

Thai Lottery...
and Other Stories from
Pattaya, Thailand

by Matt Carrell

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This book is a work of fiction. All characters portrayed herein are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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Thai Lottery

Starfish, ping-pong balls and stilettos

Felix Hoffman was found in the doorway of a small apartment block close to where the *soi*... a narrow side street, joined Pattaya's Second Road. Badly bruised, his sunburnt, fleshy torso was riddled with small puncture wounds and a gentle drizzle washed a bloody pool around his feet. As bad as they appeared, the injuries were not life threatening; his assailants were simply delivering a warning. The Royal Thai Police promptly visited the bar he named to follow up his accusations that it all started with him being robbed.

By morning the incident was the hottest topic on the web forum at Pattaya-Dream.com and questions were being asked as to whether another poor unsuspecting tourist had fallen foul of a vicious Thai gang. Richard Farmer, screen-name Loveathaismile, was thrilled to have the inside track.

“I can’t tell the whole story - don’t want to get anyone into trouble but he had it coming. He hurt a girl and then tried to cheat the bar where she works. He won’t do that again.”

His fellow members wanted details but Richard declined, he was keeping the connection to the Sanook Bar to himself.

Hoffman arrived at Sanook around ten p.m. the night before. His imitation Lacoste shirt, knee length cargo shorts and cheap sandals, the uniform of the middle-aged sex tourist. Richard guessed he was staying at one of the cut-price hotels, where laundry service generally involved a bucket of cold water and a large rock. That, or

the man's prodigious girth, might explain the broken buttons on his shirt.

Hoffman took no more than a sip of his draft Chang before he zeroed in on Noi, Sanook's latest arrival from Nong Khai, a town in the poor north east of the country. Her shoulder length black hair framed an elfin face and the wide-eyed look of someone who couldn't believe what she witnessed every night. Noi was happy enough to accept a couple of drinks as the German dispatched three more beers with practiced ease. Hoffman then paid her barfine, just five hundred baht... less than ten pounds... compensation to the proprietor for loss of Noi's services for the rest of the evening. In return for a further two thousand, Noi agreed to spend the night with him.

It was nearly midnight when Hoffman's return drew the attention of the entire bar. Waving a near empty bottle of Sangsom Thai whisky, he could barely stand. He made straight for Tak, the *mamasan*. Fifty-two years old, Tak started work in the bars of Pattaya shortly after her nineteenth birthday, first as a waitress; then as a very popular go-go dancer. Her job was to manage the girls and encourage the men to spend as much money as possible. She also dealt with customer complaints.

"She's a starfish and a goddam thief. I want my money back," Hoffman slurred the words, then reached out to steady himself against the wall. "And the bitch stole my phone."

He raised an unsteady hand, palm upwards.

"Twenty-five hundred baht now," he said, "or I call the tourist police."

He clearly knew a bit about the local scene. Starfish is tourist slang for a girl who's passive during sex

and mentioning the tourist police is usually a good tactic. They divide their time almost equally between keeping tourists in line and protecting the drunk and the gullible from unscrupulous locals.

Hoffman reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone, ready to follow through on his threat. He stared at it in silence for a moment... confused.

"Oh... well... I still want my twenty-five hundred!"

Tak had almost calmed him, when a girl Richard recognised as Dow beckoned her to the corner of the bar. A few words were exchanged and the women walked back to the German. Tak smiled sweetly.

"You fuck off now or we stick that whisky bottle up your ass," Tak said.

Dow gave Hoffman a shove and he fell to the floor in a flurry of arms and legs. His response was in German and Richard could only imagine what he was saying, but the spirit had left him. There were six or seven girls standing close by and he was openly cowed. Hoffman staggered from the bar still cursing and limped back up the *soi* to the main road.

Richard looked around. The girls had vanished amid Lady Gaga singing, at an almost deafening volume, of love, revenge and a *Bad Romance*. Richard smiled at Tak and raised his empty beer bottle. She was at his side in an instant with a fresh one.

"So what happened?" he asked.

"Bad man," she said. "Dow get SMS from Noi. He pay bar for her but not go hotel. He try *boom-boom* her on street."

Thais are masters of euphemism and *boom-boom* is a more elegant term for sex than the Anglo-Saxon

equivalents. The German had dragged Noi into a doorway a few hundred yards from the bar. He'd paid twenty-five hundred baht and was determined to get his money's worth. Had he not been drunk there'd have been nothing she could do, but he stumbled and fell and she ran. Bruised and terrified she bolted for the main street and then the sanctuary of home.

"Why he want to hurt lady?" Tak said. "German man no good. Not like you Richard... you have *jai dee*."

The smile that followed was a prompt and Richard responded accordingly. After all, she'd paid him the highest compliment, he had *jai dee*... good heart.

"Drink for you?" he asked.

"Tequila," she replied, still smiling.

Hoffman was no newcomer to Pattaya but that night he made a huge mistake. Women run the bars even if there are men somewhere in the background. Only the big main street night clubs and go-gos have security staff and the unsuspecting *farang*, or westerner, might be under the mistaken impression that liberties can be taken. Maybe Hoffman thought he'd been robbed or not got his money's worth. Maybe he simply decided a woman who could be bought so cheaply wasn't worthy of respect. The bar had emptied because the girls followed him up the street carrying their stiletto heels in their hands. The shoes were an extremely effective tool for teaching a lesson to a drunken *farang*. The girls were back in less than ten minutes, reshod and smiling at the foreign men who were looking for beer, a game of pool and maybe a companion for an hour, or until morning.

The police investigation made no progress until after Hoffman returned to Cologne, then was dropped at

the direction of Colonel Pracha Busarapon, head of the local force. As a significant investor in the Sanook Bar, he could see no reason to make life difficult for Tak and the girls. They had a reputation to preserve. *Sanook* is, after all, the Thai word for fun.

Go-go bar girls supplement a modest salary with tips and commission from “lady-drinks” bought for them by customers. They also hurl themselves into a maelstrom of screaming female flesh to catch ping-pong balls thrown by the bar’s patrons. The ladies of the Sanook go-go bar were as loud, enthusiastic and occasionally vicious, in pursuit of the tiny plastic spheres as in any bar in Thailand. They earned twenty baht for every ball they caught. Richard would soon decide who’d accompany him to his hotel and wanted to make a good impression on the girls. He paid a thousand baht for fifty balls and as the dancers and serving staff gathered in an eager semi-circle around him, he started to throw.

Tak seemed to appear from nowhere.

“Lady for you tonight, maybe two ladies better?” she asked with a smile.

Dow, the girl who broke the news about the assault on Noi was at her side as if to illustrate the offer. Richard was sure that was blood on the heels of her shoes but decided not to ask any questions.

“Dow, you very beautiful, you like barfine?”

The girl smiled, nodded and mimed pulling her dress off over her head. She was off to get changed.

Like many visitors to Thailand, Richard adopted “Th’English” as the most effective form of communication. He’d got the inside track from an American he’d met on his first trip. Clay was from

California and rumour had it he'd dodged the last troop transport out of Saigon back in the Seventies and had been in south-east Asia ever since.

"Some *farang* try to learn at least a few words of Thai but most should stop after three phrases," Clay told him.

"So what are the three?"

"It's always handy to know how to say hello and thank you... *sawasdee kap, kop korn kap*, after that, stick with *mai kao jai*. It means, 'I don't understand'."

"Seriously?" Richard was hoping for a deeper insight.

Clay smiled. "I understand what they're saying, I can even talk back to them, but if I live to be a thousand years old, I'll never understand what they're thinking. You want to understand the Thai psyche? You gotta to be born here my friend, have it driven into you from when you're this high," he waved a hand around knee height. "Otherwise you ain't got a chance."

Richard was relieved, he'd had enough of Parisians oozing contempt at his efforts to order a coffee and a croissant in the French capital, he wasn't up for similar treatment in Thailand. He decided to become fluent in the bizarre hybrid language that borrows from both English and Thai.

Thai has no equivalent of 'a,' 'the' and 'some,' so a competent Th'English speaker would never use any of those words. Similarly, like Th'English, it's spoken only in the present tense, with "time words" like tomorrow and yesterday, to indicate when something takes place. When a *farang* chats to a Thai girl in Th'English, there's no past or future... an appropriate metaphor for the relationships that ensue.

Richard was still learning about Thailand and its women; he'd given up trying to understand those of his homeland years before.

Why were they all so complicated?

Why couldn't women just say what they wanted and what they meant?

The Pattaya-Dream forum was an invaluable tool for discovering the pitfalls of a bewitching but often baffling country. For Richard, it was like a mild form of methadone for a seriously addicted man. Membership was a representative cross-section of Pattaya's hordes of male visitors. There were seasoned regulars like him, who headed to Pattaya at every opportunity, and the long-term residents affectionately known as "sex-pats," who'd moved to Thailand for a cheap and dissolute lifestyle. Then there were the "newbies," wide-eyed whatever their age and excited at the availability of cheap food, drink, accommodation and an array of bewitching women who were generally eager to please. At home a girl who looked like that wouldn't give them a second glance. Paradise for men disillusioned with life and love or those looking to party hard and have their fill of drink, drugs and sex on tap. The bars offer an inexhaustible supply of Dows and Nois. For that matter; there are plenty of Tuks, Ooys, PuyS and Leks too. If you talk to enough Thai women you may even come across a Wow or a Yo-Yo. These are nicknames or *chuu len* in Thai, meaning play-name. Legend has it that parents avoid using the child's real name as to do so may attract evil spirits. The practical advantage is that it speeds the acquaintance process. Picture this scene in a Pattaya bar:

Girl: "Hello sexy man, what your name?"

Man: “Hello sexy lady; my name George, what’s yours?”

Girl: “My name Tuk,”

Man: “That’s your nickname; what’s your real name?”

Girl: “Busarakham Leopharawattana,”

Man: “OK Tuk, nice to meet you.”

There's no point wasting time on introductions as many of the ensuing encounters may last no more than an hour. But many Thai girls are hoping to find someone to take care of them on a long-term basis. The chances of getting the much sought after GFE or girlfriend experience is much higher than with professional ladies in the West. Although Chewbacca, an advanced member of Pattaya-Dream told fellow members that if his last girlfriend was the yardstick, a GFE was the last thing he was looking for.

For some, Thailand is like spring break for American college students or an Ibiza rave for young Brits... a few years of drunken excess and a rite of passage. For others it becomes a lifelong obsession... maybe marriage to a local girl or years living off a meagre foreign pension in a cheap apartment, negotiating sexual favours in the massage shops, on the beach, or in the bars that flourish throughout the town.

On his first trip Richard expected to be able to identify a typical punter. One internet post by a Bangkok based schoolteacher postulates that most are “foul-mannered, overweight, middle-aged, married, balding alcoholics,” who’d “not even be eligible for a date in their own countries.” Even ardent feminists who rail against the Thai sex industry often comment on the appearance of the men they perceive to be its most avid participants. It's as

though that's what's really bothering them rather than any perceived exploitation of the women who're involved.

In reality the bars are full of men of every age, race, weight and social class. Handsome, ugly, fit, fat, bald, athletic, young, old and disabled are all well represented and welcomed with what appears to be almost equal enthusiasm.

Richard was a police sketch artist's nightmare.

"Any distinctive features?" they'd ask.

"Not really."

Average height and weight, he still had all his hair and was greying gently in a way he hoped looked distinguished. Dark framed Gucci glasses were intended to make him look thoughtful, intelligent and perhaps slightly trendy. He wasn't the sort of man who stood out in a crowd. Appalled at the number of middle-aged men who turned up in the bars wearing shorts and flip flops, Richard favoured button-down collars, chinos and Timberland deck shoes. It took two trips before he could bring himself to switch to short sleeve shirts and lighter, locally bought trousers to combat the heat. He'd picked up a pair of shorts at the local market, but they were still in the plastic wrapper. One day... maybe. In a bygone age he'd have been described as dapper.

Richard loved watching the customers and trying to decide how they came to be sitting on that bar stool and where their story might end. After all, his was taking shape very nicely. Thailand was working out better than he ever expected and the problems of day-to-day life back in England felt as though they were a million miles away.

The road to addiction starts with a single step

Richard first visited Thailand three years earlier. He'd been to Australia on business and the return flight made a stopover in Bangkok. The opportunity was too good to be missed and he stayed for three nights. Temples, markets and the all but mandatory dragon boat trip on the Chao Praya river occupied his first day. Following the instructions in his guidebook, he sought to avoid inhaling the spray from the river. It's a very popular tourist attraction, an essential trade route and possibly the largest open sewer in the world. On his first night, acting on a hot tip from a taxi driver, Richard ventured past the curtains of the Blue Lagoon go-go bar in Bangkok's legendary Soi Patpong.

Patpong is a must see destination for tourists. Its name is synonymous with Thailand's infamous sex industry. By day it's an unassuming and rather grubby alleyway that links Silom and Surawong Roads, major arteries in the centre of the capital. In the light of day, Patpong looks devoid of all human life... a scene from one of those 'end of humanity' disaster movies. Doors and windows are locked and shuttered and there's no clue as to the transformation that's about to take place. In late afternoon an army of young athletic men arrive to build a metal frame stretching the full length of the *soi*, to house the stalls that are the focal point for the evening's trading activities. By nightfall the alley is crammed with pitches selling watches, shirts, belts, nick-nacks and a frightening array of knives, swords and imitation armaments. The windows and doors are thrown open and the street is heaving with Thais exhorting tourists to buy from the stalls or visit one of the many bars on either side of the street. In the parallel Patpong II, there are many more bars

including a go-go which proudly advertises that it's staffed with "nearly a hundred beautiful girls and a few ugly ones."

Amongst the hawkers that plied their trade on Patpong's streets were several older ladies carrying thin, hinged wooden boxes in which rows of pre-printed lottery tickets were neatly laid out. A long-standing fan of the UK lottery, Richard logged on to the website every week and paid a few pounds for the chance to win a fortune. He rationalised the habit on the basis that some of the proceeds go to charity, unwilling to admit to the rush of excitement when he received the "News about your ticket" e-mail. A moment of pure fantasy ensued as he thought how he might spend a multi-million pound jackpot, followed in seconds with dejection as he saw confirmation that his Plus 5 ticket had come in for the princely sum of two pounds and fifty pence.

He was fascinated to see the Thai equivalent. Richard always went for family birthdays and his own "lucky" numbers when he bought his UK tickets on-line. Not an option in the Thai Lottery, you just get to choose from the box. The internet is used only to publish the results and it all feels more like a church raffle than the opportunity to win a life-changing sum of money.

The main thing that struck him was the absence of any kind of sales pitch. The ladies smiled and pushed the box half-heartedly in his direction, they hoped he might buy but would have been astounded had he done so. Nonetheless nearly a million tickets are sold every week and the fortnightly draw is televised live. A jackpot of ten million baht, around two hundred thousand pounds, is paid to anyone who can match the six-digit sequence. If there's no winner, it rolls over just like in the European

equivalents. Richard didn't know how the lottery worked, how he'd find out if he'd won or if he was even eligible to enter. He smiled, shook his head and resumed his exploration of Patpong.

On that first trip, Richard made a lengthy tour of the stalls before arriving at Blue Lagoon. The entire experience assaulted his senses. The night market is a blaze of neon and the street is awash with sweating tourists and eager Thai traders. The bars provide air-conditioned sanctuary from the heat, the humidity and the smell of sweaty tourists, cooking and poor sanitation. Richard started to wonder if the Thai fondness for street food was in part, a response to the less attractive aromas that pervade much of the city.

The bar music was also alien to him, even though it was all of western origin. Suddenly, hit with a bass beat that battered his eardrums and then each of his internal organs in turn, he felt as though the throbbing rhythm came from his own heart. To his amazement, he liked it. Even after his first couple of trips to Thailand he had no idea Lady Gaga and the *Fame Monster* album provided the key soundtrack for most of the bars. He'd seen her picture in the newspapers and decided she was just another freak created by an unscrupulous music industry. Never knowingly hearing her songs, Richard was sure she hid a lack of talent behind outrageous costumes and lewd choreography. Richard avoided the bars that stuck to what he discovered was called trance music. Fellow members of Pattaya-Dream informed him an ecstasy tablet was required to appreciate it fully.

Richard had never seen so many ravishingly beautiful women in his entire life. He visited lap-dancing bars in England occasionally... client entertaining was

such a bore, but this was more primal. Nudity is forbidden in the ground floor bars but that detracted little from the sense of raw carnality. The girls were sheer perfection. Hawkers thrust laminated cards under his nose, promising explicit shows at the top of the stairs but Richard was well prepared. Pattaya-Dream was adamant, “most Thai bars are reasonably honest, but if there’s one place you might be ripped off, it’s upstairs in Patpong.”

Richard continued on his odyssey until two a.m. when the stalls closed and the army of young men returned to dismantle the metal frame. Within the hour, Patpong was returned to a scene of post-apocalyptic desolation.

On the following nights he visited Bangkok’s other main “entertainment venues.” Local authorities in Nana Plaza and Soi Cowboy are more relaxed than in Patpong and there are plenty of bars where nude dancing is the norm.

Nana is a three-storey horseshoe of go-gos surrounding a central courtyard that hosts more open-air bars. It’s said the higher one climbs the raunchier the bar, although some on the ground floor work hard to dispel the rumour. There’s a convenient escalator on the right hand side for those who need encouragement, or indeed those who’ve been to the third floor before and are in a hurry to return. Richard completed his reconnaissance of the top floors and returned via the staircase behind the escalator. A large group of Thais was engrossed in a very serious card game out of sight of the main Plaza. They looked up, only to check he wasn’t a policeman. Apart from a flutter on the government lottery or at monthly horse races at the Royal Turf or Royal Bangkok Sports Clubs; gambling is

illegal, which probably explains why it's so incredibly popular in Thailand. Richard could suddenly see the thread that linked the gamblers, the go-go dancers and the hundreds of tourists in Nana that night. They were all playing a form of lottery, hoping their personal ticket would come up, their luck would change and their life would suddenly become the one they wanted. It might happen for a few, most would have to wait for another day but many would discover their luck had run out completely. He shivered at the thought as he made his way back to the street to find a taxi to take him to Soi Cowboy. The task sounds simple but many never make it past the rows of freelance ladies and ladyboys defending the exit. Men who've resisted the temptations of the bars of Nana Plaza will succumb to a pretty face offering to, "go with you mister." Those who survive this hurdle will cross the road to hail a cab only to fall into the hands of a second wave of ardent Thais offering them an hour to remember for no more than a thousand baht.

The *tuk-tuk* drivers were out in force. *Samlors*, more commonly known as *tuk-tuks*, are essentially motorcycles with a metal frame housing a wooden bench under a roof high enough to comfortably accommodate two passengers as long as neither is more than five and a half feet tall. Tourists inexplicably take their lives into their hands for a fee that's generally a multiple of the going rate for an air-conditioned taxi. Richard tried one once and wasn't going to make the same mistake again.

After countless explanations that he didn't need a companion, Richard crossed Sukhumvit Road and turned right into another array of traders. Passable copies of shirts, belts, trousers and shorts from the most exclusive brand names in the world were available for a few pounds

each. As he reached the final stall it was time to negotiate another line of eager young women offering the earth for under a thousand baht. Then he passed two uniformed members of the Royal Thai Police who were showing absolutely no interest whatsoever in the opportunity to apprehend more law-breakers in the space of fifty yards than most British policemen probably achieve in a long career.

Richard finally closed the door on his taxi for the short journey to Asok and Soi Cowboy. The area is named after an American airman who opened one of its first bars. Evidently he often wore a Stetson. The *soi* is little more than a hundred metres long and has dozens of go-go bars. In just two nights he'd witnessed thousands of young women seeking to sell sex to visiting foreigners, yet Richard heard the sex industry aimed at locals is even bigger. Brothels servicing Thai customers don't operate in the glare of the world media or under the limited legal constraints to which the go-go bars of Nana and Soi Cowboy must adhere. For the girls, there's a bigger disadvantage, the pay is poor and there's no chance of meeting a *farang* who can pay for a new life away from the bars.

Soi Cowboy's vast swathes of neon lighting make it seem like daylight whatever the hour and there are scores of girls baying at passers by to choose their bar. Pattaya-Dream featured a lengthy piece on a popular bar roughly in the centre of the strip. Richard was tempted. It featured a school theme and the legendary "naughty boy corner." Customers could see the *farang* from the waist up, the corner of the bar protected his modesty. In front of him was the bobbing head of his new Thai acquaintance.

It sounded a little too public for Richard's tastes so he settled for another go-go featuring a cabaret involving four dancers, a Thai man and a paintbrush. It's hard to imagine how that could be tasteful without seeing the act. The girls dance slowly and sensuously, whilst the man uses fluorescent paint to create flowers, birds or animals on their naked bodies. Lights are dimmed and the stage becomes a scene of brightly coloured wildlife, moving slowly in the wind. It's surprisingly disappointing when the regular troupe of naked girls return to the stage. Richard sipped his beer and watched them dance. He was entranced.

Girls approached him in the hope of securing a drink or a barfine but he was a cautious man. Certain he'd be ripped off or dragged into an alleyway and murdered, he politely declined. There must be a catch, he thought, having just spoken with one of the most beautiful women he'd ever seen. She offered to spend the night with him for about forty pounds. Richard decided he'd enjoy the spectacle and not take the risk. The next morning he'd board a flight to London regretting he wouldn't be travelling to Australia again. His next trip was months away, to Hong Kong, but when he discovered he could re-route his return journey through Bangkok and no-one in his office would be aware, it was the start of a passion that would become all-consuming.

Handsome man buy ticket for lady?

Sarai Charoenramasee put the finishing touches to her make-up. Late for work, she still paused to stare at her reflection in the mirror. It's not part of the Thai psyche to think "if only" or to mull over past mistakes but she couldn't help it. More than eighteen months had passed

since she'd worked at the petrol station. A daily grind, explaining to passing lorry drivers she wasn't interested in seeing the inside of their trucks; regardless of whether there was a cash incentive involved. Back then, she'd look around the small cabin where customers came to pay for petrol, oil and LPG and feel physically sick. Not only was she a million miles from the life she sought, she worked in a hell-hole where she'd never meet anyone who might offer her a way out. Sarai was propositioned repeatedly by customers, who wanted sex for a few baht or for free. She earned in a month what a past lover routinely spent on dinner for two.

When Prem Boonamee came in to pay to fill up his Toyota Sport, she wasn't looking at the man of her dreams, just the best prospect she'd seen for a long time. He asked her to dinner on his third visit and she didn't play hard to get.

Prem was a decent enough boyfriend for the time being. He bought her gifts, took her out to eat and drove a reasonably nice car. Her friends were quite impressed, so all in all it qualified as a step forward. He also offered her a way of making some extra money on the side. Prem worked as a collection agent for an unauthorised lottery that ran alongside the one run by the government. Thousands of these schemes operate across Thailand and the odds make them far more popular than the state sponsored version. The winning numbers are taken from the official draw that's televised twice monthly. On a hundred baht bet, Prem's employers paid fifty thousand to those who match the last three of the six numbers drawn in the official lottery, five thousand on bets aiming to match the last two. Western casinos typically offer double the odds available on the parallel lottery so it's easy to

believe the allegation that the schemes finance the lifestyles of some of Thailand's wealthiest people. It's been claimed for every ticket bought for the official lottery, there are nine purchases on the illegal *Huay Tai Din*. The fortnightly draw attracts a huge following but very few of the people praying for the right number to come up actually have a ticket for the government scheme.

All Sarai had to do was sell the tickets and she got to keep ten per cent of the proceeds. If there was a winning ticket she called Prem who'd bring the cash the following day. Money for old rope.

Sarai sold the tickets at the petrol station and also on the streets of Khorat. She had a knack for pulling in the customers and instinctively picked out the best target for a sale. There were fewer foreigners in Khorat than in the major tourist areas like Bangkok, Pattaya or Phuket, so she targeted *farang* with Thai girlfriends.

“Handsome man buy ticket for lady?”

The man would be flattered, the girl excited. The *farang* quickly figured out if the ticket did come in, he wouldn't have to dig so deep into his savings or pension every month to cover the cash he'd promised his girlfriend. Everyone was happy and Sarai made another sale.

The lorry and bus drivers, her best customers at the petrol station, were happy to part with one or two hundred baht every time they filled up. Her skirts got shorter, her tops got lower and tighter, she was a one women marketing phenomenon. Occasionally a customer wagered five hundred or a thousand baht at a time and she pocketed serious commission. Life was looking up.

January 2009 was a landmark for Sarai. In the first half of the month she sold more lottery tickets than ever before with several big single ticket sales. Her commission for the month was already way ahead of the salary she received from the petrol station. The draw was made on January 16, she didn't give it a moment's thought when the number 743212 was announced live on TV. The following day there were three visitors to the petrol station, each with winning tickets claiming a combined pay-out of one point four million baht. Members of the 212 Motorcycle Club, they bet on the same last three digits on every draw and Sarai was as elated as they were. Their leader was Rangsang Charo-Tak, he lived in Nong Khai and used Route 212, the road to Ubon Ratchathani, to get to work every day for ten years. The number had finally come up for him. He won five hundred thousand baht on one ticket alone and promised her a ten thousand baht bonus when the money was paid. Sarai left messages for Prem when the first two winning tickets were presented. She called him again. This time it didn't ring but returned the monotonous single note of a disconnected number.

Sarai arrived at the petrol station the following day with a feeling of dread. Charo-Tak was waiting for her and within thirty minutes the small cabin was host to all of the winners from the draw.

"I'm sorry but I can't get in contact with Mr Boonamee. I'm sure he'll return my call very soon though. Perhaps he's ill or has been called away." She was simply inventing the scenarios she hoped might explain Prem's failure to respond.

“I know you understand it’s Prem who owes you the money. I only sell the tickets but I’ll do everything I can to find him and make sure you all get paid.”

Charo-Tak smiled as he walked towards her slowly and calmly, he seemed to understand the problem. His hand gripped her throat and he pushed her backwards onto the desk. As her skirt rode up he positioned himself between her legs and rocked back and forth suggestively.

“We bought the tickets from you, so you will pay or regret it for the rest of your life... however short that might be.”

He let go and she slid, limp with fear, from the desk to the floor. The other gamblers leered at her and she was in no doubt what they’d do to her if she didn’t pay. When they finished, they’d probably kill her.

Could the spirits of the dead be stealing my petrol?

There was only one way out. Sarai had worked at the petrol station for two years and was a trusted employee. She managed the till, filled in the deposit slips and took the cash to the bank. Sarai was also responsible for preparing the receipts for each sale. The white copy went to the customer, the blue copy went to the accounting department. The sales for the day were checked to make sure they added up to the money she paid into the bank account. The deception was simple; she took a receipt book from the back of the cupboard and used that for every third sale. The white copy still went to the customer but the blue copy went into her bag and then into the bin in her mother’s kitchen. The accounting department never received a copy and Sarai took the cash, so each day the reported sales still matched the money paid into the bank. The proceeds from every third sale

went to repay the lottery winners. Had she kept the receipts they'd have totalled one and a half million baht, enough to pay off the three winners, plus a small bonus for herself. On June 14, she paid the final instalment to Charo-Tak. He looked slightly disappointed; as though he was looking forward to carrying out his threat. Sarai wondered what would stop her continuing with the fraud.

She got her answer exactly one week later. When she arrived for work her boss, Lui Kongsamrapong, was sitting in her chair, holding a white piece of paper. His expression appeared to be chiselled in stone.

“Any idea what this is?” he asked, waving the paper in the air.

“A customer receipt?” Sarai choked on the words, her mouth was suddenly dry and her stomach felt as though it was turning cartwheels.

Lui handed her the document. She recognised the number as being from the series that never made it to accounting.

“How fucking stupid do you think I am?” he asked.

She avoided eye contact but despair was etched on her face.

“Sales are down but I'm still using as much fuel as before. You think maybe it's leaking away, or the spirits of the dead are taking it when we're asleep?”

Sarai shuffled her feet and locked her gaze onto a spot on the floor midway between them as though it might be the source of her salvation.

“No you fucking bitch, you're stealing from me. I see the sales are down so I look at our receipts and what do I see? I see some of our best customers aren't using us any more. So I go and ask them, “why do you not buy my

petrol?" They tell me they have bought from me and they show me the receipt. But the receipt is not in our books, so that means the cash is not in my bank account. So that means it's in your fucking pocket."

Sarai was crushed. She half expected to be caught but the fear of failing to meet Charo-Tak's ultimatum was all she'd been able to focus on.

"So, how are you going to repay me?"

His accountant had calculated she'd taken about one point three million baht and that was what he expected her to repay. Sarai was briefly relieved he'd underestimated the scale of the theft, then realised it hardly mattered. Sums of that magnitude were barely conceivable, let alone attainable. Kongsamrapong could go to the police but would get nothing if she served a lengthy prison term. Thai jails, euphemistically known as the "monkey house," are notoriously tough. When she came out she might be in no condition to repay the debt.

"I'll find the money," she said, "I just need time."

The following night an agreement was reached. Sarai had to find forty thousand baht every month for three years and the debt was secured on her uncle's small farm. Failure to pay would mean jail for Sarai and financial ruin for her family. She explained the situation to her mother who promptly collapsed and wept for hours, refusing to speak to her daughter except to say she'd brought shame and disgrace on her family.

It took a full day before Mrs Charoenramasee managed to grasp the situation and the enormity of the challenge that Sarai and as a consequence the whole family now faced. She was calm and measured and it was she who delivered the solution. Her sister knew a lady in

Pattaya who could get a job for Sarai. She'd have to work hard but she could make a lot of money, maybe she'd meet a *farang* to take care of her. Her mother reminded her of On, the girl who spent four years away and then returned to Khorat with enough money to buy land and a buffalo. Her family lived on that to this day. Better still there was Tik, who found a nice Swiss man and she was away for only six months. He'd built her a house and came to visit just three times a year. The rest of the year, it was just Tik, her family and the Thai man who'd been her lover since she was nineteen. The kind gentleman from Geneva was mercifully unaware of the extra house-guest who made himself scarce for the triannual trips.

Yes, that would be the best solution. Sarai would go to work in Pattaya.

As dusk fell the following evening, a dark blue Ford pick-up truck appeared out of the gathering gloom. Sarai recognised the driver, he ran the largest pig farm in the area and had a reputation as an excellent judge of good breeding stock. It occurred to Sarai, as he asked her to stand, then turn and turn again, that he saw little distinction between pork and women. He instantly agreed she'd do well in Pattaya and said he was happy to take her there himself. It was too late to complete the journey that night so he suggested they break the trip in a cheap hotel near Saraburi. He paid for dinner and went to great lengths to explain what was expected of her when she started work. Sarai wasn't like the innocents trafficked to the bars and brothels of Bangkok and Pattaya, thinking they'd be serving drinks and clearing tables. She knew how On and Tik made their money. Sarai resigned herself to her fate and made no protest when her escort returned her to the

hotel and explained it would be better if she showed him she was up to the job. She complied, it was what she'd be doing for the next three years unless she could make the money quicker, there was little point in arguing.

It all seemed so long ago but only eighteen months had passed since she arrived in Pattaya. Sarai applied a little talcum powder to her face, a hint of lipstick to her mouth and picked up her handbag. She'd have to hurry; the *mamasan* was always looking for reasons to dock the girl's wages. Arriving a few minutes late would cost her two hundred baht.

Pattaya, Platinum and a lady called Pom

It was during his second trip that Richard learned about Pattaya, a sea-side resort around two hours from Bangkok by car. It's considered by many to make the capital look positively tame. Arriving by road, tourists can't fail to spot the billboard that depicts snooker superstar Jimmy White, urging them to follow his lead and buy a condo. As Richard's taxi approached the city it was caught in a line of slow moving vehicles. The driver was keen to overtake and there appeared to be an opportunity, as an oncoming motorist flashed his headlights vigorously. Surprisingly the taxi-driver held back, then the approaching car accelerated into the gap. The signal is accepted in the UK to mean - go ahead, after you; in Thailand it means - out of the way, I'm coming through. It was an early lesson for Richard that things may not always be as they seem in the Land of Smiles.

Bangkok was a revelation but it barely prepared him for Pattaya. The capital has much in common with the rest of the world's major metropolises. The sex industry is huge but the vast majority of the population work in the

offices, factories, shops, hotels and other legitimate businesses of the city. Pattaya sells holidays, sex and holidays with sex. The stunning golf courses are a plausible alibi for many of the male visitors but the accepted response to a man who claims to visit for the golf is, “Yeah right.”

During his previous trip, Richard met Pom at the Platinum Club in a small *soi* off the infamous Walking Street. It was her third week as a dancer and she was utterly captivating.

Richard quickly came to the conclusion the only two nationalities with a grasp of irony in its original sense are the English and the Thais. Pom liked to tease him.

“*Teelak*, I know you not come to go-go bar to see lady. You come for wide TV and football and nice cold beer. You not like naked lady, I sure.”

Teelak is the Thai equivalent of darling. Most girls use it because it’s easier than remembering a western name, more importantly it avoids the embarrassment of confusing their latest customer with the man they met the previous evening ... or an hour or two earlier.

Pom also teased him that he was starting to get a little bit of a beer belly. She snuggled up against him one evening and started to stroke his stomach whilst saying one day maybe they’d have children together. She laughed as she said, “but I think you be mama and we call baby Singha.”

Richard quickly switched his beer choice to Singha Light.

American comedy shows use irony but then the actor often throws in the word “not” at the end of the sentence to avoid confusion. Elsewhere they’re even less

subtle requiring an “only joking” for clarity. Thais don’t need to add the explanation and it’s not their only form of bitter-sweet humour. Pattaya-Dream ran a survey on the meanest things a Thai girl had ever said to a *farang*. Given Thais believe water buffalos are the most stupid living creature, the winner was clear. A young lady introduced her man to a number of local restaurants but finally decided the relationship had no future.

“You more stupid than buffalo. Buffalo can find food. Without me you cannot even find food.”

Pom was enchanting, smart and funny. Richard was certain, had she been born in London, she could have done anything she wanted. A top university could have paved the way to a high-powered job in finance, the law or medicine. Equally she could have made a career in TV or modelling. Instead she came from Isaan. It’s major cities, Nakhon Ratchasima, Ubon Ratchathani, Udon Thani, Nong Khai and Khon Kaen are virtually unheard of in the West and their combined population is barely half a million, yet nearly twenty-two million people live in the towns, villages and farms of the poorest region of Thailand. The flight to Bangkok from Khon Kaen takes fifty-five minutes and costs around two thousand baht, yet most locals will choose a six hour, two hundred baht bus journey in preference. The cost of the flight is way beyond their reach.

Pom was proud to have done her nine years at school, the minimum required to obtain the coveted leaving certificate.

“No certificate... no job, only work go-go, no choice,” she told Richard. He resisted the temptation to ask why, if she had this treasured qualification, she still needed to work in a bar. He guessed it was a family thing,

the forums were rife with stories about drunken fathers, absent partners or siblings still at school, striving for the coveted certificate.

Richard knew that in theory at least education is free in Thailand, but if your family needs another breadwinner or there's no cash to buy the uniform or books then there's no place in the classroom. Men leave Isaan in droves to become construction workers, taxi drivers or factory hands. For women the options are more limited. The opening gambit of most of the girls who work in the go-go bars and other adult entertainment venues tells the story.

“What your name?”

“Where you from?”

If asked the same in return, the chances are their answer to the second question will be “Isaan.”

Their first night together was awkward; Pom was new to the role. The following morning the sex was better. She was affectionate and loving and told Richard how wonderful he made her feel. With two more days before his flight back to London, he came to the bar each night to take her out.

Richard always made for the mainstream restaurants, he loved Thai food and *talay*... seafood in particular. Even the tourist-traps on Walking Street, Pattaya's main bar area, serve fresh lobster and prawns the size of your hand. The bill will be about the same as the service charge on a similar meal in Central London. On their last night together, he paid barfines for her friends, Joy, Dah and Lek. Pom announced that dinner was on her.

They started the evening with the ping-pong ball ritual at the Platinum Club, followed by drinks at Kiss,

another go-go bar owned by the same people. The girls could drink there and still get their fifty per cent commission. Richard was delighted, if bemused, his date had chosen another bar full of semi-naked women. Dinner still seemed some way off as they adjourned to a bar in Soi 16 owned by a friend of the four girls. The party was now in full flow and although he was paying for everybody, Richard felt relaxed. The year before he spent a weekend skiing in Courchevel in France. The Russian presence had driven prices through the roof but was yet to do the same in Pattaya. A round of drinks for five people in Soi 16 was around the same as the cost of a beer in the French ski resort.

“So *teelak*, when we go eat?” he asked.

“We eat now,” Pom replied.

She spun his bar stool around to show the row of street vendors immediately behind them. The other girls were already bringing plates of freshly sautéed prawns, pork with holy basil and *massaman* chicken curry with potato and peanuts. Placing the steaming plates in front of him they went back for *khao pad moo*... fried rice with pork and his favourite *tom yum goong*... spicy prawn soup. The girls also brought an innocuous looking salad that Richard piled onto his plate. It was his first and last experience of the legendary *somtam*. It comes from Isaan and for the locals it's slightly spicy. Richard later described it as papaya garnished with paint stripper and battery acid.

It never occurred to him to buy from a street vendor, even if he'd known how to ask for the dishes... where was the food hygiene certificate? Once the chilli from the *somtam* subsided in his mouth, he decided the food was as good as anything he'd eaten in the most

expensive restaurants in Thailand. He could taste every nuance of coconut, lemon grass, lime leaves and ginger. Ingredients bought from the market that afternoon and seafood straight from the ocean. It gave Richard the chance to show off his limited Thai, one of the few phrases he knew was the one for delicious.

“*Alloy*,” he said. “*Alloy mak mak*.”

Dinner was a feast and Pom insisted she’d pay the bill because it was her turn to “take care.” Richard passed only on dessert. The girls decided to go for the deep fried option. He’d thrown caution to the wind a few times with a bit of toffee banana in his local Chinese, he wasn’t willing to go for the Thai equivalent. The girls returned from a nearby stall with freshly cooked centipedes, beetles, bugs and worms. Richard decided they’d be scary enough if he saw one on his carpet, there was no way he’d put them in his mouth. The more he flinched the more the girls appeared to enjoy their dessert.

It was time to move on to one of the clubs on the edge of town where few *farang* are to be seen. Pom found a taxi and within ten minutes they were ushered to a prime table with a perfect view of the stage, right next to the dance floor. A trolley arrived with a litre of Jack Daniels, an array of mixers and a large Singha for Richard. Thai whisky is rarely the drink of choice when a *farang* is paying. Mekhong, the best known brand, is cheap, immensely popular and offers an unwitting metaphor for its bewildering country of origin. The main ingredient is sugar cane rather than grain, so it’s not even whisky; it’s rum. In Thailand one doesn’t quibble over detail and few things are as they first appear.

A couple of average to good singing performances, accompanied by some mediocre choreography provided

the entertainment. It occurred to Richard that only one member of the dance troupe knew the moves, the rest were copying with various degrees of success. Then his party took to the floor en masse and the middle-aged westerner was dancing with four beautiful Thai girls.

Richard felt he was seeing a whole new side of Thailand, he'd been given a VIP pass unavailable to most *farang* and this was the next stage in his absorption into the Thai bar scene. He took his time to adjust to "P4P" or "Pay for play" as they call it on Pattaya-Dream. At first he was horrified at the thought of paying for sex and terrified he'd be ripped off but it was so easy to get drawn in. Richard was rapidly being won over to the philosophy expressed by a favourite comedian who observed:

"I believe sex is one of the most beautiful, natural, wholesome things money can buy."

Every night Richard was approached by women who were beyond his wildest dreams but appeared to be genuinely interested in him. Was it really any different to western women who sought out rich boyfriends?

Richard was drunk and very horny the first time he succumbed, after that it became the natural end to an evening. The only part of the process he struggled with was the "walk of shame." He wasn't a man who liked to attract attention and the journey back to his hotel, arm in arm with a girl less than half his age was an ordeal. Certain everyone he passed was looking at them, he'd hope to find a taxi quickly and only as the door to his hotel room closed would he finally relax.

On his second trip, Richard developed a screening system for choosing the girls he'd barfine. Many dancers look like they'd prefer to be anywhere else but on a stage

in a go-go bar. He decided they'd be even less enthusiastic about a trip to his hotel, the more fun the girl appeared to be having in the bar the more engaged she'd be when they were alone. Most importantly, if he didn't get a spontaneous smile from the girl as they made eye contact he wouldn't offer a lady-drink. He avoided those who looked too drunk and based on the advice of fellow members of Pattaya-Dream believed he could spot the girls who were a bit too hyper and therefore possibly on drugs. Suddenly, he was an old hand.

Richard met Pom in Platinum Club, his favourite go-go bar. He rapidly made the adjustment from observer to avid participant. Now he was making a second adjustment as he began to have feelings for a girl who made a living by selling sex.

Many of his fellow members of Pattaya-Dream frowned on using the word prostitute. The distinction was drawn between their own countries where most professional ladies chose the life and Thailand where there appeared to be little alternative. In their parlance she was a "working girl."

Nonetheless, it's the major hurdle for any relationship that starts in a Thai bar. Westerners are conditioned to think men should "sow their wild oats" but women should wait for the man of their dreams. Men deal with their partner's past love life by simply pretending it didn't exist. That's quite a bit harder to do when you're with a woman who negotiated a fee on your first date. Imagine the scene:

George: "*Teelak*, you know I really love you, I'm sure I can forget about what you do for living."

Tuk: "But I have sex with many men."