all.

“Oh, Craig, my darling! I am so unhappy... I think that I must go back to Pattaya and start work in Daddy's Hobby again, if Beou will have me. I am so sorry, my dear.”

“I don't understand... ‘if Beou will have you’. We have talked about your going to the city to get a job. The costs of our living in a city would outweigh what you could earn...”

“No, dear. I don't mean that we go to Pattaya... I mean that I go alone. I can live in a cheap room; share with other girls, like I did before. You... you cannot come with me. You must stay here...”

“What? You are telling me that you want to go back to Pattaya to work in a bar and that I should just sit here and wait at home?”

“Yes, but not wait... I will not come back... You can stay here... get a divorce.... go... wherever you like. You can find a new lady, a good lady to take care of you and I will... I don't know what I will do, but it will be without you. I am so sorry.”

Once she had spoken, Lek regained her composure and the tears ceased to flow, but as the magnitude of what Lek has just said sank in, Craig began to cry.

It had been so unexpected. He had seen no signs. Not a dicky bird. He looked up at Lek, who was calmly staring back into his watery eyes.

“But why, Lek? What has brought this on now? I just don't understand.”

“I don't know where to start, Craig, but I have been unhappy for some time. I expected more than this. I thought... I spent ten years waiting for my hero to rescue me and all the time I worked and put up with crap, but worked on and dreamed of a better life. Then I met you and I thought that my dreams had come true... I am not saying this well. It is not your fault, but I expected more and I want more than.... than this.

“We have been together for about eight years and married for five or six years, but I am poorer now than when I was working. I know that that it is not your fault, Craig, you work hard, but... well, you know, we have nothing and I don't want to live like that.

“Soom has been at university for a year now and it costs... I want my daughter to go to university and I cannot see how we can afford it on the money you earn. I tried to better myself too... I went

back to school, but there is no work for people like me here in Baan Suay. If we had a car, maybe I could get a job somewhere near, but... not have.

“I do not have a choice, Craig. My family means everything to me and my daughter more than all that put together. I am so sorry.”

Craig thought before replying, his tears had also dried up, “So, I do not count as family after eight years? How long does it take to become a member of your family if you’re not born Thai? You know that I gave up my friends and my family to come here – or at least I put them after you... and now you are saying ‘bye bye’? I can see that you want Soom to have a better life, so do I, but you also know that I sit here working for fifteen hours a day, while you go out and socialise or whatever.”

“I am not blaming you, my dear. You did a very brave thing to come to try to help me and my family, but it has not worked out and now we must move on. I am very sorry.”

“Way! I did not come here to rescue you and help your family, I came here because I loved you and thought you loved me. Helping your family was secondary to me. I always told you that I would do whatever I could to help your family and I have, not that they have ever asked for anything.”

“Yes, I know, but I did not understand the differences between falang and Thai then, same as you did not understand. It was just a big accident...”

“What? Us falling in love was a ‘big accident’? My coming over here, building a house that I will never own and working fifteen hours a day for eight years is just a ‘big accident’?”

“Lek, Lek, Lek, you hurt me now very much...”

“OK, lovely accident, but now my daughter must have money and I don’t have. You have?... No? So I must go get. Or can you go get? If you cannot, I must. My mother cannot give, my family cannot give. You think that Soom must work on weekends and at night? She cannot make enough money in a hamburger bar to pay for university, so what you want her to do? Work in a bar same me before?”

“I kill someone first. I steal from someone first... but I go to work first and kill and steal later... If you have a good idea, Craig, please tell me, because I don’t want to go away again.”

Now they were both crying and Craig stood up to hug his wife, his mind racing with possibilities to save their marriage.

After a few moments, Lek pulled away, “I am sorry, Craig, but it is no good getting close and crying. Something has to be done and if I am going to go away, this is not helping either of us. You understand why I must do this and I understand that you cannot help me.

“I will leave in two days. Do you want me to move out now?”

“No, no, not yet, Lek... I think that you ought to at least tell me the costs and the shortfall. I have never asked you because you always seemed to have everything in hand and now you hit me with this! Or do you actually want to go?”

“I do not lie to you, my husband, but it is true that I do not, or have not always told you the truth one hundred percent. I tried to many times, maybe every time in the beginning, but the language was between us and ... well, it was easier not to.

“When I worked in Daddy’s Hobby, I did lots of things that I did not want to do because I had to do them. I do not want to say any more about that unless you ask me and that is your right, I think.

“Anyway, I saved some money for Soom’s education. Goong also left me 500,000 Baht when she died four or five years ago. I gave some of it to her family, but kept most of it.

“I don’t have much of it left now. I was bored here for years with nothing to do and gambled a lot of it away on cards. I paid Soom’s university fees last year and I have supplemented the money that you gave me for food for several years.

“Now, I cannot pay Soom’s university fees when they come up next year and cannot buy her the clothes, books and laptop that she needs right now to be comfortable with her studies. I don’t want her to look poor in university! She is the first person in my family to go to university and I want to give her every chance.

“That may mean losing you... but I will do it, if I have to, my darling, because I don’t know what else I can do.”

A few tears escaped her eyes, but she quickly wiped them away with her hand.

Craig was looking down at the beautifully-tiled floor, feeling like a total failure.

“So, you have paid the fees for now, right?” he said not meeting her eyes. “When do you need more money for Soom?”

“About six months. I pay university fees two times a year, but I give Soom money for her room and living every month.”

“So you have six months?”

“No, I must start working now to give Soom money every month and then more fees in six months. If I wait, it is too late.”

“OK, Lek... I wish that you had brought this up before, but, please give me a few hours to think about the problem, before you do anything quickly. Let’s say that you have... two weeks, eh? Can you wait two weeks?”

Lek nodded and put her hand on his shoulder, “Sure, I can wait two weeks.”

Craig was still shell-shocked. He put his hand to hers and patted it a few times, slowly. “I wish you had told me your problem before, Lek, I really do. Now, it’s hurry, hurry, hurry, but thanks for... Er, well, we have two weeks, eh? ... What are your plans for today?”

“It has taken me days to say this... I don’t have any plans now. Do you?”

“No, but I know that right now, work is not the answer... Why don’t you go off to your mother’s and I’ll have a think?”

Lek was glad of the excuse to get out and be alone, and, having recovered somewhat from the initial shock, so was Craig.

After Lek had left, he finished his cold coffee in one, packed up his laptop and went to the shop where he did a lot of his thinking. The office was for slog work, but Nong’s shop was for deep cogitation, usually over a few ice-cold beers. Watching the people in the village coming and going, carrying out their daily lives had always had a calming, yet inspirational effect upon him.

He sat down at the one table outside the shop and waited for Nong to notice him. He had been drinking at Nong’s shop for eight years, but they still could not talk to each other in any meaningful way. Nong appeared not to have an aptitude for English and Craig had spent most of his time trying to earn money rather than learn Thai.

As he was staring out before himself, he heard Nong say, “Hello Mr. Craig, how are you today?” in Thai.

“Sabaai dee, kap - I’m fine thanks. Khun duay, mai? You too?”

“Yes, thank you. The beer is very cold today.”

Nong always said that, but then the beer was always cold too.

Craig slouched in the bench seat and stretched his feet out in front of himself. He thought with a smile, that if he smoked, this would be a two-pipe problem, as Sherlock Holmes would have said.

“Why hadn’t she mentioned it before? Why the sudden crisis? The real bottom line was, if she believed in karma, as she insisted she did, why did she think that she could change her daughter’s karma?” It did not make sense now, although Lek’s news had hit him like a bullet.

The problem was that Lek seemed to be sure that her only way forward was to go back to work in a bar. So, whether she was right or wrong in her religious philosophy, she would probably leave him in fourteen days.

Craig knew that Lek had an iron will. If that was what she had said she would do, that was what she would do, unless there was a very good reason not to. And the only reason that was good enough was money, so he needed a supply of money.

Or he needed to shed the chains that held him and Lek together – he needed to stop loving her. Money or love?

That was the dilemma.

Lek had already decided that she would choose money, although not for entirely selfish reasons. Selfishness was in there though, he was sure. He knew that she would not be able to bear the shame of having to withdraw Soom from university for lack of funds.

Although that was the mechanics of the situation, it did not help his predicament. He loved Lek, but he was being offered an honourable way out. No-one would blame him for cutting and running now. Lek had told him that he was on his own.

Craig wondered for a little while whether Lek was offering him this easy exit because she had found someone new, but he dismissed the idea as much for lack of evidence as the fact that it would have hurt him too much to countenance it. He believed that Lek was genuinely concerned about her daughter's future and that helped him with the next choice, which was whether he should stay or go.

That would take another beer. It was not that he didn't want to stay. It was more a question of whether this problem would erupt again over an unrelated issue like Soom's first home, Soom's first car, Soom's babies, when she had them, which she inevitably would. Soom had been brought up by her grandmother as had Lek and he knew that Lek was looking forward to the role in her turn.

Craig, however, was not, yet the likelihood of it coming to pass was only three or four years away.

Nong saw the empty bottle and swiftly brought another one.

The ultimate decision was between selling everything that he had left in the UK, looking after Soom's children and staying with Lek in the village that he had come to call home or to call it a day and move on.

It was a tough one.

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Lek had gone to her Mum's house, which was just over the lane from their place, less than half-way to Nong's shop. She hadn't discussed her predicament with anyone yet, because so much depended on Craig, but she was ready to bite the bullet and go back to work if things worked out that way.

She was prepared to accept her own bad Fate, but she was not prepared to allow Fate to affect Soom's future, if she could do anything about it.

If Craig fell by the wayside, then so be it. The ball was in his court now. She had given him an out and a two-week period to come up with a solution. There was nothing more to do than steel herself again and wait for what her Karma would throw at her. She did care about Craig, but she cared more about Soom and she cared nothing for herself.

After the dreams she had had for and the nightmares she had had about Soom's future over the last eighteen years, Lek was not about to leave anything to something as intangible as Fate. Her daughter might not be clever enough to pass the examinations, that was something else, but she would sit them, shortage of money notwithstanding.

She sat with her mother, but her mother could see that she was troubled, so she cut and peeled some fruit for them both and pretended to be busy until her daughter made the first move.

"What would you think if I moved to Bangkok, Mum, to be closer to Soom if she needs me? I think that I can be more use there than here now. What do you reckon?"

"I reckon that that is your decision, Lek, but what does Craig think about it? He is your husband and therefore the one you should be asking this question, not me."

"Yes, I know, but... I'm just not sure..."

"I never followed you around when you were growing up. Did I do wrong? Why do you think that you have to be at your daughter's side and not your husband's?"

"Soom has her own mistakes to make like we all did and still do – it is part of growing up. Will you be there when she meets her first lover too?"

"I would like to be, yes! And if he's not good enough I'd..."

Lek could see her mother's smiling eyes although no mirth showed around her mouth.

"You can only do what you can do. You could not be here for the first part of Soom's life, but that is not so bad. I did my best and you were here for the last eight years. Soom is a good, level-headed, intelligent girl, now is the time to give her some headroom – let her practice what she has learned – don't keep her hemmed in.

"She may start to think that you think that she's stupid and you don't want that do you? Not when she is in a big Bangkok university with all the rich kids. They will give her enough complexes already.

"What is your true concern?"

"Money, Mum, if I am honest. I want the university fees for the full, four-year term of the course in my bank account right now, so that I know that money will not stop her staying at university. I want to see it, in a bank book."

"Yes, I see. We would all like enough money in the bank to be safe, but that is not how it is for working class people like us, unfortunately. What does Craig have to say about it all?"

She didn't want to say that she hadn't consulted him or that she was thinking seriously of going back to work, so she said, "He doesn't want to live in Bangkok. Nor do I really, since I don't know anyone there except Chalita and her husband and I couldn't just hang around with them all the time. Sis has her own life to lead. Maybe I could live in Pattaya, it's only an hour or so away.

"Craig doesn't think we can afford to live in a city and he's probably right. I would have to find a job to pay the rent and most of the university fees..."

"I see," said her mother slowly. "Like that is it? How old are you now? Thirty-nine, forty? Not old certainly, but getting old to be doing some types of job, don't you think? Your job opportunities would be limited by your qualifications, lack of experience and age, I imagine. What sort of work did you have in mind?"

"I don't know Mum. I only know bar work and basic bookkeeping. Perhaps I could get a job as a cashier in a bar, or a receptionist in a hotel or working the till in a shop."

"Don't you need qualifications to be a bookkeeper these days? I think you do, unless your family gives you a job. Have you spoken to Beou about it?"

"No, not yet. I just told Craig and he's gone to Nong's to think about it and get drunk, I suppose. He took it rather badly although I did kind of hit him with it out of the blue."

"It is a shock to me, I can't imagine what he is going through. He gave up everything to come here to be with you. All his friends, his family, his connections... and now you are dumping him. Not a very nice prospect, is it? Now that he's spent most of his money too. It makes you look heartless, my dear, although I know you are only thinking about the security of Soom's future.

"However, you are married now and you and Craig must work as a team. This may sound like your concern alone, but it is not. We might not be able to help you financially, but we would miss you if you left again. It has been so..., so homely, like the good old days, having you around again for the last eight or nine years.

"Then there is Soom. Have you asked her about your idea of moving down with her? Perhaps she was looking forward to a lot more freedom. That is one of the perks of going away to study, isn't it? To learn about life in the 'real world', learning to stand on your own two feet? And she'll have you hanging around criticising her every mistake.

"If you want the advice of an old woman, I would say not to abandon the people who love you the most. Look for ways that we, or you and Craig can sort this problem out together. Talk to him properly, don't just tell him 'this is how it is going to be...'. He has his pride too and if you push him into a corner, he may leave you and I think that you would regret that sooner or later. Probably sooner too.

"Soom would miss Craig too. Well, we all would. We have all become fond of him and his funny little ways. He's a breath of fresh air sometimes."

"Do you think that I should go to him now, Mum?"

“That is up to you, Lek, but maybe it is better if he thinks things through on his own for a little while longer. Give him an hour longer and that will give you time to think what to say to him and cook him something nice. What is his favourite? Oh, yes, Paneng. Put some of your love into a Paneng for him and if he’s not back by the time it’s ready, take him a bowl to the shop.”

“Thanks, Mum, you always know what to say just at the right moment... whereas I, well I just rush in and... Do I get that from Dad? I’ll give it a shot. Do you fancy some curry too? I’ll make enough for all of us.”

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Craig was well into his fourth pint when Lek appeared at his side. He actually smelled her coming before he saw her, or at least he had caught a whiff of his favourite Thai meal being cooked somewhere near by.

“Hello, telak. I have brought you something to eat. You not eat all day and drinking with no food is no good.” As soon as she had mentioned drinking and an implied criticism, she regretted it.

“Who cares? Go to Bangkok, then you won’t have to watch, will you?”

“I did not mean anything, my dear, honestly. May I sit down and join you? I think I need a few beers too.”

“I don’t need a few beers, I want a few beers... Sure sit down, what do you want? A Leo? Nong! Can I have a Leo, a glass, some ice and another Chang, please?”

Lek was unwrapping her parcel of food and two dishes that already had servings of white, fluffy rice in them. She passed the bowl of curry, a bowl of rice and a spoon to Craig, so that he could serve himself first in the traditional way.

“Thank you. It smells very nice. Thanks, Nong. Cheers, my dear, bottoms up! When are you off? Oh, yes, in two weeks...”

“I want to talk to you about that, Craig. I am so sorry that I sprang it on you so suddenly like that. It must have been a terrible shock. I should have been more... more subtle. Is that the right word?”

“Well, it’s one of them and you certainly were not it.”

“Yes, I know and I am sorry.” She put some more curry into Craig’s bowl before taking a little for herself. “You understand the problem though, despite my inept way of putting it, so I have come to you now for advice. You have more experience in money matters than I. I am only a blunt farm girl at heart, what do you think that we could do together as a family to solve this crisis?”

Craig knew that he was being buttered up, but he also knew that it was Lek’s way of apologising. It was very rare for her, or any Thai for that matter, to actually say the word ‘sorry’ and she had said it at least six times that day already – she preferred to show it in deeds.

“I know how important Soom’s education is to you. I know how much you blame your own previous circumstances on your own lack of a formal education and I know that you don’t want the same for Soom. An education with papers – qualifications – is like a guarantee. I know you think all that and I agree with you.

“So, I propose using my visa guarantee money to help you and Soom. That takes the pressure off for now. It means that I will not get a twelve-month visa extension next month, but maybe it’s time we had a holiday anyway. We could go to Laos – Vientiane – for a holiday and pick up a three-month visa while we’re there. I have a few ideas for replacing the visa money, but there is no rush for that. How much do you need right now for Soom?”

“I give her twelve thousand Baht every month for expenses. Later I will need sixty thousand, but not right now. In six weeks. I have most of that money, but then I have no reserves for if there is a problem. That is what worries me.”

“Yes, OK, Lek. Tell Soom that you will transfer the money into her bank account on Monday and in the meantime, we can start planning our holiday to Laos. Cheers! I mean it, cheer up. We both need to.”

Lek felt a lot happier now that the foreseeable problem had been sorted out. She had a year to find next year's payment and she still had fifty thousand in the bank.

Craig could see that the storm had passed but the sky was definitely still very overcast.

2 THE VISA RUN TO LAOS

Vientiane, the capital of Laos was not actually all that far away, as the crow flies, but getting there was a very different story unless one flew, which Lek and Craig decided against for financial reasons. Lek took the bus into Phitsanulok with one of her girlfriends to buy the bus tickets the day before they were about to leave. This too was not a long journey, but it could easily take six hours to get there and back. Lek liked to take a friend so that they could make a day of it – do some shopping and eat lunch somewhere nice. This was the plan for the day also.

Lek and Craig had been getting on a lot better since he had given her a hundred thousand Baht – a quarter of the money that he needed to keep in a Thai bank in order to qualify for a twelve-month visa extension. It troubled him, but at least his ‘family’ was stable again for a while and everyone was happy or to be accurate: Soom was ecstatic, Lek appeared happy and Craig was pretending to be happy.

Lek had postponed her plans to go back to work indefinitely, which was a relief to Craig, although he was all too aware that he had had to pay her a hundred thousand Baht to keep her. Not an ideal arrangement, but it did give him time to think about what to do next and he did feel that the two ladies in his life had earned the right to a year’s stability, even if he did decide to leave them high and dry the following year.

There was no question about it, Craig was feeling terribly hurt that Lek had been prepared to leave him at two days’ notice after they had been together for eight years. He just didn’t know what to do about it just yet and he wanted to help Soom stay in university. The kid had never had much and was genuinely nice. He often wondered whether Lek had been like that before going to Pattaya. He knew that she was a very popular woman, she often seemed to be the life and soul of the party, but she was often a different person when they were alone. Especially the last couple of years. Maybe she had grown bitter through disappointment, but disappointment with what? With him?

He had always done his best and no-one had ever suggested otherwise. When people left for the fields at seven or seven-thirty in the morning, his office light was always on and when they went to bed at nine, ten or eleven at night, his light was still burning. All the neighbours knew that and Lek had said she was very proud that he was such a hard worker. But it was true that the long hours had not translated into a good salary.

He had spent all his saving and everything he had earned keeping the three of them together and now it seemed that Lek had been topping up the house-keeping money with her own savings too.

He could think of only one thing to do: sell the flat in his home town of Barry, South Wales and live off that. He and Lek had been hoping to keep the flat for their retirement. It was not worth a lot of money, but if it had continued to rise in value for ten years, it would have seen him out and left Lek with a few million baht too.

Now it would have to go and there would be no welcome boost to the retirement fund for either of them, unless Fate pulled its fickle finger out.

It began to dawn on him that Lek had been trying to get him to sell the house, so that she wouldn’t have to go back to work. It was possible, because it would have been out of character for Lek to ask anyone to do anything as momentous as sell a house just to help her. She was far too independent for that. The more Craig thought about it, the more it made sense that that was what Lek had wanted all along.

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Lek and her friend Su waited until nine for the eight o’clock bus and so arrived at the bus station at ten-thirty. They had bought the two bus tickets ten minutes later and had about four hours to enjoy themselves before the next bus went there way. Lek made it clear that she would have to get some money from an ATM.

“I don’t have much money on me, I’m afraid, but Craig gave me a hundred thousand the other day, so we can take some of that, go for lunch – on me of course – and then we’ll have a look around the shops.”

Su was pretty much in awe of her friend and always had been, but a hundred thousand Baht was about nine months salary to her, so this was very impressive stuff.

“Let me see... we can spend five thousand today and I’ll take ten thousand to Laos with me. I’ve never been there, but they must have some decent shops, mustn’t they? Have you ever been there, Su?”

“No, not me Pee Lek. I’ve only left the province once and that was to go to Bangkok for a few days when we got married fifteen years ago. We stayed with the old man’s auntie. It was nice enough though. I haven’t even got a passport and wouldn’t know how to get one. Have you got a passport, Pee Lek?”

“Oh, yes, we went to Wales a few years ago, remember. I know Thais can enter Cambodia and Laos without a passport, but you can’t fly to Europe without one.”

Lek was not the sort of person to rub people’s noses in her apparent good fortune, but she did like to milk situations for the maximum amount of face she could get out of them. It was a habit she had gotten into after returning from Pattaya with Craig, when her reputation in the village was at a pretty low ebb and so was her self-esteem.

They took seats in a nice but not posh restaurant, after all, Lek didn’t want to embarrass her friend whose table manners left a lot to be desired.

“Order what you like, Su, it’s my treat to say ‘thanks’ for coming with me today. It’s so boring doing it alone. It’s very reasonable here too – good food, but not expensive.”

Su thought it was expensive, but she didn’t say so as she had her pride too.

However, she referred to her friend as ‘Pee’, not because Lek was older than her – they had been in school together – but because Lek appeared to be of higher status than she was. In general, ‘pee’ means ‘You are older than I and I am being polite’, but it can also refer to status, although age confers status too. The ‘opposite’ is ‘Nong’, which is a polite way of referring to a younger person or someone of lower status.

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The first stage of the journey was to get from Baan Suay to the bus station. Lek hired one of her friends to take them at seven o’clock in order to catch the VIP bus at nine. The driver took his wife and family in the back of the pick-up for a trip out to the big city, which they probably didn’t do from one month to the next. Once at the bus station, Lek treated them all to a meal and paid the petrol money.

Displaying largesse was one of her favourite jobs – she would have made a great Santa Claus, if he had been a woman.

The next stage, was the actual six-hour bus ride to Udon Thani through the mountains, but as it would be dark, there was nothing to see. Lek had taken her travel-sickness pills as usual, because she suffered from even the shortest car journey. The only problem was that they tended to make her lose her mind for several hours. She was well aware of the problem and would tell Craig when they were working, effectively putting him in charge of her well-being until she came down off them.

Lek invariably fell asleep on long journeys so the tablets were only a problem when they had to change vehicles. As they passed through Loei, Lek popped up from under her travelling blanket and peered past Craig out of the window. She looked him in the face from a few inches away, rubbed her eyes and stared out of the window again.

“If I met someone from here I would not know what to call him,” she said and flopped back in her seat.

“Do you mean: ‘Do you mean that you don’t know where are we?’” he asked.

“That’s it,” she replied.

And she was asleep again before he could tell her. He had often regretted not keeping a collection of the odd things that Lek had said and done while stoned on travel-sickness pills.

They arrived in Udon Thani shortly after three and had to wait two hours for the bus to Nong Khai, a city near the Laos border. That took an hour, so at six-fifteen, they took a twenty-minute taxi ride to the border.

Craig was leading Lek around, carrying his laptop and dragging their case, so he was relieved to find the customs channels virtually clear. They filled in the exit papers and went straight through to where they had to get another bus over the long 'Friendship Bridge' in order to cross the Mekong into Laos.

Then it was more faffing about with immigration and entry visas and a taxi to a hotel that Craig had booked on the Internet. Lao is very similar to Thai, so Craig had no problem telling the taxi driver the name of the hotel, which was situated on the 'Water Front' in the centre of Vientiane.

They were stripping off, going for a shower in their room at ten a.m. After a journey of five hundred kilometres which had taken thirteen hours. Craig was shattered, but Lek was starting to come down. Craig decided to leave the visa for the following day.

They were both tired, hungry, thirsty and inquisitive, but they settled for setting the phone alarm for one o'clock and taking a nap. However, when one o'clock came, they were both raring to go outside and see what Vientiane was like. Lek had some preconceptions of Laos and had met many people from there, but Craig had no idea what to expect. Their first impression as they left the hotel was that it was very clean.

Old but clean, in the way that proud, poor people might wear old clothes and even have an old car, but keep them in the best possible condition. A lot of the street signs still bore their old colonial names in French, although Laos had been communist for decades. Lek was amused by the way Lao used the Thai language. She kept pointing differences out to Craig, who knew enough Thai to understand what she was talking about.

The only thing that Craig remembered about Laos was that it was the most bombed country of all time and that its mostly rural population of about six and a half million were still regularly finding landmines and packets of cyanide dropped by the Americans in the Seventies, so he was surprised to hear so many American accents there.

There were also a lot of French people, presumably tourists. Lek chose a restaurant-cum-bar within a hundred yards of the hotel and they sat down. Lek took the menu and made noises as she read it, Craig ordered a Beer Lao, which he had never tried before and a spa for Lek.

"I have no idea how hot this food will be, telak, so I will order two Thai dishes and some spare ribs for you. OK?"

"Yes, that's fine. Do you want to try this Lao beer? It's quite nice."

She took a sip and agreed.

"I'll wait for tonight or I'll be asleep again soon. I can't drink in the afternoons anymore. It makes me too sleepy."

"You're getting old, that's what it is."

She knew it was true, but did not want to hear it.

"You can get a new lady if you want. Maybe a Lao lady and stay here..."

They both regretted it. It didn't take much to cause an argument these days. They both found it hard to talk together for more than fifteen minutes without one of them passing a snide comment or getting angry over the smallest thing. Conversation was like picking your way through a minefield. Craig often didn't say anything at all for fear of the consequences.

He wondered if Lek was going through an early menopause. He had heard that hormones in food were causing girls to become fertile earlier and women to become menopausal earlier too. Or at least, he thought that he had read it. He couldn't remember at that precise moment. Perhaps he had dreamed it. It made sense though. If women were born with all the eggs they would ever have and they started using them earlier, the supply would run out earlier too. It sounded feasible, but he had no idea really.

Maybe they had a million eggs and could never use them all up.

Or maybe they went off.

Lek was hoping that this vacation would be a second honeymoon. She didn't like to suggest it, but she was hoping that Craig would try to make it something romantic, something special. They had not decided how long they would stay, but they had both forgone birthday parties that month. Craig's on the 14th. had not been important, but Lek's fortieth on the 12th. had been a milestone.

It was just that the atmosphere had not been right, although the family had urged them to have a joint celebration, like they usually did. Thai Mothers' Day is also on the 12th, but they didn't even do much for that – just a small meal at Mum's. Surely everyone knew that they were going through a very rough patch.

The Seven-Year Itch a year early.

They had plenty of time – they could stay away as long as money allowed, but then they were sort of trying to spend less money, although they were not trying very hard and Craig had not mentioned being frugal on holiday.

She made up her mind to try to be extra nice to him and not find fault with everything he said. She looked up from the menu and smiled at him.

“I will have a glass of beer with you darling. Thank you.”

She called the waiter and placed the order while Craig poured her a drink.

“Cheers! Have you noticed that they don't say ‘Sawasdee, ka’ here? They say ‘Sabaidee’ instead. I have noticed that they don't say ‘ka’ or ‘kap’ very often at all.”

“I hadn't noticed the ‘sabaidee’, but I had noticed the ‘ka’ thing, because Thais put ‘ka’ or ‘kap’ on the end of most sentences...”

“That is because we are polite. There is nothing wrong with politeness...”

“I didn't say there was, did I? I just assumed it was a regional practice, like in the UK, Londoners say ‘sir’ more often than we do in Wales. It doesn't make them more or less polite. It's just their way. Maybe the communists made them drop ‘ka’ here because everyone is supposed to be equal, whereas in Thailand they are definitely not. You have a class structured society, like the UK does, with royalty and all that, but communist countries don't.

“Their class structure is built on party membership and having a good job in the civil service”.

But Lek had already stopped listening. She didn't waste any time at all worrying or even thinking about things that didn't concern her or her family and she certainly didn't care about the social structure in Laos. She just could not understand why Craig was interested in just about everything, it seemed such a waste of time.

“I emailed my brother last night and asked him to put my flat on the market. If I am lucky, the tenant will buy it, so there might be a quick sale. Well, quick for Britain. British solicitors are not known for doing anything quickly. It could still take two or three months.”

“But, I thought that you were keeping that for when we are older.”

“Look, if I don't have money to eat and drink, I won't get a lot older, will I? Yes, I wanted to keep it for another ten years or so too, but things haven't worked out like that. I didn't create the recession. I couldn't predict that people would spend less on the Internet or that the Thai baht would become nearly forty percent stronger or that inflation would hit Thailand as it has. Even you say how quickly prices are rising in Thailand. Food has shot up, hasn't it?”

“Yes. I know it is not your fault. It's just that I thought we would have the house to sell when we are older... Now we will be poor when we are old. That is not something nice to look forward to. I will have thirty years to think about how poor I will be when I am old.”

“And me! Not only you! I used to have a house and in three months I will not. Jeez, woman listen to yourself... I, I, I, poor me. What about me? It's my house you will be eating for the next ten years, don't forget that. Don't be so bloody selfish.”

“But you can go home and the government will take care of you, my government will not take care of me. I will be working until the day I die. It is something that I have wanted to talk to you about for a long time, because it worries me.”

“Did you think of that when you were playing cards all day?”

And they were fighting again already. Both seemed to realise it at the same time, because they both fell silent. Craig pretended to read the label on the beer bottle and Lek looked around the walls. The waitress bringing the food broke the awkward silence, giving them a chance to try again.

“One more beer, please,” said Craig. “How is the food, Lek?”

“Do you want to try? It is alright. Not so hot as I like. A bit boring.”

Craig took the proffered spoonful of curry and rice in his mouth.

“It’s OK. Not as hot as you like, I know, but it is all right for me. Maybe they make it like that here because of all the foreign visitors.”

“What about all the Thai foreigners? Don’t we count? I have heard before that Lao food is not as hot as Thai food, now I know that it is true.”

Craig thought that it would be hard for any country’s food to be hotter than Thailand’s, but he judged it prudent not to say so at that juncture in time.

After the meal, they walked up and down the Waterfront for a few hours. Lek bought a parasol to shield her skin from the sun and then they went back to the hotel for a rest.

Lek lay on the bed, watched TV, dozed and pretended to be dozing, while Craig checked his web sites, answered his emails and wrote an article on travelling to Laos for his web site on Thailand. She didn’t want to talk lest it led to more squabbling, especially since they had had such a pleasant walk along the bank of the Mekong.

It seemed to her that everything that she had done had been for nothing. Nearly twenty years before, she had gone to work in Pattaya because the bank was threatening to foreclose on the farm, due to a loan that her father had taken out on it, but now that she needed money, where was the farm to help her?

She had worked in the sex tourism industry for ten years and actually saved money for her daughter’s education, but she had squandered it playing cards. Well, not all of it, but most. Her friend Goong had left her a lot of money, but now it was all gone and with nothing to show for it.

She had relied on Craig to save her and to be fair to him, he was doing, and always had done his best, but they were still broke and now he was having to sell their pension fund ten years early. Again through no fault of his own, but it did now mean that they always would be hard up.

Nothing that she had hoped for and dreamed about was going to come about, except that Soom would go to university and sit the exams. It was something, but it was only a small fraction of what she had wanted. The books were right, it was all Maya. Hopes and dreams were all illusion. There was nothing you could do to change your future. Nothing helped except your behaviour towards others. People got what they deserved, they got their Karma. The rest was all smoke and mirrors – Maya.

What had she achieved? She wanted to cry, but it was beneath her dignity. Not many people and certainly not many things could make her cry.

Not any more, not after ten years in Pattaya.

She looked at Craig’s back. Eight years older. Eight years of slaving over a machine working on a medium that would cease to exist if there were no electricity. She couldn’t even remember how many web sites he had now. There was something sad about that. She ought to know what her husband was working so hard at, but it was all pointless too since it was not paying for their lifestyle, which was not lavish by any Western standards. She would never have the jet-set lifestyle that she had thought having a foreign husband ensured.

She had been so stupid and if it wasn’t for Soom, she would happily be dead. Her mother could take care of Soom, as she always had and if she faked an accidental death, her life assurance would pay Soom a million baht, which would see her through university and buy her a good job.

That was something else that Craig didn't know about yet. It was one of those embarrassing things that Thais only discussed with Thais. They were ashamed to admit them to foreigners. Corruption. No matter how well Soom did at university, she would never get a very good job if she didn't have the money to buy her one.

And they didn't have any money and they didn't have any reserves or a pension pot. Soom would discover bitter disillusionment early in life, when she realised that university had ensured her an office job, but not a good one. There were several glass ceilings that only money could smash and they didn't have any and never would have.

She was too old to go back to 'work' and earn good money now, but in five or ten years, she would have no chance at all of working in Pattaya. If she were going, she would have to go now or forever hold her peace. Could she rely on Craig to get her out of this awful situation? She would truly be happy to go to sleep now and not wake up again.

Craig woke Lek up at seven o'clock as it was getting dark outside.

"What's the matter? Why are you waking me up? Oh! I forgot. We're in Laos. What time is it?"

"Seven. There are a lot of people walking around outside. Shall we go out and have a look? Are you hungry?"

"Yes, OK. I'll just brush my teeth. Five minutes."

"OK, Lek. Say, don't you think we should get some Lao money, some 'Kip'? We paid in Baht this afternoon, but I think they just round everything up when you pay in Baht. Let's get five thousand Baht's worth and see how it goes. I can pay for the hotel by credit card. I don't know about the visa. What do you think?"

He could hear her gargling in the toilet. When she came into the room, he asked what she thought of the plan.

"I couldn't hear a word of what you were saying! I only heard 'blub, blub, blub, blub, blub'. You knew I was brushing my teeth, why were you talking to me? What did you say?"

He told her again.

"Yes, OK. We can get some Kip. You have very many Kip for one Baht, I think. You want to get now, tonight?"

"Sure, as soon as possible, eh? Do you have my new Lloyds ATM card? The green one they sent me last month?"

"Yes." She rummaged in her bag and handed it to him.

"And the PIN – you know the number – security."

"I don't have. You not give to me. You have."

Craig wanted to blame Lek, but he couldn't remember having given it to her. She might be right, but that made the card useless.

"Oh, shit. We cannot take money from the UK bank. Do you have your card?"

"No. I not take any gold or cards with me, I think it is not safe in Laos, because I do not know here."

"Right... so we cannot get any money from the banks and we are on holiday in Laos. Great! I'm not blaming you... I am just saying. I am thinking aloud. How much money do you have?"

"Thai money?"

"What else? Do you have any Chinese?"

Lek was already counting out some notes. "A little more than seven thousand Baht."

"OK, the visa costs nineteen hundred, I believe, so we have money to last for now, but we either have to go home early or.... This is bloody daft, eh? Who goes abroad with no money, eh? Only us! Come on, let's go out. We can change a thousand Baht and enjoy ourselves. We can deal with it all tomorrow. Are you ready? Come on then, my dear."

They turned left out of the hotel and walked the three hundred yards to the bureau de change that they had spotted earlier in the day. The exchange rate was two hundred and fifty-one Kip to the

Baht and Lek was as delighted as a child at Christmas to be given a quarter of a million Kip for her one thousand Baht note.

She felt very rich and very superior, which were sensations that she was not accustomed to.

“Look at all this money, Craig! Look!”

“Yes, Lek, it’s a thousand Baht in Kip. The numbers don’t matter, it is the value that counts.”

But she wasn’t listening again, just counting the notes over and over.

“Where do you want to eat, dear?” asked Craig.

“Oh, we can eat anywhere with this sort of money,” she replied. “How about that open-air restaurant on the pavement near the hotel? The food looked very nice and they had the big prawns that you like.”

So, they walked back towards the hotel and sat at an empty table in the restaurant area. When the waiter came, Craig ordered two beer Lao’s, ice and a glass. When that had arrived, Lek went with the waiter to select the food that she wanted cooked for them.

Lek was in her element, but Craig was feeling rather stupid for not having checked his ATM cards.

The food that Lek picked was fit for a king. They had a dozen huge prawns, a large, steamed, pink river fish, spare ribs, salad and shellfish. Just as they were struggling to get to the end of it all, Craig ordered another round of beer. The waiter looked at his watch and said:

“It is nine o’ clock. We close now. Everything in Vientiane close now, but you can have one more, if you are quick. You must finish before I clean everything away... OK?”

Craig agreed. Lek and Craig stared at each other.

“Surely, the capital city of Laos doesn’t close at nine thirty, Lek?”

“That is what he said. Look around you. Lights are going out, people are going home.”

Lek spoke to the waiter when he returned with the beers and the bill. He confirmed that the city did indeed close at nine thirty by order of the government. Lek was not all that bothered, because she normally went to bed at nine thirty anyway, but she was shocked when she saw the bill of a hundred and eight-five thousand Kip.

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They rose at seven thirty, showered and went down for breakfast. There were both Thai and ‘European’ styles, so they were both happy with that. Then they went back to the room, picked up their paperwork for the visa and went back down. Another surprise awaited them- they needed sixty thousand Kip to get to the embassy and back in a broken-down, tuk-tuk motorbike taxi, so they had to change another thousand Baht. Lek was not so impressed with the two hundred and fifty thousand Kip she collected after seeing how fast it could run through her fingers.

At the Thai embassy, Craig collected his form, filled it in, stuck his two photos on it and waited for his number to be called. When it was, he went up to the counter. The immigration official looked over his document quickly and said:

“Marriage certificate.”

Craig called for Lek, who came running, as she hated to keep officials waiting. They talked. Lek looked in her bag. Then said something and the official said:

“Next!” A man tried to take Craig’s place at the counter.

“Hey! Stop pushing! Wait your bloody turn! Excuse me, what is the problem with my application?”

“Your wife no have marriage certificate and no have house book. I cannot gib you non-immigrant ‘O’ visa. Next!”

“No, wait! So what can I do about it?”

“You can go back and get all your papers I need. Next!”

“But that will take a day or more...”

“Not my problem. I must see papers. You not have papers. What can I do? Next!”

“Isn’t there anything I can do? How about if I change my application for a two-month tourist visa?”

“No can do, I know what you want now already. I cannot do that. Next!”

“This is crazy!”

“Send your wife home get. You can go too or wait here in Vientiane, now please go. Next!”

Craig turned to glare at the man who was hovering behind him. He backed off a little.

“OK, I can accept fax of papers this one time, because I see you have long visa before. Now go. Next!”

Craig bumped the next guy in the queue as he exited the line.

“Isn’t it bloody marvellous? Why do I need to prove I’m married to get that visa. Your ID has your name ‘Williams’ on it; your passport has bloody ‘Williams’ in it. It’s not a very common name in Thailand, is it? Do they think I searched Thailand for a Thai woman called Williams so I could get a ninety-day visa instead of a sixty-day one? Jesus! That makes me so angry. Well, now we are stuck here. Tomorrow is Friday, so if we hand the forms in then, we won’t get them back until Monday. OK, back to the hotel.

“And we don’t have any money! Shit, shit, shit, shit, sodding shit!”

Back in their room, Lek phoned her mother to go into their house to get the documents and fax them to their hotel. Her mother was pretty worried about taking on such a hi-tech venture, but she assured Lek that she would get it done with someone’s help. Meanwhile, Craig Skyped his friend in Barry, Blond Billy, and asked him to lend them £300 for a week or so. Billy agreed to wire the money care of the hotel.

The money actually arrived before the paperwork from Thailand, but they eventually had everything they needed and Lek went back to the bureau de change with \$420 to exchange some of it for a million Kip. Holding a million Kip had as much effect on her as two hundred and fifty thousand had the day before.

In the afternoon, they went for a walk along the Mekong again and then back to the hotel. It was really too hot to do much and there didn’t seem much to do anyway.

In the evening, they ate at a different, but similar outdoor restaurant and the bill at nine thirty was about the same. Lek concluded that Vientiane was a lot more expensive than Bangkok and if she could have gone home the next day she would have, but there was still the visa to get.

The visa application went smoothly enough, although the transaction could not be completed in one day. It has to be applied for on one day and collected the following business day, which meant staying until Monday. They both reckoned that they would have had enough of Vientiane by then to make going back home no hardship.

Lao people were friendly enough and Vientiane was easier for Westerners than most Thai cities including most areas of Bangkok, but there was so little to do and it was so expensive.

On Monday morning, they got up just in time not to miss breakfast, ate slowly and then checked out. They booked a taxi to the bridge but asked him to wait at the embassy first. The embassy opened for the collection of visas after lunch at one-thirty, so they had plenty of time to start their long-winded return trip home.

Sitting in the bus to Phitsanulok, both were analysing their ‘holiday’. Both thought that it had gone well considering and both felt better for having spent so much time alone away from Lek’s distractions in the village. As she felt the tablets kicking in again, Lek reached out under the blanket and took Craig’s hand and he squeezed it back.

3 The Death of a Neighbour

Lek and Craig both benefited from their trip to Laos in that their relationship grew closer and they started spending some time with each other again. Craig still had to work all day, but Lek made a point of meeting him at Nong's for a couple of hours at five o'clock every day, whereas these meetings had dropped to once or twice a week over the previous year and even then Lek had spent most of the time on the phone talking to her daughter in Bangkok or her cousin in Pattaya.

Craig had actually wished she would stop coming, because he found it distracting and unsettling to have her talking loudly in a language he couldn't understand to people he couldn't see when he was out for a relaxing break between two long sessions of work. More than once he had reminded her that it was a mobile phone, so why didn't she 'walk over there' and chat to her family.

It hadn't helped their relationship any, but it had been at rock bottom anyway.

Now she was being 'nice' to him again, but he couldn't help wondering how long it would last. Craig was sure that either she was menopausal or worried about something and the 'something' could only be her daughter or money or both.

"How are your web sites doing, my dear?"

"I have a hundred and fifty-two now, but the global recession is still hitting them badly," he replied somewhat shocked at the sudden interest. This was probably the second time she had asked about his work in eight years.

"I'm thinking of scaling back to a hundred web sites or less, because I cannot write enough articles every month to keep them all looking fresh. At one five-hundred-word article a week for each site that would mean writing twenty-two articles a day or eleven thousand words a day. That is unsustainable..."

Craig looked up but he could see that he had lost her.

"If I am going to be writing... Lek, Lek! If I am going to be writing eleven thousand words a day for web sites, I might as well write a book, mightn't I?" he joked.

"Yes, dear. You could write a book on Thailand. Write some stories. Maybe they sell better than web sites."

"I was joking. I've never written a book in my life... I wouldn't know where to start. Writing five-hundred-word articles on interesting topics is easy enough, when you get into the swing of it. I can do five a day for a few days, but I can write three a day for ever. However, three a day means twenty-one a week which will only support twenty-one web sites, but twenty-one average web sites won't provide enough income to support us."

Craig loved to talk about his work, but no-one else in the village shared his interest and he never met anyone else. Or rarely, so whenever anyone showed the slightest interest, he tended to go over the top, as he was now. Lek tried to maintain a level of interest, but she had no idea what he was talking about.

"Darling, you know me. I care about people: my family and my friends, I know nothing about machines and computers. It just goes in this ear and out that one, but nothing sticks. I am stupid, I have no education. I never go high school and never go to university. My mother not have money to send me. That is why I want Soom to go. I don't want her stupid like me, I want her clever like you."

It always broke his heart to hear her talking about herself like that.

"You went back to school a few years ago, didn't you? I thought that was for high school."

"Yes, now, at the age of forty, I can prove that I am as clever as a sixteen-year-old. Great! I am still twenty-four years behind. Do you think anyone wants to give a job to a forty year old woman with the brain of a sixteen-year-old? No, I am on the scrap heap. I am even not fit enough to work in the rice fields like women half my age again. My Mum is sixty-er, er... something and she can

still work in the fields all day if she has to, but I would not last one hour and you would not last ten minutes.”

She started laughing at the thought of him planting or cutting rice by hand. She found the mental image of Craig up to his ankles in mud hilarious. “I am sorry,” she said with a hand before her mouth, “but when I think of you..., you standing in sloppy mud planting rice, complaining about your bad back and wanting a cold beer because there is no shade... Oh, my Buddha. You are very funny. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!

“You working with all the old ladies and they are working faster than you and you complaining and wanting a chair, a beer and an umbrella in the wet rice field... Oh, my Buddha.”

It was nice to see her laugh again. She touched his hand, clinked glasses and put hers to her lips. At the last moment she had to put the glass down again as another mental image caused a laughing fit.

“Oh, I must tell my Mum later! I will tell her that you want to help her in the field next time, but she must take a chair and some beer for you.” And she was laughing again. Craig didn’t mind in the slightest being the butt of her jokes – anything to see her laugh again, He wished she would do it every day.

“Oh, Lek, that money we borrowed from Billy in Barry. I had forgotten all about it. Had you? Anyway, I sent it back to him by PayPal today and thanked him very much. He pulled us out of the shit there big time, didn’t he?”

“Yes. How stupid we were. I liked Billy the first time we met him in O’Brien’s. And the other guys we used to sit with on market day when it was freezing cold outside... Look at the time, Soom will be thinking that I have forgotten her.”

At six o’clock Lek always phoned her daughter. It was their designated time; it was the time she should be arriving in her bedsit from university or ‘school’ as Craig called it. Lek would never demean such a respected establishment of higher education with the word ‘school’, although she had respect for schools in their place. She realised that Craig could be so flippant about university because he had attended one and familiarity breeds contempt, as they say, but she didn’t like him using that term when referring to Soom’s university.

Lek looked forward to phoning Soom every day, so took up her mobile and rang her.

“Hello, where are you now?” - the standard greeting - “Have you eaten yet? Good... Are you well? How did university go today? Good... Good. Me? I’m fine. Yes, he’s all right too. He’s sitting here with me now, drinking beer. Soom says ‘Hello’. He says ‘Hello to you too’. What are you going to do tonight? Yes, that’s right... Do your homework, read a bit, watch TV for a while and then early to bed

“Tomorrow is another day. You want to be fit and bright for every day in university. You have worked hard to get there, now you have to work hard to stay there. You will do that, I know you will..

“OK, yes, OK. Phone me if you need anything at any time of the night or day. We are well, don’t worry about us. Gran is fine too. She sends her love. Yes, OK, thank you. We miss you too. Bye-bye for now. Bye...

“That was Soom. She says she misses us... and you. I mean including you. She is doing well though. I miss her too. I want to go down to see her. Maybe stay with her for a few days, what do you think?”

“If you stay with her in her bedsit, then I can’t go. That’s what I think, but I don’t mind, if you want to go on your own. I can survive here alone, on my own, with absolutely no-one to talk to for two days, if that is what you want.

“I know how much you miss her. I don’t mind, really! I’m only joking with you. Look, it’s, er, Tuesday today, so why don’t you go down on Friday morning, stay the weekend while she’s off school and comeback on Monday morning?”

“University, dear. Soom finished school last year – nearly eighteen months ago. She does go in on Saturday morning for private lessons, but that is a good suggestion of yours. OK, I’ll book a seat

in the minibus and leave on Friday. Thank you for understanding, darling.” She cupped her mouth and whispered the words ‘I love you. Choop, choop.’ “You would only be bored in Bangkok anyway. It’s no good you coming, is it?”

It was true that Craig did not like big cities, but he said, “Yeah, right! I’d be bored rigid what with all those bars, girls, strip joints, A-Go-Go bars and everything. I mean... you get too much of that around here.... Enough to last a man a lifetime.”

Lek thought he was joking, but even after eight years, she was rarely completely sure. They both had such different senses of humour and Thai humour was different from the British variety anyway. Probably Asian was different to European in general. So she put on a weak smile and studied his face.

“Only joking. I’m happy for you to go and I’m happy to stay here. All alone, while you’re out going everywhere in Bangkok. Boring old Bangkok. While I live in up in Baan Suay, the only place I’ve ever lived without a pub.”

Now she knew he was joking. Maybe speaking the truth in jest, but that was his way. He didn’t mind her going and didn’t mind staying at home.

“OK, thank you my dear. I’ll let Soom have a shower and then ring her with the good news. I am really looking forward to it. Isn’t it exciting? We haven’t been separated for more than a few hours for eight years.”

He had had his little joke, so he didn’t push his luck. He just smiled back at her. He was wondering if he could get his friend Murray to come around and take him out in the car. He had never explored the local village ‘bars’ – if there were any.

Just as Lek was about to phone her daughter, Nong came running out.

“Lek! Lek! There has been an accident. Mrs. Ng just told me that a petrol tanker has knocked two local ladies off their motorcycle in the lane. One is dead and the other has less than a ten percent chance of pulling through. Who is it?”

“Oh, how awful! But how would I know? I’ve been sitting here for the last hour.” She told Craig about the accident.”

“But no-one knows who they are?”

“I think some people know, but we don’t know,” she replied, wondering whom she could phone to find out who the victims were.

Nong spoke up after making a phone call. It never took her long to know the local gossip, it was why she was always busy, people called in for groceries and to find out what was going on. In the absence of a local paper or radio station, Nong was the repository of all local knowledge.

“One was that young Mrs. Ma who lives... lived just round the corner. The one with two young children and another on the way. She’s the one that died outright and the other one was your next-door neighbour, Joy. They’d been out shopping apparently and were coming back through the lane when BANG! Head on into a petrol tanker making deliveries around the villages.

“He was actually due here, but was redirected down the lane by road-workers. The driver is beside himself with grief. The doctor had to sedate him. Joy is in hospital, but she was dragged a little way by the truck so she’s in a very bad way. They think she’ll die. Just a ten percent chance of pulling through.”

Craig couldn’t follow much of the conversation, but he could see other women gathering at the shop to discuss it. When Lek started explaining to Craig, Nong darted off, anxious to tell the others what she knew and maybe learn a few more details.

When Lek got up to join the other women, Craig slipped into the shop and helped himself to another Chang. He knew that there would be no decent service for at least an hour and he didn’t mind helping out. Eagle-eyed Nong spotted him in her peripheral vision and nodded him her consent.

Craig was roused from his daydreams, by a collective sharp intake of breath, but he could guess what had happened.

When she had all the information there was to be had, Lek rejoined Craig. “Joy just died too. Isn’t that just awful? Ma had two young children and was just pregnant with a third and Joy, well, she is or was a grandmother, but only fifty years old and looking after her daughter’s baby... and her husband’s not well. I know you don’t like him much, but you used to get on well with Joy, didn’t you?”

“Yes..., we never actually spoke because we couldn’t, but when she saw me sitting here she always used to shout ‘go home’. I used to like to think that she meant ‘go home to your wife’ and not ‘go back to Britain’. She probably didn’t know any other words in English. Yes, I liked her... she used to ask me to dance at parties, remember?”

“Yes, I liked her too. You realise what this means, eh? I won’t be going to Bangkok this weekend. Not if they have the normal seven-day ceremony. Still, Bangkok will still be there next week, so no rush.

“Perhaps, Soom ought to come back to pay her respects. She has known Joy all her life. I must phone her now. Are you all right for ten minutes?” She inspected his bottle, “OK, I’ll get you a fresh one first. I think I’ll have one too. It’s no good waiting for Nong, I’ll get them myself.”

As soon as Lek had sat down, she was back on the phone to Soom.

“Soom can’t come back until Friday. She finishes early on Fridays and can cancel her..., what name did you say again? Her ‘tutorial’ on Saturday morning, then, if she goes back on Sunday afternoon, she won’t miss any classes, so that’s all right, isn’t it? Maybe I could go back with her. Couldn’t I?”

“Well, obviously you could, but you won’t see much of her during the week and if you only get to see her every few months, why use up your visit so soon after she has come home? Why not leave it a month and then go down? That way you see her twice in two months. Sounds better to me.”

”Yes, maybe you are right. We’ll see what happens.”

“Well, when Soom goes back, Joy’s funeral will not yet be over, so that is another reason to put it off for a while. Look, I’m not trying to stop you going... I know that it is going to happen one day, but I want you to get the maximum effect from your visits. That is all. Think about it.”

There was no longer a bristle of gossip among the twenty or so women gathered at the shop, they had become hushed. Talking in whispers out of respect for the double fatality. Two women, one in her twenties and one just turned fifty dead, killed not a hundred metres from the safety of their homes by a truck that shouldn’t have been there, that had never travelled that route before. Two husbands and three children left behind and one baby dead with its mother, still unborn.

People talked in hushed voices about who or what had sent the petrol tanker to kill these women and wreck the peace of their families for months, years and decades to come. People talked of never going down the lane at night again lest they should come across the ghosts of Joy and Ma walking back and fore along that isolated lane doomed forever to keep trying to get home to their children.

When they left Nong’s at seven o’clock it was already beginning to get dark. Lek clung to Craig’s arm, petrified that she would meet Joy looking for someone to take care of her family in her absence. When they entered their garden, they could see the family gathering next door.

One group of men were putting out rows of chairs, erecting awnings and blocking the lane to cars, while another group were setting up the P.A. that would relay the monks’ ceremony to those sitting outside and play the funeral music.

They had already brought Joy back from the hospital and half a dozen older women were preparing her body to lie in the refrigerated casket, which would be its final resting place for its last seven days on Earth.

“I want to go to Bangkok now, Craig. I am scared. What can I say to Joy, if I see her with her head smashed in and she asks me to help take care of her family?”

“She never hurt you when she was alive, did she? So why do you think she is going to try now?”

“If you meet her, just say ‘Hello’ and if she asks you to take care of her family, tell you can’t because you’re going on holiday to Bangkok soon. I’m sure she’ll understand. She’s not stupid and has family nearby anyway. Advise her to ask them. Tell her I’m a handful.”

“You are never serious. This is serious...”

“Hold on a minute. OK, I like to joke, I accept that, but I am being serious about Joy. If she asks you, just tell her that you are too busy to do a good job. Tell her to ask someone else. What’s wrong with that? That is what you would have said if she had asked you yesterday when she was alive, so why not say it now? Nothing has changed except she hasn’t got a body any more.”

“Oh, don’t say that. Oh, my Buddha. I won’t sleep for a week until she’s gone. I know it. Oh, my Buddha...”

“Look at it this way. With all the worry, sleepless nights and helping out next door, you will probably loose those extra pounds you have been putting on, won’t you?”

“Oh, thank you very much. I’m scared and depressed and you call me fat!”

“Joke, my dear. Just a joke.”

She tried to smile.

“But, it might work. Every cloud has a silver lining, so they say,” he added as he nipped into his office.

Lek was truly worried about Joy’s ghost, or ‘Pi’ in Thai. She had been to hundreds of funerals before but never because of such a violent, unexpected death involving a close neighbour and friend. She went next door to pay her final respects before the monks arrived at about seven thirty.

After the four monks had performed their duties for the first day, which took about thirty minutes, a rushed meal was passed around those who remained behind - about fifty people. It was a very quiet affair compared to average funerals – the whole village was in deep shock. Nobody liked to voice their thoughts about the evil spirit that had caused the petrol tanker to be in the lane and to kill, on its one and only rerouting down there, two women who had made that journey hundreds of times safely before.

Attendees at the funeral wanted to get home early in case there was an evil spirit lurking in the shadows.

When Lek went home at nine o’clock, she had a friend walk her up the drive to her front door even though it was only fifteen yards, the lights were on and Craig was working in his office. He had never seen her that affected by a death – not even that of one of her best friend, Goong, six years before. Goong had died at an even younger age than Joy, but she had been ill for a while, accepted her Fate – even welcomed it - and had had time to sort out her affairs.

She hovered about in Craig’s office, talking incessantly about one thing and another, but mostly about things that she would not normally concern him with. Then it dawned on Craig that Lek was frightened to go to bed alone in the dark. Actually, it was much worse than that, she was even too frightened to shower alone, so Craig did the right thing: he shut his computer down and suggested an early night. Lek leaped at the chance and held on to him tightly all night.

Craig got to sleep with difficulty, as had been the case since he was an infant, but Lek didn’t remember sleeping at all, which was most unlike her. She was waiting for her friend and neighbour to come walking through the wall looking as if she had been dragged through a hedge backwards.

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Whatever state of consciousness they were both in, they were immediately aware when the lorry-load of huge speakers roared into life at five a.m. the next day. The speakers were less than twenty yards away, but their purpose was to call any women in the whole village who wanted to help prepare food for the evening’s ceremony. This was a cathartic event for people who were grieving. Instead of sitting at home alone while the men were in the fields working, they could sit together, chop, peel and prepare vegetables and meat and generally keep each other company.

Lek jumped out of bed and prepared to join in. There was no way Craig could sleep again, so he just started work. He understood that this had to be done and it didn't bother him in the slightest. Lek was showered, dressed and out of the house in fifteen minutes, which Craig did resent a little, wanting to ask whether she had seen Joy's Pi in the night.

Later he was glad that he hadn't had the opportunity, deciding that it would probably have caused a problem. Sometimes, he just didn't know when it was inappropriate to make a joke.

The music was turned down a lot when they had most of the helpers that they were expecting, about thirty minutes later, which made it feel less like having his head in a kettle drum at a Jamaican beach party. Craig just got on with the daily routine of checking and answering his email and writing relevant articles for his web sites, but when he got up to put the hot water on to make his coffee, he remembered what Lek had said the evening before about writing a book on or set in Thailand.

He knew that Lek had no idea of his writing skills- how could she? She had never read any of his work because she couldn't read English and none of her friends could have told her either. It was an intriguing idea and one that he may never have come up with on his own. At least, he hadn't so far in his fifty-eight years. He took his coffee back to his desk and got back into his routine.

Another routine was established too for the duration of the funeral ceremony of seven days. Lek brought him some lunch from the funeral at about two o'clock and met him in Nong's at five. He would then have to escort her to the house next door for fear of Joy's Pi, he would go back to work and she would stay there until about nine, when someone would walk her home. Craig could follow all the events from his office and sometimes he went to sit on the patio to concentrate on the monks chanting at about seven thirty.

On the fifth day, Joy's body was cremated at the usual time of three o'clock. Her friend had been cremated the day before. Craig could hear gunfire and fireworks coming from the Wat and the final acts of the ceremony were completed on the seventh day of her death.

Soom was back for the actual cremation which pleased her mother and Joy's family. Death is taken very seriously in a Thai village despite the fact that they don't fear it as Buddhists. Lek saw it as part of Soom's training, that she should learn and observe the traditions that made sense to her and to Lek. Anything that could improve one's Karma made ultimate sense. She wanted her daughter to have the best chance in life by using every tool at her disposal: physical, metaphysical and spiritual.

Normally, Lek would have played cards every night after a funeral, but she did not at this one. Whether that was because she was scared of ghosts and wanted to be home or whether she was trying to be nice, Craig never knew. In fact it was for both reasons in equal measure. She was not afraid of death, but she had been shocked by how sudden it could come and she wanted to be around to see her grandchildren.

The death of those two women had had a profound effect on her.

And so had the way Craig had talked about ghosts

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