

# The Queens of Dragon Town



NORM SCHRIEVER

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This happened.

Names, places, and the sequence of events have been changed.

“In a country well governed, poverty is something to be ashamed of. In a country badly governed, wealth is something to be ashamed of.”

-Confucius

“Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional.”

-Buddha

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”

-Matthew 5:5

## **Dedication**

This book is dedicated to the loving memory of Anton Cavka, OSU!  
My heartfelt condolences to his mother and the Cavka family

To the people of Boracay in the Philippines  
To the people of Samara, Tacloban, and Leyte in the Philippines  
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## Introduction

Life in Southeast Asia is like a deck of cards. It took me almost a year of living there to realize that, but one night, standing in a moonlit courtyard waiting for someone, it finally hit me. And if Asia is like a deck of cards, then each person is a card in the deck. Just by being born they're marked, as clearly as if they were red or black, spade or diamond. Most people are low on the deck, of course – twos and threes and sixes. Almost all of them. Only a select few are lucky enough to be born wealthy and powerful: the Jacks, Kings, and Aces. There are even Queens.

In a place where 70% of the world's population lives within a 1,000-mile radius, the competition just to survive is unfathomable. Each person spends their entire life fighting to squeeze higher in the deck, paying for the crime of their existence. Clawing and crawling to rewrite their fate, they become intoxicated with the dream of that same wealth and power they viciously resent. Most of them never will rise higher; they toil and suffer and die just as they lived.

The truth of that dynamic revealed itself to me after almost a year of traveling. I first took 19 hours of crammed flights to Vietnam in July of 2013. Vietnam, the Philippines, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia were mine to explore. I settled in when it felt right or moved to the next spot when I felt the itch, searching for something more meaningful than the typical tourist experience. I found it – or, rather, it found me when a bizarre whirl of fate dropped me into the most extraordinary circumstances, blowing the roof right off of the life I'd known.

In October of that year, when the winds started blowing and the seas boiled over, I found myself stranded on a tropical island. Unable to evacuate, it was there I hunkered down for the strongest typhoon to hit land in modern history – Typhoon Yolanda, or Haiyan as you may know it. But that wasn't even the remarkable part. It was in the wake of the typhoon when everything changed, where my voice and likeness was on CNN's *Anderson Cooper 360*, *Good Morning America*, and television shows and headlines from Moscow to London to Tokyo.

At the same time, I was stranded, stripped of my identity and any access to money, thrust into the world of the locals, given mercy and shelter by a *mamasan* and a bar full of Taxi Girls in a place I'll call Dragon Town.

In Dragon Town, I witnessed the best and worst of humanity, the craziest things you could imagine embraced as routine. But more importantly, I came to know the uncloudable joy and indomitable spirit of the people there. And it was there that I met the lowest of the low, the Queens of Dragon Town. This book is for them.

If you kindly excuse my clumsy narration, you'll find it's a tribute to those who have no voice, who can't tell the world their story themselves.

So is Dragon Town a real place? No, not on any map. But it is a fair characterization of everything I've seen and experienced in Southeast Asia. Dragon Town may not exist geographically, but I assure you that places like it exist, and everything you'll read actually happened. And it all still happens, every time the sun goes down.

If Southeast Asia is indeed a deck of cards, then there are times when the deck gets shuffled – rare occasions when all the cards are tossed in the air and flutter back to earth in perfect chaos. This is the story of one of those times, when life's deck got shuffled, with me as the wild card thrown in, and how we all landed.

So hold on – the winds are starting to stir and the sky is growing dark, and we can't shake the feeling that something big is about to happen.

## **Waiting for Sophar**

The tourists chanted, “Do it! Do it!” so the little boy put the razor blade in his mouth and started chewing. He made a big show of it, opening his mouth to show them the metal, wearing a mock expression of agony.

Once the blade was crushed up good, he spit the pieces into his palm, fanning them out with his finger to show the tourists. He was well practiced, so there wasn’t much blood. The foreigners’ faces lit up, thrilled to see something other than mundane tours of temples, museums, and the king’s palace.

The American tourist shrieked in glee and rubbed the boy’s midnight hair, while her Aussie boyfriend, drunk and sweating through his Beer Chang tank top, said that the razor blade trick was probably fake. The little barefoot street kid – I didn’t know his name, though I’d seen him every night for the last couple months – threw the chewed up blade in the gutter and cozied up to the tourists’ table.

He held his hand out again, this time making big eyes at the tourists. The man just sat back with his beer, but the woman said, “Ohhhh, how grand!” and dug in her new Louis Vuitton purse – a knockoff she’d just bought at the night market. She handed the boy a few coins.

The boy who chewed razor blades for their amusement – it was hard to tell if he was five years old or 10 – examined each coin like it was a rare species of butterfly that had just landed in his hand. He pouted his lips and his eyes widened into saucers, pleading with the woman for more.

“Sorry, sweetie, that’s all we have,” she said, as her boyfriend ordered more beers from the teenage waiter, who ran around frantically balancing steaming dishes of golden noodles, mounds of spicy curries, duck eggs, and silvery grilled fish, their glassy black eyes rainbowed with death.

The boy didn’t budge, frozen in his pose with hand out for more. The woman smiled and told him that she wished they could give more, because he was a cute little boy and they wished they’d have a boy like him when they got older, but they didn’t have any more money tonight.

“Please, madam,” the boy said, “Just one doll-er. Just one.”

The woman apologized again, telling him to go find his family and get off the streets and stay in school and good luck. But the boy did not move.

“Just one, madam. Please...” he purred.

“Bugger off now, we’re eating,” said the Aussie man, waving him away. The waiter arrived with more green beer bottles in a bucket of ice, smoking in the night’s heat. He yelled at the street boy in their native tongue and threw a half-hearted kick in his direction. But the boy was quick as only people with empty bellies can be, sidestepping while snatching a fistful of French fries off the nearest plate before skittering into the street.

“Fucking gypo,” the man yelled, starting to get up to give chase.

“It’s okay, it’s really okay. Don’t worry about it,” the American woman said. “Let’s just drink, babe.”

The waiter postured and threatened, yelling obscenities at the boy, but it was all a show for the foreigners so he might earn a tip. He knew the boy would be back the next night, when they’d all play out the same desperate theater again. Begging street kids weren’t good for business, but there wasn’t any way to stop them.

The boy who chewed razor blades strolled toward the next bar. His face changed once he crossed into darkness, the purple glow of neon melting away. His eyes no longer pouted, but a cocky smirk spread across his face. That had been a victory.

He pulled out his pack of razor blades and counted how many were left before tucking them away.

The boy paused before he reached the next group of wobbly round tables on the sidewalk. Thirsty tourists manned the table, shining with sweat and shrieking with laughter as they threw around money they’d claim not to have. But he waited for the boy twirling batons of fire to finish his act and move on before he approached. He knew the foreigners wouldn’t give him money for chewing the razors if he followed the fire-eater too soon. He ate the last of his French fries and watched.

I kept walking, past that kid, past the tables, in the middle of the street to dodge the traffic jam of tourists stopping in front of sidewalk vendors selling t-shirts, jewelry and pirated DVDs laid out on cardboard.

“My friend, my friend, good price for you. What do you look for? We have. My friend!”

My feet danced through it all, an impossible choreography of bodies and grasping hands, whizzing motos and stray dogs.

At the end of the bar street, I turned onto the wider avenue that ran along the ocean. An old woman stood alone on the corner, pleading for someone to buy the single wilted rose she held so she might eat a little rice that night.

A few blocks down, I came to the perfectly manicured park that adorned the front of the Royal Palace. It was normally empty at this time because people rushed to get home before the curfew. But on this night there was a small crowd of people, all looking at the new billboard that had just been unveiled in front of the palace only days earlier. I stopped and looked, too.

It was more than a billboard but a monument, really – a 45-foot-high painting of a man's face, disinterested eyes looking down at the citizens of Dragon Town beneath stern eyebrows. He was dressed in formal military attire, colorful medals pinned to the top of his breast and epaulettes on his shoulders. Sashes of gold and royal red adorned the top of the billboard, streaming in the wind. A thousand round yellow and blue electric lights lined its frame, illuminating the upturned dirt and sweat stained faces of the people below.

The people on the street pointed at the giant billboard, purposely built higher than any nearby building other than the palace itself. They discussed it in their own language, and even though I couldn't speak it, I understood what they were saying.

I looked up at the man's face on the billboard, too, shaking my head. He looked all too familiar. But unlike the islanders, I didn't have to guess where the money to build it came from – a regal and vain monument constructed only yards away from where a homeless girl slept with the curb as her pillow, arms wrapped around her naked baby sister.

A tuk-tuk driver pulled his moto and carriage to a stop in the middle of the street, not concerned at all that he was blocking traffic. He lit a cigarette and peered up.

A bottle smashed on the pavement behind me, making me jump. I realized I should keep moving. It might not be safe for me out here, and I didn't have time to stop anyway. I had someone important to meet.

Past the billboard of the man's face, I followed the freshly painted yellow 10-foot-high wall along one side of the Royal Palace, walking deeper into the heart of Dragon Town. The sound of ocean waves faded into thumping music as I neared the beehive of local bar streets.

I went to check my watch, but remembered I didn't have one anymore. I took out my phone and checked the time, then put it away before anyone saw me. Something scurried on the other side of the street, but it was only a few kids going through piles of trash looking for something to eat.

I was early for our meeting so I slowed my pace, wiping sweat from my forehead.

A group of island men played cards on the corner. They squatted on the sidewalk, shirtless, rearranging the cards and stroking their chins in contemplation. One of the men looked up as I passed.

"*Sus-dae*," I said, *hello* in their language, bowing my head slightly and joining my hands at my chest as was customary.

"Marine you?" he asked, looking at my short hair and basketball jersey, pointing his losing hand of cards at me. The other men looked up.

"No, *bong*. I live here," I said, referring to him as *big brother* to show respect. He looked at me for a moment, calculating my existence, and then went back to his game.

I kept up my stride, looking over my shoulder to make sure they weren't following me. There were no cars or motos on the street, only people rushing home in the shadows.

It sure looked different in the daytime, when little kids in their blue and white school uniforms chased a ball, the men tinkering with their motos or sleeping on hammocks, laundry rippling on every line. It was alive then, comforting. It used to be alive at night, too, but since the curfew, the children and mothers and families were locked inside their airless rooms after 10, sleeping together on bamboo mats on the floor.

I smiled, recalling the nights I'd slept on a bamboo mat, too.

I checked the time on my phone again. 9:22.

Would she show up? I tried to convince myself that of course she would, but I wasn't sure if I believed it. She owed me \$600 in U.S. dollars – a fortune around here – but there was so much more riding on it.

The green metal door unlocked easily for me, even in the dark, and I turned into an alley, narrow and devoid of light. The only noise was the echo of water dripping down the walls. I used to wait for my eyes to adjust to the light when I came this way, but now I could navigate effortlessly, avoiding the potholes and piles of trash where rats fed.

Climbing the stairs three floors to the rooftop, I came out in the center of the courtyard. I checked my phone. 9:27.

Sophar said she'd meet me at 9:30 to bring me my money – enough time to get off the street before the curfew. I would be leaving Dragon Town that night, taking the last ferry off the island to the mainland where I'd catch an early morning flight back to the States.

I stood there, waiting for Sophar in the one sliver of moonlight that stole in like a cat burglar. It was hard to believe I used to live up here. It seemed like a lifetime ago, but in some ways it seemed like only yesterday. But now that I had a new ATM card and my passport, I could finally get home and move on with my life, which had taken such a fortuitous tumble.

I scanned the shanty sky, still wishing I could see the snow falling. But that was impossible, no matter how much I wanted to believe. This was the tropics, and the night was only filled with stars, and the spires of the palace roof in the distance, silhouetted against the moon like the golden spine of a dragon.

In a big, crazed world of problems, it was such a small thing between us: one storm, one island, one frightened girl in one bar, and one damaged house in the province where an elderly mother drifted towards her peace. But now, standing there waiting for Sophar, it seemed so important.

I knew from the start that I couldn't fix it all for her. But maybe, just maybe, I could do something to make it better.

9:29.

I thought I heard steps.



## **Welcome to Dragon Town**

How did I first come to Dragon Town? That part of the story is easy to tell. From the summer of 2013 to the summer of 2014, I traveled through Southeast Asia. My job as a writer allowed me to be broke anywhere, so I figured I might as well be broke on a tropical beach somewhere. I booked the cheapest airline ticket I could find over to Vietnam, where I settled into Nha Trang, the seaside city on the central coast. I found a nice apartment and made plenty of local friends and started to explore. After a couple months I headed to the Philippines, where I embraced the island life on Boracay. It was hard to say goodbye to my great Filipino friends, but the next stop was Thailand, then Laos, and finally spending the remainder of my year in Cambodia.

In between there somewhere, following the trail of European, Canadian, and Australian backpackers, scuba divers, and professional partiers, I found Dragon Town. Right away, I knew it was different. It didn't have the most pristine beach I'd ever seen – that was on Boracay. The people were nice, but Filipinos and Khmer (Cambodian) people are warm and friendly anywhere you go. It didn't have the wildly exotic splendor of Laos or the living tradition of Thailand, and the food definitely wasn't as good or inexpensive as in Vietnam, but it offered something far more unique: it was lost.

The island, and its capital city, Dragon Town, almost didn't exist to the outside world; it was a phantom that didn't even appear on most western maps. Nestled in between three countries – the eastern curl of Thailand's white sand shores, southern Cambodia's unsettled natural coastline, and the western edge of the Vietnam peninsula – it offered the perfect locale for sovereignty. In a no-man's land between the Gulf of Thailand the greater South China Sea, its location and deep bay made it a perfect resting place for passing vessels following their shipping routes – and a frequent point of territorial contention. The cargo was the only thing that changed through the decades. First it was bamboo, then bananas, opium, guns, refugees, then money and secrets.

The history of Southeast Asia is pocked with brutal military expansion and barbaric imperialism. In fact, only Thailand has never been conquered by a foreign nation, but they've had plenty of bloody coups within their borders. Yet, somehow, this little island was never invaded.

No one needed to invade Dragon Town to conquer it; it was wide open, welcome to anyone who landed on its shores with a couple of baht, dong, pesos, yen, riel or dollars. Conquering the island would come with the burden of ruling it, and that would be a losing venture. Everything Dragon Town and the island had to offer was already there for the taking. Over the

decades Khmer refugees, Filipino sailors, Vietnamese boat people, Indonesian fishermen, and Chinese businessmen all arrived on the island.

Those who stayed got married and had plenty of babies, mixing their language, customs, religions, and traditions into the soup of many flavors, until Dragon Town natives could only be described as islanders.

Dragon Town was a nickname, of course. The real name was unpronounceable for the westerners who rediscovered the island as a tropical playground in the early 1990s – after the revolution, when it was safe to go there again. The island they found was eerily silent, the surviving locals shuffling about in silence with eyes like zombies, their bellies almost touching their backs from hunger.

The westerners learned quickly that for a brutal and bloody two-year period, the inhabitants of the island were fiercely divided into Gray Shirts and the Blue Shirts, the two warring factions that came to power after the Great King died. It escalated into the most unspeakable acts perpetrated by islander against islander, neighbor against neighbor, and even family members against each other.

Of course the common people – peaceful fisherman, mango growers, and rice farmers – knew nothing of the politics of the Gray Shirts and the Blue Shirts. Until then, they were only concerned with working the fields, catching fish, and peacefully raising their families.

When the Great King died, power was anyone's to claim, so the Gray Shirts came in and offered a few farmers and fisherman a steady paycheck to be soldiers – along with black clubs and shiny new boots. The young men didn't know what that meant, and the elders warned them, but it sounded wonderful and they'd never owned shoes before, so they signed up.

Soldiers need someone to fight, so the Blue Shirts recruited their own young soldiers and gave them guns, not clubs. Before long, the Blue and Gray soldiers were fighting – as is the only purpose of soldiers – and the island became a living hell.

"It's for your own good," the leaders of the Gray Shirts and Blue Shirts told the people. "If we don't stand up and purge the infidels from the island, you will be their slaves. You will be hungry and have no rights and always be poor."

The people didn't know what "infidels" meant, but didn't dare speak back for fear of being called infidels themselves. But when they looked around, everyone they saw was already hungry and poor. The quickest way to start a war is to prepare for a war, and when the infidels started burning their

homes and killing their sons and daughters and taking their wives, there was only one thing to do: pick up a gun and kill the bastards.

Soon, there were no other colors on the island but Gray and Blue, and it was all soaked red with blood. The leaders of the two parties grew more powerful and called themselves Presidents and then Kings and even Emperors, and the people had no choice but follow orders to kill the people who were trying to kill them.

So when western troops landed on the island on orders from the United Nations three years later, looking so official and strong in their well-pressed uniforms, there was nothing left to fight for and few put up resistance. The Gray and Blue Emperors worked out a peace deal with the UN that included shiny new BMWs, though there were few real roads to drive them on. The people, sensing it was all over, threw their guns in the ocean and burned their tattered gray and blue shirts.

“We are a peaceful party and only care about helping our people,” the leaders told them, starting to grow fat beneath their western clothes.

“We are committed to unity,” they said through bullhorns on a stage. “Progress! That is what we all should focus on. So we are happy to announce that from this day forward, no one will be hungry and there will be as much rice and fish as you can eat! Progress for the people!”

The people clapped, but they didn’t know what they were clapping for because they were still hungry and half of their families were dead or missing and some of them now didn’t even have two hands to clap. If only you could eat progress for breakfast and have speeches for dinner, they thought.

More stout westerners came in big iron boats. They built huge iron platforms out by the reef where the fishermen used to cast their nets, with machines that whirled and smoked night and day. “There’s something called ‘oil’ in those reefs,” someone told them.

People from all over the world started showing up on the island because of that oil, and they all needed things. So the islanders built shacks near the beach and sold them fuel and fish and batteries and toothpaste and meat and rice. But the foreigners needed a lot more beer than toothpaste. So they sold them cases of beer faster than they could boat them in from the mainland, and then sugar cane rum when the beer ran out.

The westerners got wildly drunk until they were falling down and cursing and fighting each other. But the islanders didn’t mind because they always threw around their green paper money, which someone told them was

worth more than pearls. The people preferred to trade things, like they'd always done, but pretty soon the fat leaders made sure everyone was using the green paper money.

"Since so much progress will be visiting your homes soon, we are opening the first bank on the island," they echoed through bullhorns. "This will keep your money safe!"

"What money? Safe from what?" the people thought. But they did not complain because they had enough to eat and things were far better than the years during the revolution. When they built the first bank, a glimmering steel and concrete structure as tall as a palm tree, the islanders couldn't figure out why it was so big, since the green paper money was so small. But there were jobs for some of the men, and that was good.

"This bank is a great shining accomplishment and something to be proud of!" the fattest leader proclaimed.

When it opened, the leaders called it "Bank of Canada." It stood right near the King's Palace, which had been boarded up after the Great King died and during the war. Most of the islanders didn't have any use for a bank because they only owned a few coins and some fish. Even if they did have green money, they wouldn't put it in a big building named after someone named "Canada," who they'd never met before.

But they were eating for the most part, so they didn't complain when the second and the third bank went up, along with paved roads so the leaders could drive their new Rolls Royce automobiles.

A couple years later, the oil must have dried up, because the iron machines and iron boats and most of the foreigners disappeared just as fast as they'd arrived.

"Last one off the island, please turn off the lights!" the foreigners joked. But a few of them stayed behind, the ones who didn't seem suited to go back to their old countries, who had grown thick beards and ripped the sleeves off their shirts and found local wives.

Those remaining foreigners *really* needed beer, so they bought the shacks near the beach and gave them colorful names and turned them into bars. The wild-eyed pale men must have told their friends, because all sorts of interesting people came to the island from all over the world. They sat at the bars night and day, never speaking too loudly and always facing the door, nice enough fellas who went by funny names like CIA, KGB, UN, MI6, Interpol and Mossad.

They called the island a paradise and said, “This is where I’ll come when the world ends!”

“Maybe they were practicing?” the people thought, because it didn’t look like they were going anywhere. The islanders started semi-affectionately calling foreigners *Mosquitos*, since they were always buzzing around and never left you alone.

But once the oil dried up, there was far less green paper money passed around. The reefs were ruined, so the fisherman came home with empty nets. The fat leaders assured them that this was all part of the “progress,” as they drove their shiny new Land Rovers to ribbon-cutting ceremonies at yet another new bank.

Times were hard on the island once again. For many people, their bellies started reaching toward their backs. But they were used to that, and at least no one was shooting at them or taking their family members away to die. But this time, there were funny *Mosquitos* around who still had plenty of green money to spend.

The islanders noticed that when the *Mosquitos* at the bars got drunk, there was one more thing they *really* needed – the company of women. So the hungry islanders sent their daughters and sisters to the bars by the beach.

When the women came home the next morning, they had green paper money worth as much as pearls and everyone had enough food for a while, though no one talked or laughed as they ate.

## Headline News

When I first came to Dragon Town there was no sign of the revolution or dark days from a decade earlier. It was a hidden paradise, a jewel off the usual trail of young European and western backpackers and tourists who made Asia their playground.

Most of them traveled the same well-tread route: flying into Bangkok, Thailand; then south to the islands like Phuket, Koh Pi Pi, and Koh Phangan for the Full Moon Party. When their visas ran out or they wanted to check something cultural off their list, they took a smoke-belching overnight bus to Cambodia, to Angkor Wat in Siem Reap. Then south to the capital, Phnom Penh, the most livable city in Southeast Asia, with a short stop in Sihanoukville, the chaotic gangster town on the beach otherwise known as Snookyville, or just Snooky.

Another bus took them over the border to bustling Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam (otherwise known as Saigon). They rented motorbikes and skidded and crashed their way up the country's long coast to Hanoi. From Vietnam's communist bastion city they headed to Vang Vieng and Luang Prabang in Laos, and finally hopped a flight to Bali or Ubud in Indonesia before returning home. There were many variations on that trip, but the pins in the map were usually the same.

A few countries weren't on that pinwheel: Malaysia because it was too expensive and too conservative, the Philippines because it was off by itself in the South Pacific and harder to travel among their 7,000 islands, and Myanmar (formerly Burma) because it was hard to get drugs and visas there, in that order.

Dragon Town and the island were definitely not on that popular route. To get there, you flew into the tiny Sihanoukville airport in southern Cambodia and then took a ferry two hours over choppy seas to the port in Dragon Town. There were far easier pickings for most tourists: easy-to-get-to beach towns where they could congregate by the thousands to snap selfies, drink cheap beer, listen to trashy house music, and collectively overrun the natural beauty.

There were still plenty of travelers in Dragon Town, because destinations that aren't popular become extra popular in short time, since they always looked for the next unspoiled place. That's exactly what I liked about it: Dragon Town was alive and Saturday-night crowded on the main tourist streets, but most of the city still belonged to the islanders.

I guess I came to Dragon Town for that reason, too – to escape the usual.

I was far too old for the typical backpacker antics and I was working every day, maintaining my job as a blogger for some companies back in the States. I only planned on staying in Dragon Town for a few weeks before I figured out where to go next, but I liked it. I found a simple room at the Saint Vincent Hotel, only a 10-minute walk to the beach, and booked it at the cheaper weekly rate.

My first two weeks on the island were unremarkable: I sweated over my laptop at the hotel's restaurant while talking to the friendly bartender, Marlon, with his perfectly combed hair and crisp white shirt. He told me what temples and beaches were worth visiting. I enjoyed the sun and the waves by day, and walked around and had a few pops at night before retiring early with a book or movie on my laptop.

And then, the skies darkened and the sea churned and everything changed.

It's surprising how quickly chatter spreads on an island, and Dragon Town was no different.

"Did you hear about the storm?" a lifeguard on the beach asked me on a crystal, tropical day. I dismissed the rumor as friendly banter and thought nothing else of it. But that night a few tourists were talking about the typhoon at a table next to me, and then Marlon at my hotel the next day.

"It looks like a bad one, *kuya*," he said.

It hit home when I saw the headline on the front pages of international newspapers the following day: the Hong Kong *Times*, the UK *Guardian*, and the Jakarta *Post* all reporting "Super typhoon set to blow through Southeast Asia."

The news consumed the island. At least we foreigners and travelers talked about it, sharing scraps of information to gauge how worried we should be. The locals just shook their heads at our incessant need to vocalize our concerns. But it was still only in the back of my thoughts. Maybe we'd get a lot of rain that day, so I'd work from my hotel room and get a nice break from the hot sun.

I first heard about it on Tuesday. The newspapers and newscasts said it would likely hit the Philippines first on Friday, then pass overland to the Gulf of Thailand, where we were. The international news all referred to it as "Typhoon Haiyan," though the locals called her "Yolanda."

It finally hit me that the typhoon was no joke when two things happened. First, my buddy, Whitey, in San Francisco Facebook messaged me.

“Yo G, I’ve been tracking this in the news and it looks bad, man. They’re saying it’s heading right for you and they’re expecting up to 20-foot sea swells and 150-mile-per-hour winds. I think you should get the hell out of there,” he wrote.

That got my attention. The rest of the day, I checked the news online. Every few hours, the story picked up traction until the imminent super typhoon was even front-page news in the United States. It still looked like a tropical paradise on the island, with tourists packing the beach, ordering Piña Coladas and jet skiing. But what really shook me up was something Marlon said that night at the hotel bar.

“Norm,” he said, pouring me a San Miguel Light beer in a frosty glass. “I’ve lived on this island almost my whole life. I’ve seen many typhoons and storms hit, but never worried before. But this one. This one, I really think... *Kuya* – my friend – if you can, you should get off the island.”

That got me. My imagination churned with fright when I went to bed that night. I woke up around 3 AM, unable to get back to sleep, Marlon’s words echoing in my head. I took out my laptop and checked the international news again. The typhoon was the lead story now on most news sites, frantic meteorologists estimating that Haiyan would deliver sea swells up to 25 feet high and 225 mph winds starting in about 48 hours.

I tried to imagine a 25-foot sheer wall of water rolling up the beach and through the palm trees, drowning the bars and stores and streets. Hell, from what I could see, at least three-quarters of the city and the island would be covered with water – all but the hills in the jungle interior. There were only a handful of buildings in town that were more than three stories high that wouldn’t be completely underwater. And the winds, screaming across the open sea, sledgehammering into us and shredding the island like propeller blades? I’d looked around that day, noticing all the coconut trees, the flimsy bamboo shacks, the cheap corrugated tin roofs that would turn into razor projectiles. Even imagining it made me swallow hard. I didn’t see how most people would survive. And I was one of those people.

I pulled up Cebu Pacific Airline’s website and went to book the flight departing Snookyville airport at 11 AM the next day, my fingers shaking so I hit the wrong button and had to reenter all of my information. I stopped mid-type when I went to fill in my passport number – there was a problem. I didn’t have it, or at least not with me.

Earlier that week I’d applied for an extension for my travel visa, since I was planning on staying at least a month. With my application, they collected my passport and submitted it all to the Ministry of Tourism, to be



returned to me with a fresh stamp when it was approved. I couldn't even try to get my passport back the next day because all government offices had been closed in preparations for the typhoon. Flying was out of the question.

But there still was a chance for me to escape the island. I could catch the ferry over to Snookyville, because sometimes they forgot to check passports if you left or arrived via boat. Or, I could always try to bribe the officer on duty into issuing me a temporary visa card. Once in Snooky, I could make the five-hour bus ride inland to the capital city, Phnom Penh, and from there, wait it out in safety until the storm passed. Then, I could easily come back to Dragon Town to get my passport and things once it was safe.

I closed my laptop and breathed a sigh of relief before sinking into my pillow, trying to catch a few hours of needed sleep. There was only one more thing to do – catch the 7 AM ferry off the island, the first one making the passage to Snookyville – and I'd be all set. I slept well.

## **A Kiss From Yolanda**

In the morning I got up and packed my bag, ready to catch the ferry off the island to safety. But it was already 6:15 AM so I didn't have the time to carefully pack every single item I owned. Would I be back? I wasn't sure, but I definitely wanted to come back for my passport. So I rifled through my big yellow North Face duffel bag and jammed a couple pairs of shorts, a few t-shirts, a few toiletries, and my computer and camera into my backpack. Everything else I zipped up in my duffel bag and placed it on top of the dresser, hoping it would stay dry if the room flooded. I took the key and walked down to the front desk.

"I'm heading off the island for the weekend," I said to the young lady with braces who was working. "But please keep my room." I slid my key across the desk to her.

"Yes, sir," she said. "And we hope you come back to see us soon." I thanked her and walked outside.

That time of morning was usually reserved for the islanders, who now waded out with their nets instead of going out on boats, grandmothers sweeping their yards, and old men selling breakfast porridge from pots balanced across their shoulders on a bamboo pole. "*Congeeeee, congeeee...*" they'd sing to stir their sleepy-eyed customers.

But this morning, there was a strange amount of traffic – mostly foreign backpackers who had the same idea as me. No one spoke as we filed out of our hotels and guest rooms. I caught a tuk-tuk to the ferry terminal, which sat on the south tip of the city where two concrete jetties thrust improbably into the apple green sea.

"Big storm coming, they say," the tuk-tuk driver said, our eyes meeting in the rearview mirror as he rattled over potholes, escaping the nest of Dragon Town.

The driver applied his squeaking brakes once the ferry terminal was in sight. A chain link fence topped with barbed wire guarded the entrance. Outside, a crowd of irate travelers, backpackers, and foreigners clamored to get in. I got out and paid the driver and watched him drive away, belching smoke. I pressed into the back of the crowd.

"Mate, the first ferry is supposed to leave in like 15 minutes and these wankers won't let anyone in," a scrappy English guy with bad skin and a mohawk said to me. It was true. Two half-asleep ferry workers in white polo shirts stood behind the fence at the entrance, turning people away. They held clipboards to show people their orders so the mob wouldn't turn

on them. "I'm sorry, there are no ferries traveling," they said. "They've all been canceled. No more."

The teeming gang of foreigners yelled and questioned and pleaded and threatened, but the ferry workers could only shrug and repeat their orders. The Coast Guard had issued a storm advisory warning, so all maritime traffic in the Gulf of Thailand was suspended.

It was 36 hours before Yolanda was supposed to hit, but there was no getting off the island. We were stuck. The foreigners huffed and yelled and begged. The ones who had children held them up for the ferry workers to see, but there was no relenting.

A black Range Rover with tinted windows rolled up. The Range Rover parted the group of foreigners with its fender, inching towards the gate. The crowd protested, putting their hands on the hood and shooting dirty looks at the invisible driver behind black glass, but moving out of the way. The ferry workers snapped to attention as the Rover approached.

They unlocked and rolled back the gate, letting the car roll through with their arms extended to keep any tourist from making a break for it. They locked the gate back up once it was inside. A family got out of the car, the man in a nice blue business suit with a Chinese flag pin on his lapel, and his wife in a white sundress with a matching sun hat gathering up their two children. Another worker in a white polo shirt met them with a courteous bow and led them right past the ticket window into the ferry building. I guessed the family had to pay a hefty bribe and hire a private boat for them to scoff at Coast Guard orders.

The English guy next to me turned red faced and started to yell and pump his fist, "Let us go home! Let us go home!" he chanted. A few others picked up the chant but it was half hearted, dying out as quickly as it started, leaving the English guy as the lone chanter. He was obviously still drunk from the night before - not exactly the best choice to lead our mass civil protest.

I waited another 15 minutes, but the ferry workers just shook their heads and confirmed their orders. When it became obvious they weren't going to open the gates, the crowd lost heart and started to walk away. How else could we get off the island? Someone mentioned hiring the helicopter that took people on island tours. I turned and walked up the road a little and flagged down a passing tuk-tuk back to Saint Vincent's.

I was stuck on the island. I would have to hunker down and try to survive a direct hit from the typhoon.

Later on, I found out that the ferry workers had a change of heart. Whether by order, guilt, or harassment by the foreign crowd, they did roll back the gate, letting about 60 foreigners in. They eagerly filled up one boat and set sail from the island to the mainland that morning. If I'd waited another 20 minutes, I would have been able to safely evacuate, and none of what I'm about to tell you would have happened.

"Back so soon, sir?" the girl behind the desk asked, sliding my key back to me. I went upstairs and dropped my backpack in my room, taking my bag down from on top of the dresser, and putting my toothbrush back on the sink. I didn't know what to do, but I was too amped up to sleep, so I went outside to walk around.

The headlines jumped off every paper and blared from every television set: "Super Typhoon Set to Touch Down." "Massive Storm to Slam Southeast Asia." "Storm of The Century Coming." The locals didn't seem fazed by the impending danger, laughing and singing as they nailed plywood over windows that faced the beach and piled sandbags into the front doors of their shops.

If I had to ride this thing out, I was going to be prepared for the worst. I stood in a long line at one of the ATM machines that accepted my bankcard and took out \$200 in U.S. bills – the most allowed in one day. Money in hand, I visited the air-conditioned minimart, recognizing many of the foreigners from the ferry terminal. I filled my cart with cans of Spam and little hot dogs, bread, Snickers bars, a couple flashlights, plenty of batteries, a knife, and two huge canisters of drinking water – enough to live for a week, at least. I also threw three bottles of rum and a carton of American cigarettes on the counter – they might come in handy to trade or as a bribe in the aftermath.

My little room at Saint Vincent's thoroughly stocked, I assessed my surroundings with new eyes. The structure had concrete walls that would hold up well. The roof, on the other hand, was just cheap corrugated tin that would peel open like a bag of potato chips once the winds started. I could hear the footsteps of the hotel workers on the roof, tying down the water tank and pounding nails in the tin to secure the roof. The good news was that my room was three flights, which could be a lifesaver once the sea rose. Every day, I'd cursed as I climbed those three flights in the tropical heat, but now they were my only comfort.

The door to my room didn't open up to a hallway, like in most western hotels, but an outdoor terrace. That high up, there would be nothing to shield me from the winds. Hanging over the edge of the railing and looking down, I calculated how high up I was. Maybe 28 feet high? The latest

update sent from my friend Whitey anticipated 25-foot sea swells hitting the island.

I tried to imagine the storm, ocean waves swelling and rising unchecked, quickly overtaking the white sand beach, filling in the palm groves by the beach, spilling across the boardwalk and overtaking the bars, restaurants, and shops like toys in a bathtub, shattering windows and splintering structures like matchsticks, the gray angry froth soon swallowing up roof lines, walls of water racing through the narrow paved streets as people screamed and ran inland, only to be washed away.

Where would the people go? I looked out at the horizon. The whole world was ocean, as far as the eye could see. It was terrifying to think that our tiny bump of rock and sand was just a blip in the middle of all that, like ants floating on a leaf in the middle of a raging river. The ocean was coming to take the island back, and I didn't see how many of us could live through it.

And afterwards? What would be left? Who could help us? How would we survive, trapped in the center of thousands of square miles of ocean with no clean water and no food on the island? Or would it all be underwater, erasing any trace of our existence?

It was 24 hours before the typhoon was set to hit.

I took out my computer and went online, checking the websites of the three nice resorts that sat in the middle of the island, the only ones high enough up in the hills that they wouldn't be underwater if those sea swells really did reach that high. Their websites all showed they were booked and weren't taking any more reservations.

"Hey, are you OK? I read about some crazy storm that's going to hit," a friend messaged me. "I know Asia is big, but you're not anywhere near that, are you?"

That night, I turned the air conditioning in my room all the way up until I had to put on a sweatshirt to keep from shivering. I was sure we'd lose electricity so I might as well enjoy it. But I tossed and turned, my mind corkscrewing tighter with visions of the black sea chasing me.

At 3:30 AM I sat up, opened my laptop, and typed out a quick blog – just whatever thoughts came to mind. I guess I wanted there to be some record of my final thoughts in case those words outlived me. I didn't understand why, but that seemed important. Though my family in the U.S. was away on vacation, I didn't want my mom to somehow read it and worry. But I

had to tell everyone I loved them, and that I was thankful. It was my goodbye.

When I was done writing, I titled it: "[It's 3:39 AM and I'm wide awake.](http://www.normschriever.com/blog/its-339-am-and-im-wide-awake)"  
(<http://www.normschriever.com/blog/its-339-am-and-im-wide-awake>)

I shared it on Facebook, and closed my laptop. I lay down and closed my eyes again. This time, a strange peace drifted through me, an acceptance of whatever destiny awaited with the daylight. I slept.

## **Panicked Cats**

The next morning, the day the typhoon was set to make our acquaintance, I did not feel that same peaceful acceptance. Instead, I was more than slightly freaking out, my brain crackling with anxiety like popcorn hitting hot oil. I rearranged the supplies I'd bought the day before, putting the important things on the top shelf.

I made sure the candles and lighter were near the door, where I could find them in the dark. I plugged in my computer and phone and made sure they were fully charged. I put on my baggy khaki shorts and a basketball jersey but changed twice, then went from flip-flops to sneakers and back again. I might die in these clothes, I thought, or be stuck wearing them for days or weeks.

I laughed at myself for trying on clothes to get the perfect super typhoon outfit like a debutante going to a ball. What odd circumstances we find ourselves in, and even odder how we respond.

Outside my room, on the terrace that led to the stairs, the most beautiful sunrise greeted me – the sky smoky, hazy embers of orange in first light. But then I realized it was almost 8 AM, hours past dawn. The air held an eerie humidity I'd never felt before, like opening a suitcase of wet clothes.

In the courtyard below, everyone was in preparation: hauling water, nailing plywood, and tying down anything that might fly around. I could feel the whole island buzz with an uncontrollable nervous energy, like a prisoner pacing the night before his execution. "I really should eat something," I thought, but my stomach cast a dissenting vote. I went back inside. I didn't know what to do.

Emails and messages rolled in from my friends who'd read my "goodbye blog" and news of the super typhoon:

"Norm, we're praying for your safety!"

"We love you and hope you make it through this with no problems."

"This doesn't look good – are you going to be OK?"

Instead of providing comfort, their alarmed tones further frayed my nerves. I went outside to try and stomach some breakfast and hit the ATM again, but an "Out of Order" sign hung on it. The security guard explained that it was out of money. On a remote island, if things aren't brought in every day, they run out quickly. The shelves at the stores and markets

were almost bare as travelers picked through, buying whatever was available at the last hour.

I went to two more ATMs but they were all out of order, despite a line of tourists trying them anyway. I walked back to my room along the boardwalk that lined the beach. Off my left shoulder, the sky was a swell of purple-black clouds crawling through the air. There was no wind yet – instead, a preternatural stillness, a deep vacuum of humidity that blanketed the island as the barometer dropped off the charts.

A few locals were still out, going about their business cheerily, but everything on the beach was boarded up and empty now. Other tourists nodded to me as if to convey, “here we go,” but we didn’t speak.

When I looked down to the palm groves around me, I saw one of the craziest things I’ve ever witnessed: there were ants everywhere. Marching in perfect columns, thousands of ants streaming across the sand. And another column over here, and more over there.

I stopped in my tracks and looked around. Everywhere, there were ants streaming around – thousands, too many to count. And other insects: beetles, spiders, crickets making their way down the trees and across the vast desert of the beach, some of them drowning themselves in the sea.

Sensing the coming storm with some primal survival instinct, they were abandoning their nests and searching for safety. There was no place to escape on an island, but they felt they could not stay.

Across the boardwalk by a vacant restaurant, a dozen island cats thrashed about in panic. Island cats are usually fat and lazy, with no natural predators and a nonstop supply of mice, discarded fish parts, and food scraps. But now, they felt an unseen predator stalking them. Unlike the orderly insects, the cats didn’t know where to go.

The cats hissed and bared their teeth, clawing at each other when they got too close, fur standing on end with the adrenaline of survival. They ran in circles, started in one direction and stopping, then suddenly bouncing the other way, eyes wide black ovals, bumping into each other and lashing out. I’d never seen more than one cat at a time on the island, but here there were a dozen – no, 15, maybe 20. Cats circled the sand and climbed the walls and scratched up the palm trees.

Back at my room, I lay in bed and enjoyed the air conditioning and television with new appreciation. I woke up a couple of hours later and shuffled outside to the terrace. It was only noon, but the sky was a charcoal slate. There was neither a moon nor a sun, like the atmosphere on a planet



in a bad sci-fi movie. No one was in sight. The tops of the palm trees started to sway. I stood on my tiptoes to catch a glimpse of the sea past the rooftops and trees.

The water was completely gray, frothing with whitecaps like a boiling pot of water forgotten on the stove. A towel and a swimsuit that one of my neighbors had hung to dry danced around in the air before settling into the dirt below. I could hear the creaking of ropes as the wind strained to break the water tank free.

Here we go.

I went back inside and lay down and stared at the ceiling. Waiting was the worst part. How long would I be in here? Would the roof rip off? Would the winds get so high they shattered my one window? I pulled the curtain closed. How would the concrete walls hold up when 200 mph winds slammed into them? The lights flickered and I heard a tree branch crack. It was only 2 PM, and I stared at the ceiling, watching a frantic lizard make its way across. Waiting was the worst part, because I wished it was over – or at least here.

Finally, I couldn't take it – I needed to get out of that room. I grabbed a sweatshirt, as it was now unnaturally chilly outside, along with my phone and GoPro camera, and headed downstairs. I walked to the beach. At least I could watch the storm come in and take a few photos while it was still safe, before bunkering down in my room.

It was strange to see the empty road and boardwalk, which had been packed with tourists enjoying the sun and barhopping only the day before. Two island teenagers passed me, shirtless with homemade tattoos on their arms, laughing with bravado as one threw a rock at the wooden plank over a café window. There was chaos in their laughter. It was their time. It occurred to me that the storm wasn't the only thing we might have to worry about, as there were no police or any other authority in sight. They'd probably evacuated, headed home to their families, or to the hills.

Ten minutes down the beach, I saw a hotel with signs of life. The Victory Divers Resort sat facing the beach with an outdoor bar, where on sunny afternoons packs of perfect-physiued Swedish, Norwegian, and French college-aged kids hung out, drinking beers and retelling their scuba diving adventures.

Even though the wind whipped up sand that rattled the bamboo shacks, a half dozen people sat at the bar. Franz, the hotel owner's half-Filipino, half-German son with curly locks and nipple piercings, was working. He poured beers for a couple older American expats, slumped over their

typical liquid breakfast, probably not noticing anything was different on this day.

I joined them at the bar and ordered a beer. The bartender told me I should order food while the electricity was still on, so I asked for a hamburger. Sitting at the beach bar, I had a perfect view of the black sky and storm rolling across the ocean at us. The beer was good, with the wind hitting my side and the false safety of a few people around me. I felt even calmer after two beers.

A guy about my age sat at the bar wearing an Oakland Raiders t-shirt. "Turn this up. Hey, man. Turn it up," he said to Franzi. The TV was set on a Malaysian newscast documenting how Super Typhoon Haiyan had slammed into the central Philippines.

In areas like Leyte, Tacloban, and Samara, the few reports that got through painted a horrific picture: the islands had been completely decimated, entire cities leveled to rubble and washed under. No one had any idea the extent of the damage or how many were dead because no more communications were coming from those areas.

The newscasters could only bounce between the two images available: a satellite map showing the path of Haiyan, and a 15-second video someone shot with their cell phone showing the winds howling past their condo balcony.

"Damn, that's crazy," I said.

"Yeah, it's a hell of a storm all right," Raider said.

"No, I'm all set," I said to Franzi, who had placed another beer in front of me.

"Come on, don't be a wuss," Raider said. "Drink."

"This one's on me," Franzi said. I'd planned on heading back to the concrete walls of my hotel room, but I might as well hang out while I had company - and electricity.

We drank our beers and chatted, loose from the alcohol that was an antidote to my adrenaline. The winds pushed angrily at the trees now, the sound of palm leaves rustling and occasional branches snapping drowning out the noise of the TV. The power lines blew around like jump ropes and soon the lights flickered and went out, and the TV went black.

"Ohhhhhh!" everyone at the bar said in unison. We were really in it now.

I planned my escape back to my room, but a fresh beer was put in front of me, as Raider bragged to me about the countries he'd visited and all the wild parties and women along the way.

"I met this girl playing pool my first night in Cambodia," he said. "She stayed with me for the next three weeks and we traveled all over and had fun and drank every night. When I was ready to leave to come here, she asked me for money – said she was working the whole time. Can you believe that bullshit? I told her to fuck off and gave her enough for the bus back home."

I nodded but my thoughts were elsewhere. I checked my cell phone, and was amazed to see it was still working. Each time I got to a new country, the first thing I did was buy a local SIM card. Even though the power was out, my cell phone service from the mainland was still operating.

Straining my eyes to read my iPhone as rain blew in, I saw reports that Haiyan had almost caught up to us. But the updated projected path was through the Gulf of Thailand, about 30 miles south of the dot on the map that was our island. We'd still take a hit, but the epicenter would just miss us, blowing past over open water. I told the others the good news, and they cheered and raised their beer glasses.

It must have been the confluence of a million factors that turned the tempest south of us at the final hour, probably sparing our lives. I took a deep breath for the first time in 48 hours and threw my head back in relief, letting the rain hit my face.

By 4 PM the typhoon was on us. Even though it wasn't a direct hit, the winds were raising hell like I'd never seen before, and the rain backed up the streets until people had to wade up to their waists. But, thankfully, the sea wasn't rising over the island – my biggest fear. Instead, the ocean waves were actually being pushed backwards.

It was the damndest thing: 150 mph winds were blowing from the other side of the island, meeting the ocean waves at our beach head-on. Instead of the waters rising onto the land, they were being blown offshore, the churning whitecaps fighting to arrive at the shore, as if in slow motion.

After that, we were so relieved to be alive that Franzi poured free rounds and there was no use going anywhere. I grabbed my GoPro and walked out to the flooded boardwalk to shoot some video, keeping my eyes up for flying debris or projectile coconuts.

Franzi walked past me with his surfboard under his arm, stepping onto the beach.

“Are you serious?!” I laughed.

“Sure, why not?” he asked, wrestling his board to submission when the wind pulled at it.

“You’re crazy!”

“You guys should go up on the roof to get a better view. The staircase is through the lobby. Just be really careful up there and get back down quick before anyone sees you.”

Going up on a roof during a typhoon probably isn’t the most prudent idea – especially since we took that suggestion from a guy surfing in it. But Raider grabbed his beer and I grabbed my GoPro and we made our way through the hotel lobby, covered with soaked towels to quell the few inches of rain on the floor, and headed up the staircase. One floor, two, three, and we got to the fourth floor, past the last hallway of rooms, to a heavy red door leading outside.

At first, we thought it was locked. The handle turned but the door wouldn’t budge, even when Raider put his shoulder into it. Or maybe it was nailed from the outside? But then we heard the scream of the wind against its face and knew why it was difficult to open. We set our feet and counted to three and pushed, managing to force it open just enough to slip outside.

The hotel roof was as big as a parking lot, with an industrial AC unit and a little wooden structure to enclose the door. The rooftop had a waist-high railing, with the front of the hotel facing the ocean, just higher than the palm trees. The wind was vicious up there, like an animal that clawed at my face and tried to pick me up by the loose parts of my sweatshirt.

We made our way across the roof deck by crouching so the wind wouldn’t catch us and the rain didn’t sting so much. With one hand on the railing to anchor me, I steadied the GoPro and shot some footage scanning the island and the ocean.

“Let’s video you in the storm,” Raider yelled in my ear. “Saying something to everyone back home.”

Though I only understood half of it, he took the GoPro and trained it on me as I stood back by the railing. I said something about being in the worst typhoon in history and the winds and all that – though I’m sure I looked

pretty goofy, half drunk and sopping wet. Little did I know how far that video would travel.

We finished and made our way back to the red door. Bracing our feet and pushing with our shoulders, we wedged it open. But the whole force of the hurricane winds hit the broad face of the door. There was a loud splintering and all of a sudden I was left holding only a doorknob, half the red door flying above us and off the rooftop like a kite, never to be seen again. Surviving a typhoon but then getting killed by a flying door would've been a hell of an unlucky way to go.

We made our way down the stairs, a torrent of water from the open doorway streaming in. Franzi was now lying on the beach with his sunglasses on, pretending to sunbathe. I said goodbye to him and Raider and headed back toward Saint Vincent's.

The streets were so flooded it wasn't worth keeping my shoes on, so I carried them in my hand and made my way, not knowing where I was stepping under the water. Debris was strewn everywhere like the lawn of a college dorm on Sunday morning: splintered plywood, burst sandbags, broken glass, fallen palm trees, fishing nets on the tops of roofs, an army of single flip-flops, and a capsized boat.

A few brave souls were out already and the mood was jubilant since we'd all survived. A maintenance truck inched its way up the flooded road, shirtless and wet-faced workers in the back cheering and high-fiving me as they passed.

Back at Saint Vincent's, I headed up to my room, holding onto the railing so I didn't slip off the rain-soaked stairwell. It was dark inside my room, the last remnants of cool from the air conditioner sucked out when I opened the door. I chuckled at the candles near my bed and pulled back the curtains. I took off my clothes and threw them on the floor in a wet pile and fell onto the bed. I couldn't tell if it was 6 PM or midnight, but I passed out, dreaming of ocean waves that traveled backwards.

## **Typhoon Hangover**

It was still dark when I woke up, the sky just hinting at softening into dawn. The jungle heat had invited itself into my room once the air conditioning went out. I flipped the light switch in a half-asleep reaction, but it still didn't work. I splashed water on my face, threw on some swim shorts, and shuffled outside.

Standing on my balcony, I could see a clear, powder-blue sky – the storm was gone. I looked down at the morning streets below. Everyone was out and cleaning up, sweeping leaves and small branches, chopping fallen wood, and piling up debris. It seemed like every island man, woman, and child was outside already, working before dawn. They worked without talking but cheerily, as if everyone was humming the same silent song of thanks.

“Good morning, *bong!*” a voice came down to me from above. The same teenager who had secured the water tank the day before was now patching the wobbly roof. No one had to tell them all to get up and work, no one waited for someone else to come fix their problems, and no one complained that they were doing more than the next person. A man was up to his neck in grease, smoking a cigarette while trying to get the hotel's generator to operate. A hunched grandmother swiped her bamboo broom at the dirt. They all just did it because it needed to be done, and still being alive was all the compensation they needed.

“Community,” I said out loud, realizing it was an odd thing to do when I heard my own voice. But it was true.

There was no way I could go back to sleep after seeing all the locals working. I had to do something to help, too. Grabbing a shirt and my key, I made toward the stairs, intending to offer my token physical labor to the effort. But then I remembered my GoPro sitting on the floor right where I'd left my soggy clothes the night before. Maybe I should upload the photos first, and try to get in touch with my family and people back in the States to let them know I was OK.

I collected my GoPro and laptop and plopped back down on the bed, the door open to let the cool air in, listening to the sweet music of people rebuilding below. I connected the camera to my laptop and downloaded the video. I watched it on my laptop and edited out the parts that were too shaky from the wind or when I'd had the camera on by mistake.

Since the electricity was down on the island, the Wi-Fi wasn't working, either. I turned on my cell phone, which still had 37% battery. It searched for a signal and I was shocked it picked up one bar from some tower far off

on the mainland. I turned on the phone's hotspot, leaving it balanced on the railing outside, and logged onto the Internet on my laptop. First, I emailed and Facebook-messaged my friends and family, letting them know I was safe. I started uploading the video to YouTube so I could show them the extent of the typhoon, but it was slow going. Several times, the video was partially uploaded when the cell signal was lost. My phone was running out of juice, down below 25%.

I found that if I stood out on the corner of the balcony with the laptop in one hand and the phone held high over my head with the other, the signal was strongest. Finally, when the battery was down to 8%, the video successfully posted on YouTube. I quickly wrote in a title and description. 6%. I got the link and posted it to Facebook. 3%. Finally, I managed to tweet it out right as my phone died.

The sun was up now and it was a gorgeous morning, all humidity wrung out of the air and the sea breeze back to a pleasant kiss. By the time I made it downstairs after posting the video, most of the cleanup work was done.

I started walking that day, heading up the beach, taking photos of the damage and the cleanup. But with every able-bodied person attacking the problem with vigor, by noon there was little evidence we'd experienced a typhoon at all, save for a few colossal piles of debris and the blackout.

Walking all morning, I saw parts of the island I'd never seen before: the shanty towns up the coast from the main tourist parts of Dragon Town, littered with cell phone cases and toy cars that had somehow washed up; fields of mud with boats stranded, sterns askew in the air after the water somehow blew out of the lagoon; horse carts and morning fires, laundry drying on the roofs. The little children splashed in the mud and swung from dangling power lines like Tarzan on a vine, all of it an exciting new game to them.

I waved to the islanders and they called, "*Sok so bie!*" back to me with sunny smiles, wishing me good health. I lent a hand when the men were raising the tall bamboo windcreens in front of their shops on the beach again, or when a pushcart filled with blue plastic water jugs got stuck in the mud. Of course, I really wasn't doing much, but they just seemed to be appreciative that a foreigner was there and eager to help at all.

The first day after the typhoon was filled with novel inconveniences, as we basked in the glow of our good fortune. A couple of the restaurants were open by the afternoon, but they didn't have ice or fresh supplies so menus were limited – and prices doubled. By the end of the day a new noise overtook the island, this one far more intrusive than the winds of the typhoon – the sound of generators kicking into action. The bigger hotels

and nice restaurants and shops had portable petrol-powered generators to run the essentials. But they only ran them a couple hours at a time to conserve petrol, since the price had risen five-fold. They made a terrible racket that rattled your teeth and sent your hands over your ears, but no one complained.

At Saint Vincent's, an old man in coveralls with a cigarette hanging from his mouth, covered head to toe in grease, wrestled with their pre-war beast of a generator, as it was prone to breaking down constantly. But he'd always manage to get it back up and running. When I heard his cursing cease and the generator's pull start, whir, and cough to life, I'd run up to my room and turn my air conditioner on full blast, turning on the TV for any news, and charging my laptop and phone.

The second morning after the typhoon, the first boats departed from Dragon Town when the Coast Guard lifted their travel advisory – the weather postcard perfect once again. But when the boats arrived on the mainland, they found the people reluctant to do business or share their supplies, as many areas had been hit hard and were struggling just to feed and provide water to their people.

The boats came back half-filled with only the most essential cargo: petrol, bottled water, eggs, live chickens squawking in crates, canned goods, batteries, cigarettes, and beer. A whole lot of beer. Sometimes, there were even a few dozen bags of ice. The sweaty tourists would gladly pay a dollar for a glass half filled with ice, running the glorious frozen cubes over their foreheads and necks with eyes closed until it melted moments later.

The bank machines were still down in Dragon Town – and, from what I heard, most of the mainland, too. That didn't stop us foreigners from lining up at the ATMs when the generators were on, hoping for a miracle that one would be stocked and online. Most of us were running desperately low on cash, especially since prices were so high. When there was a rumor that someone got cash out of the ATM at the Bank of Canada at the outdoor shopping plaza, D Mall, the whole mob ran down there, only to find out it wasn't working.

Tourists started trading their watches and even their iPhones to pay their hotel tabs. I gave away my cigarettes to the old man wrestling the generator, and gave the bottle of rum to the young guys working at Saint Vincent's. They insisted I have a drink with them.

"How long do you think the electricity and Internet will be down?" I asked as we sipped the warm amber swill out of dirty glasses under a night-blanket of diamonds.



“Any day now, *kuya*,” they’d say, referring to me as a “dude” now that I was semi-indoctrinated to the ways of the locals. “Any day for sure. Now drink up. To our families!”

The first days after the typhoon weren’t so bad. I swam in the ocean all day and laid in the shade in the scorching afternoon, praying for a breeze. At night, it was so hot there was little hope for sleep. You couldn’t leave your door open because the bugs would attack you, so there was nothing for me to do but drink a few warm beers with my island friends before passing out for four hours before the sun blazed through my window and started climbing the wall. I went to only the cheapest restaurants I could find, counting and recounting the dwindling cash in my wallet.

The third day after the typhoon, my cell phone came alive again, reconnecting with the far-off tower on the mainland. Just like that, I was part of the outside world again. Instantly, my phone started buzzing and beeping with notifications, vibrating across my nightstand and falling to the floor. I picked the phone up and looked at it. This couldn’t be right: I had hundreds of emails, messages, notifications, tweets, and comments. No, thousands!

People all over the world had watched my homemade video shot on the hotel’s roof. In the first hours and days after the typhoon, there had been literally no images or accounts coming in from the hardest hit areas. The devastation was so total that people were worried about survival, not shooting and sharing videos, and they still didn’t have power or cell service. But the international media was consumed with the story of the typhoon, and the beast needed to be fed.

Someone found my video on YouTube and shared it with their friends, who shared it with their friends, and then tens of thousands of people did the same. My email was filled with requests from media to use the footage. When they didn’t hear back, they assumed I was dead and used it anyway, since dead men don’t sue.

They played my video on news stations from Moscow to Tokyo, London to Buenos Aires, and Frankfurt to New York. Interview requests rolled in. Of course I mentioned that our island hadn’t been hit nearly as hard as others, but the reporters still wanted to talk to someone, and I was available and spoke half-decent English.

I managed to chat with a handful of reporters and TV hosts over a choppy Skype connection. Those interviews were aired on *Good Morning America*, CNN’s *Anderson Cooper 360*, *Outside Magazine*, and a half dozen affiliates of the big networks. Of course, I never got to see them, but my friends in

the U.S. messaged to tell me they were blown away to see my mug adorning their televisions.

It was a cool experience, but I knew that the real story was the devastation to so many people around us who desperately needed help. During the interviews, I expressed my wishes that people donate to help the typhoon victims.

After that, I received well wishes from people all over the world, but especially folks who had family or friends traveling through Southeast Asia, thought to be on our island when the typhoon hit. They hadn't heard from them after the storm and were understandably concerned. I emailed back, assuring them their missing loved ones were probably down on the beach working on their tan and drinking beer. But I also promised to do my best to find and reconnect them.

After a while, there was a whole list of names, so I wrote them on a piece of cardboard and brought it down to the lifeguard station by the beach. Since it was a central location that most tourists passed at some point, I asked if I could post it there, with instructions where to come find me or email me if the "lost" travelers saw the sign. But by the time I tacked the cardboard list to the lifeguard stand and started walking away, my email buzzed with seven new requests to find people. We needed a better system.

I wrote another blog, posting photos of the missing and whatever vital information that their families provided. I tweeted that blog out and, sure enough, it got carried around the world as well. Through the wonders of social media, we were able to reconnect most of the travelers with their families, letting them know they were OK.

One of the biggest newspapers in Sweden wrote an article about the "humanitarian work" I was doing in the wake of the disaster. I told the reporter that I really wasn't doing that much, and others deserved far more praise. I let them know I was only following the example the locals had set that pre-dawn morning after the typhoon, when each person did what they could to help without being asked, just for the greater good. That morning, I told the reporters, they had taught me the true meaning of a word we use all the time in the west but perhaps had lost sight of: *community*.

## **Stranded**

Five days after the typhoon, I was out of money. My local friends assured me that everything would be up and running on the island any day, but despite promises from the local officials in Dragon Town and speeches by mainland politicians on the news, the power hadn't come back on. Hotels and restaurants ran off their generators on the few hours on/off system.

The ATMs still didn't work, but that didn't stop tourists from lining up and trying every morning. Like me, many of them were running out of money. Unlike me, many of them just used their credit cards or even caught a boat off the island, heading to Cambodia or Thailand to enjoy the modern amenities and comforts before deciding where their next stop would be.

But I still couldn't leave. I didn't have a passport, so flights were out of the question. I could risk the ferry crossing and hope a lax visa officer would let me into the country, but I didn't even have money for a ferry crossing anymore – or the bribe it would require. I also didn't have a credit card, as I'd misplaced mine a month earlier in a boarding house in the Philippines. No credit card, and now very little cash.

It seemed like I should have no worries after making it through the typhoon scare, but I was out of options, with only \$14 left to my name. My room was paid for one more night, but after that I had to re-book the reservation somehow. The hotels were only taking cash, since their credit card processing systems were still down. But there had to be a solution. I had a few thousand dollars in the bank, but I just couldn't get to it – a disconnect that swelled to maddening frustration.

As a last resort I thought surely my bank, Wells Fargo, would have a way of getting money to me. I'd been a good customer for a long time, so they must have a way to wire cash in an emergency situation. So I held the phone over my head to get a decent signal, my arm hurting by now, and Skyped the international customer service number on the back of the card.

After 37 minutes on hold, I got through to someone who claimed to be a human being.

"Hello. Can you hear me?" I said over the choppy connection. "I really need your help. Thank god I've got you on the line because..." They transferred me to someone else. I waited another 19 minutes and then the Wi-Fi connection skipped and the call was dropped.

After several attempts, I got a hold of someone.

"Yes, hello! Don't hang up, please!" I said.

“Yes. I am happy to help. Can you please give me your card number, mother’s maiden name and three-digit security code?”

“Sure, 477506075465, Wilhelm, 621.”

“OK, now please tell me the name of your first pet, street you grew up on, and middle school mascot?”

“Button, Pickwick Road, and Dragons.”

“I’m sorry, but the computer says your first pet was not a dragon.”

“No, no, that was the mascot.”

“OK, I’m happy to help you. But first, would you like to volunteer for a brief 37-question survey?”

“Umm, no, I wouldn’t. But please help me. Oh, man, where do I start? I’m in Southeast Asia traveling and we had a typhoon and I’m stranded on this island now, and the bank machines are off and I really need money.”

“OK, I’m happy to help you with that. Our goal is always to pay very close attention to our customers’ needs.”

“OK, great.”

“OK.”

“Yes?”

“All right.”

“What? Are you there?”

“Oh yes, yes. So you say your card was stolen in Asia?”

“Stolen? No, I have my card, but I just need to set up a wire transfer or direct payment to my hotel because the ATMs aren’t working.”

“Thank you for your request. I deeply care and would love to be of service. So your card isn’t working at the ATM machine? Have you tried a different ATM?”

“No! No! You’re not listening...”

“Or why don’t you just walk into a Wells Fargo branch?” she asked.

“PLEASE listen. I’m stranded on an island in Asia and we just had a typhoon – the one all over the news – and we have no power and I can’t leave and I can’t get money.”

“OK Southeast Asia, well, let me see... we have a branch in Hong Kong. Please just go into that branch and they will be happy to help you.”

“Hong Kong? That’s like 1,000 miles away!”

“Well, if your card has been lost or stolen I can file a security alert.”

“No! Please, no! It HAS NOT been lost or stolen. I have my card! I just can’t use it.”

“OK.”

“So whatever you do – and listen closely – please, please DO NOT cancel my card.”

“OK, have a nice day.”

The next morning, one of the ATMs in town started working again for the first time. I was saved! I got in line just like everyone else, sweaty and disheveled, unslept because of an all-nighter on hold trying to get through to Wells Fargo, but thrilled to get cash. After waiting for nearly an hour in the sun, I was finally at the front of the line. But when I slid my card in, the machine started beeping and blinking like a slot machine that had just come up all cherries. “Your card cannot be used with this machine. Please check with your bank,” the screen displayed.

I ran back to my hotel and stood out on the balcony, this time duct-taping my cell phone to a broom handle to save my hurting arm, and managed to get through to Wells Fargo customer service after a reasonable 36 minutes. They informed me the card was cancelled and my bank account suspended because someone called in the night before and reported it as stolen.

I begged, pleaded, and cursed. I held for a supervisor and tried to reason with him, but he insisted there was nothing he could do about the unfortunate turn of events, and wished me good luck. But would I like to take a brief survey?

I had three hours to go before I had to check out. Where would I go? I looked at all my clothes and toiletries and wet swimsuit strewn about the

room. All of a sudden, my little room at Saint Vincent's seemed like paradise, despite the heat and the noise and the stairs.

My family may have been on vacation, but there were still plenty of friends who would wire me money in a heartbeat. So I asked at the front desk where the local Western Union office was. I spent \$3 on a tuk-tuk across Dragon Town to the neighborhood where it was. Down to \$11. It was a big relief to find the office and see them actually open.

I walked in and inquired what I needed to do to get people to send me money. They informed me that they were currently sending money if a customer had cash, but not accepting any incoming wires or dispensing funds because of the banking and telecommunications outages in the country. Oh, and I'd need my passport.

I was truly at the end of the road. The tuk-tuk driver only charged me \$1 to get back to the hotel because he saw the defeat on my face. \$10 left.

There had to be a way to get money or at least pay for my hotel. There was always a solution if you just thought enough, but 45 minutes later I still couldn't come up with one. I sat in the air conditioning in my room and checked my watch every twenty minutes, then every ten.

Just after 1 PM, there was a knock on my door.

"Sir? Hello? Will you be staying another night?" the voice asked, as nicely as possible.

I threw my things in my bag and lugged it down the stairs. At the front desk, there were a dozen tourists ready to check in, fresh off the ferry, fanning their shiny, pale skin. I asked the nice lady working at the desk if I could somehow extend my stay and pay later, explaining the situation. She felt sorry for me, so headed back into the office to ask her manager. I could hear her talking to the owner, who said no and chastised her for even considering it.

I shuffled out of the lobby, dropping my gaze from the doormen. Where would I go? Sit in a park? Spend my last few dollars at a coffee shop for the afternoon so I was at least indoors? It would be different if it was just me, but I had a huge duffel bag and a backpack with my computer and all my things.

Should I seek out tourists who looked compassionate and ask them for help? There were so many "I lost my passport and money, please help me," scams that it had become cliché. Where would I sleep? Try to find a safe spot on the sidewalk somewhere to spend the night? On a bench on the

boardwalk by the ocean? On the beach? This couldn't be happening. I was trending in international news and had thankful mothers all over the world inviting me to their homes and offering to cook me dinner, but I was now homeless and destitute on a far-off tropical island.

For the first time in my life, I felt like less than a person. I didn't exist. Without a passport, credit card, working bankcard, or access to money at all, I was not a citizen anymore. Without numbers, PINs, security codes, and travel documents, I was fading away, invisible, *persona non grata*.

"When did we become defined by these things?" I thought. When you were on the outside, no one cared. If I walked by, I would have looked right through myself without a thought, other than self-serving pity. It was one of the strangest and scariest feelings of my life.

I only knew that I had to do *something*, so I chose a direction – right – and started walking.

"Hey, Norm," someone said to me. "Norm – hey buddy, where you go?" It was Marlon, on his way in to work his shift at the hotel bar. "What's wrong, *kuya*? Everything OK?"

I put down my bags and told him my problem. He listened with sympathetic eyes, nodding his head.

"Yes, yes, that's a problem, *kuya*. I would talk to the owners of the hotel for you, but I know they won't care," he said. "Fucking Koreans."

"It's OK, thanks," I nodded my head and looked back down at the sidewalk.

"So where you go now?"

"I – I don't know," I said, my voice shaking. "But I'll be all right." I picked up my bags again and started heading toward nowhere, toward a night sleeping on the streets and who knows how many nights, or what would happen to me, but surely I'd be relieved of my possessions soon – and probably more.

"*Kuya*, wait."

I stopped.

"You have been nice to me," said Marlon. "And not all tourists are. I will try to help you. I don't have any money, but here," he took out a pen from the pocket of his work shirt. "Do you have something to write on?"

I put my things back down on the sidewalk and found an old business card in my backpack and handed it to him. He turned it over and wrote something on the back.

“Go to this place. Ask for the Mamasan. She is my mother’s cousin and I know she used to have extra rooms. Tell her you are my friend and I hope she can do something for you.”

I thanked Marlon profusely and took the card from him, careful not to get my sweat on it.

“Yes, yes, of course, but don’t thank me yet.”

I grabbed Marlon and gave him a hug, relieved that I was saved from sleeping on the streets. He wished me luck and went into the hotel, and I picked up my bags and hailed a passing tuk-tuk.

“Hello, sir!” the tuk-tuk driver said, thrilled at his good fortune. “First customer today! Good luck for me and good luck for you! So where we go?”

I checked the business card from Marlon and read it to him.

“Candy Bar. 136 Street.”

“Ahhh, yes, I know where that is,” he said with a wink, and we rushed off into the boiling cauldron of traffic.



## **Candy Bar**

The tuk-tuk driver wove through town, turning around to talk to me when traffic slowed.

“Sir, you like bar? If you want, I show you other bar. Better girls, more cheap?” he said, measuring my face in his rearview mirror with his one good eye.

I politely declined, infinitely relieved that I’d run into Marlon. My sweat-stained t-shirt cooled in the breeze as we picked up speed.

“Where is this place?” I asked.

“Not far now. Don’t worry. Sam Sam take you there. Anywhere you go Dragon Town, I help you.”

“Sam? You said that’s your name?”

“Yes, Sam Sam. Sam Sam the Tuk-tuk Man.”

“Well, if you’re born with the last name ‘Tuk-tuk Man,’ at least you know what you’re meant to do in life,” I said, feeling upbeat for the first time in a while.

“What, sir? Yes, Sam Sam ride tuk-tuk.”

“Never mind.”

Sam Sam accelerated down a street parallel to the beach, but two blocks inland. The streets zoomed by – 110, 118, 130 – each one a mirror image of the last, without sidewalks, not wide enough for two cars to pass. We passed rows of narrow two-story structures with lots of beer signs but few windows, people living on the top floors, their balconies adorned with hanging laundry and potted flowers, all leaning into the street like ears trying to overhear a secret.

Finally, Sam Sam turned down street 136 and slowed to a crawl, pulling around an old man with a bent back who was pushing a cart of coconuts. I didn’t see any promising hotels or apartments where my new room might be, but I looked for the sign that said Candy Bar. Rose Bar, Xanadu, Utopia, Airforce One, Sweethearts, Happy Man Bar, Insomnia – there it was, Candy Bar, toward the beach end of the street on the right. We pulled over and I got out.

“You want me wait?” Sam Sam asked.

I told him no, thanks, that was all right, and paid his fare and told him to keep the change. I was down to \$8.

“Later we go temple tour? Very nice and good for you,” he said.

I waved goodbye and shouldered my duffel bag, walking up to Candy Bar. Out front, two ladies lounged on a wooden bench, sucking on mango slices sprinkled with red pepper, fanning themselves with oversized cellphones.

“I’m looking for Candy Bar. Is this it?”

“This no candy bar,” one of the girls said, making the other girl giggle. “This drink bar.”

“Umm, Marlon from Saint Vincent’s sent me. He said I should talk to someone named Mamasan?”

“Don’t worry so much, guy. Yes, Candy Bar,” she said, pointing me inside.

It didn’t look like much, but then again most bars don’t in the daytime, so small and bare you can’t imagine why anyone would pay for the privilege of drinking there. Candy Bar was no different: a solid wood bar lined the left side of the room, stools leaned up against it, with a concrete floor only wide enough to accommodate two or three people still wet from the mop. Towards the back there was a tattered green pool table and a couple black vinyl couches held together with duct tape, facing a small stage made out of painted plywood with a wall of mirrors behind it. It was dark except for the daylight spilling through the front door.

A girl in an oversized t-shirt that read “No Money = No Honey” washed down the bar mirror with a rag. When I told her I was looking for Marlon’s aunt, she put down her rag and whisked through a black curtain into the back of the bar.

I waited, looking at the liquor bottles shelved behind the bar, a few small green fans affixed to the walls and a sign that read, “Ring the bell and buy all the ladies a drink, 1,500 baht.” Maybe she wanted me to follow her back there?

The curtains parted and someone came out. At first, judging by her silhouette, I thought it was the same girl. But when she stepped forward I saw it was an Asian woman probably in her mid-30s, not at all unattractive, with wide, simple features and chestnut eyes beneath reading glasses. She had an air of seriousness that made her seem older, standing half cloaked in the shadows. She looked me up and down as I

stood there, sweating and disheveled, taking in my fake G-Shock watch, sun-faded t-shirt, and beach worn flip-flops, my luggage taking up half of the width of the bar.

"Hi there. Are you Marlon's aunt, Mamasan?" I asked.

"I am the Mamasan, yes," she said, putting a hand on her hip. "And who are you?"

I introduced myself and told her that Marlon sent me. I told her what happened after the typhoon and how I had no money and no place to go.

"I will definitely pay you back if you could help me with a place to stay," I said, trying to sound trustworthy but not too desperate.

She listened without speaking, piercing me with those hard brown eyes, judging all my past sins – and estimating my future ones.

"I see," she said. "So Marlon sent you?" But it wasn't a question.

She stepped forward from the shadow of the doorway into the sunlight and for the first time, I could see her. Mamasan's face was badly scarred on the same side as her heart, a crisscross of dark and hardened flesh that ran from her upper cheek near her eye almost down to the tip of her chin. The scar was powdered with makeup but still a little darker than the rest of her face.

She looked me over again, calculating whether I would be a debit or a credit in her world. But then the woman I would come to know only as "Mamasan" smiled, making her look 10 years younger.

"OK, Norm *bong*, maybe we can find something for you," she said with a new softness in her voice. Touching my arm, she guided me to sit down at one of the chairs at a cocktail table.

"But you have to pay me back the first day you get your money again, OK? No *bula bula*."

"OK, of course. No *bula* at all. Never," I agreed. "Umm, but what's that mean, again?"

"Bullshit," she said. "And there are rules here. If you break them, I throw you out. First time of trouble, I promise."

I told her that was great and she wouldn't have any problems and of course I'd pay her back and thanked her over and over until she held up her hand to shut me up.

"It is nothing rich like you are used to. You will be living with the girls. Come on, I'll show you."

I didn't know what girls she meant, but she told me to leave my bags and took me through the back curtain of the bar. We dodged our way through a storage hallway impossibly packed with boxes, stacked cases of beer, and the carcasses of broken fans. While I had to squeeze and contort my body to get through without knocking things over, she navigated effortlessly through the indoor cave.

We passed the bar's washroom, where an old lady wrapped in a sarong squatted on the wet tile floor, chopping up greens and putting them into a pot of water.

"Who's eating *that*?" I asked, but regretted it instantly.

Mamasan didn't answer, but brought me out a bent screen door into an alley. The walls were so narrow and high, I didn't know if we were indoors or outside. But I didn't look up because it took all my concentration to keep from tripping, since the concrete beneath our flip-flops was pocked with deep holes. Puddles of shiny water collected in other places beside random piles of garbage. It was almost pitch black in the alley, though I could feel the midday heat.

"Careful now, Norm *bong*," she said. "Come with me."

At the end of the alley, we came upon an open courtyard. The sky opened up so it wasn't dark anymore. I could see little kids kicking a deflated rubber beach ball, old ladies serving tea and soup on card tables outside their front doors, and a shirtless man lifting homemade concrete weights.

"When you come up to your room, you can either come through the bar or through this alley from the street," she said.

Touching my elbow, guiding me gently like you might do with an escaped mental patient you knew was harmless, she led me to a dented and faded green metal door with bars on its upper half. She produced a key from her pocket and reached her hand inside, opening a heavy padlock and swinging the door open. I followed her down a pitch-black hallway, ducking my so I wouldn't scrape the concrete ceiling, cool from never feeling the sun.

At the end of the hallway, we turned up a wide staircase under the sun again. As we climbed, each landing revealed entryways to two apartments, where I glimpsed a hammock or a parrot cage inside. Was one of these mine? But Mamasan showed no signs of slowing down until the stairs ended four flights up on the rooftop.

On the roof there were eight metal shacks, each one about as big as one-car garages. They had no visible windows and only one door, some of which were propped open. I could tell that the shacks were lived in only because of the piles of shoes out front – dozens of flip-flops, wedges, and sparkly high heels carefully paired up.

Across the center of the roof hung a laundry line, with jean shorts, dresses, and shirts so small I thought children must live there. A few of the lopsided shanties had altars sitting out front, two foot-high statues of Buddha adorned with coins and apples and oranges, bowls of rice and sticks of half-burnt incense.

“OK, this one is where you stay,” Mamasan said, stopping at a shack near the center of the rooftop and unlocking a padlock that held the front door shut. This was the room that Marlon had offered me? I went in after her and looked.

A blast of burning air met us like we’d opened a furnace door. She pulled a string from the one bare light bulb hanging in the center of the single room so we could see. The only furniture was a plywood platform with a flimsy roll of foam and a red bed sheet on top of it. There was one dusty fan in the corner, which made a clacking racket and struggled to oscillate once she turned it on. Partitioned off in the corner behind a half wall was a cracked toilet, a small sink with a broken shard of mirror hanging over it, and a plastic hose with a nozzle that served as both the shower and water source for the sink.

“You stay here as long as you want,” Mamasan said, rearranging the one red sandbag pillow on the bed. “But I have to charge you a little more because I am taking you at your word. \$20 each once you get your money back, OK?”

“\$20 a night, OK,” I said, not daring to bargain.

“\$20 a week,” she said. “I give you key and you come and go as you please, but you have to follow my rules. If you don’t follow my rules, we have a problem and you are gone. Do you understand?”

“Yes, of course,” I said, realizing this was the only option that kept me from being homeless. Hopefully I’d only have to stay for a couple of nights. “But aren’t you going to tell me the rules first?”

“No – you agree to them first, then I tell you.”

“Sure, I’ll agree to anything at this point,” I said, chuckling. But she was serious.

“OK, yes, I agree.”

Mamasan looked at me over her glasses. “First rule is that you never lie to me when I ask you something.”

“OK,” I said, nodding.

“Second rule is that you don’t smoke or do drugs in here.”

“No, don’t worry. I don’t do drugs,” I said, trying to look respectable and sober. “And I only drink sometimes and usually just beer...”

“I don’t care what you do,” she said, holding up her hand to stop me. I could see that the scars marked the back of one of her hands, too. “I just don’t want you to fall asleep and start a fire. So no smoking and no cooking, either.”

“That’s OK, I don’t know how to cook,” I said. “So I always eat out.”

“Yes, I can see that,” she said, looking at the well-fed belly beneath my shirt.

“And the third rule... and this one is very important...”

I waited, ready to agree to whatever it was.

“The third rule is that whatever you do, you can’t fall in love with my girls,” she said. “You get feelings for any other girl at any other bar in Dragon Town if you want, but not here. It only causes trouble.”

“Of course,” I said. “I’m pretty sure that won’t be a problem.”

### **F.O.B. (Fresh Off the Bus)**

They called them everything except what they really were: Bar Girls, Go-Go Girls, Working Girls, or my favorite name, Taxi Girls. I never found out why they were called that, but I guessed it had something to do with the taxi drivers who told their customers about the girl's services. Either way, all those other names were perfectly acceptable, but it would be blasphemous to come out and say what they really did.

That's one of the many things I learned that first afternoon in my hotbox room on the roof of Candy Bar. Mamasan set me up with keys to the numerous padlocks and security doors on the adventurous trek up to my room, gave me one ratty red towel to match my one bed sheet, and said I could eat meals with the girls at the bar – which would be on my tab, too.

I was appreciative of Mamasan's generosity, but my first afternoon in my new home, the only thing on my mind was how soon I could get the hell out of there. Surely I'd be able to get some money somehow, when Western Union was working again or when my family got back from vacation. I wanted to stay in that room for as little time as possible.

I unpacked the contents of my bag, laying my clothes on the bed and folding them neatly, but then realized I had nowhere to put everything, so I put it all back. I was already wet with sweat, and the only way to cool down the room was to open the front door. There was a small window in back, but opening it brought a supernova of sunlight reflected off the neighboring tin roofs, so it was kept shut.

The bathroom seemed unusable to me, too. The toilet wasn't flushed with a handle, but by filling up a red plastic bucket with water and then pouring it in, letting gravity do the rest. Rat droppings lined the sink and the floor. Dirty brown water came out of the hose with pressure strong enough to repel protestors.

Around 1 PM there were stirrings at the other shacks as the occupants woke up. One by one, the girls came outside to yawn and clear their heads, making sure the world hadn't ended with the previous night's festivities. It was hard to tell how many there were, or even how to differentiate one from the other, much less how old they all were, though I couldn't imagine any of the girls being over 25. Some of the girls hung laundry on the line, and another started a rice cooker plugged into a blackened outlet. Two girls in sarongs with wet hair squatted reverently in front of their statue of Buddha after placing fresh fruit and relighting the incense, folding their hands and raising them to their foreheads as they bowed.

When they saw me, the girls didn't seem surprised. They didn't say hello, but they also didn't wait for an invite, a dozen inquisitive Asian girls filing past me and taking over my room, leaving their flip-flops at the door. They looked me over, chattered among themselves and laughed, but it wasn't the big foreigner sitting on the bed sweating profusely they were most interested in.

The girls descended on my duffel bag and backpack, taking all the contents out and passing them around the room. They held each pair of boxer shorts to the sky and laughed at how big they were, discussed the mini surge protector, tried on my swim goggles, and argued what the electric hair trimmer was supposed to be used for. They inspected everything I owned before carefully folding and putting it all back. They then went through my toilet bag in the bathroom, smelling the hotel bottles of shampoo and lotion and tasting the toothpaste.

Satisfied with their inspection, the girls finally said hello.

"What your name, where you from?" a girl with a nose ring asked.

"Hi, I'm Norm. I'm from the United States," I said.

They giggled. "United? Where that?"

"USA, you know, United States of America."

"Ohhh, 'Merica," they said, nodding in approval. "Same-same Obama."

"Yeah, exactly, but I lived in Califor--"

"You have iPhone?" they cut me off, an odd question when you're just getting to know someone. When I told them I did and showed them, they descended on it like a pack of starving chupacabras.

"No... no, you need a password to get..." I said, but they'd already bypassed it somehow and were going through my song list and scrolling through all my photos.

"Ohhh, you have wife? How many babies?" they asked when they saw a photo of me with my mother, sister, and my nieces and nephew.

"No, I'm not married, and don't have children," I said.

"Ahhh, why not? You no young man. Why no have?" I didn't really want to explain the most intimate details of my personal life, but they'd already moved on to other parts of my phone.



“You play Fuckbook?” they asked.

“What? Play Fu – what?”

“Fuckbook,” she said. “Facebook. Fuckbook. Same-same, but different.” I told her that I did and she insisted on looking up my profile and adding herself.

Soon, a girl came in with a bowl of watermelon, mango slices covered with chili pepper, and some alien round fruit with furry spikes on its skin. We all ate while they asked me more questions.

“How long you stay holiday? Where you girlfriend? Have iPhone 4s or 5?”

There was no table for us to sit and eat, but the girls all squatted deeply, their butts almost touching the ground, somehow at perfect ease in what would be a torturous position for me.

After we ate the fruit, they retreated to their own shacks without saying goodbye, where they swept up, snoozed on their bedrolls with doors open, or chattered on their cell phones. Even with the racket, I fell asleep on the bed in a puddle of my own sweat, drained from my recent ordeal.

I jumped up in the blackness, disoriented in my new surroundings. Once it came to me where I was, I rose, considered splashing water on my face until I saw it come out of the hose in my bathroom, and stepped outside.

It was after sunset, the horizon burning the last orange streaks against the growing blackness. My new neighbors were getting ready for work, buzzing around outside their shacks, applying makeup, putting in earrings, trying on outfits, and lending shoes to each other. They sure looked different all done up.

They started closing their front doors, securing them with heavy padlocks, and going downstairs.

“Come down, *bong*, eat with us,” they said. I really had nothing to do in my room, so I put on a fresh t-shirt and followed.

After walking into a few walls on the way down, I finally found the back door of the bar and went in. The little old lady was in the bathroom cooking on the floor again, and everywhere I turned there were more young women, primping in the mirror, checking their cell phones, or grabbing their little bellies and complaining they drank too much beer and needed to start exercising.

“You exercise, Mosquito?” they asked, grabbing my shoulders and chest like I was a prize cow.

“Yeah, I like to work out. I try to go...”

“Hey guy, you exercise... or SEXercise?!” they asked, shrieking with laughter as they congratulated themselves on their wittiness.

Inside the bar, I went to say hello to the Mamasan, I guess to figure out what the hell to do with myself next. She directed me to a bar stool at the very end, by an ancient desktop computer, and sat me down. She brought me a Coke, and another girl placed a bowl of bathroom floor soup with a saucer of rice in front of me. I was instructed to eat, so I did.

There were a few customers in the bar now, old white men in sagging tank tops and baseball caps hunched over their beers, flirting with the girls in thick accents. Instead of being creeped out, the girls seemed to relish it, hugging the guys and flirting right back with them.

“Are you free tonight, dear?” one portly Canadian man asked.

“I available, but never free!” the girl said, laughing.

Music started playing – a surprisingly good dancehall reggae joint – and the streets filled up with tourists and girls going to work. Soon, Candy Bar was in full swing.

I learned a lot that night – possibly more than any other night in my life. Of course I’m going to tell you all about it, but first I have to share the most remarkable thing I saw that night, something that is bright in my memory to this day.

Sometime in the blur between 10 PM and whenever, someone walked through the door of Candy Bar who was quite unusual, even for the Bacchanalian craziness of Dragon Town. It wasn’t a politician or a Saudi prince, a CIA agent or a gunrunner, nor a Singaporean gangster or a Thai Mafioso looking to unload fake passports. All of them would have been less memorable than the person who walked in.

An island girl walked through the front door of Candy Bar, wearing a simple floral dress faded by dust and sun, one shoulder strap held together with a safety pin. She carried a battered suitcase with a broken clasp, splashed with the same dried mud that covered her feet and legs. I’ve never seen a human being look more frightened. Frozen in the doorway, she glanced around at people drinking and dancing and carrying on inside

the bar, and for a second I thought she was going to turn around and run away. But Mamasan had already caught her eye, so the scared girl took off her shoes at the front door, lined them up neatly, and forced herself to take a few shaking steps inside, as if ghosts were pushing her.

I'd come to find out, later that night as the other girls gossiped and her story circulated, that she'd just arrived on a bus from the furthest province on the island - which happened to also be the poorest province on the island and the one that had been hit hardest by the typhoon. She hadn't eaten in two days and was there to ask Mamasan for a job. Her name was Sophar.

## Royals

*"I've never seen a diamond in the flesh  
I cut my teeth on wedding rings, in the movies..."*

All night the music pulsed, my thoughts only able to survive in the breaks of silence. I sat by the end of the bar, for lack of any other place to go. I watched.

*"And I'm not proud of my address  
In the torn up town, no post code envy..."*

My new neighbors, the Taxi Girls of Candy Bar, were unleashing their combined fury on the night. They didn't just greet the patrons at the door; they attacked them, screaming "Helllllloooo sexy man!" in unison, and rushing to be the first one to grab their arm and lead them to a bar stool or a couch in back.

*"We don't care, we're driving Cadillacs in our dreams  
But everybody's like:  
Cristal, Maybach, diamonds on your timepiece,  
Jet planes, islands, tigers on a gold leash..."*

Once their prey was in reach, they started the chess game of lust in which they were so adept. One drink, that's all they needed to get a tourist to sit and talk with them, and then buy them a drink, and then why not one more round for good luck?

*"And we'll never be  
It don't run in our blood  
That kind of lux just ain't for us,  
We crave a different kind of buzz..."*

They'd jockey for his attention and implore the customer not to leave.

"Come on, guy... open your heart and open your wallet!" they'd say.

Through it all, Mamasan made sure I was OK, checking in with me every once in a while with a glance. The other girls stopped to chat when they didn't have customers, mostly out of boredom and to inquire why the hell I was there if I wasn't going to buy drinks, perplexed by the poorest tourist they'd ever seen.

"So live here? No? But you stay us now? You no go back you place? Why no girlfriend? What wrong with you?" they'd ask, trying to get my story straight. But they were just as quick to abandon me mid-sentence, jumping

up and swatting me aside when a group of drunken Australians on holiday or Malaysian businessmen walked past the front door, the portal to the girls' whole world.

I had company sitting at the bar – Sophar, the other new outcast. She had sable black hair that fell to the middle of her back, brushed perfectly straight but ending with slightly jagged edges that revealed it was a homemade haircut. It was hard to tell how old she was, but I guessed she was probably around 19 or 20, but definitely not in her mid-20s yet. She had a healthy face with more roundness than her slender frame, perfect skin, and slender mocha brown eyes that glinted with warmth whenever she did look up from the floor. A small, perfectly round brown beauty mark adorned her chin.

Once Sophar had walked in from the night, like a scared cat in a room full of pit bulls, she'd found Mamasan, who took her aside and talked to her sternly. She nodded and stared at the floor as Mamasan talked while pointing to the bar and upstairs. I imagined that she was learning the rules, too – though there were probably a lot more than the three I had pledged to uphold.

"Look at this one, take shoe off at door like she still in village," a girl with a gap in her teeth said, shaking her head.

The other girls talked about Sophar openly, looking her up and down with scalding judgment and making fun of her for having a dirty, ripped dress and dark skin.

"She have little fly on her chin!" they laughed, pointing to the beauty mark on her chin and pretending to swat at it. "Maybe I hit it with stick!"

At one point in her first night, Apple, the top earner and prettiest girl in the bar, walked up to her and said something, pointing out the front door. Sophar got up and walked out, looking back at Apple for approval. She came back twenty minutes later, looking so confused she might cry.

"Haha, stupid girl," Apple howled to the others, "I tell her toilet outside like in province! She never go city toilet before!"

Sophar set her face against their laughter and sat as far from the other girls as she could get. From what I could understand, she had just arrived from the furthest province on the island, where they said everyone was poor and worked outdoors so their skin was dark. She'd never left her little village before and didn't know one single person in Dragon Town, but came to find a job in a bar. That in itself wasn't unusual, for most of the girls had

arrived at that same front door under similar circumstances. But they seemed to resent Sophar for a different reason.

“She bring bad luck,” Apple said as the other girls agreed. “I no have customer tonight. Too slow. She bad luck.” They meant it, taking the invisible phantom of luck seriously in every part of their lives.

Sophar was bad luck because she showed up right after the typhoon, and now business was slow, so they saw a logical connection. The girls barely acknowledged her, so she ended up alone at the end of the bar next to me, the island of uncool with a population of two. Sophar sat with her stool swiveled facing the crowd, trying her best to look natural and mimic the demeanor of the other girls, but her mouth was tight with anguish.

She clutched the one plastic water bottle they’d given her with both hands, taking imperceptible sips to make it last as long as possible. Since we were both new, I tried to make her feel better by making friendly eye contact, to which she almost jumped out of her skin, thinking I was another bar customer. So I smiled and gave her a thumbs up. But she had no idea what a thumbs up meant, since it’s a western gesture, so I imagine she assumed I was offering to stick my thumb somewhere it didn’t belong. She scooted her stool away and clutched her water bottle even tighter.

Near midnight, Candy Bar was just warming up but I couldn’t keep my eyes open and had to get away from the blasting music. So I waved goodnight to Mamasan and went back through the bar and up toward my room. The walk seemed longer in the dark, as I had to go slowly so I wouldn’t trip over potholes, piles of garbage, or things that scampered out of the shadows when they heard me coming.

Once safely upstairs, I sat out in front of my room on the steps for a while, enjoying the night air, thick with stars and a rice bowl moon. It had been a hell of a day for me. I had hopes I’d get it all sorted out in the next day or two so I could move back into a nice hotel with air conditioning, but I was grateful to Mamasan for taking me in.

Where would I be if Marlon hadn’t run into me and offered to help? It was still unimaginable how far I’d fallen. But as I watched the stars and heard the distant throng of music and laughter, I thought about how my nightmare was many other peoples’ daily reality, especially the girls. I couldn’t help but think about that new girl, Sophar, and the look on her face when she walked in.

After a while I started nodding off, so I retreated to my room and lay down. Even in the early morning, it was so damn hot and airless that I had to sleep with the front door open. If someone wanted to sneak in and steal all

my things they were welcome to it, but that would still be better than the heat. I put my laptop under my pillow and closed my eyes.

Sometime a few hours later, I was woken by a strange sound – a whimpering outside. I stepped out my front door, rubbing my eyes. At first I couldn't figure out where the sound was coming from, and thought maybe it was an animal that was hurt.

Then I saw Sophar, sitting on the stairs of the shack next to mine. She was hunched over, hugging her knees, her hair wet and tangled and covering her face. She was crying, but muting her sobs with her hands so she wouldn't wake the other girls.

Sophar didn't see me, and I didn't know what to do. I didn't want to scare her any more. I quietly stepped back into my room and lay back down on the bed. I should stay out of it because it was none of my business, I thought. There was nothing I could do to help.

## **The Wild, Wild East**

The next morning I rose early, while the girls were all still sleeping, and went down to Western Union again to check whether they were up and running yet. They weren't, but they assured me it would be any day now. I walked to save my last few dollars, which took the better part of the morning, and the girls were all stirring to life upstairs when I got back. I didn't plan on staying with them a moment longer than I had to, but if I was going to be in their world, the least I could do was try to learn their names.

That was a major undertaking, as it was nearly impossible for westerners to pronounce their Thai, Viet, Khmer, or Filipina names. So they each manufactured a nickname, invented for the sake of their foreign clientele, and something they could post in English on Facebook.

There was Apple, the top looker in the bar; Aneang Happygirl, with her nose piercing and *yantric* tattoos on her entire back; Samantha Prettygirl; Mony Giggly; a girl I knew only as Hiandbyebye, who never talked to me; half-Vietnamese Srey Diamondgirl; Ratha Badheart; Ala Fakelove, with the gap in her teeth; Gi Gi Sweetless; POV Sweetie; Jenny LopLop; Anni TingTong, whose mom worked in the bar, too; Lin Lin Lily; Alia Thai; Reneath Lovely; Savannah Solonely; Thoeun Nocheaty and her little baby Bamboo; Rosey Tam; and, of course, Sophar.

The girls looked surprised to still see me there in the morning, so they took a renewed interest.

"What you name?" they asked.

"Norm."

"Nuhm?"

"Norm. N-O-R-M."

"Why you say 'Nohm?' That you name?"

"Yes, close enough. Nohm," I said.

A squall of giggling followed. "Oh my Buddha – he say he name Nohm Nohm!!!"

Apparently, when the girls couldn't quite get "Norm," they settled on the closest alternative, "Nohm," which I later came to find out is the word for breast milk in their language. From that day on, whenever they'd pass by



they'd say "Nohm Nohm" and grab a boob, pretending to shoot milk at me, entertaining them to no end.

Other than disparaging my name as a maternal bodily function, the girls had two new favorite pastimes to amuse themselves at my expense. One was to reach to shake my hand, but then pull their hand away at the last moment, running it up the side of their head like they were combing their hair. This made them squeal with delight, a way to show their superiority over a Mosquito. Of course I fell for it every time, often twice in a row with the same girl, until I refused to shake hands with anyone.

Next was the ritual of shoulder banging at Candy Bar. For some reason, the girls were fixated on big shoulders, I guess because they were used to lean and slender islanders. So the girls thoroughly enjoyed smacking the shit out of my shoulders every time they passed by, either open handed or with fierce little closed fists, jarring me without warning, sending my drink flying all over my shirt so it looked like I just "Normed" on myself.

Other than those interactions, it was clear my role was to sit at the end of the bar and not mess up the girls' interaction with tourists.

"Don't talk too much, Mosquito," the girls told me. "But silent no good too."

At the other end of the bar sat Sophar, as still no one talked to her or helped show her the ropes since she was bad luck. I couldn't understand what they were saying, but it was obvious the other girls were openly making fun of her, like cruel school children.

Sophar pretended to ignore them and look straight ahead, but when they passed, she'd glance in the bar mirror and try to straighten her hair after licking her fingers. She was wearing the same torn dress as the day before, only now it was stiff because she'd washed it with the hose in her room and hung it out to dry. Every now and then, a tourist would sit next to her and try to talk. But since she spoke no English and recoiled when they tried to put a hand on her thigh, they quickly moved on, or were pulled away by the other ravenous girls who were ready to party.

Mamasan seemed fine with extending my meals and even beverages on credit, as every time I looked down there was an icy San Miguel beer or Coca Cola in front of me, whether I wanted one or not. But the same wasn't true for Sophar, who I hadn't seen eat since she arrived. So when the old lady who cooked for the girls placed a plate of rice and a curry in front of me, I only ate half, pushing the rest down the bar to Sophar. She didn't thank me or dare touch the food, just looked at me sheepishly in the mirror, frozen in fright. But when I turned around later, the plate was clean.

Faced with a long night sitting at the bar with nothing to do – my only good option without money to go out or air conditioning in my room – I observed the theater around me.

As tourists walked the streets, the girls' first mission was to snare them, somehow capturing their attention and bringing them into the bar.

How would they get them inside? A lot of bars followed the western model of offering drink specials during happy hour, but with a hundred bars competing for the same tourists, happy hour started expanding to happy *hours*. To win an advantage, the bars kept extending their hours until happy hour was now an all-day, all-night affair. Actually, it was hard to find a time that *wasn't* happy hour in Dragon Town.

So they started putting their best looking girl out in front of the bar. The Looker was paired with a girl who spoke great English and had a funny, outgoing personality – the Mouthpiece. The Mouthpiece and the Looker worked as a team. With plenty of gentlemen spending their vacations getting drunk and partying on the island, there was always foot traffic at night. All the Looker needed to do was get their attention or divert them over. From there, the Mouthpiece went to work.

"Hellllooooooo welcommmeeeee!"

Her one and only goal was to get them through the front door. She'd do this by making them laugh, getting them engaged in a conversation, asking about their vacation, trying to dance with them, slapping their ass, stealing their baseball hat, or cracking a joke in their language.

"Come on, guy! Looking, just looking. No charge for looking," they'd say.

"Goodnight handsome man! You same-same Vin Diesel! Come inside!"

"Hey Australia! Yesterday you promise visit me! You lie, you die!"

The girls were crafty, pretending to know a passing tourist, hoping to confuse him long enough to stop and talk.

"Hey guy, long time no see? Where have you been?"

If that didn't work, they could always try a more direct approach, grabbing the man's junk and leading him to the front door without letting go.

Once the tourist stepped inside the bar, the Looker and the Mouthpiece went back to work outside and the next crew took over, like a well-oiled

NASCAR pit crew. Their goal was to get them to sit down and order something.

“Helllllooooo sexy mannnnn!” they’d scream in unison.

Some tourists would just pop their heads inside the door to scan the girls, but then walk out if they didn’t immediately see someone they liked.

“Where you go? Come back for number one Boom Boom! I love you!” they’d yell as the men dipped back outside. “OK, fuck you then, guy!”

Once the girls did get a tourist inside and seated, it was a free-for-all. From what I could ascertain there was no formal system to determine who got to sit or talk to the tourists, but nothing was left to accident in the bars. If a patron saw a girl he liked, he would sit next to her or call her over. But if he was still unattached after a microsecond, the girls would try desperately to make eye contact. Looking someone in the eyes meant everything in Dragon Town – it was like an implied promise, just short of a contract, and those girls were masters at reading the intentions and emotions of a potential customer.

There were girls scattered among the bar stools, dancing on the small stage in back, or sitting at the cocktail tables and couches, so wherever he ended up sitting, he always had company. He had to be damn fast to order a drink from the bartender because before he had the chance, one of the Taxi Girls cozied up to him and asked him what he wanted.

Taking his order was another angle for the girls, an excuse to sit next to him and try to earn a tip after he paid. Once his beer came, the girl who’d ordered it for him wiped off the bottle’s lip, pouring it into a glass, and making conversation before he even had a chance to take his first sip.

“Where you from? How long you holiday? Where hotel you stay?”

Her end game was to get the tourist to buy a Lady Drink. Drinks bought for the girls were more expensive – about \$3.50 compared to \$1 for a beer, or \$1.50 for a weak mixed drink. When Lady Drinks were purchased, about two-thirds of the profit went to the bar and the other portion to the girl. So the girls hustled hard to get a tourist to buy them drinks, and it was great luck to catch a tourist with deep pockets on a big bender, who would buy Lady Drinks all night long. Those guys were called “ATMs.”

Therefore, it was imperative they keep the men in the bar as long as possible, buying drinks – and hopefully finding a girl to his liking. One dollar to a girl for a Lady Drink may not sound like much, but the average

daily wage for islanders working in a factory, a restaurant, or sewing all day was only about \$2.

So the girls weren't shy, peppering every tourist in sight with the invitation to buy them a drink every three minutes. Those who didn't speak much English could creep up behind him and start massaging his shoulders and then ask for a Lady Drink afterwards, or offer a perfect and delicate origami flower made out of bar napkins.

Some girls chose a more subtle approach, clearing their throat to intimate that they were parched, a medical condition that a \$3.50 liquid refreshment could easily cure. If the customer didn't take notice, the girl would escalate into full blown coughing attacks, holding her hands to her throat like she was choking, making it obvious that the tourist would be an accessory to death by thirst if he didn't buy her one quickly.

Another way they could get a Lady Drink was by playing a game and betting a drink on the outcome. Inside the bar there was Jenga, cards, and a game of dice called Jacks, rolled inside what looked like a cigar box. It was harder to get Lady Drinks out of that one because it was all luck, but the girls still loved it for some reason. The other games were a setup, of course, because the girls were so proficient that they never lost. The pool table was another place to hustle tourists, as these girls were sharks from daily practice when they were bored.

Even if the Mosquito patron was good at pool, the odds were never even, because the tourist was drinking and more than a little distracted. If he won, the bar girls didn't have to buy him anything because of course they had no money, or they would just play double or nothing or say they bet a kiss. But when he lost, she got another Lady Drink – and the chance to keep the ATM in play a while longer.

Games were great for Lady Drinks, but the real brass ring for the girls was to get Bar Fined, when the customer paid the Mamasan to take them out of the bar. Being Bar Fined meant they were going back to his hotel, and she'd get paid for her company, so it was a big deal – a financial victory for the night. The Bar Fine at Candy Bar was \$10, which went to the house, and then whatever was arranged between the patron and the girl changed hands later and became her profit.

The tourist would pay his bar tab and the extra \$10 for the Bar Fine right on his bill, while the girl went back behind the curtain to grab her purse and maybe change into her casual clothes. Together, they'd walk out the front door, hand in hand like a cute couple on a date, the oldest business arrangement in the world consummated on one more desperate Dragon Town night.



## **The Frog and the Scorpion**

It was the strangest predicament. Although I was stranded living over a bar in Dragon Town, surviving only by the generosity of the poorest of strangers, I was more connected than ever with people all over the world. My video and blogs about the typhoon were still bringing in interview requests and well-wishes from around the globe, thank you emails from relieved mothers in Switzerland, New Zealand, South Africa, Brazil, and Italy. They even invited me to come have family dinner if I was ever in their country.

But what I really wanted to do was ask them to airlift me off the island, or at least somehow bring in a thousand dollars cash so I could pay my tab, get my passport back, and move on with my life. But I was still hopeful I'd have access to funds soon. Wells Fargo had finally conceded that it was impossible for me to walk into the branch in Hong Kong, so they mailed a new ATM card addressed to me, care of the main post office in Dragon Town. They promised it would show up soon, but until then I was resigned to make the best of my setup.

The attention my blogs got from the international community also caught someone's notice in Dragon Town, and I received a visitor at the bar. I was working on my laptop at a cocktail table in back one sweaty afternoon my first week when a police officer walked in. I was startled because I'd never seen one in the bar before, and assumed police were bad for business. Even though what the girls and the bar were doing was legal – or, not technically illegal, is a better way of saying it – having cops around scared away the tourists.

But Mamasan smiled and greeted him warmly, as did the girls who were mopping up and cleaning. The policeman, in a freshly pressed uniform of awkwardly short shorts and a tightly tucked-in black polo shirt bearing a police emblem, chatted with Mamasan for a moment before both of their gazes turned to me. She came over, standing behind me with her hands on my shoulders, and whispered in my ear.

“Listen, Norm, this policeman is a friend of the bar. He tells me that someone wants to talk to you about your writing and the typhoon.”

She led me over to the policeman, who took my hand with both of his and bowed formally. His hair was combed neatly to one side and he had a moon-shaped smile full of braces.

“Hello, Norm sir, my name is Tin Tin. I am corporal of the Royal Dragon Town Police Force. I have been instrumented – no, instructed – to come collect you because the Prime Minister would like to thank you for your

service to the people of our island.” It was obvious his little speech was rehearsed.

When I said that would be fine, he instructed me to come to the Office of Civic Ministry the next day at 14:00 hours, bowed again, and walked back out onto the street.

When he left, Mamasan told me that Tin Tin was one of the good police officers in Dragon Town. Actually, she was of the opinion that he was the *only* good police officer in Dragon Town. Back during the revolution, Tin Tin’s father had taken an assassin’s bullet in the ass that was intended for a General, so his family was in good favor with the right people. They put Tin Tin on the police force as a repayment, the joke around the station being that they’d sacrificed one ass for another.

It was supposed to be a ceremonial gesture only, as Tin Tin received no training nor came close to passing any of the police aptitude tests and was even thought to be a little touched in the head. He was just supposed to attend the formal graduation ceremony and then collect his small stipend check every month while safely planted at home, where he couldn’t get in the way of real police business. So everyone was surprised when he showed up for work the first Monday morning.

They didn’t know what to do with him, but definitely didn’t want to insult him because it might get back to the General, so they immediately promoted him to the made-up rank of Corporal, gave him a desk right outside the restroom, a gun with no bullets, and told him to walk a beat in Dragon Town and keep the tourists safe.

Ironically, he did just that, and he was probably the only one. All of the other police were basically a government-sponsored gang, empowered and dedicated to harassing the hard working, common people who were powerless to fight back. Mamasan and all of the other bar owners had to pay bribes to the police every month so they wouldn’t be shut down.

Every once in a while the police would arrest a drug dealer who failed to pay them, or someone who was outbid by a rival dealer, making a big show of it in the newspapers and the evening news. But in reality, the thought of them actually solving a crime or helping anyone was patently ridiculous.

The next day I shaved in the broken mirror over my sink, took my one button-up, collared shirt out of my bag and put it on, and slipped on running sneakers instead of flip-flops. The girls, doing laundry and chirping on their cell phones outside our rooms on the roof, oohed when they saw my island-formal attire, teasing as if I was a tourist: “Hellloo rich man! Where you hotel?”

“I stay at Candy Bar... you know it?” I teased them back, leaving them giggling. I went downstairs to see Mamasan before I left. She looked me over, sighed in disappointment, fixed my collar, and gave me instructions.

“Sir Norm,” she said, addressing me formally for the first time, “this is a good meeting. The Prime Minister is a very important person in Dragon Town. Listen to whatever he says. Now good luck to you.”

I said OK and turned toward the door.

“And if you can...” she said, stuck on her next words. “Well, just, good luck.”

I asked her where the Office of Civic Ministry was, but she pointed to a tuk-tuk waiting outside, freshly washed and waiting for me. I got in and took off, already sweating through my Sunday best clothes.

The driver took me through the rich part of town, where there were many banks and even western clothing boutiques and cafés with cakes in the windows. We stopped in front of a Soviet-era square office building completely devoid of personality or charm, blocking out the sun.

The tuk-tuk driver, who said something to the security guards in bulletproof vests, pistols on their hips and knives strapped to their thighs, led me to the door. The guards led me inside to the reception desk, where a pleasant and pretty secretary greeted me in English and asked me to come with her. We ended up in an outdated conference room with a wooden lectern on one end and the flags of the municipality of Dragon Town, Thailand, the Philippines, Cambodia, Vietnam, and China lined up next to it.

The secretary offered me a seat to me on the side of the table right near the head, and sat down next to me. She produced a clipboard and introduced me as government officials came in one by one.

I met a Magistrate, an Assemblyman, and a Special Economic Minister – a lean Asian man wearing a shrewd black suit with a pale face beneath horn rimmed eyeglasses, the only one not in island attire. They all sat down, too, and soon the Prime Minister came in. I stood when everyone else stood.

I don’t know what I was expecting, but the Minister was shorter than the rest of them and quite plump, with shorts showing too much of his flabby pale legs and a checkered, buttoned-up shirt you’d expect a math professor to wear. He entered and said hello to everyone and then turned to me.



“Our esteemed Prime Minister,” the secretary announced. “I would like you to meet Sir Norm Sheeder... Schreener... Schwr... I would like you to meet Sir Norm. He is famous writer and helped save many lives after the typhoon.”

I went to protest that none of those things were remotely true but she continued: “And this is our esteemed Prime Minister of Dragon Town.”

He shook my hand, though I half expected him to psych me out by pulling his hand back like the girls at the bar.

“Nice to meet you, sir,” I said.

“No need to be so formal and call me sir,” he said warmly, patting my hand.

“Oh, OK, that’s very nice of you.”

“You can just call me Mr. Prime Minister. Now, please, sit everyone.”

Firmly planted in our chairs, the secretary moved on to official business.

“We would like to formally thank you for your service to the people of Dragon Town after the terrible events of the typhoon,” she said.

“Is the air conditioner working?” the Prime Minister asked no one in particular, reaching out to see if he could feel it. “Is it even working?” He got up and went to the AC unit on the wall and started fiddling with it. He turned the temperature down before managing to break off the faceplate, which he left lying on the floor, and then came back.

“Right, where were we?”

“We were recognizing Sir Norm for his service and telling him our plans for the fundraiser.”

The Prime Minister looked puzzled but the secretary filled me in on their plans to throw a big fundraiser to help the poor people and communities who were affected by the typhoon. We’d have a night of live music and dancing on a stage on the beach and charge admission and sell t-shirts, raising plenty of money to rebuild houses that were damaged, clean out wells, replant seeds, fix schools, and provide medical care to the injured. They wanted my help, since I had turned into a voice for the island with the international community.

I thought it was a fantastic idea and told them so, which was met with hearty agreement. With the secretary furiously scribbling notes, we set a

date for a Saturday night four weeks out and allocated tasks, like getting a logo designed and booking the bands and building a web page for the event. Everyone at the table got a job except the Prime Minister. He sat there and nodded enthusiastically.

“Where are the snacks? Don’t we have snacks?” he asked.

The secretary scrambled out the door and came back a moment later with her arms full. She placed cans of iced tea and Coke, plenty of plastic wrapped pastries, colorful Chinese sweets, and pig skin potato chips on the table. The Prime Minister carefully took his first pick and then the rest at the table grabbed up what was left. I took an iced tea but declined anything else and continued with our preparations.

“We should have a press release that we can send to the local newspapers and radio stations and...” but I was drowned out by the sounds of plastic wrap being ripped off, chips crunching, and gulping.

Soon, the secretary said that the Prime Minister had to leave because he had another appointment. The only item left for us to button up was to issue a permit for the event. All eyes turned to the Special Economic Minister, who hadn’t spoken the whole time. They spoke in a language other than English – I think it was Chinese. Each person at the table said something to him as he sat stoically and listened. When they were all done, he said something to the Prime Minister in a stern voice, who nodded and bowed slightly.

“I do not think the permit will be a problem,” the Special Economic Minister said in proper English, bringing smiles of relief to the others’ faces.

The meeting adjourned, we stood when the Prime Minister stood and then said goodbye. He thanked me again with chocolate cupcake in his teeth, shook my hand, and turned to leave the room.

“Oh, and Sir Norm... one more thing.”

“Yes, sir?”

“Do you play Facebook?” the Prime Minister asked. “I love Facebook! You have to add me,” and he left.

The other officers filed out as well, and the secretary picked up the knob from the air conditioner and started cleaning the conference table of wrappers and cans. She said she’d be in touch and we’d finish our plans for the charity event and wished me a great day.

I found my way out to the front steps, blinking from the sunlight. My tuk-tuk driver, lounging on his back seat with a newspaper over his face, jumped to the drivers seat when he saw me, whirling around to collect me so I wouldn't have to cross the street. I got in and wiped my neck and unbuttoned a few buttons of my shirt to let the air in as we drove back to the bar.

Mamasan was waiting. She sat me down and had a plate of food brought out, along with a cold towel. She asked me how everything went and I told her. She mulled it over but didn't share her thoughts.

"That's good, right?" I said.

"Sure," she said. "But you can trust them as much as a Japanese kid in Alaska."

I had no idea what that meant, but she went on.

"You never know with these politicians," she said. "They never give, they only take from people like us. Do you know that some of my girls used to be teachers and nurses? But the government salary sometimes comes, sometimes doesn't for months, so they have to come work in a bar."

"But it's just a fundraiser," I said. "So I think we'll raise money and help a lot of people?"

"Listen," she said, sitting down next to me so that we were face to face. "Have you ever heard the story of the frog and the scorpion?"

I told her that I didn't think I had.

"One day, a scorpion was trying to cross a river. The river was wide and ran fast so he couldn't see any way across. But he saw a frog floating by the bank of the river so he decided to ask him for help getting across.

"'Hello Mr. Frog,' called the scorpion. 'Would you be so kind as to give me a ride on your back across the river?'

"'How do I know that if I try to help you, you won't sting me?' asked the frog.

"'Because if I sting you,' the scorpion replied, 'then I would die too, for you know I cannot swim!'

"That made sense to the frog, so he agreed to take the scorpion across the

river.

“He swam over to the bank and settled himself near the mud to pick up his passenger. The scorpion crawled onto the frog's back and they slid into the river. The water swirled around them as they crossed, but the frog swam near the surface so the scorpion would stay above the water.

“But halfway across the river, the frog felt a sharp pain in his back. He turned his head and saw the scorpion pulling his stinger from the frog's back. His back began to go numb and he struggled to swim.

“‘You fool! Why did you do that?!’ croaked the frog, ‘Now we shall both sink and die!’

“The scorpion shrugged, and then danced on the drowning frog's back.

“‘Because it's my nature,’ the scorpion said, before they both sank into the water and drowned. ‘And I cannot change that.’

“Do you understand now?” Mamasan asked me softly, standing up to clear my plate and glass. “It's the same with these politicians. It's in their nature, and that will never change.”

I told her that I thought I understood, but I really wasn't sure.

## **Family Me**

When word got out that I'd met with the Prime Minister, the girls were far more interested. In fact, they were downright perplexed why someone as important as the Prime Minister would want to meet with someone like me. After all, I was the only foreigner they'd ever seen who was completely destitute.

"Why you have small baht?" they'd ask me nightly, when I explained yet again that I wasn't on vacation and couldn't buy them drinks.

To them, it didn't add up. I had pale skin, a job on my computer, could speak well, and wasn't a drunk or drug addict, but somehow I still had to rely on Mamasan's charity. She didn't even ask me to hustle Lady Drinks like the rest of the girls.

"No money, no honey," was the saying I heard every night, encompassing both their policy with customers and their general philosophy of life. They reinforced that mantra with other variations of regional currencies:

"No riel, no feel."

"No peso, no say so."

"No baht, no got."

"No dong, no thong."

"No chicken, no curry," I'd say, proud of myself for finding a rhyme and contributing to their rhetoric.

"What you mean, guy? Have different curry, no chicken," they'd protest. "Curry shrimp. Curry beef."

"OK, OK."

"Curry rice. Curry veggie."

"OK, I got it."

Everything came at a cost in Dragon Town, even when it didn't always have a price tag. So despite Mamasan's warning speech about frogs and scorpions that I still fully didn't fathom, I was eager to jump into planning the fundraiser, which would help the poor islanders and also gain favor for Mamasan.

Sure enough, I heard back from the Prime Minister's office the next day, but it wasn't an email from his secretary to coordinate the event, as we'd agreed. Instead, I received a Facebook friend request from Fun PM1969. I

confirmed him as a friend and wrote a message saying that I was honored to be chosen to assist with the fundraiser for the needy people on the island. Fun PM1969 sent me a request to play Candy Crush. That must be an innocent mistake, I thought. Then a request to play Pirate's Treasure popped up, and then Fun PM1969 poked me. Shit.

It only took a few hours for my newfound novelty among the girls, thanks to Fun PM1969, to wear off. Soon, I was resigned to my usual routine. Sophar's nights in the bar were the same, too, which was to say, not good.

She carved out space down the bar from me, observing the comings and goings of patrons and the other girls without participating. When a drunken customer wandered over to try to talk with her, she put her head down, unresponsive and shaking with fear until he eventually got the message or told her to piss off for being so rude and walked away.

Sophar watched the other girls laughing and dancing and making money on tips and Lady Drinks every night. She still hadn't brought in one single baht for two nights, and then three, and then her whole first week. She was still wearing her torn dress, or a pink Hello Kitty shirt and white shorts – her only other outfit. Sitting in the bar every night because it was too hot in my room, I'd open my laptop to try and get a little work done. But I quickly realized there was far more for me to learn about the world in front of me than on my computer.

Behind the bar worked a girl who was perhaps the most beautiful of all in Candy Bar. Ava wore elegant black cocktail dresses with sparkling jewelry and silver high heels, even though she was already enviably tall. Her makeup was always perfect, and not a hair was out of place. She was slender but shapely in the right places, like an exotic model from a magazine, with delicate feminine features. The other girls would have all been venomously jealous of Ava except for one small detail: Ava wasn't a girl at all.

The first couple of nights, I had no idea she was a he, or used to be a he, or whatever. But after sitting there a while I picked up on it, though I thought it would be rude to just come out and ask. Either way, she was cool and spoke great English, so I didn't inquire. But it was confirmed on the night of my meeting with the Prime Minister.

As I ate my dinner at the bar – and ordered a little extra for Sophar – Ava told me she wouldn't be working behind the bar that night because she had a date. A former customer was coming back on vacation from Germany. He was a successful BMW salesman who preferred the company of ladyboys, and Ava was his favorite.

“Norm *bong*, did you even know I was a ladyboy?” Ava asked me in well-practiced English.

“Well, no but...”

“Of course you didn’t. Because I am all woman!” she said, whirling behind the bar, dancing gracefully with her own mirror image.

I laughed at her bravado. “Well, there you have your answer,” I said.

“But seriously,” she said, stopping her dance when she noticed some imperceptible flaws in the mirror. She touched her nose and brushed her hair back over her ear as she spoke to me through her reflection, her voice hushed. “Tell me, do you think I am pretty like the other girls?”

I told her that I wasn’t able to tell at first, and that she was one of the prettiest girls in the bar.

“Ahhh, you just say that because it’s true,” she said, waving away my niceties while pretending to pose for the paparazzi’s cameras.

“For that, I’ll buy you a drink,” Ava said, coming back with a bottle of Coke.

“But seriously,” she said, turning to me and leaning in, the façade gone for just a moment. “No one tells me that.”

“Sure. No worries, Ava,” I said.

“So many foreigners are scared,” she said. “Even to be friends with me. I don’t know why. I don’t hurt anybody.”

It was true. I’d already seen plenty of guys talk to all the girls around them, but then look right through Ava like she wasn’t even a person. I smiled, as if to say I could use all the friends I could get.

Thrilled to have someone to genuinely talk with at the bar, Ava told me how it all worked. There were plenty of ladyboys in the bars in Dragon Town – more than you would ever guess. There were specific bars for them, like Alley Cats, Emotions, and especially Heart of Darkness, but some of them also worked in the hostess bars, though usually there was only one ladyboy per hostess bar, so there was no competition.

It was just another niche that was thirsty to be served, as a lot of tourists weren’t necessarily gay but got turned on by the trannies, cross dressers, or Third Sex – ladyboys. They made a surprising amount of money and flew

over to Thailand for surgeries, where it was cheap and they had world-class doctors.

"It is usually the big macho guys who like us ladyboys," she said while chuckling. "Like the miners and men who work on the oil rigs."

"Really? That surprises me," I said. But when I thought about it, it didn't.

"Do you know how you can tell if someone is a ladyboy? If you ever take home a bar girl?" Ava asked. I assured her I had no intention of doing that, but I'd heard you look for an Adam's apple, though the Asian ladyboys were either so small that they didn't have prominent Adam's apples, or they had them surgically shaved. I also heard you look at the size of the hands or the feet but, again, you couldn't tell in Asia.

"There's only one real way to find out if a girl is a ladyboy, Norm *bong*," she said.

"What's that?"

"Panties down before money down."

She laughed at the expression on my face.

"Remember that!" With that, she grabbed a bottle of vodka to start filling a drink order for a couple bankers on vacation from Jakarta.

"I don't think I could forget, even if I tried," I said.

Since she had a date coming in that night, Ava asked me to take care of the music for the bar. I was happy to accept the job because it gave me something to do to help out Mamasan, and I was getting sick of some of the Euro house junk that they played later in the night.

Ava finished powdering in the bar mirror and walked toward the door to meet her date.

"Aren't you going to wish me luck, Norm *bong*?"

"Good luck tonight, Ava," I said.

"Ha! With beauty like this, I don't need luck!" she said with a wink, and left.

I moved over to the computer and started going through YouTube for a few songs, and then a few more. It was a job I never relinquished as long as I



was around Candy Bar. It also got me talking with Sophar, which is how we first became friends.

Since I was sitting by the computer, in her unspoken territory, she became curious. By then she understood I wasn't a customer but there under special circumstances – some form of desperate outsider, like her.

So when I played a song, I'd check to see if she liked it. Sophar now understood the thumbs up and thumbs down system, and that's how we started interacting. It stung that she gave me eight out of 10 thumbs down for my song selections, but I was happy to communicate with her nonetheless.

"Beer. Man. Australia," she said, pointing to me, repeating words she'd heard.

"Yes, this is a beer, and I am a man. But I am United States," I said to her. She looked confused so I slowed it down, and then Googled a world map on my phone and showed her where I was from. She held my iPhone like it was a Fabergé egg, amazed that someone would trust her with such a treasure. But our secret game had been born; Sophar would point to things, and I would tell her its name in English. She'd repeat the word until her pronunciation was understandable.

"Money. Bar. Tell phone."

"Good! Yes, 'cell phone.' Good!"

For the first time since she'd walked into the bar, I saw a glimmer of something in her shy, defeated eyes. With English words, she suddenly had hope.

I ran upstairs and grabbed an old notebook and a pen and gave them to her. I wrote down the English words we worked on and she'd write the same word in her language, with the care of a first grader scripting her first letters. She was hesitant to write at first, because she didn't want to spoil the clean white spaces of the notebook, but I took the pen and scribbled a happy face to show her it was OK – that she was worth more than an old notebook.

Within the hour, Sophar lit up after she learned her first complete phrase: "How do you say?"

Empowered, she could now point to things and ask me the question on her own, starting to catalog her new, inhospitable world. She could barely sit still, pointing things out and scrambling back to the notebook. She watched

me write them down to make sure I didn't forget, afraid it might all fade away and be lost forever. She waited impatiently when the music stopped and I had to scramble to get another song playing on YouTube, the rest of the girls booing and yelling at me for being a bad DJ. But this time, Sophar gave me a thumbs up.

"Music. Good. Sophar like."

When she couldn't figure out a word's translation, I'd Google it on my iPhone for her.

She was amazed that her language came up, so I gave her the phone to hold while I was DJing. She took the job seriously, clutching it with both hands so it didn't fall or get "accidentally" picked up, a common occurrence with drunken patrons' phones in Dragon Town.

With a wave of my hand, I encouraged her to play with the phone as much as she wanted. I gave her my password and showed her how to look on Facebook and scroll through my photos. She stopped on one and looked.

"Family?" she said, a word I was surprised she knew because we hadn't covered it.

It was a photo of me with my mother, my sister, and her three children, sitting on the front porch of their home back in Colorado. It was the day after Christmas the previous year, a perfect winter day after a fresh snowfall the night before, blanketing the lawns and rooftops, freezing the bare tree branches into pristine crystals, burying the street before the plows rolled through with salt and hard metal scrapers. The sun was out and we were smiling.

Sophar looked at the photo for a long time, the screen's reflection playing off her face in the dark bar.

"Snow," I said, pointing to the white stuff around where we sat in the photo, arms around each other and wide smiles, squinting against the sun.

"Do you know 'snow?'" I asked. "You'd like it. Well, unless you had to shovel it, or drive in it, and it turns brown by the road after a few days."

Sophar didn't say anything.

"Snow comes from rain. I mean, it's like frozen rain." And I made the sound of water falling and traced it falling to the earth with my fingers. "You'd like rain, Sophar."

She looked at the photo.

“Sophar?”

“Family. Me,” Sophar said, pointing to herself and then to the photo.

“What?”

“Sophar family me,” she said. I didn’t know what she was trying to say at first.

“Oh, yeah, you have a family,” I said. “You say, ‘I-have-family.’”

“Sophar you say I have family,” she said.

“Where does your family live? Big family?” I said, pointing. “Mother-sister-children?” She looked at the photo again.

“Sophar like snow,” she said, caressing the screen before handing the phone back to me. She turned to her notebook and pretended to study the words.

Maybe it was just the neon lights dancing on her face, or the cigarette smoke caught swirling in the bar air, but I thought she had tears in her eyes.

## **Helicopters and Butterflies**

Sophar wasn't the only one paying attention. There was little else for me to do at Candy Bar but sit and talk to people and watch – out on the roof with the girls when they woke up, during lazy hot afternoons with Mamasan while the bar was being cleaned, or on the benches out front watching the street come to life as red afternoons softened to breezy purple evenings. Then, at night. Always at night, there were girls who didn't have customers and wanted to talk, drunk bar patrons who wanted to shoot the shit, and, of course, Sophar.

I usually had my laptop open, trying to get some work done for my job blogging for companies in the U.S. But every task took three times as long as normal since the power would go out and the Internet came and went as it pleased. The nice establishments in town still fired up their “Ever Silent” brand generators, causing an ear splitting racket like a chainsaw inside my head while I was trying to work.

But it was still better than having no power, AC, or fans to move the fiery air, which most people on the island still dealt with. Boats were running as usual to the mainland every day, but the price of petrol and diesel and other basic supplies had doubled and then tripled in the aftermath of the typhoon. Most of the government buildings were still closed, including the department that had my passport in processing limbo, though the city's squadron of tax collectors went back to work immediately.

So I spent my days running from one café, bar, and restaurant to another, trying to get work done, ordering only a Coke as I tried to pick up their Wi-Fi signal. On good days, I half-caught up with my job, but on most days, I ended up drinking a whole lot of Cokes.

Through it all, the girls came to the opinion that I was a workaholic.

“What do you work?” Apple asked me.

“I'm a writer,” I said.

“Ha! Yeah, sure guy, and I am a newscaster!” she said.

“And I a television star!” Nocheaty said.

“No, really, I'm a writer. That's my job,” I said, as they started acting out their new imagined professions.

“Writers are liars,” Apple said. I went to correct her but then kept quiet, realizing that was one of the most profound things I’d ever heard. These girls were sharp.

They didn’t know the word “workaholic,” but they tried to help cure my affliction by making it damn near impossible for me to get anything done. Just as I’d sit down to start typing during the rare and precious times when my laptop was charged and the Internet was working and I had slept more than four hours the night before and the heat wasn’t melting my brain, a girl would sit down next to me and want to talk.

“What you do now?”

Mostly they wanted to chat about how I worked too much, or why I never bought anyone drinks. It dawned on me that they weren’t used to seeing a westerner working. They sincerely believed that we had so much money we could just play and party all day and never have to worry about a thing. They thought life in Australia or America or Germany meant you were born into a life of permanent vacation, like the richest families in their countries.

“You working, Nohm *bong*?” they would ask, just as I got rolling, my headphones on to indicate I wanted privacy.

“NOHM NOHM CAN YOU HEAR ME?!” If I didn’t answer, they’d say it two or three times, then forcibly remove my headphones, putting them on their own heads to check my music, and then ignoring my response when I answered them.

“Yes, I *was* working.”

What they really wanted me to ask was, “How are you doing?” or “What’s wrong?” – phrases that signaled it was time for them to open their Pandora’s box of gripes and life problems to me.

“Not good today – no customer,” they’d say, and make the saddest puppy dog eyes, a look that was well rehearsed to guilt a man into buy them something. Or they’d share that their stomach had been hurting, a mysterious ailment that plagued many of the girls, but would only earn them an IV with no diagnosis if they collected enough money to go to the doctor. So when Sophar’s stomach was hurting her first week, too, the other girls made fun of her.

“You have China stomach!” they tormented her, referring to the fact that Chinese products were made cheaply and broke so often. If I had to guess, I

think their stomachaches were from constant stress and nonstop alcohol consumption. But in Sophar's case, it might have been hunger.

They thought I was a workaholic? These girls worked all night, every night, and sometimes during the day, too. The bar was open seven nights a week and never closed, even for holidays, as far as I could tell. The girls were given two days off a month. They never slept more than a few hours each night since they didn't retire until the sun was coming up, and they downed drinks at a rate that would emasculate a lumberjack.

Most of these girls were shy of 100 pounds and barely over five feet tall, but still they threw back endless beers, cheap tequila, Mai Tais, White Russians, vodka and Red Bulls, or "Jack and Cocks." Yeah, I did a double take, too, when I first heard that being ordered. It was almost impossible for some of the girls to say, "Coke," so they'd say "cock" instead, shouting out the drink order, loud and proud to the bartender.

Each Lady Drink meant another \$1 in their pocket, as the bar got the rest of the money. A Taxi Girl could just about survive on her paltry salary and the money she earned from Lady Drinks – if she only ate rice and slept on a friend's floor. But eventually she'd have to buy some clothes, or she would desperately need something from the pharmacy if she was sick, or she would need to send money back for a family emergency in the province – a \$5 price tag that would shatter her fragile monthly budget.

Of course the girls preferred a Lady Drink instead of the comparable \$1 tip. Alcohol was one of the only ways they could rise above the torturous routine of their lives. Surprisingly, they never complained about the fact that they sold their bodies to strangers – or at least not to me. But they confessed that it was the boredom that plagued them the most.

"Hi all loves I just lie my house so bore today no happy come drink tonight," they'd post on Facebook.

Their whole world shrank inside of Candy Bar. They worked there, slept there, ate there, and socialized there, mostly. Every night was another Saturday night. The music was the same. The faces were same-same but different. They grew numb to it. The only seasons were hot and dry or hot and rainy. No wonder they made up fake birthdays three times a year (and they didn't know their actual birthdays, because there were no records).

Alcohol was the only vehicle fast enough to outrun their lives. Even after a week I could diagnose most of these girls – or at least the popular ones – as raging alcoholics who would fall into the throes of a bottomless depression if they ever stopped partying.

“*Mow!*” they’d yell, the Thai word for drunk, pointing at me accusingly for being wasted, even though I was only drinking a “cock” with no Jack.

“*Mow mak mak!*” I’d yell back at the top of my lungs and point back, which meant they were very, very drunk.

“No, you *ting tong mak mak!*” they’d scream back, calling me very crazy, moving on to the next Mosquito at the next seat, who might actually be in a festive mood and buy them a drink.

But the girls didn’t want to just exist, getting skinnier on their \$1 a day salary, a few Lady Drinks and scattered tips. Even for the girls who were less attractive or spoke little English, sooner or later, they’d get Bar Fined.

The chance to earn a windfall of \$20 or even \$30 or \$40 in one night was the brass ring they all reached for. They’d communicate that desire to a customer by giving him a massage or rubbing his arm (or regions further south), or just by being in the right place at the right time when the other girls were already Bar Fined and a drunk tourist with money burning through his pocket stumbled in. The house got their \$10 for granting the girl freedom to walk out the door, but how much the girl earned after that was up to her.

“So how much do you want, honey?” a tourist would ask.

“How much can you give?” the girl would respond, well trained in the negotiation tactic that you never float the first number. It was brilliant. If he was new in town and didn’t know how it worked, he might offer something ridiculously high like \$100, which the girl would gladly accept, going to change and grab her purse before he could change his mind. Or, if he came in too low, she would laugh in his face, or make those puppy dog eyes, so the real negotiation could commence.

Did he want short time or long time? What hotel was he staying at? Could they go to the club first to dance and drink? Those were some of her questions that influenced the price, because if he just wanted her for a couple hours, she could come back to the bar in time to try and do it all again with another customer. Or, if he wanted her to stay through to the morning, her entire next 10 hours would be committed and there would be a second round of Boom Boom, but she might get a hearty breakfast out of it. If the tourist stayed in a nice hotel, that made a big difference, because it was far less fun for them to hang out in a rat hole \$13-a-night boarding house that looked far too much like their own digs at Candy Bar.

Eventually they’d set the price – sometimes \$50, \$40 more often, or \$30 only if the girl was really desperate and had no other customers. But never

\$20, or even \$29. That was a searing insult, and they'd rather go to sleep with a growling stomach, so they'd tell the customer to fuck off and call him a Cheap Charlie.

The girls prided themselves on how close they could stick to the \$50 mark – that defined their value. Subtract \$10 to the house for the Bar Fine, and they just made \$30 or \$40 for the night. A few good nights of being Bar Fined could pay their rent and buy food and some new clothes. If they had a regular job like a waitress, hotel chambermaid, or worked in a stall at the night market selling t-shirts, it would take them all month to make what they could in a couple nights with a customer. Still, it came at a cost, because the other islanders who knew – and they always knew – would look at them differently for the rest of their lives.

"I no good today – no Boom Boom three week, no customer," Nocheaty complained to me, then tossing her ruddy-cheeked baby, Bamboo, to another girl when a new Mosquito walked in the door.

I assumed that the girls would be greatly interested in good-looking men, as there were plenty of athletic young Australians, lean surfers, chisel-featured European footballers, and muscled-up American military coming through the front door. But to my surprise, the girls were wary of good-looking bar patrons.

Good-looking and young guys had big egos, and always thought they could barter for a discount. The girls wanted someone more passive, someone who would hold them in high regard, so they could boss the guy around and hopefully turn him into an ATM.

"My boyfriend so good I so happy thank you all my friend I drink good tonight drink happy," a girl would post on her Facebook, next to a photo of her posing by the beach while a cherubic and perfectly bald Italian senior citizen, looking utterly confused and wearing only a thong, lay on an outdoor massage table next to her.

Despite the young guys' looks and impressive physiques, the girls knew that the better shape someone was in, the poorer they probably were. Young men were also mostly broke, backpacking around chasing beer specials and staying in the shabbiest hostels – sometimes only shared dormitories. They were more likely to be on to the next girl the next day, a different one every night.

The girls had a term for those guys – they called them Butterflies, as they floated from bar to bar and girl to girl. Even worse, if a guy was really aggressively cutting notches in his belt and didn't even try to hide it, they called him a Helicopter.



“Fucking Butterfly!” the girls would yell after yet another Mosquito walked out, only to turn into a bar down the street. “Young man no good – want to fuck all night and no tip. Fuck fuck fuck cheap.”

So the girls preferred older men, despite their looks and sagging dispositions, because the sex part was one-and-done and they treated their ladies much better.

“He have no *power!*” they’d proclaim about their older customers. But old men had more money than young travelers and were easier to hook as boyfriends. Some of them just wanted companionship, rarely performing without the aid of Kamagra and Viagra that was sold ubiquitously in the street.

“There are no ugly foreigners,” Ava told me once in all seriousness, a lesson in the economics of flesh in Dragon Town. The old ones weren’t too bad, she thought – it was the young ones the girls had to look out for.

## **Fuck You, I'm Not Angry**

"Is that a monkey?!"

"No, that a tuk-tuk driver," Savannah Solonely said.

"No, not him. Right behind him. There. That's a monkey!" I said.

"Yes, so what?" she said. "You like monkey so good, go buy him drink."

It was no big deal to the girls, but I was amazed there were wild monkeys walking around the streets. A mother with a red butt and a couple of her babies sifted through a pile of trash, chewing on coconut husks and tipping soda bottles to see if there was any left. But the girls didn't see them as endearing zoo attractions like I did. Instead they were dirty and aggressive nuisances – and sometimes even thieves.

The girls explained that the whole street used to be infested with monkeys. Not only did they make a mess rooting through the trash, but they would actually steal from the tourists. Sneaking underfoot, dangling from the tin roofs, or swinging from the power lines and trees, the monkeys would grab sunglasses, wallets, or food off the tourists' tables. They'd caw with monkey laughter as the humans yelled in protest and tried to give chase. The locals thought it was funny, too, and there was a legend that one of the islanders even trained a monkey to steal phones and wallets off the tables and bring them to him.

But when the monkey problem got so bad that they were getting aggressive, shitting everywhere and scaring customers away, the business owners knew they had to do something. So they hired the old, one-legged security guard from the Pickled Parrot bar down the street to get rid of him. All day, he'd stand out there with a slingshot, pelting the monkeys with rocks. Pretty soon the monkeys moved on to safer areas, but you'd still see one wandering down the street from time to time.

"You look same-same monkey," the girls would say to another island girl with a wide nose or darker skin, one of their most stinging insults.

The most vicious and damning thing a girl at Candy Bar could call a westerner was not a monkey but a Helicopter, a Butterfly, a liar, cheap, or disparage the fact that you were sober – in that order. They didn't care if you sold drugs for a living or got embarrassingly fall-down wasted every night or wore socks with sandals or had bad teeth or were bald or needed a pill to get your bamboo strong or practically any other defect – but if you didn't have money and didn't pledge your undying love to her, and only her, they became angry.

“You lie, you die!” is a saying I heard the girls yell liberally every day, sometimes expanded jokingly into: “You lie, you die; you cry, you die; you shy, you die; and sometimes when you fly, you die if plane go bad.”

It was grand irony, of course, because these guys were paying for their services and the girls might have five or ten guys in their stable of customers who were in town at any given time, yet they would become enraged at all of them for being Butterflies and failing to commit.

As the new girls learned the game, they’d eventually become adept at getting Bar Fined instead of just hustling Lady Drinks. Some of the girls I’d rarely see, other than at the beginning of the evening, because they’d always get Bar Fined well before midnight, sometimes two or three times a night. Those were the moneymakers, the “Earners,” as Mamasan called them. She treated them well, showering them with praise, big meals outside the bar, and nights off at the casino.

Graduating from being Bar Fined every night, the next promotion for the girls was to lock in a boyfriend. Boyfriends would Bar Fine them a few nights in a row, take them out to D Mall to buy nice things, and spend days with them, too, when they could lounge poolside at the tourist’s hotel, white towels covering inch of their body so they wouldn’t get tan. Of course the tourists paid for all of this, but more than just penciling out financially, boyfriends let the girls feel something else: loved, attended to, romantic, like any normal girl. So if the girls were lucky, they’d get three or seven boyfriends at the same time so they could feel extra loved and extra normal.

Their boyfriends were usually only in Dragon Town a few days before they headed to remote beaches to scuba dive, or over to Siem Reap in Cambodia to see Angkor Wat, or on to the beautiful cluster of islands in Thailand. A boyfriend might take the girl along on these excursions. It was easy – they only had to prepay the Bar Fine for each day, plus whatever money he arranged with the girl. A poor or unpopular girl might go just for the experience and the good meals, while the Earners would negotiate a weekly rate.

Eventually the boyfriends would leave for their cold lives behind cold desks in their far-off countries, but the girls would keep in touch. In fact, they’d stalk them every available moment via Facebook, Facetime, WhatsApp, Viber, Skype, and whatever other technological tendril could reach that far.

The girls used their phones to recruit, too, affectionately calling their network of texts, social media messages, and calls to customers and between themselves, “The Coconut Wireless.” So when the girls had down

time, in between other customers or throwing down shots and dancing on the bar, they'd send a mass message to all of their boyfriends, followed by 12 emoticons of teddy bears and pulsating hearts and fish puckering up for a kiss. If the boyfriends didn't get back to them immediately, they'd get angry and send a mass message documenting their distrust at the lack of personal attention.

"Fucking Butterfly. Fuck you guy, why you lie me? Why you lie my phone?"

When the girls were in a state like that, the worst thing the guy could do was text back, especially with something inexcusable like, "Sorry, I didn't go out last night," or "My stomach has been bad, but I'll see you tonight."

That put them in the line of fire for the girl to unload her full wrath.

"Fuck you fucking Butterfly. I kill you! Then I wake you up and kill you twice!"

Sometimes she'd even forget which guy she was talking to and call him by the wrong name. But they'd always make up, sometimes in the same sentence.

"Fuck you I kill you OK I love you baby kisses I wait for you honey... but no lie me or I really kill you twice."

Continuing the love affair when the tourist left served three distinct purposes: they might come back one day and spend more money on her, bring her perfume or a phone when they returned, or he might even continue his financial support once he was home.

"You bring me back perfume when you go Australia?" Apple teased me, despite the fact that she knew I wasn't Australian and wasn't going anywhere. "I want Coco Chanel."

"How about I give you Coconut Chanel," I said, sliding the coconut I was drinking down the bar to her.

"I see how you are, guy," she, flipping her hair in mock indignation as the other girls laughed and high-fived me for getting the best of her, for once.

The dynamic between the girls and their "boyfriends" was puzzling, but I guess we're all human and have the need to feel desired, so the guys were paying for the experience of having a girlfriend, the façade. It was admission to a carefully orchestrated play, as possession of beautiful facsimile was better than being alone – the "Valentine Effect."

Hell, that was the way dating worked in Asia even for the regular folks who wouldn't dream of stepping foot inside a bar. A man was expected to take care of a woman. It would have been an insult not to give a girlfriend some money, even if it was still in the courtship phase, a slight that showed the man didn't value or care about her.

I remembered talking to an American girl who was living in Southeast Asia, working for an NGO. She'd met a nice island guy and they went out for a first date. They had a great time, though it was strictly platonic, and the night ended with the man walking her home. They said goodbye at her front door, but before they parted, he took her hand and placed \$30 in cash in it, then walked off. She was stunned and somewhat confused about why their date had been monetized, but realized it was meant as a sign of affection and even respect. That's just how it was in Dragon Town, too: you either got married or you paid to play, but to do neither would be dishonorable – and glaringly impractical.

So the bar girls expected money from their foreign boyfriends, and felt wronged when it wasn't forthcoming. To cement the relationship and help their new girlfriend out, the guys would wire money back to her every month: \$50, \$100, or \$250 if they were lucky. What's that to a successful foreign businessman who knows he's got a beautiful young woman waiting for him, to feel like the lord of his castle? And guess what? Judgment be damned, some of them did return to the island and ended up marrying bar girls, taking them back to their home countries.

But more often than not, the man would send money for several months before it started dwindling, and then stopped altogether. So the girls had to work hard to keep the fires burning. They'd talk to their boyfriends on the phone or Skype every night, send them selfies every hour, and tag the man when they posted a photo of their own breakfast on Facebook, a way to mark their territory.

The girls never wanted to miss a face-to-face Skype chat with their sweetie because most of them wrote English far worse than they spoke it, if at all, so it was the easiest way to keep a guy on the hook. They were so considerate about staying in touch with their overseas boyfriend that they'd Skype him – even while sitting on a hotel bed waiting to get paid by a different guy, the screen turned away so he couldn't see.

“Baby I visit my sister I wait for you honey I miss you so much. What? No, my sister just flush toilet.”

That's why the girls at Candy Bar trained me not to yell out “hi” or announce my presence in any way when I entered their neighboring rooms on the roof. If the boyfriend heard other guys or – Buddha forbid – saw

them in the background on Skype, a huge part of their income might be lost. I entered in silence until I knew the coast was clear.

Candy Bar was their dating service, presenting a steady stream of opportunities to add new boyfriends to their list of benefactors. Or, at the very least, they had a place to live with some food and their sisters around to look out for them. For that, most of the girls considered themselves lucky to work in a good bar. But there were phalanxes of freelance Taxi Girls, as well.

Every night, the freelancers congregated at the plazas of open-air bars, at the boardwalk by the beach playfully called the “Palm Tree Bar,” or circled around the night markets, trying to blend in while catching a Mosquito’s eye. Freelancers had a big advantage because they didn’t charge Bar Fines, and there was no bullshit with Lady Drinks, but they also had to hunt their own prey or they wouldn’t eat.

When a freelancer met an interested tourist, they could go anywhere they wished without the rules for a bar. They could go out for food, drinks, and then back to his hotel, or even to a short time hotel for \$5 for a couple hours. But they were the shadowy outcasts of the legitimate bar world, and the tourists didn’t realize that there was more at risk if they went with a freelancer. Mamasan told me that they were the girls who had been kicked out of respectable bars, who got too drunk and caused problems, who fought with the other girls, or who just weren’t right in the head.

“A lot of the freelancers smoke *yaba*,” she said, referring to Southeast Asia’s nasty version of meth, combined with heart attack-levels of caffeine and a few other poisons.

They might be freelancers because they were sick, maybe with The MONSTER. Or they just weren’t attractive enough for a mamasan to put them on salary and feed them, maybe with a deformed arm or bad limp because they had been malnourished or suffered from Dengue fever as a child.

But a lot of freelance girls just enjoyed the autonomy of being their own boss, coming and going as they pleased, and adjusted their prices according to the growling in their belly. Some only wanted to go on dates with customers when they had feelings, though they’d always have feelings when their rent was due. Others might prefer not having to compete with a bar full of other girls every night.

They were even girls who had regular jobs but couldn’t make ends meet to feed their families on meager government or service salaries – which were often paid weeks or even months late, if at all. Some of the freelancers just

didn't want to be forever labeled as bar girls, I figured, but they were definitely demonized by those who worked at Candy Bar.

"Be careful with the freelance girls on the street," Ava told me, back behind the bar after a few nights off dating her German boyfriend. I assured her I wasn't in the market, but she liked to give me advice anyway, and loved it when I started typing on my laptop after she spoke.

"Why's that?" I humored her.

"A lot of the freelance girls are *jao*, thieves - they steal from customers," she said, looking at herself in the mirror and puckering her lips. "And sometimes customers pay for the mango, but get the banana."

## **Bazooka Barbecue**

“Good morning, sir!” Sam Sam the Tuk-Tuk Man said as I walked outside the bar. “You want shoot bazooka this morning?”

“Shoot what, Sam Sam?”

“Bazooka. Shoot bazooka very fun. Or AK-47 also very fun. But bazooka more fun. Big boom! I can take you there?”

I stopped and put my hand on his shoulder and laughed. “No, no, oh my God, no. But you’re serious?”

“Oh yes, sir. Very fun. Serious. But not so fun for cow.”

“There’s a cow?!”

“Have cow if you pay for cow. Cow goes boooooooooom all over when you shoot with bazooka. I take tourist Australia last week and he like very happy.”

“That’s terrible.”

“Yes, yes, terrible very fun. Australia man want to take cow home for barbecue but they say no.”

I shifted my backpack and wiped the damp from my forehead.

“Thanks, Sam Sam, but no shooting for me today. So, you work on this street a lot?”

He was a friendly fella; the kind of guy who kept his cheer no matter what life threw at him. He was so slight and thin that he had to roll up his pants and hold them up with a rope belt. He was in his early 30s and had one bad eye, permanently red and half-closed beneath his faded Detroit Tigers ball cap.

“Yes, work here every day. But today no tuk-tuk just moto. No money petrol,” he said, patting the seat of his vehicle. “So where Sam Sam take you today, sir?” Sam Sam asked. “Maybe temple? Or Royal Palace tour? Or shoot bazooka?”

“No, no bazooka,” I said. “I’m sorry, brother, but I don’t have much money today. I’m just going to get coffee and do some work on my laptop.” I showed him my backpack to prove it.



“Ohhhh, very good man. No money OK. I take you on moto, no tuk-tuk today. You pay me after what you want.”

“That’s very nice of you, but I won’t have money after, either. But thank you.” I patted him on the shoulder and went to walk away.

“OK OK, we go and you pay me tomorrow,” he said, vaulting into the driver’s seat of his motorcycle with surprising grace.

“I really won’t have any money tomorrow either. I stay over this bar and lost my bank cards and can’t get money,” I said. “But thank you.”

“OK sir, we go. You no pay,” he said, patting the seat behind him. “We go.”

I protested but he insisted it was all right, so I got on the back of the bike.

“You good man! *Klang!* Strong!” he said, sizing up in the rearview mirror as he kicked the bike to life with a choke of smoke and pulled out, doing a U-turn in traffic, only inches away from getting clipped by a speeding delivery truck.

“What you name again, sir?” he asked.

“I’m Norm. N-o-r-m,” I yelled above the throng of the traffic.

“Worm! Good man!” he said.

“Norm!”

“Yes, Worm!” And I didn’t protest, because it was still better than “Nohm nohm.”

Sam Sam the Tuk-Tuk Man brought me all over Dragon Town that morning. Every time he tried to take me to one of the popular tourist attractions, I instructed him to take me to the real city, to the places no westerners saw.

As we whizzed through a maze of endless streets, he pointed the old high school that was turned into a prison and a notorious den of torture during the war, barbed wire still sitting atop its walls and white shutters closed. He warned me about the areas I shouldn’t walk at night, including the concrete labyrinth of apartments with barred windows, bushes and a tree growing out of its cracked face. He told me that street was run by Vietnamese gangs, and the next neighborhood by a notoriously brutal Laotian gang. Sam Sam slowed down to show me the best street side

pharmacies to buy steroids or human growth hormone, though I assured him I didn't want to take that stuff.

"But when you do - it here," he offered.

I was amazed to learn that you could buy any drug on the market without a prescription at these little outdoor pharmacies, many of them stamped with "For Donation Only."

He showed me the seemingly innocent circular park around the pagoda in the center of town that became a haven for drug dealers and freelancers every night.

"Is that a monk?" I asked, pointing out a man with a shaved head in a traditional orange robe, sitting in front of a store chatting on his smartphone.

"Yes, Buddha monk," Sam Sam said.

"And they let them have phones?"

"Sure, why not? How else can call?" he asked, explaining that young people often entered the monkhood and lived at the Pagoda for a few months or years. They didn't need to renounce their whole lives like priests in Christianity. He also told me to watch out for the fake monks, criminals who would shave their head and throw on orange robes and scam the tourists by selling them overpriced bracelets.

The islanders didn't take kindly to these monk impersonators. They took their faith seriously, so they'd beat the scammers to a pulp if they caught them. Sam Sam also told me not to give money to a blind man who wasn't really blind but just put on sunglasses, or to fall for a friendly Filipino couple inviting you to dinner but then taking you to a remote part of town and robbing you - or worse.

When we saw a baby-faced soldier barely big enough to carry his gun, his green uniform sagging off of his skinny shoulders, Sam Sam explained that there was a yearly lottery drawing, determining which 17-year-olds had to enter the army for two years and which got a pass. The poorest kids always lost the lottery and got drafted, he told me.

"Rich people always luck." But even when someone from a powerful family was drafted, they could pay a poor family to send their son to serve in his stead.

We went by the humungous windowless catacomb as big as a city block that was the Russian Market, where people rented closet-sized stalls and packed them with clothes or purses or local foods or backpacks or shoes or moto tires, but never two different things. The stifling hot indoor market was open all day and night, so people slept right in their stalls, sprawled out on top of their merchandise until a customer came around.

We drove past a surprising number of American 7-Eleven stores, and then their knockoff 6-Eleven Asian counterparts, Japanese noodle houses and laundry shops that also sold bus tickets. Sam Sam told me which stores to avoid because the Korean owners rubbed the expiration dates off their spoiled food and drinks.

As the morning turned to the pavement-melting heat of noon, Sam Sam took me to the very end of the ocean side boulevard. It looked different than the boulevard and beaches in front of the nice tourist areas and hotels. Families slept on the sidewalks under cardboard tents, their laundry hung out to dry on bushes while they went half naked because they only owned one set of clothes. Some of them squatted in front of the concrete building that was the public restroom, hoping a westerner would want to use the bathroom so they could charge them a few coins, pretending to work there.

There were children everywhere, so many I wondered if anyone went to school on the island – shoeless, blackened children dodging cars and collecting cans, trying to sell lotus flowers or beg change from a stopped motorist.

“Pa Pa, Pa Pa, please one dollar for rice,” they said, cupping their little hands to their mouths. There were mostly children out on the street begging because they knew tourists wouldn’t give to adults. Sam Sam told me that the children were put out there by their parents, or even gangs who scooped up homeless children and made them work the streets. They learned a surprising amount of English, and were some of the best salespeople I’ve ever encountered. A little girl with the moon in her eyes tried to sell a tourist one of the hand-woven bracelets she had secured to a piece of cardboard.

“Hello madam hello sir I would like you to buy one of my bracelets I make them special myself good luck for you thank you how many would you like discount for three?”

“No, thank you. But you are cute.”

“OK madam what is your favorite color?”

"I like purple, but thank you, no."

"Purple OK my favorite color too you are like my big sister OK here try this one on," as she took out a purple bracelet and laid it across the lady tourist's wrist. "Just look – no price for looking."

"It's very nice, but no thank you. I don't have money on me now."

"OK, later then here I give you this one for free good luck for you good luck for me and you pay me later no problem."

"Later? No, that's all right, but thank you. How would you find me?"

"You pay what you want I trust you because you are like my sister and we have same favorite color I want you to have this present."

"Oh... OK, I guess," the tourist said. "Thank you so much."

"Yes and you can pay me what you want when you see me later, OK?"

"Sure, I will."

"And don't buy from anyone else, OK? You want to buy bracelet you only buy from me you promise?"

"Hahaha, yes, I promise."

"OK good because you lie, you die," the little girl said with a big smile, showing her dimples. Dragon Town was a small place so, inevitably, she would see the tourists later.

"You remember me, sister? I like your bracelet looks nice," she'd say. The tourist would receive her warmly and tip the girl maybe \$2 or so for a bracelet that cost 5 cents to make.

As Sam Sam and I drove up to a major intersection, four police officers lazed on the corner, standing next to their bikes in the shade of a tree.

When they saw us, they walked into the street, waving for us to pull over.

"Why are they stopping us?" I asked Sam Sam, but he didn't answer. He slowed down and veered toward the curb to pull over. I went to put my feet down to meet the concrete. The policeman relaxed and approached us, reaching for his ticket book. But right as we pulled up to the cop and almost came to a stop, Sam Sam hit the throttle, violently swinging the bike away from the police officer. He yelled and tried to grab at us but Sam Sam had

already accelerated enough and crossed the flow of traffic amid curses and honking horns.

“What are you doing?” I yelled to Sam Sam over the wind. I looked over my shoulder, but the cops weren’t giving chase, realizing it was a lost cause and heading back to the shade. Sam Sam turned down a side street and slowed.

“Don’t worry, they no trouble us,” Sam Sam said.

“What? Man, you just ran away from the police.”

“They have to pay own petrol. No chase us, too much petrol.” He explained that the police all were responsible for paying their own fuel for their motorcycles, so if a motorist they were trying to pull over evaded them and got away clean, they knew it wasn’t worth the energy and fuel to give chase.

“Why were they pulling us over, anyway?” I asked Sam Sam. “What did you do wrong?”

“They see you,” said Sam Sam. They didn’t need a reason to pull someone over. They could because of their badge and gun; that was reason enough. They just wanted a bribe from a foreigner, probably about \$10 would do it, and if I didn’t pay, they’d give Sam Sam a ticket for some made up infraction or even impound his bike.

“They say pay, I have to pay,” he told me. Evading the police was just a part of life for the average islander.

I remembered something I had seen on the beach when I first got to the island, before the typhoon, when I was just a tourist like everyone else. There were vendors that walked up and down the beach, mostly older women wearing long sleeve shirts and round hats to protect them from the sun. They mostly sold fresh fruit, prawns that they would cook on coals in a clay pot right there, or foot massages and pedicures. The women didn’t have licenses and weren’t supposed to work on the beach, though they were just trying to make a few dollars a day to eat and support their families.

The police played a cat-and-mouse game of trying to bust the women, taking away their goods and collecting a fine – or bribe. So when a policeman would start patrolling the beach, the women moved on or stayed away. But one time while I was swimming, I saw a commotion in a small crowd near the shore. A policeman had cornered one of the vendor women, who had nowhere to escape but was intent not to lose her wares and pay a

bribe. So when the fully clothed officer walked up to her, she simply walked into the ocean, stopping when the water was mid-thigh. The policeman yelled for her to come back and threatened her, but she just stood there. He didn't know what to do, and the other beachgoers loved watching him being tormented.

The standoff continued, with the officer contemplating taking off his shoes and socks and rolling up his pants and going after her, but the woman calmly stood there in the water with a basket of fruit resting on her head. He tried everything, even pretending to walk away and hiding behind a palm tree, but she didn't fall for it.

Finally, the hot sun and his loss of face in front of the crowd wore out his resolve. He walked away looking particularly angry, especially when the crowd started cheering over his defeat. Once he was safely gone, the woman simply walked back onto the beach after her cool, refreshing break in the ocean, and started selling fruit again. Although we weren't nearly as creative, that story came to mind after Sam Sam evaded the police on our moto.

The islanders usually crossed the street when they saw the police, but they weren't the only ones looking for a bribe. There were government workers everywhere and the graft was complete. They weren't hard to spot; throw a rock and you were bound to hit some middle-aged man with a beer gut in a blue dress shirt, khakis, and black shoes. They drank for free outside local shops, congregated in the shade near the Royal Palace or rode their motos along the road by the beach. They carried walkie-talkies and a book to issue tickets, though no one really knew what their actual job entailed.

It was a big racket, Mamasan had warned me, as their only purpose was to ticket common people for some made-up infraction, which could all go away with \$5, 60 baht, or whatever they had in their pocket at the time.

The men had official sounding titles but no actual job. Once a politician was assigned his office, he'd hire all of his friends, relatives, and cronies. They were all put on the books as employees and paid a salary of \$50 a month. But they kicked the politician back \$30 of that money and did no actual work, except recruiting others under them, who would make \$10 a month to be their official assistants and kick up the remaining \$40. It was like a big pyramid scheme in government, with dozens or even scores of employees swearing fealty to their politician and all of the money flowing up – but no actual work getting done.

After a couple hours driving around with Sam Sam, I felt bad that I was taking all of his time so I told him it was OK to head back to the bar, but he insisted we stop for food. We sat outside at a sidewalk restaurant that

popped up every morning, squatting on stools among islander business people somehow not sweating in their full-sleeved collared shirts, students in school uniforms taking a break, and old men smoking and playing a game that looked like checkers with bottle caps. We sat on the tiny stools and Sam Sam ordered lunch for us and we ate rice, curry with eggplant and pork, and dark iced coffee.

After lunch, he dropped me off in front of the bar. I gave him the last few folded baht notes from my pocket and apologized for not having more.

"It's OK, Worm," he said. "You are my friend. Good man!"

I thanked him and wished him good luck the rest of the day.

"And what do you do tomorrow?" he asked. "I take you go shoot bazooka? Very good boom!"

"Haha, no bazooka, Sam Sam."

Only when he drove off and I walked into the bar did I realize that my phone wasn't in my pocket. I rifled through my pockets and backpack again furiously but no, it was gone. I'd never misplaced my iPhone before. It must have been stolen.

"Shit! How could I be so stupid?" I asked, realizing that it must have been Sam Sam, as he'd had plenty of opportunities to pickpocket me. Maybe the whole thing was a scam, and that's why he was being nice, not charging me and buying me lunch. Of course! It was worth a fortune to someone poor and desperate like Sam Sam, and now I had no way of finding him or trying to get it back. Damn, how could I be so...

"Sir Worm! Worm!" I heard a voice outside. Sam Sam ran into the bar, panting.

"Your phone," he said, holding out my iPhone with both hands, brushing dirt off the case. "You drop on seat. Please be careful, sir! Hold phone very tight."

## **Paradise in Trouble**

One of my first nights living over the bar among the Taxi Girls, I had a visitor sneak into my room and share my bed. Rousing me from my sweaty sleep, I heard rustling outside. I thought it was just one of the cats I'd seen outside. I heard it again, scratching against the wall, but then it got quiet. I listened for a long time but didn't hear any more, so I passed out again.

I woke up when something brushed across my arm. It was smooth and thin and slid across my skin. I shot up and groped in the dark for the mini flashlight I'd purchased before the typhoon, which I kept by my bed. I found it and turned on the flashlight. In the corner of the room, the huge hairy backside of a rat squeezed through a crack in the wall, its spindly tail slithering across the floor as it retreated outside.

At that point, I did what any macho grown man would do: I jumped up on the bed and danced around with my hands over my head, shrieking at a pitch I didn't know it was possible for a human male to emit. When the rat's snout poked back in, I took off running to escape out the front door, but forgot my bed was covered in mosquito netting. I tripped on the net and fell and dragged it with me, blinding myself as I burst into the night air, dancing around looking for rats.

The girls started emerging from their rooms, rubbing their eyes and trying to figure out who had let off an air raid siren. But it was only me, naked except for boxer shorts and a wedding veil of tangled mosquito net over my head.

"Who scream like that?"

"What girl hurt?"

"What the fuck, guy?"

"Oh, sorry. I just... I just... I wanted to say goodnight," I said.

"Come on, man! Let us sleep."

"OK, sorry. Sleep good."

"Fuck you, guy. Sweet dreams," and they went back to bed.

Needless to say, I didn't sleep a wink the rest of the night, launching into the air and switching on my flashlight whenever I heard the slightest noise. But the rat that had been sharing my bed didn't return.



In the morning, I told the girls what had happened and they nearly Nohm'd themselves laughing.

"Why you so scare rat?" Ala Fakelove said.

"Those things are disgusting," I said. "And they can bite you."

"But look how big you," Aneang Happygirl said.

I asked them what I could do to get rid of the rats, but they didn't understand the question. So I explained that I wanted to make sure they didn't come back and come into my room and on my bed while I slept.

"Well guy, can get cat?"

"Yes put many wild cat in room."

"And if you scare of cat, you get dog!" they said, and laughed all morning at my expense.

But there was one girl who wasn't in a laughing mood.

I felt bad for Sophar, keeping to herself with her eyes on the floor, washing her one dress every night, but there was little I could do to help her. And after Rosey Tam, the cocktail waitress in the bar, got into an accident, things got even worse for Sophar.

Mamasan told Ava to watch the bar one afternoon after she got a text. Rosey had been in a bad moto accident. She was at the hospital, but they wouldn't let her in or treat her unless someone paid up front. Mamasan rushed out of the bar, bringing a couple of the girls with her.

When they came back hours later, they reported that Rosey's leg was bad, but they had paid to get her into the hospital so at least she wouldn't bleed to death or die of shock. They had photos on their cell phones and showed them to the girls around the bar. Her leg was mangled above the knee, with bone and tissue poking out through a foot-long rip in the flesh. I wished I hadn't looked.

Mamasan said something to the girls in their language. They nodded their heads in agreement and went back to work.

"We will try and raise money for Rosey," Mamasan said to me, once she saw the look of concern on my face. "The doctors are worried about infection. If they don't operate soon, they think she will lose the leg."

The hospitals certainly worked differently there, as I found out when I went with the girls to visit Rosey the next day. If you didn't have cash on your person when you arrived at the hospital, even if you were unconscious and about to die, they would turn you away. Most of the common people from the province or even in the city could never afford medical care, and a lot of the islanders never visited a doctor in their lifetime.

That fact dawned on me when the girls were going through their usual teasing. Someone would ask, "Where are you from?" and the answer was always, "I'm from my mom," or "From the moon," or then, "From the sun" – back and forth like that. When I tried to get creative by adding, "I'm from the hospital," the girls just looked at me with blank stares, not understanding my meaning. None of them had been born in a hospital; just pushed out right at home before their mom went back to work in the fields or the streets.

In the provinces there were few doctors, as people employed a mix of home remedies and questionable spiritualism to cure their ailments. Natural healers were held in high regard, visited day and night with sick people in tow. The healers were given donations; a few coins and they would give an elderly person who was going blind a special herbal tea to drink while brushing a branch from a magic tree across her back, or applying sacred mud salves to a child with a cancerous lump in exchange for some food.

When these remedies didn't work, it was because the curses working against the patient were strong, and they probably hadn't prayed enough – or paid enough. But in the rare case when the lump went down or the old person started to see again, the healer was revered as someone who had the gods' favor.

Sometimes it went bad.

I read an article about a magic healer in Dragon Town's bilingual newspaper one day. The paragraph said that the healer, who had been treating people far out in the provinces with his mystic healing powers for years, had finally been accused of being a charlatan by nearby villagers. They dragged him out of his home and stoned him to death. It was a healthcare system I didn't envy, even at the nicest public hospital in the city.

Offices with white walls and air conditioning and fancy foreign medicines were for rich people. Instead, the girls – who had myriad ailments every day described as "stomach hurt" – learned to self heal, because no one was going to help them. You didn't need a prescription to buy any medicine from the guerilla pharmacies that pocked the streets, but even the cheap

counterfeit drugs were mostly out of reach for the girls. So their medicine was usually Tiger Balm.

They carried the little glass jars and used the fiery herbal ointment as a cure-all for any malady. But the most bizarre medical ritual was the practice of self-imposed torture with Tiger Balm.

One of my first days in the bar, I saw a girl's back and shoulders were striped with deep purple bruises. I thought she'd been brutally whipped by a customer or something the night before, so I asked if she was OK. She looked at me like I was bananas and explained that to feel healthier, you took the lid of the Tiger Balm, covered it with the stuff, and raked it over your flesh as hard as possible, digging in so deep that it caused horrible bruising. How this was supposed to heal them I never understood, but it was common practice and they truly believed the extreme pain boosted their immune system or purged whatever demon had possessed them.

If the girls were so sick that they passed out, or it was so bad they thought they might die, they did try to see a doctor, using a week or two's pay. But mostly the doctor just gave them an IV and then sent them on their way. They loved IVs – the doctors' version of Tiger Balm – and at least once a day I'd see someone riding on the back of a moto holding their own IV bag up in the air, fresh out of the hospital and on their way home.

Rosey stayed at the Soviet Friendship Hospital – a mammoth square monstrosity of a building devoid of all personality and windows, other than slats in the concrete. People who were seriously injured or really sick still had to pay to get in there, and then tried to bribe the two or three exhausted doctors who were charged with taking care of hundreds of patients. The hospital didn't give them food and couldn't even guarantee a bed, so a patient's whole family would move right into the hospital, bathing, feeding, and cleaning their ill relative.

Inside the hospital, there were people everywhere: camped out, living and sleeping on bamboo mats in the hallways, in the stair wells, in hammocks they hung from railings, and on the floors. Some people had to live outside, on the scorching balconies or on the roof, until a room or some floor space opened up for them. Rooms meant for six patients were stuffed with 20 or 30, with relatives sharing their beds. If they were lucky, they'd have a little electric fan. If not, they'd take turns fanning the sick relative, trying to keep the flies off of them. In the afternoon it was so hot no one talked or moved; only the moans of the sick rose above the humming of tropical humidity outside.

When we went to see Rosey, I saw an older woman trying to carry a 50-pound sack of rice up the never-ending concrete staircase, so I offered to

help. She gladly accepted and led me to the second floor, stopping at the door of a supply closet. I thought it must be a mistake, but she knocked gently and the door opened. Inside, there were two other family members and a big dog. They were all living in the closet, eating only rice and hoping not to be discovered or kicked out.

That first night we learned about Rosey's injury and saw the photos, the other girls at the bar prepared a long necklace of jasmine blossoms, sort of like a lei you might see in Hawaii. They passed it around and each of the girls donated a few baht notes, stapling the money to the necklace string in between the flowers.

It was the tradition, I learned, where each girl stepped up and donated what they could for their sister in need. They had other necklaces for customers that the girls took turns wearing, going around sharing the photos of Rosey's leg injury and pleading for the patrons to donate toward her operation. The tourists did just that, impressed that these girls were all surrendering a few days' pay to help, and not barraging them with Lady Drink requests for one night.

By closing time, there were four necklaces fully loaded with baht bills like chicken feathers. They'd raised more than two hundred dollars – enough to pay the doctors and buy medicine to stave off infection, and a good chunk of what they needed for an operation to save the leg. Thanks to Mamasan and the girls, Rosey did eventually get better and come back to the bar, though her leg was never the same; she walked with a stiff limp, but refused to stop working and smiled more than ever.

But there was one girl who didn't donate when the money necklace got passed her way. Sophar looked at the necklace and then at the girls, thinking about what to do. The girls said something to her, but she handed it back. I don't know if she didn't have any money, since she'd just started working at the bar and hadn't even earned a Lady Drink as far as I could tell, or if she just didn't want to, but she didn't offer any money for Rosey.

The girls didn't forget that.

The next day, Sophar was assigned the task of cleaning the bar and the bathrooms by herself. It was like that all week: spending almost all day on her hands and knees scrubbing the floors, her one sundress becoming wet and gray on the bottom. But the girls weren't satisfied with the punishment.

"Sophar, go bring this drink customer," Apple barked at her, pointing to a sweaty American guy in business slacks and a white dress shirt, an expat

attorney who drank whiskey alone in a booth with his sunglasses on, even though it was the middle of the night. Sophar just looked at her.

“Stupid girl no even speak English,” Apple said. She said something in their language and pointed again. Sophar picked up the glass of whiskey and held it with both hands, walking toward the back of the bar where the man sat, focusing on the rim of the glass so that none of the liquid would spill. As she passed by, Apple pretended not to see her and turned around sharply, her arm coming down across Sophar’s hands. The glass fell and shattered, whiskey and ice spilling on the floor. Everyone in the bar stopped at the sound of breaking glass. Sophar stood and looked down in disbelief at what Apple had just done.

“What the fuck stupid girl?!” Apple yelled at her, loud enough for Mamasan to hear at her table in front. Apple shook her hands out and started patting down nearby customers with napkins, even though they weren’t wet.

“Stupid new girl not careful,” she told them. “Maybe she need go back her province.” It was all over in a second and everyone went back to their drinking and conversations, except for Sophar, who still stood frozen, unsure what to do, until Mamasan came over.

“You’re paying for the broken glass,” Mamasan said. “And the cost of the drink. That’s \$4 coming out of your pay, so you be more careful next time.”

But Sophar didn’t understand, of course, so Mamasan yelled at her in their language, making Sophar wince, her eyes filling with red.

“Sit down, Norm,” Ava said to me, watching it all from behind the bar.

“What?”

“Sit down, it’s OK,” she said.

I hadn’t realized I was standing.

“But that’s fucked up, she did that on purpose,” I said.

“I know,” Ava said. “But it doesn’t concern you.”

I sat down.

“That’s the way it has to be,” Ava said to me. “She’ll learn. Or she won’t last long.”

Apple smirked at Sophar and walked casually to the front of the bar, where she started dancing. Sophar looked like she was on the verge of tears, but went and got the broom and mop and cleaned up the spilled drink.

The next day was supposed to be Sophar's first day off, her only one of the month. But when she walked out of her shack in the morning, Apple reminded her that she still had to clean the bar before she could leave.

Sophar spent the first half of the day cleaning. Once she thought she was finally done, the other girls yelled at her for forgetting to clean the sidewalk in front of the bar. So Sophar had to scrub the sidewalk and then the gutter, too.

In the early afternoon when Sophar was out front, a Rolls Royce turned down the street. I saw it, too, but had I to blink to make sure it was real. But there it was, angelic pearly white with big curved wheel wells and gold trim on the fenders and a big gold hood ornament. The Rolls drove very slowly down the street. Everyone stepped aside to let it pass.

The car stopped in the middle of the street in front of the bar, where the islander driver, wearing a white suit and white hat, parked. He got out, opened the rear door, and out stepped a woman – an islander, but with light skin and a surgically perfected nose, finely dressed with a sunhat and expensive high heels.

The driver opened a white sun umbrella and held it over the woman, accompanying her to the front door of the beauty parlor across the street. He waited outside as she went in, guarding the entrance and watching the car, which was still parked in the middle of the road. It blocked all traffic, so when motos or tuk-tuks came down the street and saw the rich person's car, they turned around and went back without protest or surprise, finding a different street to traverse. People walked around the car without touching it or even looking at it too long. The lady didn't come out of the beauty parlor for an hour.

Sophar cleaned the gutter, pushing a scrub brush and soapy water to clean out the swampy muck of cigarette butts and discarded beer and plastic Baggies and emptied buckets of cooking water and who knows what other sewage. When she paused to look up, her reflection stared back at her from a shiny gold-rimmed hubcap of the Rolls Royce. Sophar looked at her reflection for a long time, an unrecognizable Taxi Girl with tears in her eyes kneeling in filth on the city street.

Then she went back to scrubbing. Sophar didn't look up again, even when the lady came out of the beauty shop, got back in the car, and drove away.

## **A Redneck, A Frenchman, and A Good Smelling CIA Agent Walk Into A Bar**

When I was first stranded on the island and taken in at Candy Bar, I was desperate to talk to other foreigners. Seeing another tourist – or even better, the rare American – was refreshing because it reminded me that my situation was only temporary. But I had to be careful because some of the foreigners were crazier than all of the bar girls put together.

Still, Mamasan encouraged me to chat up the *barang* from time to time, as it was good for business. If I could get a guy talking about his favorite soccer team back home, debating the best bar in town on a Saturday night, or the virtues of living in Vietnam over Thailand, they might stay a little longer and order more drinks.

I met plenty of decent people visiting the island with good intentions – young couples doing charity work to help the typhoon victims, photographers who liked punk rock music, or college kids on their gap year looking to experience foreign cultures.

An older American expat with a boxer's nose came into the bar from time to time, always wearing a white tank top and a big cowboy hat. "Cowboy" was a local legend, visiting Dragon Town's poorest slums and hospitals, walking room to room and handing out \$20 bills to the families of sick children there. He was beloved by those islanders and even the tuk-tuk drivers hugged him, as \$20 meant they could afford the next round of medicine for their children instead of just watching them slowly die in the heat.

But for every Cowboy, there were a dozen wild cards.

After a while, I wasn't at all surprised to see an old Scottish dodger clad only in a kilt standing on the bar at 10 in the morning, completely "pissed" (as they say in the UK), wailing incomprehensible drinking songs. A British guy who taught at an island school started drinking with his breakfast every morning before class. He told me that he came from a wealthy estate in London and went to Oxford and used to be a pro skier, but refused to shake my hand. The next morning, he'd introduce himself to me again and tell the same story, but not remember we'd talked the day before.

One day, a squirrely Canadian guy with a hollow stare ordered a cheeseburger, but didn't touch it when it came, just looking at the plate in front of him. Finally, the drunken patron sitting next to him joked that he should "eat the damn thing, not just look at it." Squirrely grew red faced

and picked up the plate and threw it across the room – burger and all – smashing it into the wall.

“I’ve had people fucking telling me when to eat or shit or walk through a door for twenty years, and I’m not going to let anyone tell me now!” he yelled.

The bar patrons left him alone after that, for it was obvious he’d been in prison a long time.

There were also plenty of Russians in Dragon Town, formidable and stern men with stomachs as big as Siberia but skimpy thongs. We didn’t mix with the Russians, who wouldn’t even piss on you if you were on fire, but they preferred to frequent their own windowless casinos and KTV karaoke clubs, anyway. The Russian mob was moving into Southeast Asia, and it was nothing for them to buy up whole plots of beachfront property or buildings and turn them into their own dens of sin with gambling and drugs, perfect opportunities to launder money or run guns.

There was a French guy who came in the bar at least once a week. Everyone seemed to know him, though I never saw him Bar Fine any of the girls. He sipped cognac and played pool and seemed a little off, talking to himself even when no one was there. I stayed clear.

One of the girls filled me in about who he was. The Frenchman once worked for a big international charity that fought sex trafficking in Southeast Asia. It was important work; so important that Frenchy got a little over zealous with his methods.

He’d figured out that if the charity got mentioned in newspapers for exposing tourists who went with local women, it raised their profile in the international community and, therefore, more donations poured in – which meant that his pay scaled higher, too.

So Frenchy started setting up sting operations in Dragon Town, paying a teenage girl or freelancer a few baht to stand out on the beach boulevard and solicit customers. He told the girls to be very persuasive, even if the guys said no. If they did offer to go somewhere with the girls, Frenchy would confront them, snapping photos on his cell phone and then threatening to expose them in an unscrupulous Australian tabloid. Unless, of course, they wanted to make a sizable donation to his charity, which could be conveniently paid to Frenchy right on the spot.

One day Frenchy saw an Australian man walking by the ocean with a girl. The girl, who was Asian but with light skin, was maybe only 14 years old.



They'd always hold hands, and sometimes the man had his arm around the girl and kissed her on her cheek.

Frenchy started looking for them, the man so obviously arrogant that he didn't even try to hide his relationship with the girl. Frenchy was salivating to bust the man. He got his chance one day when he saw the man and the girl walking by the beach again. He ran up, pointed his camera, and took a shot. It came out perfectly, both faces clear as the man was hugging the girl and kissing her on the forehead.

It was Frenchy's big break, so he didn't confront the man but sold the photo to the tabloid, which printed it to lead their special report on sex trafficking.

When the paper went to print, the Australian man was identified and everyone knew his name. He was ruined. He lost his job, his friends wanted nothing to do with him, and people yelled nasty things to him on the street.

Frenchy was proud of himself – and received a hefty sum for the photo. But there was one thing he'd missed: the girl was the Australian man's daughter. The Aussie was married to an island woman and they had several kids, all of whom looked Asian but with lighter skin. The man was just walking his 12-year-old daughter to school every day.

After that, the charity fired the Frenchman and he faced allegations of embezzlement back home. So he stayed in Dragon Town, disappearing into the shadows like it's so easy to do. For the last couple years, he'd only come into the bars to interact with the girls, doing "research" for his next big philanthropic project.

But Frenchy wasn't the only nut in the fruitcake that was Dragon Town. There were plenty of men – and women – who would have either been locked up or thrown in a mental hospital if they were back in their home countries.

One of my favorites was Alabama. Sometimes he'd come into the bar with his father and we'd talk. They had been carpenters in the U.S. until Alabama suffered a brain injury in a car accident and couldn't work well anymore. So he came to live on the island with his father, where they could make their money stretch and stay out of trouble.

Alabama and his dad started drinking around 9 AM and went long into the night. They usually didn't come into the bars, because it was too expensive for beer, so they'd sit at the expat watering holes near their \$7 a night guest house, the air thick with cigarette smoke that even the wobbly

ceiling fan couldn't cut through, listening to the chatter of cricket or rugby on TV.

I'd see 'Bama walking all over town. He never used a tuk-tuk so he could save his money for beer, and he really had nothing better to do than walk, anyway. I'd spot his crimson baseball hat with a white cursive A on it. I always said hi to him, because he wasn't a bad guy at all; he was actually pretty warm-hearted. But it was only a matter of time, I thought, until something happened to him. Alabama was a little off to begin with, due to his brain injury, and he'd get so drunk that he'd wander into bad neighborhoods or start pissing all over the front of an islander's shack. It was a miracle no one had run out with a machete and cancelled his vacation permanently.

There was a former CIA agent who came into the bar. I can't tell you his name, because I promised never to repeat it, a promise I took seriously. The ex-CIA agent was a big man, probably 240 pounds of stacked muscle, despite the fact that he was probably in his late 50s. He combed his hair neatly and dressed in designer jeans, his perfectly creased polo shirt tucked in despite the heat. He was composed, polite, soft-spoken, and always smelled like good cologne – the only Mosquito I ever saw who didn't seem to sweat in the tropical heat and humidity.

The man worked for the CIA for a couple of decades, including on the island during the 1990s when the UN was trying to stabilize the country. Once he retired, only a few years before I met him, he left the U.S.

"I'll never go back," he'd say. He probably couldn't reemerge without fear for his life, he said. So he married a nice island woman and started his new life, laying low. But he told me some wild stories, things we call "conspiracy theories," but which are just common-knowledge within the intelligence community.

He'd reminisce about Dragon Town in the early years after the revolution, when everyone walked the streets with AK-47s or pistols tucked in their waistbands, gunshots popping like fireworks every night, when men were thrown off rooftops for crossing the wrong mobster and bodies washed up on the beach every morning, heavy with Dragon Town bullets. There was no law in those days, he told me, as he sat and sipped his beer without sweating, always facing the door.

The good-smelling CIA agent said these things not to brag, nor did he embellish – in fact, I had to practically beg him to tell me more, and he wouldn't give me his local phone number or his email address because he was wary of talking to a writer. But he liked talking to me because I wasn't

a drunk, and worked and showered regularly, which instantly made me one of the most credible people he'd met on the island.

I can't tell you the other things he told me, for I will honor my promise – and not just because I gave my word, but because I have no doubt that he could make me disappear without as much as ruffling his polo shirt or fading the scent of his Cool Water. But I will pass on some advice he gave me.

“Keep some gold,” he said. In case there was a revolution again, or any political trouble, or another natural disaster, or you got arrested on trumped up charges because your enemies paid off the local police, or you had to leave in the middle of the night for any reason, you wanted a little gold. \$1,000 worth or so was a good amount, he told me, to pay off a fisherman to smuggle you over to the mainland and pay off the customs officer, and for a fake passport, and then to buy a bus ticket overland to wherever you needed to go and start over.

You could hide the gold in your shoe or in your teeth, or even swallow it if you were worried about thieves. Everyone accepted gold without bothering with currency conversions or worrying about counterfeiting. And when the shit hit the fan, you certainly didn't want your money in a bank. Gold, he said. That could be what saved your life if there was another revolution.

## Earners

I went to see if my ATM card had arrived most afternoons, a sweaty 15-minute walk to the yellow French Colonial mansion with white shutters that had been converted to a post office after the war. You could still see bullet holes that pocked the raw cement. It was cool in the post office, with its high ceilings, slowly whirling plantation fans, and mahogany railings on the grand staircase. The workers lazed about among neat piles of brown wrapping paper and string.

*"Sus-dae.* How are you today?" I asked the manager when it was my turn in line. An open bottle of white rum with a red cap sat in plain sight at his counter. "Did something come for me?"

"What is your name, sir?"

"Norm. Norm Schriever. Remember? I've been in every day this week."

He'd look at me through glazed eyes, trying to connect it all.

"I will check for you." He went into the back, came out after five minutes to ask me to write down my name again, grabbed his bottle, and went back for a long time before emerging.

"No letter. Sorry. Come back tomorrow, sir."

After two weeks, I stopped going to the post office every day. It seemed like a waste of time and it was too damn hot to walk there. And even though I was still cut off from the outside world and without more than a few dollars to my name, I was out of harm's way.

My accommodations on the roof of Candy Bar were by no means comfortable. In fact, they were exhausting, but I wasn't complaining; I'd fallen a long way without hitting the ground. Sure, I couldn't sleep more than two hours at a time, always woke up in a pool of sweat, and shared my shack with rats, but I followed the girls' lead, making do with what I had without complaint.

We shared our food at every meal, so no one had too much and no one had too little. If the water pipes were backed up for a couple days, I took a shower with rainwater out of a five-gallon bucket. When I couldn't find aftershave at the store, since every lotion had skin-whitening chemicals in it and Asian people rarely shave anyway, I just borrowed Astroglide from the girls, slapping it on my neck and face like it was Aqua Velva.

I began to understand the little things the girls did, like buying baby powder by the jug, covering their faces and bodies with a fine white cloud every couple hours. It kept them cool and prevented sweating, and they also liked that it made their skin look lighter.

To try and fit in and make myself useful, I added another job – along with resident DJ and chatting up tourists so they'd stay in the bar. I became the designated roach killer. Whenever a gigantic cockroach scurried across the bar, which was often, the girls calmly pointed it out to me and I'd stomp after it with my oversized flip-flops.

They didn't bother the girls in the slightest, of course, as many people ate candied or roasted beetles or crickets like they were peanuts. But the roaches were bad for business because they scared the Mosquitos away, so they had to go. I hunted them with abandon my first week, but I started to feel bad about killing them, so after that, I just chased them out of sight and pretended to step on them.

My shirts began to hang off me as I lost weight, but I never needed a reminder of the alternative. Still, when I walked by tourists eating lavish meals and drinking frosty beers at a nice restaurant, I'd find myself wishing that I could eat there, too. But my belly was never empty, and it seemed like Mamasan actually liked having me at the bar.

"You are good for business," she said one morning when we had the bar all to ourselves, except for a couple of sleepy girls doing their chores.

"Am I? I feel like I just sort of sit here and do nothing," I said.

Mamasan lifted her head from a big accounting notebook she always wrote in. "Yes, that's true – you sit there like a water buffalo and don't ever buy Lady Drinks and you broke my stool last week..."

"I'm really sorry about that. I told you I'd pay for it when my money comes."

She waved away my apology like she was swatting a fly.

"When the other tourists walk by and poke their head in to look, they see a nice customer at the bar, even when the bar is empty," she said. "No one wants to go into an empty bar, because they think something is wrong with it."

She sighed and sat back, dropping her pencil in the crease of her book's pages. "But no one wants to go into a bar with too many tourists, either, because they think all the girls are taken."

"It looks like you're doing well," I said. "It's a better bar than the other ones on the street. Except maybe Rose Bar, but they don't have a pool table."

She shut the book and rubbed her eyes. "But I'm still not making any money. Everything goes up," she said. "Never down, always up."

"Well, things always go up," I said. "And that's why you're in business." But she didn't get the joke.

"Last week, they come to the bar and tell me I have to pay a fine. 25,000 baht," Mamasan said. "I don't have 25,000. That's crazy. They get it from all the bars on the street."

"That's like \$700 or something, right? Why did they fine you? What did you do wrong?"

"It doesn't matter. Something. Nothing. They ask and we have to pay. The police come in and we have to pay if we want to stay in business."

"That's messed up. And no one even knows what the fine is for? Can't you make a complaint?" I asked, but it sounded ridiculous even to me.

"Have you talked to the Minister again?" she asked. "About the event?"

"No, but I've been emailing with his secretary," I said. "Although he does send me game requests on Facebook all the time."

In the two weeks since I'd met with the Prime Minister, I'd worked on my portion of the fundraiser. I drafted a press release for the international media that had contacted me about the typhoon, put together a colorful flyer and a t-shirt design, and emailed all the hotels to try and get their patrons to attend. I emailed everything to the secretary for review.

She said they'd look at it but never got back to me. The fundraiser was getting closer but I didn't hear about anyone else's progress, and I was often confused as to who was supposed to do what. But the secretary assured me that I was doing fine and everything was coming together. She said they'd even been in touch with Red Star International, which was considering making a big donation to help the typhoon victims.

"You do what they ask," Mamasan said. "It can only be good for us." I hadn't realized there was an "us," but that was fine with me, since I was always looking for ways to contribute and repay her for taking me in.

"But I need to do something," she said. "We need more business. 25,000. I don't know." She opened her book and picked up her pencil.

"I'm sure it will be fine," I said, though I had no idea.

"Maybe I'll start charging to play pool."

"That probably wouldn't be a good idea."

"I'll just have to work the girls harder," Mamasan said. "Two Lady Drinks every night or they have to pay out of their own pocket. And I'll start fining them 20 Baht if they are late. Earners. I only want Earners."

"I'm sure things will get better."

"They don't understand that I do it for them. I don't make money. It's for them. Do you see me getting rich? Am I wearing diamonds?"

"Nope, you're not," I said, examining her earrings. "I don't think they are. They look like jade or something."

"I'm not, let me tell you. I do all this for them. But they're so young, and don't listen. Do you know I pay for their doctor exams? And I pay for their condoms and feminine things? All of the other bars make their girls pay. But I want my girls to be healthy."

"They have to pay for their own condoms? Really?"

"So young and they just don't listen," she said.

"Yeah, but did you listen to anybody when you were that young? I know I sure didn't."

"When I was their age... I was..." she said, slipping off someplace far away. Mamasan touched the side of her face and looked out the front door, the sunlight flooding into her eyes.

Mamasan clapped her hands, breaking her spell and chastising the girls wiping down the chairs in the bar, barking sharp commands in their language. The girls said something back and smiled at Mamasan, then put their heads down to their work again.

"These girls," she said. "They don't save a thing. They waste their money on purses and phones. I try to tell them. But from now on, only Earners!"

I nodded my head, even though I knew some of them were in trouble if they had to sell two Lady Drinks a night.

"It seems like they work hard. And the new ones, like Sophar, are getting better. Maybe just a little time..."

"Yes, that one," Mamasan said. "I'm ready to send her back to the province. She takes up more space than even you do."

A black bird flew in the open front door and perched in the rafters. The girls took their mops and tried to wave it away. I wanted to change the subject.

"Well, I hope I am not a burden on you. If you need my room for more girls or want to rent it out, I can find something else," I said, even though I knew I couldn't.

"No, it's fine," she said, turning the page on her book and pulling it closer. "No one will stay in that room, anyway. Only you."

"Why's that?" I asked.

"Because it's haunted," she said. "The girls didn't tell you yet?"



## Red Envelopes

None of the girls had bothered to tell me that my room on the roof was haunted, probably because watching to see if anything horrible happened to me would be more entertaining. After Mamasan spilled the news I asked Ava about it, as she was dusting off the bottles behind the bar later that evening. She chuckled.

“Haunted? Is that what she said? Well, I guess they say it is. No girl will stay there now because three people died in that room.”

“Are you serious? What happened?”

“Years back, an old tourist went up with a girl and was found dead in the morning. They think from an overdose. And last Christmas a girl committed suicide in there.”

“Shit, that’s crazy. You mean this Christmas, just a few months ago?”

“No, the year before,” Ava said. “And the last one was a boy who crashed his moto and died. He used to be the security guard for us. He stayed in that room.”

I shook my head.

“But you have nothing to worry about.”

“Why’s that?” I asked.

“Because you’re a Mosquito, and I don’t think Asian Michael Jacksons bother western Mosquitos,” she said.

“Michael Jacksons?”

“Yes, you know, Michael Jackson,” she said, dancing like a zombie. “A ghost.”

“Oh, *Thriller*.” I laughed. “But I don’t know if it works that way.”

It didn’t really bother me that my room was haunted. The way I saw it, people die all the time, and if you add it all up over the history of the world, people have probably died on every inch of the planet. The tourist shouldn’t have been shooting heroin and the boy died on the street on his moto, not in the room. And I was a big fan of Michael Jackson. But the girl who committed suicide...

I didn't believe in ghosts, but I did understand how one of the girls could get pushed to the point of ending her own life. I could see the strain they were under, cleaving their spirit in two with raw disregard, threatening to spill their sanity out onto the concrete before the other girls had a chance to scrub it away.

And with Mamasan's new policy that each girl must sell at least two Lady Drinks every night, the screws were turning tighter.

There just weren't enough tourists walking the bar streets most nights, and the same Lookers got most of the attention – and the Lady Drinks. Those usually went to stunning Apple, tall model-esque Hiandbyebye, and well-endowed Gi Gi Sweetless.

The other girls who were part of the Lookers' pit crew, as I thought of them – the ones who called the guys in, or ran back and forth for drinks and ice, or massaged them, or spoke good English, or ran across the street to grab a restaurant menu and bring it back when a guy was hungry – wore tight-lipped expressions of fear on their faces when they heard Mamasan's new policy. No, it was something more than just fear – it was anger.

The girls were angry at the gods. They were angry at everything that happened in the universe before them to make things as they were now. They were angry that they couldn't wash the dark off their skin after growing up working in the fields. They wanted to scream at the sky that their noses were too flat, or their greasy skin shined all the time, that their teeth were bucked and there was no money for the dentist, or they'd had a fever as a child that made their eyes foggy.

"My stomach too fat?" Nocheaty would ask me, patting the belly that had emerged after she gave birth to Bamboo. "I eat only rice, but still fat."

"No, of course not," I'd say.

"You *pak-wan*," she'd say, calling me "sugar mouth" for saying nice things.

I tried to encourage them, telling them they were smart and nice and would find a good guy and have a bright future, somehow trying to be a counterbalance against the heaviness of their world. But these girls weren't interested in empty words. Compliments wouldn't buy milk, or diamonds.

They knew exactly who they were. Some were beautiful, but that could be its own burden, and most were not. But whether they were from the far off provinces or right there in the city, they all came from the same place; a place where kids took their first steps barefoot around broken glass, where

there was no money for school so they went right to work cutting sugarcane or delivering charcoal, a place with fathers who beat them if they were around at all and uncles who took them for their first time, hot cheap whiskey breath and a dirty hand over her mouth, but not a whimper the next day.

And now, they were here, shackled even though they wore no chains. The girls were rejected by tourists every day, balled up and tossed away like unwanted pieces of paper. They were laughed at and dismissed and made fun of when guys were drunk or cruel. But that wasn't the worst part – they were used to that. The worst was when a guy looked right through them like they were invisible, as if their existence wasn't even worthy of his scorn or disgust.

After a while, the anger was too heavy to carry, so they resigned to their fate. Their role in life was to absorb pain. Their pain and other people's pain, if possible. That was their purpose. They had to sift through a thousand lies, a thousand disappointments, ten-thousand heartbreaks just to find one shred of joy to keep them going, a morsel of happiness swept their way.

Maybe it was an accidental Lady Drink from a drunken tourist who didn't realize what he was agreeing to, or a spontaneous food fight would break out with noodles and rice flying, or they got to take the bus to the province to see their family once a year. Every Chinese New Year, Mamasan even paid for a feast of duck and noodles and pig and gave them each a little red envelope with a couple dollars. Those were the things that kept them going.

How long could they work, I wondered? Would it be their bodies that gave out first, or something else? To these girls, 30 years old was ancient; even Lin Lin Lily, the most grizzled vet in the bar, was only 28. I didn't see a lot of options for them outside the bar. Where would they go after this?

They'd consider jumping, but they could never get high enough to do the job right. They might cut their own arms with a razor, but it was just to see the pretty blood. They were haunted without ever having to commit suicide. It couldn't go on. Something had to happen, something had to change. But it never did. This would be their fate.

Ghosts? The girls weren't afraid of death, they were afraid of life.

## **Connect Four**

Sophar wasn't the only one. There were other girls who came and went from Candy Bar while I was there, and from the bar next door, and down the street, and the many streets – hundreds of them, if you zoomed out far enough.

A girl who had worked for Mamasan a couple years was robbed and had to move back to the province, borrowing money for bus fare. She'd been living in her own rented room away from the bar, and someone must have been watching. When she came home early from work one night because she was sick, she opened her door to find three guys in there. They threw her against the wall and smacked her around a bit and made her tell them where she hid her money and gold.

The girls never put their cash in banks – it was insane to think you'd give some faceless institution your money and hope they gave it back to you when you needed it. That was for fools. Instead, they bought gold. The girls would buy long gold chains they linked around their waists, and another on their ankles, and maybe store other gold nuggets hidden away somewhere in their living quarters. But gold could be stolen, too. After the men ripped the gold off her body and took everything she'd saved, the girl had to go back to her family in the province.

Another new girl had to leave Candy Bar because she was afflicted by the worst possible curse a bar girl could suffer – she was ticklish. She was pretty, spoke enough English, and the other girls liked her, but no guy could even put his arm around her or she'd bust up, squirming and giggling. There was no way she could be a Taxi Girl and make money like that, so she had to quit and move away.

Others couldn't take the harsh hazing in the bar, as each girl's survival was competition for another. There were ten bowls, but only nine servings of rice. So they fought fiercely for everything they had. Just like Apple, the resident enforcer, had knocked the drink out of Sophar's hands, she did much worse to another girl.

The new girl was from the city, not the province, and had a stuck-up attitude and refused to clean or do chores. When she stole a customer from Mony Giggly, who hadn't made money all week, word got around.

Apple came up behind the new girl later that night, jamming a handful of crushed up chili peppers into her face, eyes, and mouth, not relenting until the girl broke free in a desperate fit. It was their homemade version of mace, and the new girl screamed and cried in pain all night, but was gone by morning.

In the beginning, they weren't exactly easy on Sophar, either. Other than Ava, Sophar didn't have any friends in the bar. Some of them tolerated her, others ignored her when the rest of them hung out, taking their meals together out in front of the bar, walking to the old market to look for clothes, or watching a new Thai music video on one of their cell phones.

When customers came into the bar, the other girls rushed them as they walked through the door, working in tandem per someone unwritten agreement that I didn't fully understand, but that I knew Sophar wasn't part of. She would turn her bar stool around to face them, but rarely saw an opening to force her way into the pack.

But just like the runt of any litter adapts or dies, Sophar did find her way to survive. There was one thing she could do better than anyone else in the ecosystem of the bar: she could play Connect Four.

At some point, Sophar found the box for Connect Four between the Jenga and Jacks in the storage closet. The box was ripped around the edges and held together with tape. She took it out one Saturday night when the bar was jumping, so no one even noticed.

Of course Sophar couldn't read the instructions printed on the inside of the box, so to learn the strange, colorful contest that required dropping round chips into a grid, she did something else: she put it out on the cocktail table behind her and left it there. Throughout the night, several customers sat at that table and played a game, mostly out of nostalgia, before pushing it away.

Sophar watched, studying their every move, proclamation of a win, or dispute over cheating. At the end of the night, she carefully collected the game, counting the pieces, and put them back in the box. She didn't put it back in the closet, but brought it upstairs with her.

The next night she made her move. Early in the evening, a group of old American men with cigarette butts hanging from their mouths like leathery smokestacks were sitting around, drinking cheap beer and talking about how messed up their home country was, and then how messed up the island was.

Sophar picked up the box and carried it over to them, standing in their field of vision but too afraid to speak. She held out the game like an offering. Amused by the timid creature, they took the game and pushed out a stool for her sit down, but not before barking the sharp caveat, "But we ain't buying any goddamn Lady Drinks."

Sophar didn't ask for one. She had other plans.

They played a game and she won in five turns, catching the man off guard with a diagonal run of four tokens in a row. He laughed.

"Maybe I'm too drunk if I let this squirt beat me," he told his friends.

"Play again me," Sophar said.

"What? Again? Yeah, OK, sure."

"We bet drink," she said, holding her head up high and looking him squarely in the eye.

"A drink? No way. I told you - we can play for fun. Other than that, forget it." He turned back to his friends. Sophar looked down at the game but didn't clean it up and put it back in the box. She thought, and then tapped him on the shoulder.

"Me three win, you win no, you buy drink?"

"If me three win? What does that mean? Oh... if you beat me three games to none?"

"Yes, three," Sophar said.

"Ha! You've got balls; I'll give you that! OK, but what do I get if I win?"

"You win me, I buy beer you," she said, with no sign of the gravity of the wager she was making - betting \$1.50 of money she didn't have - showing on her face.

"OK, you're on!" he said. "Here, move over," he said to his friends. They played and sure enough, she won three in a row. The man was left scratching his head, his friends laughing at him.

"Well you play her, then, if you think you're hot shit," he told them. "She's damn good, I'm telling you!"

"More play?" she asked.

"No, no, hell no!" he said, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

"Drink me please," she said, placing the game and pieces in the box carefully.

“Yeah, yeah, what the hell. Waitress!” he called to Rosey, who came limping over. “A Lady Drink for this one.”

“Really? You sure?” Rosey said, since Sophar was the only one sitting at the table and she never had customers or Lady Drinks. Rosey glanced under the table, looking for a hidden girl but sure enough, it was just Sophar sitting there.

“I said a Lady Drink, didn’t I?” the man scolded Rosey. “What do you want, dear?”

Sophar thought about it. “Milk,” she said.

“Milk? You want milk? Are you joking?” The men laughed at her.

“Yes, milk,” Sophar said.

“Hey, I’m not paying \$3.50 for a fucking milk,” the man said. “If I’m buying you one, you’re drinking booze.”

“I’ll bring a White Russian,” Rosey said, and limped off.

She brought back the drink and gave it to Sophar. The men paid their bill and stumbled up from their table. When they left. Sophar sat at the table and drank her White Russian. The milk tasted a little weird – maybe it was spoiled? But she hadn’t had milk in a long time. She didn’t retreat back to her corner of the bar but sat at the cocktail table by herself, scanning the front door and calculating, with a look of satisfaction on her face.

After that, Sophar knew how she could make her way in the bar. She played Connect Four every chance she got, leaving the game sitting out on the bar a stool down from her, cozying up to the unsuspecting tourist who happened to sit there. They didn’t mind because she didn’t ask for drinks as they played – at first. She even learned to lose a game or two along the way, which was more fun for the tourist, and they sometimes offered to buy her a drink on their own. But eventually she turned to business.

“If me win, you buy drink, OK?”

And she did win. In fact, I never saw her lose on purpose. When challenged by a customer who was obviously smart or practiced at the game – or even worse, sober – she rattled them with Double Speed Connect Four, her own invention that was played with two chips at a time.

On Monday she was hungry and at risk of being sent back to the province because of Mamasan’s new rule, but by Friday she had a way to make two

Lady Drinks easily every night, and even a way to get the attention of men without competing based on looks, English, or being aggressive. Sophar had carved out a way to survive.

That simple children's game in its tattered box probably saved a life, I came to find out.



## **Sophar's First**

I liked the beach in the morning. Early, when the sun was new and the fisherman waded out to stretch their nets before hauling them in and laying them on the rocks to dry, when the shopkeepers' wives swept the dirt patch in front of their doorways, and vendors roamed the streets on wooden carts, steam rising from every bucket of tea and rice porridge.

I would walk down to the beach, still half asleep. I loved to sit in the sand and watch the waves roll in. It was hard to believe this was the same beach where I'd watched the typhoon only a few weeks earlier. I didn't know what had changed, but it seemed so different.

Looking out at the ocean stretching to the horizon reminded me that there were people all the way on the other side, and that everyone could only see as far as their own horizon.

There was no use trying to sleep in the morning, so I might as well wake up and go to the beach. There was no use trying to sleep at night, either, with the bass from the music rattling the walls and tin roof of my room. Sleep came in two-hour increments. Sometimes I heard laughter, and sometimes I heard yelling, but mostly laughter. And even later at night, or rather in the morning when I'd finally surrender to the mosquitos and the heat and closed my eyes, I'd hear Sophar crying on her steps. That kept me awake more than anything.

In the beginning, she cried most nights, and I always listened. I didn't go try to comfort her, but I felt I could at least be with her by listening. Once the sobs turned to whimpers and then sniffles, she'd pick herself up from the steps and retire to her room. Then I could fall asleep again.

But over time Sophar's crying tapered off, until now, I didn't even hear it anymore.

Some nights most of the other girls were Bar Fined, so Sophar and I and a couple others were the only ones in the bar. Other times, most of the girls were around, when the bar had a slow night because a full moon party or the night market stole their tourists, so only the best Lookers and Earners made money. By 9 PM, when only a trickle of customers were coming in to play pool, the girls went through their phones and texted all of their past customers, trying to drum up business. When the customers didn't answer or never showed up, the girls got testy and sometimes a fight broke out before getting broken up quickly. It was on one of those nights that Sophar had her first.

It rained that night. The gutters turned into rivers and the tuk-tuk drivers covered their carriages in plastic sheets so their customers wouldn't get rained on. The man who came into the bar was a huge mass of a human being who seemed twice as tall as one of the girls, not at all muscular, with a pale, shiny shaved head. It was hard to describe him as anything but ugly, but his droopy eyes seemed kind. I think he just wanted someone to talk to.

"Hello ladies," he said with a cautious smile, waiting for the girls' approval. He walked in, shaking water from his clothes, responding to the girls' half-hearted cries, "Helloooooooo welcomeeeeeee handsome rich man!" though he looked neither handsome nor rich. He was Austrian, I think, because he ordered a Carlsberg and asked them to change the TV to an Austrian football match, FC Red Bull Salzburg against Sturm Graz.

Since it was raining and there were few customers, the girls flocked to him, wiping the rain off his bald head and sweaty ham hock arms with small towels, leading him to a table where they surrounded him, one shoving a menu in his face while two others massaged his back. But it was to be Sophar's night.

"Excuse me, ladies, but I'm going to move to the bar to watch," he said. He picked up his beer and sat at the bar in front of the TV, next to Sophar. The thirsty pack moved with him, glaring at Sophar and trying to squeeze in with a shoulder. But when it was clear that the giant wasn't going to open his heart and his wallet to the rest of them, the bar girls peeled off and left them alone, retreating to the couches where they could take off their high heels and play games on their phones.

"Hello there," he said, looking down at Sophar. "Do you like Austrian league football?" She looked up at the TV when he pointed, hoping to avoid conversation with the big man since she he was a little scary, but not wanting to face the other girls.

"Ahh, you're watching the game, too? Well, it's nice to be in the company of another true fan," he said, "You must drink with me then when we score. If we score. No, WHEN we score! That's the spirit! See, you're good luck already!"

He cheerfully slapped the bar with one of his giant paws, the unintended violence jarring Sophar.

"Well, my little good luck charm, we must drink to Salzburg!" the man said. "Bartender, bring me two Crown Royals neat and two San Miguel beers."

Ava waved toward the other bar girls, palm open, inviting the oversized fella to buy Lady Drinks for the other bar girls.

“No, no thank you,” he said. “Tonight I think I will just watch the match with my little good luck charm. Yes, that’s what I’ll call you – Lucky. You don’t talk much, do you? No matter, I like it that you don’t bother me with questions about offsides and corner kicks while I’m trying to watch.” Sophar didn’t say anything.

“But you do know about offsides, right?” he asked. The drinks came. “Now drink! To Austria!”

Sophar didn’t understand a word of it, but Ava placed the drinks in front of her like she was royalty, carefully arranging the napkins, wiping down the lip of the beer bottle, even placing a bowl of stale nuts in front of them.

Sophar looked at the man and then at the glass and bottle in front of her and then at Ava. Ava said something to her and nodded to the drinks and smiled. Sophar picked up her liquor when the man did and held it with both hands, touching it to her forehead in the traditional sign of gratitude.

“Thanks you,” she said.

“Ahhhhh, she does speak! Well drink up, Lucky, because we have many more to go tonight. To the boys on the pitch!” he said, and kicked back half his glass in one gulp.

Sophar tried to do the same but coughed and gasped.

“Slowly, Lucky, slowly. You are a little spitfire, aren’t you?” the man said. “You’re truly the best drinking partner I’ve had in a... OH YEAH! GO GO GO GOAAAALLLLLLL WHOOOHOOOOOO!”

He made a thunderous racket, thrusting his arms skyward in victory, hitting the ceiling fan and knocking dust about.

“Drink up, Lucky! Bartender, two more please. Yes, I mean four more, please!”

Ava prepared the drinks and put them in front of the couple, though now there was quite a backlog in front of Sophar, who choked down another sip of Crown Royal with some spilling out of the corner of her mouth.

“Lucky,” she said.

“Yes yes, my girl! Lucky indeed! Wow. You are a pretty one. I mean of course I saw it before, but now in this light, I see that you are truly beautiful. How old are you? What’s your name? I want to know everything. But we have time for all that later.”

“Lucky,” she said, diving back into the drink like it was a swimming pool on a scorching day.

By the end of the game, FC Red Bull Salzburg had scored three second-half goals on their way to a 4-2 victory over Sturm Graz. The giant man had finished a bottle of Crown and part of the new one Ava opened. Full drinks sat on the bar in front of Sophar like airplanes on a runway waiting to take off. She was quite drunk, even though she was still trying to down her second glass of liquor. She was swaying, and would have probably fallen off her stool if the beefy shoulder of the man hadn’t been there to keep her up.

“Ahh, my sweet Lucky,” he said, putting his arm around her and lowering his head way down toward the floor to rest on hers. “Are you sure you don’t have a boyfriend? I really like you. I’m not just saying that, and I don’t mean like all guys say that in a bar. I mean, I really like you.”

“Sophar *mow mak mak*,” she said, trying to focus out one squinting eye.

When the big man wasn’t looking, Ava took away the full drinks in front of Sophar one by one, putting them behind the bar and then handing them to Rosey so she could bring them to the other girls. There was no way they were wasting that booze, and if it was going to be a rainy night without customers, then at least they could get drunk.

“My little Lucky, why don’t you come with me tonight?” he asked. “I mean, would you like that? I would love to spend the night with you. You are so pretty and you don’t talk too much or always play on your phone like these other girls.”

Understanding that he was asking a question, Sophar tried to zoom in on his blurry face.

“So let’s go back to my hotel. I have a nice hotel with a pool. Well, we don’t need a pool when it’s raining, but it’s nice to have one. And breakfast. We’ll have a grand breakfast. How much is the Bar Fine here?”

“\$10 Bar Fine, sir,” Ava said.

“OK, yes, that’s fine. And please add up my drinks. I think I’ll pay my bill now and take Lucky home. How much for a girl? What does she want?”

Ava stood in front of Sophar and took her hands, holding them in hers. She spoke to her softly in their language. The look on Sophar's face changed from dizzy drunk to stone sober when she understood what was going on. She put her drink down and spoke to Ava in barely a whisper, even though the man couldn't understand their language anyway. Ava patted Sophar's hands tenderly and explained it all to her, pointing to the man and back to her and then back to the man. It went on for quite a while, Sophar listening as her hands trembled in Ava's.

The giant man slid a stack of colorful money across the bar to pay for his bill, with a ten-dollar bill on top.

"So, are we ready to go, Lucky?" he asked. "Let's go have a grand night! And you'll love the breakfast, I promise. What's she saying, anyway?" he asked Ava.

"She says you are very handsome man and nice," Ava said. "It's OK, just one moment please, sir."

Ava talked to Sophar like a mother might speak to her child on the first day of school, explaining things and encouraging her, then finally shrugging to signal that it was her choice. Sophar peeked at the man in the bar mirror, scanning the map of his face.

And then, Sophar did something I'll never forget. As she contemplated whether to go with this big tourist, she looked up at the ceiling of the bar. But not just at the ceiling, somehow past it, to the unseen sky above. She looked up at it for a time, and then closed her eyes, listening. Through the chatter and the music, she heard the heavy rain.

When Sophar opened her eyes, she looked to Ava and said something. Ava answered and then gracefully scooped the money off the bar. Sophar drained her glass of liquor and then looked up at the big ugly man.

"Yes, *bong*," she said, forcing a pleasant smile on her face. "We go hotel you."

"Just grand! Let's go right away, before it rains any harder." The big man took her tiny hand in his. She wobbled a little when she got up but he steadied her, laughing. The Austrian man led Sophar through the bar, past the other girls, who snickered and stared in disbelief.

Sophar held the big man's arm and let her head fall against his side, only reaching the top of his monumental belly. When they opened the front door, I could see the rain streaming in columns off the tin roofs, neon from the bar signs shimmering in the puddles in the street.

“Tuk-tuk!” the man yelled, before the door swung shut and the night swallowed them.

## **Shine Bright Like A Diamond**

Rihanna was the patron saint of Taxi Girls. I don't know how they ever found her, or why they revered her so much, but she was special.

"Find light in the beautiful sea..."

There was plenty of music from the U.S. – as well as from all over the rest of the world – but Rihanna was different.

"I choose to be happy..."

No matter who the girls were – the popular ones who had fake nails and extensions in their hair, the newer girls from the provinces who were still shy, or the girls who had been at it so long they couldn't remember life before the bars – whenever Rihanna was on, she sang just for them.

"You and I, you and I  
We're like diamonds in the sky..."

They especially loved this one song I first heard in the bar, "Diamonds." When the girls heard Rihanna sing, "I choose to be happy," they knew they were alive, no matter how poor they were or how badly their stomachs hurt or how many problems were avalanching on top of them.

Whenever they heard that line, they stopped what they were doing and closed their eyes and sang it with her, every one of them. All the fights and competition and petty disagreements ended instantly. I could tell by the looks on their faces that for the duration of those five melodic words, they were free.

Rihanna gave them hope that they still had at least one choice in their lives. They needed that hope. They needed it to wash off the sins of the night before and start all over again. Every. Single. Night.

The girls hated the day. They came to hate that sun because, beneath it, everything was clear, everything visible. It was a fiery reminder that their life was slipping by as they lost their chance to go to school or have a family.

But despite the volcano of anger and shame that swelled to burst their insides, they could still choose their destiny every night. They could choose to be happy. Rihanna reminded them of that, and that's why they loved her.

How else could the girls cope? I quickly realized that most of them were terrible alcoholics. Still, that was their best alternative to deal with the shotgun monotony and depression that came with their lot, the knife-point of danger in going with a strange man to a strange hotel every night, where no one could help them if things went badly.

Some of the girls needed something stronger than alcohol to get by. Sometimes, even Rihanna wasn't enough. I'd plead and chastise them not to do it, but I knew some of the girls smoked *yaba*.

"Do you know what that stuff does to you?" I'd ask. But they'd just chuckle and dismiss me as being old and conservative. I realized there was no way to make them think long-term when they needed every ounce of their splintered psyches just to make it through the night. It was hard to blame them for that.

"It feels so good to be bad," Apple told me one night. If they were going to do it, they were going to own it.

I noticed that some of the girls would go with any tourist, though they didn't have to. No one forced them, and the girls turned down plenty of guys. So if the tourists thought they could just show up and wave money around and these beautiful girls would fall in line, they had another thing coming. Sure, they did what they had to for survival – sometimes crazy things for a dollar or two – but their pride wasn't part of that transaction.

The girls in Candy Bar each formed their own policy on which men they preferred or went with. Some girls didn't like Africans – the Nigerian illegal immigrants who were starting to arrive in Southeast Asia en masse. But other girls absolutely loved brothers from the U.S., many of whom were once GIs and came back once their service was completed.

Other girls drew a hard line based on nationalism and wouldn't go with Chinese or Vietnamese men. Everyone in Asia hated someone else, I quickly learned. The Cambodians hated the Vietnamese, Thai people hated the Cambodians, Laotian people hated the Chinese, and on and on it went, playing on centuries of war and distrust, current immigration policies and environmental practices. When a country polluted shared rivers, over-fished the wrong waters, bought mines and stole minerals, and abused the workers who flooded in from the poorer countries, they were widely despised – but also equally emulated.

One of the girls would only party with Korean customers, while others stubbornly refused their advances altogether. At the bar, they called Koreans "333." I couldn't fathom what that meant until I made Ava tell me one day.



“Three inches, three seconds, and a three baht tip,” she said under her breath, looking around to make sure there weren’t any nearby. The Korean men had no social etiquette, she explained, walking into the bar and scanning the place without sitting down or ordering a drink, walking out immediately if didn’t see a girl they liked, as if they were pawing through the clearance rack at a sale. Then, they’d walk into the next bar and do the same thing, over and over. The girls paid them back by calling them “333,” which made me laugh to no end.

Other girls loved Australians, or the well-tattooed Englishmen who got way too drunk but had good hearts, and some felt comfortable enough to go with the Arab and Middle Eastern customers. When the sheiks or businessmen flew in from Dubai, the girls got ready, Ava told me, because they had the chance to earn a ton of money. But it could be a tough few nights, or turn into a nightmare for the ones who didn’t know how to handle the brutish Arab men.

While it was almost inconceivable to me, a lot of the girls had local islander boyfriends, as well as their working clientele. Some of the girls even went after work to underground clubs where muscled-up Asian men danced, and the girls would actually pay for the company of the guys. Ironically, this incensed Mamasan to no end.

“Why would the girls waste their money paying for sex?” she’d ask. “It’s like a snake eating its own tail!”

It may seem like everything in Dragon Town revolved around primal appetites, but there was more to it than that. It was also about celebrating being alive today, since tomorrow was never a safe bet. Only one generation earlier, finding a strong mate and having as many children as possible increased the odds of a family’s survival, in a time when so many islanders were starving, or could be taken away and never come back. Vitality wasn’t just recreational, it was essential to life.

So every time an elder tried to sell me barbecued snake or spider in the market, they’d let me know it was good for libido, that it would “make the bamboo strong,” with a chuckle and a glint in their eye. Everywhere I looked there was a special local wine, the bottle stuffed with a cobra and a scorpion inside to ferment. Whoever drank it would absorb the powers of the animals, they’d say with a wink.

“You drink this, you have happy wife!”

Sometimes it made me feel alive, too, just being around the girls in the bar, the glow of their boundless energy contagious. As I got to know them, they

became friends and then started to feel like more – like sisters. There was plenty of beauty and good times, too, and maybe I’ve been remiss by not telling you enough about those.

But there were other times that absolutely broke my heart.

Like when I’d pass a restaurant and see a freelancer sitting at a table by herself, picking at a plate of mashed potatoes because it was the cheapest and most filling thing on the menu. The realization that it was probably her only meal of the day wasn’t the part that stung me the most, but the look on her face, sitting alone, staring off blankly, numb and expressionless, as others moved and laughed and drank around her.

Or when I’d walk by the massage girls out by the beach, working in the hot sun for 14 hours a day, with no customers but still cheery, trying to fight the good fight as long as possible before they had to resort to working in the bars. Too many girls disappeared for a couple days, and then showed up to work with the name of their aborted baby tattooed on their arms.

There were no songs to offer condolence or comfort on the endless, sleepless night before Nocheaty had to send her baby, Bamboo, back to the province.

The baby was only six months old, and there was just no way Nocheaty could work in the bar and still look after her. It’s not that they worried about the infant’s health or safety around the bar, but babies were bad for business. In fact, other than rain, babies were the worst thing for business. They were an instant reminder to the patrons what might happen if they didn’t exercise prudence and restraint – a music stopper.

Nocheaty definitely couldn’t leave Bamboo in the hot shack upstairs, and there was no one else to look after her. Besides, Nocheaty wasn’t even earning enough money to make it on her own. So she knew what she had to do: send Bamboo back to the province to live with her grandmother.

Nocheaty knew how it worked because some of the other girls had gone through the same thing. Her mother would raise the baby as her own, and forever after Nocheaty would be called “auntie.” If she was lucky, she’d get to see her newborn daughter once or maybe twice a year, at best. But probably not.

So the night before they sent Bamboo to the province on the bus with a cousin, no one tried to stop Nocheaty from drinking. Mamasan didn’t even charge her for the drinks, and the only reason they didn’t just put a bottle of whiskey in front of her was that they were trying to slow her down. No

one said a word to her, but the girls crowded around, rubbing her back and kissing the tears away from her cheeks.

No one could fault Nocheaty when she got so drunk that she started screaming at the customers. They didn't even chastise her when she slapped a German man in face when he told her to lighten up and have a good time because this was a bar. The girls didn't mind carrying her upstairs when she was so drunk she couldn't stand, or when she threw up all over.

That night, the girls took care of Nocheaty in shifts up in her room, holding Bamboo close once her mother was safely passed out, rocking the baby and singing to her that it was all going to be OK.

Those were the times that weren't very nice, when it was impossible to simply choose to be happy. On those nights, even Rihanna couldn't help them.

## **No Justice, Just Us**

I wasn't there when it happened. They police raided the bar right after midnight when they knew it would be crowded, so I was up in my room, fast asleep. I'd lain down with my headphones on to block out the music from below, so I didn't hear the front door get kicked in or the bottles breaking or the girls screaming and cursing when the police charged inside the bar and took them away.

But I did jump awake to a knock on my door. I opened it to see Mamasan, her face creased with urgency. It was so early in the morning that the sky behind her was purple and the moon was almost gone. I hadn't seen Mamasan upstairs except for the first day when she showed me my room.

"Wha-what's going on? What's wrong?" I asked.

"Norm, we got raided last night," she said. "The fucking police kicked down my front door."

"Holy shit. What happened?"

"I knew they were watching me, because I never paid the 25,000. But I didn't think they would shut us down," she said.

"Are you serious? What happened?" I asked, shaking the sleep from my head when I realized I was repeating myself.

"And they took the girls."

It felt like someone had punched me in the chest. I looked at Mamasan.

"All my girls. They're being held in the jail. I need you to watch the place while I go down there and try to get them out."

"Of course, let me just grab my shoes and I'll..."

"If the girls say something, they'll arrest me, too," she said, flinching at the sound of a truck backfiring on the street below. "I'm finished if they talk. They'll throw me in prison for years."

"OK, of course, I'll come right down with you," I said, slipping on my flip-flops, putting on a t-shirt and following her down.

"They didn't have to break down my door. They didn't have to do that. It wasn't even locked."

Mamasan cleaned out the cash register, stuffing money into her purse. She grabbed her accounting book and told me to watch the place until she got back, but not to talk to anyone.

When she left, I surveyed the bar. It looked like a typical crazy night was underway when everyone had vanished into thin air. There were open beer bottles and drinks sitting on the tables, the neon bar signs still on even though the sun was coming up, and pool balls scattered in mid game. A pair of glasses lay smashed to pieces on the ground.

But the music had stopped and the knob on the front door was hanging off a splintered board where it had been kicked, daylight visible through the cracked wood. I picked the stools off the floor and placed them at the bar, then got the broom. I swept up the broken glass and the cigarette butts from a spilled ashtray, and poured what was left of the beer bottles and drinks into the sink.

Mamasan came back through the front door in an hour, just as I'd started to worry. She threw her purse and book on the bar.

"They won't even let me see the girls," she said.

"Are they OK, you think? Where are they?"

"They're at the jail but I couldn't see them," she said. "But I did talk to Tin Tin on my way out. He told me that they were going to hold the girls until they talked. They want to know everything about the bar."

"Damn, the police can do that?"

"They're not even giving them food or letting them use a toilet, just a bucket in the cell."

It scared me how rattled Mamasan was, shaking with fury. She started rearranging the beer bottles and glasses I'd neatly stacked on the bar, her eyes darting with adrenaline.

"He told me they wanted the girls to make a statement that I had underage girls working, and that customers touched them inside the bar, and that I stayed open after hours," she said.

"B-but it's not true, right?" I asked. "You don't do those things, so you have nothing to worry about?" Maybe it was time for me to pack up my own stuff and get the hell out. If they could throw all the girls and Mamasan in jail, they could come after me next.

“No, of course not – you think I’m crazy?”

I sighed in relief.

“Well, except all the bars stay open late. And the girls might touch the guys, of course. But never underage. Never. I check their papers carefully, every time.”

“So what happens now?”

“It is all so ridiculous. No one takes care of their girls like me. Everyone knows that. Even the police. I’ve had almost every politician in Dragon Town in here. The perverted Magistrate comes in almost every week. Doesn’t even pay.”

“Maybe the girls won’t say anything,” I said. “Do they have to release them after a certain time, or give them a lawyer?” But I already knew it didn’t work that way.

“If they don’t hear what they want, they’ll just make it up. And once they have a signed admission from even one of the girls, they’ll charge me with trafficking. That’s an automatic 12 years in prison. They’ll take the bar and everything I have.”

“What can I do to help?” I asked, still in disbelief that the police could have raided the bar and arrested the girls at any time. These hostess bars were everywhere, operating out in the open, and if it was illegal, why hadn’t they arrested any of the foreign men inside of them?

“Nothing, Norm, but thank you for asking. You are a nice man. You are good to the girls.”

I put my hand on her shoulder, but she shooed away my attempts at sentimentality.

“Don’t worry, I’ll think of something to get them out,” she said. “I have to.”

I went back up to my room, stuffing a few shirts, my hard drive and laptop into my backpack – an emergency get-the-hell-out bag that I was all too familiar with packing. I didn’t want Mamasan to think I was abandoning her, but wanted to stay clear of the bar in case the police came back or there was more trouble. When I went back downstairs Mamasan wasn’t there, so I left, propping the front door closed, since it wouldn’t lock anymore.

I stayed away most of the day, lying low at a café that served 50-cent coffee and then sitting by the beach. In the evening I walked by, surveying from the other side of the street. The bar was still empty. I peeked in, but there was no sign of Mamasan or the girls. I went in and sat at my regular seat and pulled up a song on the computer, but turned the volume way down.

I couldn't stop thinking about the girls in jail. What were they doing to them? I tried to picture them, all packed into in a dingy cell. What were the police doing to make them talk? How scared Sophar must be. I just hoped Ava was there to talk to her and help her. Did they put ladyboys with the men or the women? I hoped they hadn't hurt any of them.

I didn't sleep that night. The silence was the weirdest part. No music, no chatter, no laughter, no yelling, no glass breaking, no crying. The silence was more deafening than a thousand Ever Silent generators.

In the morning when they still weren't back I couldn't take it, so I went down to the ocean to exercise and clear my mind. I ran and swam until I was panting and shaky-legged, but it didn't help. All I could think of was the girls. Their voices asking, "You exercise or SEXercise?" I laughed and walked back to the bar. The front door was open. I rushed inside.

Mamasan was there, and a few of the girls were sitting and eating or arranging things in the bar. Their faces looked ashen from lack of sleep, their eyes puffy and red, not meeting mine. No one spoke.

"You got them out?!" I asked Mamasan, who was sitting at the table doing her accounting.

"Yes, Norm, the girls are out and safe now," she said. "Until next time."

"That's great! How did you do it?"

"I did what I had to do," she said, the look on her face letting me know this was anything but a festive moment. "Now they are out."

She put her head back into the book. She wrinkled her brow and then threw her pencil down.

"What am I looking at? My head hurts. Can you bring me some tea?" she called to a girl. "I don't know how long I can keep this up. I'm so tired."

I thought it was best to leave Mamasan alone, so I went upstairs. I looked around for Sophar but didn't see her. A few girls were out in the courtyard hanging their laundry or refreshing their altar to Buddha, taking away the old bread and half-eaten oranges the rats had gnawed in their absence,

lighting fresh incense. Most of them were sleeping, the sounds of their breathing coming from the open doors.

That night, the bar was jumping. I don't know why it surprised me that they were open for business. I guess I assumed they would all want to rest up and lay low for a while. But quite the opposite, every girl was working, everyone fierce with the desperate energy you feel when your life goes off a cliff but is miraculously saved at the last moment. There wasn't a yawn or a lazy dancer in the place. Mamasan didn't have to scold or give any instructions. There were so many *barang* men it was like they had willed them there. The music was loud and everyone got good and drunk and made money. They had to.

I saw Ava behind the bar and she smiled.

"Why do you look so tired, Sir Norm?" she asked. "When we were the ones in jail?"

"It's good to see you, too!" I said. She came around and hugged me.

"I was really worried about you guys," I said. "What the hell happened?"

"Well, you know we got raided, right?" she said, walking back behind the bar and pouring two Rum and Cocks.

"Yes, yes of course, Mamasan told me all about it," I said. "Was it bad in jail? Did they... if you don't want to talk about it..."

"No, not so bad. Just boring, mostly," she said. "I wish I'd brought tweezers because my eyebrows look like a jungle." I laughed, then turned my head to look for Sophar.

"Your little friend did just fine, in case you're wondering." She motioned across the room. Sophar was at a table in back with Apple and two other girls, entertaining two tourists. They were all chatting it up and having a grand time. Sophar was smiling. I hadn't realized how nice a smile she had.

"She's OK? I mean, she didn't..." I said.

"You poor thing. Yes, she did better than OK," Ava said. "At first they had us all in one big cell, but they'd take away the girls they thought were weak and move them to separate rooms, one by one. They found out Sophar was the newest, so they had her alone for a long time."

I watched as Sophar finished her beer and put it down. Ala Fakelove poured some of her own beer into Sophar's glass. Apple put her arm



around Sophar. She squeezed her close and said something in her ear and they laughed, together.

“But she didn’t talk,” Ava said. “They told us we’d get four years in prison and even arrest our families, but Sophar didn’t break. Not one of the girls said a word.”

## **The MONSTER**

Once it started to cool down in the late afternoons, the islanders all came down to the ocean to watch the sunset. Teenagers sat on the wall overlooking the sea with their new love interests, old men in their faded U.S. Navy hats lined up on the benches like birds on a wire. The young mothers were too busy working to socialize, selling soda and beer out of coolers they wheeled about, or mollusks they dried in the sun and covered with chili powder.

The boardwalk that paralleled the beach was a wide strip of tiled ground, palm trees, and flowers planted in a grassy median. A row of tall flags flapped in the wind, every country in the world represented – a leftover gift from the United Nations.

There was a sewage-processing substation near the boardwalk. Sometimes we were lucky and the ocean breeze blew the smell away, but other times it was so foul you had to cover your nose with your shirt. But you got used to it after a while, and soon I didn't even notice. That sewage station, a square platform fenced in with big green bars, was refuge for the destitute families who lived there, the lowest of the low in Dragon Town.

During the day, they congregated on whichever side of the sewage station provided shade, lounging on bamboo mats and pieces of cardboard. The women sat together and talked, wearing pajama pants and sweatshirts despite the heat – probably the only clothes they owned.

Their babies and toddlers ran around naked and the women didn't bother to chase them. The children were left covered in dirt and waste from head to toe, snot running from their noses, the only bath they ever took in the irrigation hoses before the park workers shooed them away.

Some of the more ambitious homeless people tried to plant a few rows of crops on the patch of dirt and wild grass near the park. That land was surprisingly fertile, thanks to the sewage that spilled out, making for good irrigation.

The people who lived in the park rested during the day, snoozing in any shade they could find. As the park started to fill up when it became cooler, they went to work, the children begging in earnest, the adults cooking mud fish and soup of greens on small wood fires.

They might play cards or rummage through a nearby trashcan or kick around a plastic water bottle, but they didn't stray far from their base of the sewage station. It was like their own personal apartment complex, and they knew no one would bother them or try to kick them out. It smelled so

bad, no one cared to reclaim it. Even the police that motorcycled through the park didn't turn their mirrored sunglasses toward them, the people who took refuge in the city's sewage.

Some of the women were sick. I could see it. When they hung laundry or washed, you could see dark round bruises and boils on their arms, backs, and necks. And they were so skinny, ribs stretching their skin, their faces slowly turning back to skulls, something eating at their flesh: the MONSTER.

"It's harder for man to get," I overheard an island woman tell a drunk foreigner one day in surprisingly good English. She looked to be in her 30s, and lived by the sewage station in a tent of cardboard and rags. "The MONSTER, you know? Too easy for girl to have. But harder for man."

Maybe she used to work in a bar, I thought.

The girls at Candy Bar never talked about the MONSTER. Occasionally, there were whispers; a girl who didn't "pass her medical" as they called it, or was losing a lot of weight, or always felt sick, but it was almost always something else, and she was back to work soon. Still, they all knew someone who had gotten sick with the MONSTER. That's what they called it - "sick."

Once the girls got sick they would be kicked out of the bar, of course. That meant losing their only form of income as well as their housing. But just as bad, the other girls who were once her friends and sisters would distance themselves. They didn't want to catch it by touching the girl, who was obviously bad luck. There would be no heartfelt goodbye; the girl who was sick would just leave in the middle of the night before the rumors could be confirmed in the light of day.

So in the bar, among the girls, it was better not to talk openly about getting sick. No one wanted to invite bad luck into their front door, for they understood that once the MONSTER came in, it would never leave.

Once a girl was sick, there were only a few of options for her. She could live by the sewage station and beg. If they weren't too sick yet, some girls with the MONSTER would work as freelancers, hanging on corners without streetlights, working with bad tuk-tuk drivers as their pimps, only coming out late at night when the tourists would be so drunk they wouldn't notice the bruises covered in heavy makeup. The darkness was their veil, then.

Once they were too weak for that, they could work in brothels in old boarded up houses, taking orders from shirtless men with beer guts and knife scars who sold them, or beat them when they couldn't sell them. A

foam pad in the corner of an attic with cardboard walls and one meal a day was the most comfort they'd ever know again.

The lucky girls made their way back to their province, where they could at least be sick at home. They wouldn't be too much of a burden, they promised themselves, and it wouldn't be long now, anyway.

There, they could rest among family, enjoying the breeze off the rice fields in the evenings and the sound of the rustling palm trees when it rained, with juicy dragon fruit and fish caught fresh from the creeks. They would at least see the faces of their loved ones as they faded to the next life, surrendering to that pleasant blue and green province dream before they went to join their ancestors.

## **The Golden Ticket**

The girls didn't ask for much from their boyfriends, other than Lady Drinks and money for clothes or a new French perfume and taking them on vacation and a few baht to help out their three sick grandmothers and maybe even a new phone so they could keep in touch with the guys once they went back home to their countries. Other than that, they were fairly content.

But there was one more thing the girls could get from a customer. No, it wasn't love or marriage or a baby – though those were all useful tools that might help them reach their penultimate goal: to get a visa. It wasn't a visa like a credit card, but official approval to move to another country.

I called a visa the Golden Ticket because it would allow the girls to get residency in England or Australia, Norway or Germany, Canada or even in that perfect paradise, the United States. Those places were the lands of luxury where everything would be better for them, and therefore their families, forever.

"Everyone rich you country?" they'd ask me. "Give money poor people and take care of people sick and easy get job, yes?"

"Sort of. I guess," I'd say, not sure how to convey that it was a little more complicated than that. But they wouldn't have listened to me anyways, because for them, heaven was one floor below wherever they could go with a visa.

It wasn't just folly – there were plenty of girls who found their Golden Ticket and moved to other countries. Those who got out, who escaped to a better life, became legendary among the other bar girls, even though they wrote their friends on the island less and less and almost never came back to visit.

But most of the average Taxi Girls didn't even dare to dream about getting the Golden Ticket. They dreamt of dinner, not of a visa to another country. That was only for the best and brightest Lookers, those who were touched by luck.

Visas were big business in Dragon Town, too.

"Want a visa to Australia? Come talk to John Powers!" a popular advertisement read, beneath it a photo of a ruddy Aussie dressed like Crocodile Dundee, posted on bathroom walls and on the back of tuk-tuks. "The best in the business, serving Dragon Town for 15 years! (We also do tourist visa extensions, business visas, and party boat tours.)"

I thought it would be a relatively simple process, where you filled out some paperwork and paid the fee and waited for them to say yes or no. But the visa game had a rulebook a foot thick.

Visas were so expensive that you had to be rich just to apply, and even though every application should be the same, in theory, you helped your chances if you hired an attorney. The islanders understood that attorneys were just people you bribed to work the system – only legally.

Immigration to places like the U.S. and Australia was tightly controlled, because people might go over on a tourist visa but never come back. It was so common that it had its own name in their language: *tago-non-tago*, or TNT.

So to have a shot at getting your visa approved, you needed to prove that you had plenty of reasons to come back, like a home, property, a huge bank account, and a business. In fact, the best way to get a visa to another country was to prove that your life was so good in your home country that you really didn't want to leave at all.

During their civil war, droves of islanders tried to sneak out, stowed away on fishing boats over to Thailand, washing up on the shores and looking for someone in a white shirt with the letters "UN" on them who they could ask for something called "as-y-lum." Sometimes it worked, if you didn't end up dying at sea or robbed and enslaved by traffickers or beaten back by the locals or thrown in giant refugee camps for years at a time.

These days, no one had to sneak out and apply for political asylum; they only had to convince a foreigner to fall in love and marry them. The girls knew they had to stay married for two years to keep their permanent residency in their new home country, so happily ever after just had to last 730 days.

Sophar thought she had a chance at the Golden Ticket when Jans Farder the Party Starter walked into the bar. He was definitely impossible to ignore: a Nordic specimen wearing a shirt two sizes too small that looked like he'd butchered a few shower curtains. Jans was in his early 20s, topped with a shock of white-blond hair, so tall that he had to duck under the doorway when he entered Candy Bar. We heard Jans before we saw him, his laughter announcing his arrival before the rest of him made it around the corner, with a wide smile that never left his face and blue eyes filled with life.

Jans ordered a beer and headed back to the pool table, where Sophar was sitting. She was starting to fit in well with the other girls, and making more

on Lady Drinks, emboldened by her success with her first customer and acceptance after the raid.

“Hello han-some man, what you name?” she said to Jans, holding out her hand to shake.

“Jans Farder, ya?” he said. But when he tried to take her hand to shake, she pulled it back, cooing at the victory. Confused by what had happened, he kindly shook her elbow hello.

“Where country you from, Jans Farter?” Sophar asked.

“Farder. I am not a farter, but a Farder,” he said. “I am from Sweden. Where are you from?”

“I’m from the moon!” Sophar said.

“The moon?”

“No, no – I from my mother!” she laughed, racking up the pool balls. She handed him a stick. “Beer for you, Farter? And drink me?”

“For you?”

“Yes, good luck for me and better luck for me,” she giggled, hanging the triangle around his head.

“OK, sure, why not?!” Jans said, pulling some wrinkled baht notes and a few coins from the pocket of his cutoff jean shorts. Sophar skipped to the bar and ordered, proud that she had landed such a rich and exotic creature.

“I like nose you,” she said when she got back, reaching up and tracing its aquiline angle.

“My nose?” he asked, wiping it with the back of his hand and then checking for foreign objects. “Well, your little nose is nice, too, ya? A perfectly fine nose.”

“No!” she said. “Nose me small and flat from eat too much rice.”

“Rice? Where did you hear that? I’m not sure if that’s how it works, but I think it’s fine – a cute nose, like the rest of you,” he said.

“Cute? What that mean, Farter?”

“Cute means... pretty, like I like you, ya,” he said.

“Like Farter too! You skin good white,” she said, putting her arm up to his. “I skin brown. No one like. Ugly.”

“Where do you get these things?” he asked, sinking a lucky bank shot. “Your skin is very pretty and brown. They would love you back in Sweden with that skin.”

“Sweven?”

“Sure, you would love it,” Jans said. “But very cold. So much snow this time of year. Have you ever been there?”

“Snow? Have Sweven? Sophar love snow.”

“Well then you should come to Sweden, because this time of year, we get nothing but snow,” he said.

“I no leave province and Dragon Town my life,” she said. “But I want go Sweven you.”

“Yes, why not? You really should!” Farder said, knocking the eight ball in by accident, taking it back out and placing it on the green felt. “Now can I have another beer? I think I have enough left.”

Sophar smiled and sprinted toward the bar, but stopped and looked back.

“I want baby blue eye,” she said to Jans. “I want baby Farter same-same you.”

“I am not a Farter, I am a Farder,” he said, proudly. “Now which way is your bathroom?”

“Toilet back there,” she pointed.

He confessed to Sophar that he didn’t have much money, as he was just on break from university. So he was staying at a dingy \$8 a night backpacker’s hostel. But she didn’t care because she wanted to go to Sweden with the Farder, so he Bar Fined her that night.

The next day Sophar wasn’t around the bar, though I did spot her sitting with Jans outside the Happy Pizza place that served marijuana as a pizza topping. He was smoking cigarettes and drinking beer, checking out other girls behind his sunglasses while Sophar looked perfectly content staring



at his nose and blue eyes. When he took a swig of beer, she dabbed his chin with a napkin.

Jans came around the bar the next few days so I got to know him a little bit. In the afternoons he drank beer and played his wobbly guitar while I drank iced coffee and tried to catch up on emails now that the electricity and Internet were back on full time. He asked me what I was doing.

“Just trying to help organize this fundraiser for the island. Everything takes forever here and it’s hard to get a straight answer out of anyone,” I said.

“Yes, I notice that,” Jans said.

“It’s our culture,” Ava said, overhearing our conversation. “Saying no to someone directly is like a little insult, and they might lose face.”

“Well I don’t see how saying ‘yes, it’s all handled so don’t worry’ is helping anyone, when this fundraiser is only two weeks away.”

Ava just shrugged and went back to applying lipstick in the mirror.

I’d done my part for the fundraiser but was still waiting for word that the special events permit was OK’d. The Prime Minister’s office kept saying it was coming any day, but without the permit we couldn’t finalize the venue, confirm with the bands, or print flyers and start passing them out. But to their credit, the one thing they had done well was fundraising, sending out requests for donations to 50 international nonprofits on official governmental letterhead. Every once in a while, someone would hit “reply all” on the event email list and I’d read the correspondence between the organizations and the Prime Minister’s office. It looked like nine nonprofits were on board with donations already.

“What fundraiser is that?” Jans asked. So I told him.

“If you need another band, I am happy to play,” he said, plucking one of his mistuned strings. I told him I appreciated it and I would let him know.

Jans was intent on becoming the next big rock god, and plucked at his guitar every chance he got. He mostly sang German death metal, but in a soft acoustic lullaby style. When I requested he sing some Guns N’ Roses, I was surprised that his voice actually wasn’t half bad.

“I will go down in the annals of music history!” he proclaimed.

“The what?”

“I will become a rock god like Meatloaf!” Jans said.

“I think the word you want is ‘annals,’ and no offense, bro, but does anyone listen to Meatloaf anymore?”

But that only fired him up more.

“No one will stop me from my anals!” he said, so I didn’t object.

It was definitely less boring with Jans around the bar. It was none of my business, of course, but I could tell Sophar was falling for him and really thought he was taking her to Sweden. She thought Jans Farder the Party Starter was her Golden Ticket. Whether it was a calculated business decision or folly of the heart I don’t know, but I found out that she wasn’t even charging him.

“I told her I have no money until I get home, ya,” he said to me when she went upstairs to get her things before leaving with him one afternoon. “But she says it’s no problem and I only have to pay the Bar Fine every night.”

“Really?”

“Ya, and she won’t leave me alone. When I leave my hotel, she stays there all day, just watching TV. I feel not good leaving her there, but I know she won’t steal anything and she seems happy,” he said. “She won’t steal anything, right?”

It was true: once the girls got the chance to go to a nice hotel with a guy they liked, or, in this case, a crappy hotel with a guy they loved, they didn’t want to leave. In a world where relationships had to be renewed every evening, leaving meant they were at the whim of the guy. He might lie and said they wanted to hang out later, or that they’d come by the bar again that night, but once the guy was gone, she was powerless to get him back.

So when a Taxi Girl got to sleep over and then spend the next morning in his hotel room, she wanted to extend the luxury as long as possible. Hotels had air conditioning and fluffy soft beds with clean sheets and covers and mini fridges with all sorts of sodas and chocolates, sometimes even Toblerone. The girls memorized the minibar price lists and let their customers know that they weren’t eating and drinking the most expensive things, saving him money.

They girls knew that if they kept a tourist in the room long enough, he would get hungry, as foreigners had to eat every hour or two. So he would order room service and she could eat French fries and watch him eat an

entire hamburger in one sitting. Hotels had free Wi-Fi and places to plug in her phone so she could play Facebook or Skype someone. Hotels had showers with cold AND hot water you could adjust, and sit down toilets with sprayers, and marble sinks lined with little bottles of shampoos and conditioners and soaps and lotions she could take without stealing.

But the best part was probably the television. Sometimes there were almost 100 channels so she could watch romantic movies from Thailand, or fashion shows with models so perfect they looked like aliens, and something called “reality shows” from the United States with people so rich they had cameras following them as they complained about their problems and got in arguments with one another.

Even the bad hotel rooms, like the one Jans stayed in, had most of those things. Even if they had a few roaches or rats, there were still far less than where she lived, and there was always AC.

So when the guy got itchy sometime the next day and wanted to leave his room, she simply told him that she wanted to stay, but that he was perfectly free to come and go.

It usually took the guy off guard, as he sorted through the logistics of leaving a Taxi Girl in his room while he left. His biggest worry was that she could easily go through all of his stuff and rob him blind once he walked out the door. But the girl addressed his reservation before he was even able to voice it.

“Just lock me in room when you gone,” she’d say.

He could do that in the older hotels or guesthouses, where the doors locked by key from the outside. In the newer hotels, her ID was down at the front desk anyway, and security wouldn’t let any Taxi Girl leave without calling up to the guest upstairs first, to make sure he hadn’t been robbed or wasn’t dead or anything. As crazy as it may seem, volunteering to be locked inside a hotel room like a prisoner where she couldn’t even escape if there was a fire, there was no denying that it solved the problem. It also set her up to spend the day in comfort, and to stay with her new “ATM” again that night.

The expats who lived there and locked their girlfriends in their apartments regularly – at their wishes – even had a name for it: Locked Up A Broad.

So when Sophar asked to stay, Jans acquiesced. She camped out in his hotel all week while he went out. While Sophar refolded his moldy, tattered clothes and smelled his pillow and dreamed of the snow she’d see with her new life in Sweden, he partied at the bars with his new friends, some Aussie students traveling during their holiday. They’d met Jans when he

was playing guitar and liked his music so they brought him out to the bars with them four nights in a row. In fact, the Aussies liked Jans so much they even included him in their friendly rugby-team hazing, slipping a couple Viagra into his beer when he got up to go to use the bathroom.

Jans had no idea why they were chuckling when he got back to the table, but he downed his beer and unpacked his guitar from its case. What his friends didn't know was that he was booked to play an acoustic set at the bar that night.

He went up and sat on a stool and started strumming away for his audience. Within 15 minutes, he squirmed uncomfortably. When 25 minutes passed, he readjusted his guitar and looked extremely concerned, his forehead sweating. And within half an hour, he had a raging surprise. But since he was up on stage with all eyes on him and no place to escape, he had no choice but to keep singing and hide it behind his guitar.

I wasn't there that night, but from what I heard, Jans played the concert of his life. He was only supposed to play five songs or so in exchange for tips and a couple free beers, but stayed on for two and a half hours without taking a break. He played "I'd Do Anything For Love" three times, and "Paradise by the Dashboard Light" and "Bat Out of Hell" twice, plus a freestyle rap version of Nena's "99 Red Balloons," and even a 13-minute encore of David Hasselhoff's "Hooked on a Feeling," so passionate that everyone in the crowd truly believed that he was, indeed, hooked on a feeling.

Jans even kept playing when a guitar string broke, and only stopped because it was past midnight and the pissed off DJ was already bumping house music. Jans got up and ran out the front door without even collecting his tips from the jar, holding his guitar in front of him like a machine gun. Everyone clapped and cheered except his friends, who were still laughing.

Jans was infuriated until he heard the news the next day. Sitting in the bar that night was a coordinator for a Chinese cruise line. The man was so inspired by Jans' legendary performance that he left his business card for the passionate musician. When they met up the next day, he offered Jans a contract singing on a cruise ship that traveled up and down the coast of Vietnam. Jans wasn't quite a rock god just yet, but was one step closer to inserting himself into the "anals" of music history.

He was ecstatic when he went back to his hotel, ready to pack, since he had to leave the next day. But when he told Sophar, she didn't share his enthusiasm.

“When you I go Sweven together?” she asked him.

“Sweden? Who’s going to Sweden? No, listen; I got signed to a cruise! I’m going to get paid to play music! Isn’t it wonderful news?” he asked, zipping up his bag.

“Where I go?” Sophar asked.

“You? Well, you stay here I guess, ya?” he said. He only realized what was going on when she turned away so he wouldn’t see her cry.

“Don’t be upset. What did you think?” he said, reaching out to touch her shoulder. “But I’ll write you on Facebook all the time, I promise.”

“You fucking lie me!” she said, pushing his hand away, storming through the room and collecting her things.

“But you live here,” he called out as she walked out the door, grabbing a handful of chocolates from the minibar before she left, slamming the door shut behind her.

He locked the door behind her and finished packing his things. The phone rang a few minutes later. Jans answered it.

“Good morning, sir. Your guest wants to leave now. Is that all right?”

“Ya,” he said. “Let her go.”

## **Yaba**

There was a fire in the old market. Everyone was in the street running in that direction. I walked with them, even though I didn't know why. People yelled and pointed at the column of black smoke that wound like a twister from the roofline, only a few blocks from the bar. They ran in the street without looking. A lady dropped her basket of fruit, and a shopkeeper's little girl screamed and cried because she was forgotten. I didn't understand what the people were saying, but it seemed like they were all looking for someone.

I walked to the end of the block like in slow motion, with people running in both directions around me. A mother carrying her baby came past me, their faces and hair covered in black soot, their clothes wet. She was crying, but I could see they were not burned, just scared.

Tin Tin jogged past me. His shirt was ripped and he was covered in black soot, too.

"Go back, Sir Norm," he coughed. "Get back to the bar and tell Mamasan."

"Is there anything I can do? Tin Tin?!" I called after him, but he was already gone in the crowd.

I jogged back to the bar and told Mamasan about the fire, but the girls were already packing the liquor bottles into crates, and Mamasan and another girl were carrying the cash register toward the front door.

"We'll be OK," she said to me. "But just in case the fire gets too close."

I decided to do the same, so I ran upstairs. The girls seemed perfectly calm and didn't pack anything – or didn't have anything to pack. They lined up at the edge of the roof to watch the fire. I went over to watch with them.

We could see the flames. The entire front face of the old market, a jigsaw puzzle of red and blue tin roofs, kiosks, and an overgrown lily pond of stalls beneath umbrellas, was engulfed in orange and red. The flames taunted the crowd of spectators, who saw how close they could get before crying out and pushing back when a wood beam cracked or a roof collapsed, billowing sparks.

I could feel the heat of the fire even from blocks away. Men ran with buckets of water, holding rags over their mouths. The buckets sloshed and splashed most of their water out as they ran. We heard the siren, but it took a long time until we saw the fire truck. It was slow getting through the streets near the market, nudging through the crowd and running over a

moto in its path. By the time the firemen reached the market and unrolled their hoses, there wasn't much left to save. The inferno had burned through most of the market already, taking everything with it. The fire was reduced to embers and piles of black wood and ashes now, but the smoke was thicker, filling up the sky like it was dusk, not morning.

The girls didn't say anything as we watched, so I didn't either. Soon, they started walking away, until only a few of us were left. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Sophar open the door to her shack, gaze around at the smoke in the sky, blink a few times, and go back in, shutting the door.

In the week since the Farder left her, she hadn't come out of her room much, except for work at night. She didn't look well. She didn't eat and cried all day, and even Mamasan and Ava were worried about her, so they asked me to try and cheer her up.

I'd found her sitting out in front of the bar the previous night, in the dark where I couldn't see her eyes, just the red glow of bar street neon. I sat down next to her. She didn't say anything.

"Hello sexy mannnnnn!" I yelled at a puzzled Japanese tourist in a fishing hat who was walking by, imitating the girls in my best high-pitched Asian accent. "Where are you from? Buy me a drink!"

The tourist looked around to see if I was really talking to him, then picked up his pace, crossing to the other side of the street.

"What's your name what's your number?!" I yelled after him.

Sophar laughed, then stopped and dabbed at her eyes.

"Are you OK?" I asked, sitting down with her.

"Sure, OK for what?" she replied. I figured she didn't want to talk, so I left it. We watched a little island girl doing acrobatics for tips from the passing tourists, bending her legs back at an impossible angle and then suspending herself into a handstand.

"Why he lie me?" Sophar asked, once the street show was over.

I didn't have to ask whom she was talking about.

"I don't know Sophar," I said. "But everyone goes through it. You'll feel better soon."

"I hate," she said. "I hate he lie me. I want die my heart."

“Don’t say that. Of course you don’t.”

She dried her eyes with a napkin so flimsy it disintegrated once it touched her tears.

“Don’t cry, Sophar, everything will be all right,” I said.

But, of course, I didn’t know if it would be. It was different for them – the girls in the bars, the people on the streets. She was right – none of the other islanders wanted to marry a bar girl. Or a driver with a bad eye who slept in his tuk-tuk on a hammock, or someone who ate out of the trash. Who would walk down the aisle with a guy who owned no shoes, or exchange vows with a girl born with a cleft lip?

Why would they? Marrying meant bonding families together, forever. It would be selfish and hurtful to try and join your kin to a lesser family – one that would make life more difficult and wouldn’t put food on the table. That was not a convenience they could afford.

If you were extremely lucky, you might get one chance at making your life better. To throw that away for something as frivolous as love or attraction was an insult to your ancestors, all of those who had toiled and starved to keep you alive.

But the girls in the bar had their hearts broken by customers so many times there wasn’t much left, like a fire that had nothing left to burn. After a while, they knew that anger and hurt were the only lovers that would never abandon them.

Secretly, they might still want to get married and have a family and leave their life in the bar behind, but it was a prison that was hard to escape – even if the warden left the front gate wide open. How do you go from \$400 a month sleeping in hotel rooms, eating every time you’re hungry, and drinking vodka to \$80 a month sleeping on the floor, eating soup once a day?

But in the hidden moments, I’d still hear them talk about how they wanted a baby. They would love it, even if it was ugly or had dark skin, they promised. They posted photos of elaborate weddings and dresses on Facebook. Like Sophar, every one of them had once bought into the dream of marrying a foreigner, getting a visa, and going someplace far away from Dragon Town, where everyone was rich and happy and well fed.



Sophar turned and looked at me, but something was different about her eyes. They were half closed and distant, no emotion in them, like the eyes of a sleeping animal.

“Thanks you, Norm *bong*,” she said. “You nice me.”

Thunder clapped and it started to drizzle, sending steam off the hot street. Vendors scrambled to pull their wares inside or cover them with plastic sheets.

“Of course, Sophar,” I said. “Now come on inside and I’ll let you beat me at Connect Four again.”

She stood up slowly, looked out at the rain that peppered and pinged the tin roofs.

“No. Sophar need work,” she said, not looking back at me. “Sophar need money, no can stop.” But instead of going back inside the bar, she walked out into the wet street, letting the rain hit her, spreading dark circles on her shirt like bullets were hitting her. She did not try to cover up, but lowered her sunglasses over her eyes even though the sky was dark. I watched her go up the block, until she disappeared around the corner into the jungle of freelance streets.

I went back inside but I didn’t tell Mamasan or the other girls, and they didn’t notice when Sophar came back an hour later and started working again, her sunglasses still on.

After Farder ripped up her Golden Ticket, Sophar started playing the game better than most. There was a customer almost every night now, and sometimes even two if she got Bar Fined for short time and came back, or snuck off at 3 AM without Mamasan knowing to go to the dance club Pontoon to meet another guy. She bought a tight dress with sparkles on it and a pair of second-hand high heels. But she looked even skinnier and had black, cancelled-out eyes all the time. It didn’t take much for me to figure it out.

“Come here, please, I need to talk,” Mamasan said to me one day in the bar. I thought maybe I did something wrong or she was fed up with our arrangement, about to assure her that my bankcard had to be coming soon.

“Sure thing. What’s going on?”

“Your little friend. She is not doing well. She thinks I don’t know, but I know. I am not stupid. I’ve done this a long time.”

“Who’s not doing well?”

“Tin Tin came down yesterday because there was a problem. He said it was one of my girls,” she said. “I cannot have *jao* working here. That’s more trouble and they’re already trying to take my bar.”

“*Jao* means ‘thief,’ right? What happened?”

She told me that a few businessmen from Malaysia had come into the bar a few nights earlier and Bar Fined Sophar and three others. It was the guys’ last night in town, so they wanted to have a big party. They were staying in a nice suite in the Royal Century and had many bottles of Red Label, so everyone was drunk and crazy and had a good time. But the men woke up late for their flight the next morning, so they paid the girls and ushered them out, and then packed and left the hotel.

One of the men thought that some cash and his iPad were missing, but he didn’t have time to deal with it because they were late. But when they got to the airport they missed their flight, and by then he realized he’d been robbed. So they went down to the police station to file a report.

The men complained that they didn’t remember much from the night before and were all feeling foggy – far more than the usual hangover – so they suspected they’d been drugged. Mostly, they were just mad they missed their flight, and needed an official police letter so they could rebook without paying for new tickets.

Tin Tin and another policeman paid a visit to Mamasan at the bar, because it was her girls at their hotel that night.

That was the kind of thing that happened with freelancers, but wasn’t supposed to go down with legitimate bar girls. That’s why a tourist went to bars and paid the Bar Fine – protection from bullshit, as well as the assurance that the girls got regular medical checkups.

When any girl – whether from a bar or a freelancer – heard that it was a tourist’s last night in town, they pressed hard, knowing that he’d want to party and spend money on his last night without conscience. But too often, freelancers also realized he’d be on a plane back to his home far away the next morning, so a missing watch or iPhone would likely go unreported in the scramble of hung-over packing.

Getting the tourist properly loaded always helped, but to really do the job right, they could slip him a roofie. The girl could then rifle through his room and luggage, and even try to get into his hotel safe. They could try as

many passwords as they wished, like #1234 and #0000 and #9999 or his birthday, without the safe shutting them out.

A few of the freelancers worked in tandem with their local boyfriends or tuk-tuk drivers. They'd get the tourist drunk and get on a tuk-tuk with him, then drive to a shady part of town where the driver would pull over under a bridge or in an alley and take out a knife, taking everything the tourist had on him. Of course, the girl pretended she wasn't in on it.

Some of the freelancers even slipped their marks scopolamine, often called truth serum, which would make them so impressionable, they'd gladly open their own safe and withdraw all the money they could from an ATM without protest – or remembering any of it the next hazy morning. Even the security camera footage would show the man acted voluntarily.

But when tourists got robbed, they almost never went to the police. They were embarrassed and didn't want to invite questions – or worse, headlines – that could follow them back home. The police were also notorious for detaining a tourist who was actually the victim of a crime, demanding a bribe to release them.

So most tourists scampered out of town when they got robbed, when a drug deal went bad, or when they got caught with their pants down in a place they weren't supposed to be. There were a lot of tourists who didn't take their sunglasses off at the airport.

"Sophar was one of the girls in the room," Mamasan told me. "I know the others. They've worked for me a long time and never a problem."

"I don't know," I said. "That doesn't sound like her."

"Now police come around the bar? That's bad for business," she said. "You remember what happened last time?"

"Yeah, of course I do."

"I need you to talk to her," she said. "Before it's a problem for all of us. Or maybe I should just fire her?"

I told her I would talk to Sophar, and started packing up my computer.

"And one more thing," Mamasan said.

"Yes?"

"I think she's smoking *yaba*. I can see it in her eyes," she said. "I have rules here, remember?"

"I know you do," I said. "I'll try to talk to her."

## The Returned

It just happened one day; I got my life back. My new ATM card finally arrived. It came in an overnight package after only five short weeks, not to the post office like they told me it would, but somehow right to Candy Bar. When I came in from lunch, the FedEx package was sitting on the bar where anyone could have taken it, but it was untouched.

I unwrapped the white cardboard envelope and felt the smaller bank envelope inside, the weight and stiffness somehow comforting. I tore it open and there it was: a shiny, brand new Wells Fargo ATM card.

I ran my fingers over the numbers and the letters of my name, NORMAN J SCHRIEVER, silver and slightly raised against the raincloud gray card. It seemed too good to be true. I could just insert the card into any one of those electronic machines mounted outside banks and U.S. dollar bills would spit out, and with those I had all the options in the world again.

I showed it to Ava behind the bar.

“Congratulations, Norm *bong*,” she said, washing some glasses.

“Thanks, Ava,” I said. “Hopefully it works.”

“That is what you were waiting for this whole time? So now you are free.”

Free. What a word.

“Do me a favor and don’t tell anyone yet, OK?” I asked her.

“Of course. You know I never talk,” she said with a wink.

It wasn’t that I didn’t trust the girls, or that I thought they’d defy all standards of decency and start hitting me up for Lady Drinks; I knew they would. It wasn’t that I worried about Mamasan presenting me with a sizable bill; I was eager to pay her anything she asked. I just didn’t like the way things could change again so quickly, even for the better. Somehow, it felt out of control to have my life back so suddenly, like a pearl diver coming up too fast – the vertigo of the returned.

I realized I was being ridiculous, so I put the envelope in my backpack and went back to trying to write on my laptop. But really, I was eavesdropping, listening to the crazy French aid worker who was in the bar again, drinking with a couple older American sex-pats, one of them in camouflage shorts, with yellow toenails and teeth to match. The other American, wearing a fedora with a blue band, must have suffered a stroke because

one side of his mouth and face drooped, slurring his speech. Frenchy bought them a round of drinks, and they all chain-smoked by the pool table.

“Ah, hell, it’s the same thing,” the man in camo shorts said.

“Sure as fuck is,” said Blue Fedora. “You know how much money I pay my ex-wife every month for her to sit on her ass?”

“What the hell’s the difference? They’re in it for the money,” Camo agreed.

“But don’t you think it’s wrong to come to these places and pay for it?” Frenchy asked, which was a funny thing to say when standing in a girlie bar.

“But you do pay for it,” Camo said. “Like when...”

“Yes, yes, I know what you will say: you pay for it anyway,” Frenchy interrupted, dropping cigarette ash on his shirt. I think he was a little drunk. “But it’s different than buying, say, dinner and drinks or a movie. Don’t use that old *merde* argument. I mean, don’t you feel bad about it?”

“Why the hell should I?” asked Camo.

“I always feel pretty good about it – especially right afterwards,” Blue Fedora said.

“If it’s not me, it’s going to be someone else, right? I mean, they’re all consenting adults, and no one is forcing them into these bars.”

“Really? Did you know they need to be 22 years old to work in a bar?” Frenchy asked. Of course the islanders completely ignored this law, as waitresses and cooks were often still teenagers and you’d find children working alongside their parents in the bars, the patrons built-in baby sitters. So when a young mother came door-to-door selling knockoff perfumes, her young daughter was always in tow, and the bar girls would braid her hair and kiss her cheeks while her mom tried to make a dollar.

“So what?” Fedora asked.

“So... watch this,” Frenchy said. He turned to address the room, cupping his hands around his mouth to project better.

“Attention, all of you girls working here,” he boldly announced. Not one girl looked over.

"How many girls here are 22 years old?"

Every single hand in the place went up, the girls still not bothering to lift their heads or stop what they were doing.

"See, they are old enough," Camo said.

"And how many girls forgot their ID at home?" Frenchy bellowed.

Every single hand went up in the air again.

"So what's your point?" Fedora asked, wiping the corner of his mouth with a napkin. "I treat 'em nice and pay 'em and that's what they want. They're not complaining."

"And if it wasn't me, it would be someone else," said Camo. "Back in the States they won't even give you the time of day unless you have a bunch of bread and drive a nice car. How is *that* right?"

"Yes, sir, and when they divorce you they take half of everything and leave you high and dry," Blue Fedora said.

"At least half."

"Ahhh but it's the *system*," Frenchy said, putting down his pool cue and pointing his well-manicured finger at the men. "By going with these girls you are participating in the system, and that further reinforces the vicious cycle."

"Don't get all preachy with me!" Camo said. "What the hell are you trying to get at, anyway?"

"So you're telling me the system is going to stop if we don't come to Asia and have girlfriends?" Blue Fedora asked, munching on some bar pretzels, a few of them sogging out of the bad side of his mouth.

"Well, no," Frenchy said, "But that's not the point."

"You really think if I asked these girls, they'd prefer there were no bars so they couldn't make good money?"

"But you're not *listening*..." Frenchy said.

"Hey, honey!" Blue Fedora yelled to the passing waitress. "Do you like to make money?"

"I lovvvvvve money!" she said. "Why? You have tip for me?"

"No," he said. "Maybe next time."

"Fucking Cheap Charlie," she said, and kept going.

"You Americans just don't understand that we are causing all this," Frenchy protested, waving his cigarette around. "But of course *they* don't know any better."

"Hey, buddy, I fought for my country. I served," Camo said, standing up. "So why the hell shouldn't I enjoy myself a little? Why should I suffer back home, when here I can live like a man should?"

"Yes, but it's *wrong*," said the Frenchmen, "Don't you see it? *Morally* it's wrong. You're hurting these women..."

"Most of the time, they're the ones hurting me!" Blue Fedora said, sending his friend into a fit of laughter, trying to high-five but missing.

The Frenchman, disgusted at the whole thing, paid for his drinks and then walked outside, turning into to the next girlie bar, where he could continue defending someone else's half-naked honor.

"What a frog asshole," Camo said, scanning the bar for someone who might be sympathetic, but settling on me. "Is he always like that?"

"I don't know," I said, shrugging.

I remembered meeting someone in Bangkok, at the airport during a layover. An American guy, wearing a nice black business suit and a red tie despite the heat, sat next to me at the lounge as I ate a sandwich. He ordered a double whiskey at 10:30 AM. I only recalled what he said because of the look on his face: he was defeated. There was no fight left in him.

His prestigious financial planning firm had transferred him to the Philippines, where he was set up with a luxury condo and a driver and made great money. He was fat, but not that old yet. He told me how he'd met a nice Filipina woman at a proper bar - not a place like Candy Bar - and they'd started to date.

They fell in love and she moved into his condo and eventually they got married. She talked him into giving her money to open a business for her parents, and then every month for her brother to go to welding school. He



was hesitant, but that was the way in Asia – you provided for family, too. He wanted to make her happy, so he paid. Everything seemed fine.

But she started bringing her brother around the condo more and more. They were always there, and he disliked not having privacy, but again that's the nature of the beast with family in Asia. The brother did try to be helpful, fixing things around the condo and even watching after the place when the American was out of town on frequent business trips.

The American caught them in bed together one day when a business trip was cancelled. It wasn't her brother at all, but her boyfriend. They'd been playing the poor, unsuspecting guy the whole time.

Once he found out, the man lost everything. His wife and her "brother" even refused to leave the condo, and foreigners had few rights in their country, so he had to move out of his own place. The American man started drinking every night and then every day, too. He was barely hanging on, with bloodshot eyes and yellow sweat stains on his \$200 shirt. As he ordered another double whiskey, he told me that he was flying to Guam that day – the only place he could get the marriage annulled, since it was a U.S. commonwealth, because they didn't have divorces in the Philippines. I'd heard a hundred sad songs like that in Candy Bar.

For the most part, men like Camo and Blue Fedora were nothing in their own countries. They could barely survive on their measly pension or salary back home. They were too old, too poor, and too ugly to get the attention of a woman. But here in Dragon Town, they would be treated like someone important. They could live again, feel what it was like to be wanted, and didn't need to be lonely or invisible anymore. They could purchase the façade of love. And sometimes, just sometimes, it had a chance to be the real thing.

"If we treat 'em nice and the girls make up their own mind, who are we hurting?" the expat with the stroke said out loud, even though Frenchy was long gone.

But there were other ones, men who weren't so nice. I heard rumors or read headlines about terrible stuff that went on, though none of it was in plain sight. It seemed like it was mostly fellow Asians who did the really horrible things to these girls – to their own people – stealing or buying them young and forcing them into it, turning them docile with electric shocks and spider bites. Sometimes, it was their own family members who sold them. Or they were tricked, signing up to go to Malaysia or Thailand for a decent job as a maid, but beaten, drugged, and made slaves instead.

What would Ava and Apple and Sophar and the rest of them be doing instead of working at the bar? The question always popped into my head. In their country, this was the best opportunity someone born into poverty could ever hope for, outside of working 14 hours a day in a hot kitchen, giving massages on the beach, or selling things at a kiosk in the market for pennies. That's why they were here. Sure, it was their choice. But is it really a choice if you have no other choices? If I had been born into their situations, into their skin and their lives, would I be any different? Or worse?

What, exactly, made us so different?

Luck. That was the only answer I could ever come up with.

I took my new ATM card out of the envelope, grabbed a pen, and signed the back. I walked outside and down to the nearest bank machine. I put the card in and punched in my code, hit the button for English, and took out \$300 in crisp American bills, all that was allowed with one transaction. Then, I did it again, and tried one more time, until it wouldn't give me any more.

## G11

I found a room at G11 hotel on 184 Street, a 10-minute walk from the Royal Palace, 15 minutes to the beach, and a \$1 tuk-tuk ride through the old market to Candy Bar. The rooms at G11 were gigantic, with cool slate floors and high ceilings and the largest beds I've ever seen, with immaculate fresh white sheets made up every morning. There was air conditioning: life-giving, alpine mountaintop air conditioning that I could set as cold as I wanted without paying extra, even so cold that I needed to wear my sweatshirt and still woke up with a sore throat every morning.

I could sleep as long as I wanted in the silence, and then go downstairs for a breakfast of omelets and pancakes, as many as I could eat, all included in the price of \$24.75 a night that I paid with my new bank card. I talked to the manager and tried to negotiate a lower price if I stayed for a few weeks, as I had no idea when my passport would finally be ready.

My new room had a balcony that overlooked a walled-in courtyard next door, with palm trees and flowers and a man-made creek. The courtyard was easily half a city block, but it was always empty, save for a little bungalow where an old, hunched-over woman lived. She acted as caretaker, but there was very little work for her to do, so she mostly lay out in a hammock, cooking on a wood fire when the sun went down, and trying to sneak a peek at some tourist skin inside the hotel rooms.

Sam Sam the Tuk-Tuk Man congratulated me on my new accommodations when he came to pick me up. I could tell he felt important coming there. I had him come collect me every morning and bring me to the Lone Star Café, where they had great iced coffee and big ceiling fans that kept it cool so I could write for a few hours. He insisted on waiting outside, even if I took a few hours, instead of letting me sit in someone else's tuk-tuk.

"How much do I owe you, Sam Sam?" I'd ask.

"Up to you," he'd say. "You are brother Sam Sam. Pay only what want you. Up to you."

I paid him what was fair, and then gave him a generous tip. And after a while we didn't really worry about paying every time – I'd just throw him a \$20 bill every once in a while. I asked him about the courtyard one day.

"One time past nice club," Sam Sam said. "Nicest disco Dragon Town. Many rich people every night party. But one boy bad, son of general..."

He went on to tell me how this one punk teenager, the son of a famous general, would go to that outdoor club with his friends and always start

trouble. The kid would push people around and hit on someone else's girlfriend right in front of them, starting big fights. The general's son would break a bottle over someone's head, or even pull out a gun. He shot someone in the stomach once, and shot at someone else the next weekend, but missed and nicked a bystander.

The club owners would call the police, who were always stationed only two blocks away at the Royal Palace. But the police would wait until they saw the general's son's Range Rover safely drive away, and only then they'd pull up to the club to clean up the mess. No one dared name him to the police. Even if they had, it wouldn't have made a difference – he was untouchable. The police even demanded a payment from the club for showing up. So the owners of the club had no choice but to shut the place down, closing their business.

Now, a few years later, it still stood deserted beside the hotel, beautiful but useless because of the general's son, who had moved on to terrorize other discos in Dragon Town. The whole courtyard was empty; a beautiful silent graveyard in stark contrast to the crowded anthill I was used to at Candy Bar.

I'd expected a big emotional ordeal when I moved out of my room above Candy Bar, but it wasn't like that at all. I guess the girls were used to foreigners leaving. Everyone left – it was only strange to them how long I'd stayed.

I'd told Ava and the girls that I was moving to a hotel but would still be in Dragon Town until I could get my passport back, so I would come visit, and they were always welcome to come see me and hang out at the pool.

"Thank you, Norm, but I don't want to ruin my perfect skin in the sun," Ava said, showing off her arms. "But you can come back and buy me a Lady Drink anytime."

"How about I buy you a Ladyboy Drink?" I asked. She laughed, pushing me away when I went to hug her.

"This isn't goodbye, Norm *bong*, just see you later," she said. "Now go say goodbye to someone who will actually miss you."

I found Sophar upstairs, sitting outside her room, squatting in the shade of the doorway. She was talking on an expensive smartphone.

"Yes my boyfriend. You come see me tonight?" she asked. Sophar signaled for me to be quiet when I walked up. I went inside my room and checked to make sure I hadn't left anything, then came out with my bags.

“Yes, my love, I wait you. I miss you.”

She'd learned fast. After the girls were all arrested and Sophar didn't talk, the other girls and even Mamasan all embraced her. She could sit wherever she wanted and talk to whomever she wanted without anyone's permission. She joked and danced and hung out with the other girls, all her new friends. She had plenty of customers and was becoming an Earner... and, apparently, she even had a new smartphone.

Her English was even coming along surprisingly well, though there were still words she couldn't get.

“El-e-phant.”

“Elegfunt,” she'd say. “Elagfont.”

“It's OK, we'll come back to that one,” I'd say, trying not to chuckle.

“Elegflont!” she'd say, red-faced. “Don't laugh me!”

“Don't worry, Sophar, you'll get it soon.”

But her English was nearly conversational. I remembered the frightened and hungry girl from the province that had showed up in the doorway of the bar, trembling in her one ripped dress.

“Sophar,” I whispered. “I have to go now. I'm moving out. Remember, I told you?”

“Yes, honey when you come see Sophar? You no lie me,” she said into the phone, motioning for me to wait. I stepped out of the sun, my shirt sticking to my back with sweat.

“My tuk-tuk is waiting for me,” I said.

“No, I no work bar more. I promise,” she said. “I wait you, honey. But need money go doctor for sick.” She looked perfectly fine.

I waved goodbye, motioning that I would come back when she was done with her call. I went downstairs. Sam Sam took my bags and arranged them carefully in the back of the tuk-tuk.

When I turned back around, Mamasan was watching from the doorway, the scars on her face more visible in the daylight. I smiled and took an envelope filled with money from my pocket and handed it to her.

"You can count it – it's all there," I said.

"I know it is," she said, putting the envelope into her pocket without even looking inside. "It's been good having you here, Sir Norm. Good luck to you with everything."

"You too," I said. "And thank you again. I'll definitely come visit."

"You are always welcome back," she said. "I just hope we are still here."

"Why wouldn't you be?"

"Don't say anything, but they're trying to force us out," she said, looking at a drunk island man on the street, who swayed to the other side of the street to avoid her chastising gaze. "All of us in the neighborhood."

"Force you out? Who?"

"The Chinese," she said. "These greedy fucking Chinese businessmen. I don't know why they don't just stay in their own country."

"Ready with you are, Sir Worm!" Sam Sam yelled out from his tuk-tuk.

"Hold on – one second, Sam Sam," I answered, then signaled for Mamasan to continue. She looked around to make sure no one could hear us, standing in the doorway.

"Tin Tin was with his favorite from the bar the other night, Ratha," she said.

"Wait, Tin Tin goes with girls from the bar?"

"I send her from time to time," she said. "Ratha likes him and it's good for business. He talks on the pillow, as they say."

"Smart," I said.

"Yes, every man has his weak time," Mamasan said. "So she told me Tin Tin asked if she'd consider being his girlfriend once she didn't work at the bar anymore."

"OK."

"She said she'd probably be working at the bar until she lost her looks or had a baby, but he let it slip that it would probably be much sooner than

that. She didn't know what he was talking about, but she made him tell her everything.

"Tin Tin said that the Prime Minister made a deal with a group of rich Chinese. They wanted to buy this whole area of bar streets because it's near the beach. They plan on knocking it all down and making luxury condominiums and a mall for tourists," Mamasan said, waving her hand up and down the street.

"They just needed to clear it of people, first, Tin Tin told her. So they are forcing everyone out to close all the bars and restaurants."

"The Chinese?" I asked Mamasan, remembering the man at the meeting in the Prime Minister's office, the Special Economic Ambassador. He was Chinese and didn't really fit in with the rest of the islanders, yet everyone deferred to him, including the Prime Minister.

"So did they make you a good offer?" I asked.

"That's not how these people work," she said. "They will keep raising taxes until we can't pay. Or they have other ways. A few people have been beat up by Chinese gangs with pipes and sticks. And my friend up the street woke up with snakes inside her house one morning. One bit her baby."

"They put snakes inside the house? That's crazy."

"Yes, we think so. The Chinese want all the people out so they make it impossible to live here," she said. "And the fire in the market..."

"Wait. You think they set that fire on purpose?"

"What do you think, Sir Norm?" Mamasan said, taking one step back inside the doorway, her face masked once again. I looked around the street.

"I think they have a big slingshot," I told her. "And we're the monkeys."

## **The Legend of the Liger**

“There’s no such thing, Sam Sam. I’m telling you.”

“Yes, Worm *bong*. I no lie you. Li-ger,” he said.

We stood in the shade out in front of the G11 Hotel, waiting for a man pushing his cart to serve us plastic cups of ice, pouring coconut crème into the dark java. I handed him a U.S. dollar bill, which he accepted only by holding out both hands and letting my place it in his palms, bowing his head to the green crisp bill.

“Thank you, sir, I receive one dollar,” he said, and then went in his pockets to find me change. I signaled for him to keep it and he bowed and moved on.

“You mean tiger, right?” I asked Sam Sam, sipping the coffee. “Ti-ger?”

“Yes tiger. But li-ger.”

“Right, you’re saying ‘ti-ger,’” I clarified, realizing his English was limited.

“Yes. But no; lion, too. Same-same but different.”

“Oh my Buddha, Sam Sam, have you been drinking?”

“I no lie you. Lion go with tiger, make baby. Li-ger.”

I shook my head and put my hand on his shoulder. He just sipped his coffee and looked up at me. Poor guy, he probably never even went to school and would believe any superstition he heard. There were definitely some crazy ones floating around Asia, but the lion-tiger mix was a fantasy straight out of a children’s book.

“No have li-ger America?” Sam Sam asked.

“No, Sam Sam, that’s ridiculous. How would it even... I mean, where would they... Just trust me on this, it doesn’t exist.”

“OK, Worm *bong*,” Sam Sam said, not wanting to get me agitated and potentially lose his fare for the day.

“OK, now let’s go.”



"I think you sleep nice hotel now you very strong," he said, pointing up to the G11 Hotel behind us, puffing out his chest and flexing his stringy biceps.

"Yeah, it's great to finally get a good night's sleep," I said.

"Strong like li-ger," Sam Sam said.

Since moving out my shack above Candy Bar and into the hotel, I felt like a real person for the first time in a long time. I took glorious hot showers and dried myself with fluffy, white towels that weren't stiff from hanging in the sun. I sat down at proper restaurants among the other tourists and ordered the biggest cheeseburgers they had on the menu. After dinner, I went back to my new home, lay down in the icy air conditioning, and watched American movies.

I went to the ATM across the street from my hotel nearly every day, taking out as much cash as I could. Every time, I expected the ATM to eat my card or say that my account was cancelled, but it kept working. I thought I should probably buy gold, but I never got around to it. I emailed my family and friends and assured them I was fine now, and would be coming home to the United States as soon as my passport was ready.

"When you go home United State?" Sam Sam asked me. He didn't understand why I'd been stuck in Dragon Town in the first place, since I was obviously rich and had no trouble getting visas or traveling as an American.

"My passport, Sam Sam," I said. "Remember? They still haven't returned my passport so I can't travel."

"Oh," he said, but I could tell he still didn't understand, just like he couldn't fathom that ligers weren't a real thing.

"We go shoot bazooka bang bang today?" he asked.

"Not today, Sam Sam. But how about I take you to lunch?"

Candy Bar was different after I moved out, but it had nothing to do with my absence, of course. The girls hardly even noticed I was gone. But all the bars changed once the Ministry of Anti-Corruption, who ironically kept one of the biggest, nicest mansions in town as their office, posted a notice on every door on the bar street.

From what Mamasan told me, it said that the Ministry was declaring that whole area a Special Economic Development Zone, enacting ordinances to

clean up the street so it would be more tourist friendly and increase business and prosperity for everyone in Dragon Town.

It looked like the tourists on the street were already making plenty of friends, but from now on, Bar Fines would be illegal. Any business that wanted to stay open past midnight had to pay a tariff every month. Of course to enforce these laws they needed additional police, a whole new division to issue and monitor the after-hours licenses, so taxes would be going up.

When Sam Sam drove me down to Candy Bar to say hi to Sophar and Ava and the girls, there were twice as many of them standing outside, trying to entice passing tourists.

“Hey handsome man come here,” they yelled. “Come here talk to me. Where you go? Come back later, you promise?” One girl ran in front of a group of men from Singapore, blocking their way by outstretching her arms and legs. When they slowed down, another girl knelt down and tied his shoelaces to hers. With a giggle, she shuffled toward the front door of the bar, dragging the tourist’s foot with her. His friends laughed, but he didn’t want to break his shoelaces, so they went inside.

There was another change on the bar streets of Dragon Town: the freelancers were coming. They never used to venture south of 110 Street. That was the unwritten code. The bar girls didn’t bother them and they didn’t interfere with the customers walking up and down the bar streets.

But now, the freelancers stood on the top of the street, trying to stay out of sight, but calling to the tourists when they got off their tuk-tuks and walked toward their hotels. The freelancers strolled back and forth and tried to make eye contact, whistling under their breath to try and get a man to notice them. A couple of them wore dresses and makeup, but most looked like every other common girl on the street, too poor to dress up. They didn’t speak much English and some wore too much makeup to make their skin look white – or to cover their bruises.

“Be careful,” the tuk-tuk drivers said. “Bad girls smoke ice, rob you.” A young mother, very pregnant again, held her baby and smiled and cooed at the drunken westerners. She didn’t even know what to charge them.

“\$100 Boom Boom? \$50? OK, \$10. \$10 we go you hotel now.”

The girls at Candy Bar didn’t like it at all.

“Freelance girl come this street, I give her fucking blue eye,” Jenny Lop Lop said, cocking her fist to show she meant business.

The freelancers were violating a sacred agreement by coming into their territory. But the bar girls couldn't just return the favor; they had to charge a Bar Fine anytime they had a "date." Of course the girls broke that rule secretly, as they had their favorite customers they'd visit during the day or after their shifts, or even local boyfriends that would drop them off for work on the back of their motorbikes, the girls riding sidesaddle so they wouldn't burn their legs on the hot tailpipes.

There were balloons in Candy Bar when I walked in. The lights were darker than usual, and neon writing was all over the mirrors. A rotund white American with a flat top haircut and a green fishing vest smoked a cigar, six girls crowding around him. They rubbed his back and his fleshy legs and held a glass of whiskey up to his lips.

"You so handsome, *bong*," they said to the man. "You so strong."

He signaled to the waitress and she brought him a basket filled with orange and white ping-pong balls. The girls let out a collective scream of excitement and stood at attention. Flat Top took the basket and gave it a heave into the air, the ping-pong balls flying all over the floor, bouncing into every corner and under chairs.

The girls scrambled after them on their hands and knees, pushing each other out of the way, fighting to collect as many as they could like a twisted Easter egg hunt. Flat Top cackled at it all, puffing on his cigar and blowing out smoke without taking his glassy eyes off the girls.

Once there were no more balls to be found, the girls brought them up to the bar and turned them in. Each orange one was worth 20 baht, about 50 cents U.S., and the three white ping-pong balls got them a free Lady Drink.

I looked over at Ava behind the bar, but she just shrugged. I sat down to talk to her, making sure Mamasan wasn't within earshot.

"What the hell is that?" I asked.

"Oh, just another way to make money," she said.

"That's screwed up," I said.

"They're making it harder. I don't remember it this bad. Mamasan has to pay an extra 2,500 baht if she wants to stay open past midnight. They raided Utopia and Xanadu last night."

“But how can the girls... how can the bar stay open without Bar Fines?” I asked.

“Oh, there is always a way,” she said, turning her attention to Rosey the cocktail waitress, who was attending to Flat Top. He was ready to pay his tab and take two of the girls back to his hotel. When Rosey came over and handed his money to Ava to cash out, Ava subtly put the receipt in front of me on the bar. Instead of listing \$20 for two Bar Fines, it showed an additional seven Lady Drinks that had never been ordered.

It was a foolproof way to keep the Bar Fines off the books in case the police raided again. Rosey brought Flat Top his change and the two giddy girls went in back to change clothes and grab their purses, and left with him.

Ava casually poured two shot glasses of water into a bottle of vodka before screwing the cap back on.

“And now, the girls have to bring in four Lady Drinks a night,” she said. “Or it comes out of their pay. I know Mamasan has to run a business, but I don’t know how long we can keep doing this.”

I nodded my head and looked around.

“Hey, where is Sophar?” I asked.

“She got Bar Fined earlier,” Ava said without looking up.

“Again?”

“Yeah, I think a Rig Pig took her out,” she said, referring to the nickname for the rough and uncouth men who worked on offshore drilling rigs for 60 days straight before they had three weeks with nothing to do but drink and party in Southeast Asia, with a lot of money to burn.

Sophar had been in the bar less and less before I’d moved out, but I hadn’t even seen her since I came back to visit. She’d really become an Earner.

I waited, but Ava didn’t say anything more about Sophar, focused on reading a text on her phone instead.

“So...” I said.

“Yes?”

“I...”

“Is there something you want to ask me, Norm?” Ava asked.

I looked over at the empty stool that used to be Sophar’s place, remembering that first night we were both new. Ava looked at me, pools of sympathy filling her eyes.

“What do you *really* want to know?” she asked, putting down her phone and patting the back of my hand.

“I... Is there really such a thing as a liger?”

“Yes, of course,” Ava said, looking relieved and picking up her phone again. “It’s a man lion that has babies with a lady tiger. They used to be all over the jungle, but now there is one right at the zoo.”

“No shit, huh?” I said.

## **Flip-Flop Hands**

There was a man I saw almost every day, working the bar streets trying to collect change from tourists. He had no legs. His pants were tied off right below where his knees should have been; blown off by a landmine, someone told me. The man got around with his hands, placing them one after another on the street and dragging his body behind him. He wore flip-flops on his hands to keep them from getting burned and cut on the street. He existed among the trash and refuse and sewage, car mufflers and other people's legs his horizon.

Whenever I saw the man, he was smiling. He'd scoot his body among the tourists and islanders, resting in the shade of their forms as he held out his hat for a donation.

Most people ignored him, as it was easy to look away or pretend you didn't see him, or just walk away. But some tourists did give, reaching down and handing him a few coins or baht notes. He would give them a smile of genuine appreciation, put the money in his pocket while sitting on his stumped legs, easing the weight by keeping one flip-flopped hand on the pavement. He'd flip his ball cap back over his head and start his shuffle down the street's gutter again, one flip-flop hand at a time.

I always watched the man. Or more accurately, I watched the people who came in contact with him. Although some gave a little money, it seemed like no one asked him what his name was or talked to him. No one bent down to see him face to face, treating him like a person.

Of course there were plenty of other disabled beggars and people working the streets, including hundreds of landmine victims. During the civil war, the Blue Shirts had buried countless landmines to protect their bases and camps from the Gray Shirts, who planted their own to cover their retreat. By the time the United Nations came in, there were still thousands of them hidden in the ground on the island. It was usually farmers and little kids playing who stumbled on them in the countryside.

There were less and less every year, but it still happened, more than two decades later. The victims would almost always lose their legs and sometimes their arms because the mines – manufactured in the U.S., Russia, and China – were built to injure and maim, not kill. An injured soldier required two more soldiers to carry him, I learned, slowing the whole procession down, but a dead soldier could just be left behind.

Since there was no government help for the poor, no social security or pensions or even free medical care, anyone who was disabled or sick had to fend for themselves. If they were lucky, they'd get hold of a sign that had

English words – though I don't know who first wrote these for them – as they sold maps, tour guides, or photocopied western books. Their signs were copied, word for word, because they found it comforted tourists, who could read the sign instead of averting their eyes from their stricken forms. The signs usually read something like:

*Hi I am (write your name here),*

*I am disability but I do not want to beg. I have family to eat and only want to work for them. That gives me pride and respect and good feel, just like you give. So please buy one and it will help me and give my babies to school. Thank you. If you cannot buy me, then please give me small money so I can eat my family tonight. Thanks you very much.*

If they were fortunate, they had family to take care of them. But most in the city, like the man with flip-flop hands, did not.

When islanders came to Dragon Town to try and find work, they were usually on their own. Of course if they had an older sister or uncle or any family living there, the family took them in without question. People from the same village also looked out for each other, even if they weren't close when they lived out in the country. That's why many of the girls working in any given bar were all from the same province – they recruited each other and clung tightly to someone familiar, a tribal thing.

There was no formal caste system on the streets of Dragon Town, but people who were born with infirmities or had their arms or legs blown off by mines or grew sick had no chance of getting a job. So they had to create their own.

Some could make a few coins or a handful of rice from sweeping up for a shopkeeper, collecting cans, or selling garlands of lotus flowers to tuk-tuk drivers for good luck. If you were sightless, whether born that way or because you'd had your eyes blown out by a landmine, you only really had a few options: you'd either work at the special blind massage parlors or play music on the street for change, or hope you had a daughter who could drop out of school to lead you around the streets to beg, your hand on the back of her shoulder.

But for those on the bottom, begging was the only opportunity they'd ever get in life. For that reason, the worse their sickness, deformity, or injury, the better their chance to make money and survive.

There was a man on the street that pushed around a crippled person in a wooden cart, like the ones they used to carry fruit or chickens. I couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman, but the person's shriveled and twisted

frame lay prone on the stiff wood cart, with no protection from the sun, comforted only with a tattered and filthy black blanket. They would lift their skeletal hands only high enough to beg for alms from a passing tourist. All day and night, the able-bodied man would push the person in the cart, working in tandem, for neither could get by without the other.

This was no scam, no clever ruse, nor did any of them suffer from the affliction of laziness. These were people dying in the streets literally right in front of me, huffing glue or paint thinner out of baggies to quell their hunger, stumbling around half clothed, their skin blackened from the merciless sun and filth of this world – from which their only escape would be death.

When I first saw the man with no legs who pulled himself along the streets with flip-flops on his hands, I wanted to help. I was living at Candy Bar so I didn't have money to offer him at the time, but I would give him my bottle of water or save some of my leftover dinner for him. He always smiled when he saw me coming, tipping his ball cap like an actor soaking up a standing ovation after a command performance. I'd squat down to say hello but he didn't speak any English.

"Norm. Norm," I said, patting my chest. "My name Norm."

He'd just tip his ball cap and bow again, smiling before he dragged himself off. I wanted to help him.

A couple weeks later when I saw a man with crippled legs operating a homemade three-wheel bicycle, converted so he could operate it with hand pedals, I got excited.

"Where can you get those, Sam Sam? Do they sell them?"

"No, I think make," he said. "Tuk-tuk shop make."

"How much do you think it will cost?" I asked.

"Sam Sam think maybe 2,000 or 2,500 baht," he said. I smiled. For the small sum of \$50 or \$75 U.S., about what most tourists spent on any night out, I'd be able to completely change his life.

I vowed to buy him one of those hand-pedaled bikes as soon as I got my ATM card back. No longer would he have to exist among the garbage and sewage. He wouldn't get covered in mud and have to crawl through puddles when it rained. I'd be giving him his humanity back. I imagined the look of happiness and appreciation I'd see on the man's face.



I told Sam Sam my plan and he agreed without fully understanding what I wanted, content that I'd placed my trust – and money – with him and not another tuk-tuk driver.

Weeks later, when my ATM card did arrive, I didn't forget about my vow to buy the man with flip-flops on his hands the special bike. After a few days of Sam Sam driving me around, we spotted him, resting in the shade of an alleyway. I asked Sam Sam to pull over and we walked up to the man. I squatted down to talk to him. He smiled and tipped his baseball cap to me.

"Please tell him," I said to Sam Sam. "That we have great news."

As Sam Sam translated, the man looked intently at him.

"Tell him that I'm going to buy him one of those hand pedal bicycles so he won't have to crawl on the ground with his hands ever again."

Sam Sam translated, but the man's smile faded into a look of concern.

"I will pay for everything, of course," I said. "Please tell him it's free."

Sam Sam talked to the man for a long time. The man with flip-flops on his hands slunk lower, avoiding meeting my eyes.

"He say he no want," Sam Sam told me.

"What? What do you mean?"

"He no want bicycle. No want walk up."

"Why?" I asked. "Did you translate right? You must have told him the wrong thing. Tell him..."

"He no want," Sam Sam said. "He say thank you but no want."

"What? But why the hell not?" I said, looking at the worn blue flip flops hooked on his fingers.

Sam Sam put a coin in the man's hat and wished him goodbye. I was stunned.

Once we were back in the tuk-tuk, Sam Sam thought for a while, and then explained.

"If he no walk on ground with flip-flop, tourist no give money," he said, turning back to look at me. "Maybe he little mad you try take away he

money?" he shrugged, checking his rearview mirror before pulling into traffic in front of a tour bus.

## **It's Better to Receive**

I hadn't heard from the Prime Minister's office in three days about the fundraiser, so I knew something was up. It was only a week and a half away, but still nothing was finalized. On a whim, I checked the website they'd talked about building to promote the event.

Sure enough, the website was up and working, displaying the date of the fundraiser and the venue and all of the details of the bands that I'd mentioned we could probably get, though nothing had been confirmed. Prominently displayed in the middle of the web page was a plea to help the islanders affected by the typhoon, with a big button that read, "Please Donate Now To Help The Victims of Super Typhoon Haiyan." The icons of several well-known international charities adorned the page, including Red Star International. The text on the site thanked them for their generous contributions as sponsors.

Instead of emailing, this time I called the Prime Minister's office. The secretary picked up. I told her I saw the website and it made it seem like the event was a certainty, but no one was answering my emails and, as far as I knew, nothing had even been approved.

"Thank you for your call, Sir Norm," she said. "I will let the Minister know about your questions for his consideration."

"But is the event on?" I asked.

She paused long enough that I was worried I'd lost the connection.

"Hello?"

"I have just been updated that the special permit was not approved, so we cannot have the event on the beach."

"Really? Oh, man, that's too bad," I said.

It was quiet on the other end.

"So where can we have it? Or do we need to reschedule?"

"We thank you for your hard work," the secretary said. "We will look at other options and get in contact with you."

"OK, so I don't need to do anything more for now?"

"We will let you know when we need your help again. The office of the Minister thanks you, Sir Norm. Have a nice day."

"OK, but wait," I said. "One more thing. It looks like there are sponsors? Is it true that Red Star donated already?"

"Yes, we have received many generous donations from all over the world for the Minister," she said. "He thanks you again for your..."

"For the victims, you mean," I said.

"What?"

"You said 'for the Minister.' You mean the donations were for the victims, right – the islanders after the typhoon?" I asked.

"Did I?" she said. "I don't think I did."

"Yes, I'm pretty sure you said 'for the Prime Minister.'"

"Please excuse my mistake then, Sir Norm. What I meant to say was that the Prime Minister will see to it that the money goes to the people who need it the most on the island."

"Great, then. That's good news. I know it will really help," I said, and we hung up.

## **Breakdown**

I was sleeping in my room at G11 when the phone rang. I picked it up. I didn't know what time it was.

"What? Hello?"

"Yes, Mr. Norm. Sorry to wake you, sir. But your friend is here downstairs to see you," the hotel clerk said.

I tried to shake the sleep from my brain. "Friend? What time is it? Who?"

"It is 3:14 AM, sir. Your friend is asking for you. She is... she is in quite a state."

"What friend? Who is it?" I heard talking.

"She says her name is Sophar, I think, and that you know her."

"Sophar? Is here? OK, I guess please send her up."

"OK, sir. We will... ummm... escort her upstairs. Have a good morning, sir."

I got up and put on some clothes and splashed water on my face. Soon, there was a knock on the door. I opened it and Sophar was in the hallway, leaning with her face pressed against the wall. She was very drunk.

"Sophar, are you OK?" I asked, nodding to the teenage bellboy who strained to hold her up.

"Nohm... Nohm help me. I drink too much," she moaned, falling in the general direction of my doorway. I caught her. She was wearing a purple t-shirt three sizes too big for her and white shorts, not her normal attire working at the bar. Her face and hair were wet. She had been crying.

I brought her inside and lowered her slumping frame onto the edge of the bed, propping her up so she could sit.

"Sophar, you drank too much? Not good. What are you doing here?" But she had already melted into the bed, her head hanging off at an impossible angle. Her eyes whirled, trying to adjust to the spinning room.

"Nohm, I bad. I sorry. I so bad. Help me please," she said.

"Sophar, what the hell?" I said, more than a little annoyed I'd been roused from sleep to babysit a drunk. "Are you going to be OK?"

She wasn't OK. She curled up against the wall and started crying again.

"I am so bad, Nohm. My mother... my mother."

"What about your mother, Sophar? You're just drunk. You'll feel better in the morning. Why don't you take a shower to sober up and then I'll get you a tuk-tuk back home?"

I still clung to the hope that I'd be able to send her back to the bar. She understood what I said about the shower so she got up and steadied herself, protesting when I tried to help.

"Are you sure you're OK? You can't even walk." She snailed her body against the wall and into the bathroom. I was sure she would fall so I got up to help her, but I heard the water turn on and her clothes came flying into the room. I took out a bottled water from my mini fridge and grabbed a clean towel and put the wastebasket right next to the bed.

She took a long time but finally came out, dripping wet and naked. She stumbled and collapsed right into bed.

"Sophar..." I said. I handed her the towel and then got up and took out a sweatshirt and basketball shorts for her to wear. She dried herself and put them on.

"Nohm, I so bad," she said. "My mother need me but I shit. Fuck!"

"No, you're not, of course not. You're just drunk. Please stop crying."

She covered her face with her hands and turned to the wall, curling up into a ball. I brushed her hair back. I hoped she wouldn't puke on my bed.

"No! I bad! I fucking shit!" she said.

I tried to calm her down and tell her it would all be OK, but she cried even more, shaking uncontrollably like someone who had been locked out in the cold. I wiped her nose with the edge of the towel.

"Sophar, no. Please, Sophar... it's going to be all right," I said. I was scared. I had never seen someone cry so hard. "Do you want me to call someone at the bar?"

"I drink the money. All the money," she moaned. "My mother! I want to die!"

She thrust her head against the wall. *Bang!* Her forehead smashed into the concrete wall. *Bang!* She did it again.

“Sophar... Jesus, no,” I said, pulling her back by the shoulder. “What are you doing?”

“All the money gone. My mother no love me now,” she wailed. “I want die!” *Bang!* She smashed her head against the wall again, rattling her own teeth.

I realized that she wasn’t just trying to get attention. She was really trying to hurt herself. I leapt across the bed and put my hands in between her forehead and the wall to absorb the impact.

“No, no, Sophar, what are you doing? Please.” I cradled her head, turning her body away from the wall. She tucked her head into my shoulder and chest and sobbed. There was blood on my hand.

“Please, Sophar, it’s OK. I promise it will all be OK,” I said, rubbing her hair and her back. I held her tight so she couldn’t get away and try to hurt herself. “Shhhh... shhhh...”

“I drink all money. Money for roof.”

“I don’t know what money you are talking about. Just try to go to sleep,” I said. “I’ll help you. I promise. Just sleep, please.”

It was one of the longest nights of my life, though it was probably only four hours that we lay that way. My arm was dead from her weight, but I wouldn’t let go of her, afraid she would hurt herself again. I thought she would pass out quickly like most drunks do, so I could finally get some rest. But she went on. How could one person cry so many tears?

I couldn’t understand any of it except that she had spent her money on drinking that night, and something about her mother. I promised her it would be OK and that I would help her, just to calm her down so I could finally close my eyes and have some peace.

It was daylight by the time Sophar finally dozed off. It was still dark inside the room, but a soft glow came through the curtain and I could hear the birds. I looked at her face.

“My mother...” she whispered, before mercifully slipping into slumber. “And rain come soon. The rain...”

## **The Sunlight Hurts**

Later that morning, Sophar finally woke up. She yawned and stretched, and then looked up at me with guilty eyes.

"I so sorry, Nohm," she said. She snuggled her face back into my side. "I sorry I sorry. You hate Sophar."

"You were just drunk," I said, trying not to sound annoyed. "It's all better now."

But I felt like shit, my throat sore and my eyes so puffy I could barely see after a sleepless night. But somehow, she looked just fine, except for a red bump on her forehead. "It must be nice to be so young," I thought.

"I sorry I swear you."

"It's OK, Sophar, I don't care. But aren't you hung-over?"

"No, I just... just sad," she said. But the panic from the night before was gone from her voice.

"Do you remember what you did last night? You tried to hurt yourself, Sophar."

"No," she said. "I think so?"

"You hit your head against the wall. I was really scared. Why would you do that?"

"My mother..." she said, closing her eyes and choking back tears again.

"You kept saying something about your mother last night. Tell me what's going on. I can't help if you don't tell me."

So she finally told me. It took a long time because she didn't know all the words in English, and I asked a lot of questions to make sure I understood. But once Sophar told me the whole story, I held her even closer.

Sophar first came to Dragon Town because of her mother.

They lived together in the province, on the northern end of the island. They were poor, like everyone else, but they got by farming a small field of rice and picking a mango grove they rented from their neighbor, selling the mangos in the market.



But when the typhoon hit, the roof blew off of their house. The rice fields flooded, and the leaves and fruit all blew off the mango trees. The next morning after the typhoon, when I was writing a blog and posting videos that would reach the world, Sophar and her mom were waking up to a house that had no roof. They had no money to fix it, and not even enough for food.

That morning, Sophar looked at her mother, and knew what she had to do.

So the next day she put on her best dress and took only what she could carry in her one small suitcase, including her most prized possession: a radio that she carefully wrapped in a cloth. She jumped on the back of a friend's moto and got dropped off at the crossroads where the dirt road from her village met the paved road. She walked the last few miles until she reached the bus station. She was dizzy because it was so hot, and she was very thirsty. She went inside the station.

There were people like her everywhere, hungry and tired and scared. It was hard to hear over the chatter, babies crying, and everyone trying to get help or sell things to buy food or a ticket to go somewhere, anywhere. Inside the station, she sat down on a bench and put the radio in front of her on the ground on the cloth. Soon, a man approached.

"If that radio works, I will give you eight dollars for it," he said in their language and currency.

"Twelve, and I will give you the cloth to wrap it in," Sophar said.

They settled on ten, and once she counted the money, she walked up to the ticket counter and asked for a ticket.

"Where to?" the man asked.

"Dragon Town, please," Sophar said.

"That is eight dollars."

She boarded the rusty green bus. It was very crowded with people, whole families with their possessions in bundles and buckets, holding chickens and babies under their arms. Many of them were going to live with relatives after their homes were blown over or their crops ruined by the typhoon.

When the children started to cry, their parents hushed them. But the parents were scared, too. Sophar looked for a seat on the right side of the bus, which would be in the shade as they rode toward Dragon Town, but

there weren't any. So she squeezed into a seat made for two people, next to a young couple and an old man. The man looked at her, his eyes yellow.

"Do you have anything to drink?" he asked her. "Or to eat?"

"No, *bong*, I am sorry," she said.

The bus rattled to life, belched smoke, and drove off. It took a long time to get across the island to Dragon Town, and the bus had to go slow. Many of the roads were bad, flooded from the typhoon. There were trees down and power lines snaking across the pavement, stuck cars and carts and people everywhere, and even dead livestock.

They passed a house that was on fire in the middle of a field, the ink-black smoke marching like a column to the sky. They drove all day. It was hot and dusty. People got on the bus and got off the bus, but they were all the same, trying to escape to somewhere better after the typhoon.

Sophar spent the time looking out the window and thinking.

She thought about her mom back at home, and their house with no roof. She thought about her life. And she thought about what she had to do. But she didn't like that, so she forced herself to think about her mother again. The rainy season was coming soon.

She'd left her mother with a dry bag of rice, a few jars of fish, and plenty of sour green mangos that had fallen from the trees. There was no roof, and the rains would come soon.

"Do you have anything to drink?" the old man asked her again, forgetting where he was. Some people drank water out of hoses when they stopped, but the bad water had leached into the wells after the typhoon, so some of them got sick. Sophar bought a big bottle of water and some boiled peanuts at the next stop and split them with the old man.

"Thank you," he said. "I lost my wife, you know. She couldn't swim. The water came so fast. We held on to the staircase as long as we could. I gave her my belt and told her to hang on, but she let go."

Sophar looked down and saw that he wasn't wearing a belt.

"Thank you for the water, daughter," he said.

"It's no problem."

"I lost my wife, you know."

It took them all day and all of the night to get to Dragon Town. People were sick. They passed plastic bags and buckets of waste to the front, where the ticket man would open the front door and throw them out. The roads were bad, and sometimes so flooded or covered with downed trees that they had to turn around and go a different way.

Everywhere they looked there were people with machetes and brooms, ropes and baskets, clearing the downed trees and sheets of tin roofing, and putting the palm fronds in a big pile and lighting them on fire. They passed a fishing boat that sat alone in a field of mud, stern cockeyed, pointing at the sky.

It was so sweltering and airless in the bus that after a while, the people didn't even bother brushing the flies from their faces. Everyone was relieved when night fell. But the bus had to drive even slower at night. At one point, the bus got stuck, its back wheels sinking into a deep patch of mud on the road. The bus driver cursed and woke everyone up and told them they had to get off.

They all got off and lined up in the road, sinking in the mud up to their ankles. They were afraid he was going to leave them in the middle of nowhere in the night. The driver and the ticket man piled rocks under the wheels and then tried to move. The wheels caught the rocks and they managed to pull it forward out of the puddle. Everyone got back in. Mud dried on their feet and shoes as they slept.

When Sophar got so scared she felt like crying, she thought about her mother, or about the old man next to her who had lost his wife. That gave her strength. Sophar knew what she had to do: she would go to Dragon Town and work in the bars, the bars where the girls gave themselves to the rich and strange foreign men.

A few girls from her province had gone to the city to work in those bars in years past. They only came back once a year – if at all – but they called sometimes to say hello and all of them sent money home. The girls they said it was easy to make money from the foreign Mosquitos in the bars and it wasn't so bad, though they complained often that they missed the province. They implored the other girls in the province to tell their mothers and fathers that they were only working in restaurants.

Sophar had a plan for when they arrived in Dragon Town. She would ask someone at the bus station where the bars were, go straight to the first one she found and ask for a job. If they said no, she would go to the next one, until she found work. She would give herself to the foreigners, too, if she had to, and make money. She would send it all back home. Well, as much of

it as she could, but she'd eat only once a day so she could save more for her mother. When she sent it back, her mother could pay to have a new roof on the house and buy food. Then, her mother would be OK when the rainy season came and Sophar could move back home. She didn't want to do it, but there was no other way.

The bus rattled through the night, and in the morning they arrived in the big city. Sophar got off the bus and walked into the station. There were more people than she'd ever seen in one place before, everyone rushing past her. She clutched her suitcase close and walked out front.

There was a line of tuk-tuk drivers waiting on the street, but they didn't yell to her because they could see she had no money.

"Where is a good bar near here?" she asked the first tuk-tuk driver. He looked at her ripped dress and the mud on her feet.

"I don't know, there are many," he said. "I dropped some tourists off at a place called Candy Bar last night."

"Thank you," she said, and started walking down the street in the direction he'd pointed. She walked a couple of blocks before the tuk-tuk pulled up to her.

"Get in, sister," he said. "I will take you there for free."

## **The Province**

Sophar got up to use my bathroom and then came out and stood at the edge of the bed, dressed in her own clothes again. She folded my sweatshirt and shorts carefully and put them on the bed.

“What you do now?” she asked. “Work today?”

The morning after her drunken night at my hotel, I finally understood why Sophar had come to Dragon Town from the province. I’d just happened to be there when she walked into Candy Bar, the first bar the tuk-tuk driver brought her to straight off the bus. Hungry, tired, dried mud still on her feet, she was shaking with fright but in need of a job. I finally understood why she had to make money so desperately: to pay for a roof on her mother’s house before the rainy season came.

“Yeah, I have to work, unfortunately,” I said. “But I really want to stay in bed because some little drunk girl kept me up all night.”

“Sleep Nohm – you so tired.”

“I think that’s a good idea.”

“OK, I go now,” Sophar said. “Thank you, Nohm. I so sorry very much.” She walked toward the door.

“Sophar.”

“Have good day, you work and please no worry to me,” she said, opening the door.

“Sophar, wait.”

She stopped.

“I promised you last night that things would be better. I told you I was going to help you.”

“What you say me? No remember.”

“I want to help you and your mother. I’ll give you some money, OK?”

“What? You help mother me?”

“Yes. I promised I’d help. I’ll give you the money for your mother’s roof,” I said.

“What, Nohm!? You no lie?”

“Yes. I mean, no, I’m not lying. You said it would cost like \$600, right? I think I can do that now.”

“Nohm! Really? Thanks you, thanks you!” she said, running back to the bed and grabbing my hands, bouncing up and down holding them. But then she stopped, her face growing stern.

“But I pay to you back, Nohm,” she said. “It... what word English?”

“A loan,” I said.

“Yes, a loo-en. I give you loo-en when I make money.”

“You really don’t have to.”

“No. I only take money you if I pay back loo-en, OK?”

“Sure, whatever, that’s fine Sophar.”

The door to my hotel room was still open. An English couple walked by in the hallway. The woman looked at Sophar and then at me on the bed. She clutched her husband’s arm and whispered something to him. He turned to look, but then they were gone. Sophar shut the door once they passed. She turned back to me.

“Nohm, you come with me province. You see I no lie. You come see Sophar mother.”

“It’s all right, I know you’re not lying.”

“Sophar no *jao*. You come me province. You see house and mother, me. Or I no take money.”

“OK, OK, Sophar,” I said, holding up my hands in surrender. “If that’s really what you want.”

She searched my tired eyes to see if I was serious or if it was just more *bula bula*, like all the men who lied. But she could see I meant it, so she wished me a good day and left, practically skipping down the hall, in a far better state than the night before.

The phone rang.

“Yes, yes she can go,” I said to the front desk clerk.

When Sophar left, I called down for some coffee to be brought to my room and took out my laptop. But I was too sleepy to work, so I gave up and lay back down in bed. I couldn’t help but calculate the inconvenience of leaving for the province. Maybe we could fit it in on Friday? Hopefully we could get there and back on the same day, because I had a busy week. I fell asleep.

I texted Sophar later, letting her know that Friday would work for our trip. She said she couldn’t get out of work unless I Bar Fined her, so I said that was all right. She wanted to take the bus, but I knew better than to spend all day on a hot local bus, so I told her I’d hire a taxi instead.

Early Friday morning, I grabbed my backpack and headed to the bar to pick up Sophar. She was waiting out front, with her old suitcase and a new purse, wearing the same dress I’d met her in, though now it was mended and cleaned. I greeted her and told her that she looked nice. She smiled, probably relieved I’d shown up.

“What time is the taxi coming to get us?”

“Soon, Nohm,” she said. “Don’t worry too much.”

We sat out front and watched the morning street.

“What shirt you wear?” Sophar asked me.

“What do you mean?” I asked, looking down at my Celtics basketball jersey, one of the same five jerseys I’d had on every single day since she’d known me.

“No have nice shirt?” Sophar asked, looking at a clean-cut Irish tourist in a collared polo shirt strolling hand in hand with his new girlfriend.

“We’re just taking a taxi ride to the province, right?” I asked. “Who cares?” But when I saw the look on her face, I regretted how that came out.

“Sorry, Sophar, but this is all I have.”

“It OK, *bong*,” she said. “Don’t be angry.”

A tuk-tuk pulled up and she started to put her bags in.

“OK, we go.”

“I thought we were taking a car?” I asked.

But Sophar just laughed and waved me in. She moved her bags from the bench in between us to the floor and sat at attention as we rode north through the city, a direction I'd never been.

The tuk-tuk brought us to the outskirts of Dragon Town, through the neighborhood where most people were Muslim. There were mosques and all the women wore scarves or hijabs over their heads – even the little girls in royal blue uniforms, laughing on their way to school. We passed a row of shops that all sold rope and nets, coiled and stacked out on the sidewalk. And then shops with bins of curries and spices, then the furniture makers, with a cloud of sanding dust blowing out to the street, and finally the coffin makers.

The tuk-tuk stopped in front of a big bakery with an orange sign and glass windows and Sophar got out. We went inside. The line of customers all turned and stared when they saw me. A teenage worker in a white uniform with a white hat came out to greet us with several bags of fresh bread.

“For the children village,” Sophar said. “They like bread sweet.”

I reached for my money to pay and peeled off a crisp U.S. ten dollar bill, holding it out to the teenage boy.

“No, no, Nohm,” Sophar said, putting her hand over the money and pushing it back toward my pocket. “No pay too much.”

“What? We have to pay, right?”

“Yes, but money too big. Pay too much.” The worker just sat there with his hand held out, a nervous smile on his face beneath a face dusted with baking flour.

“Well, I was going to get change, of course.”

“Give me,” she said, “I pay.”

I handed her the \$10 bill, confused about what the hell we were doing.

She chewed out the bakery worker a little bit in their language and finally, when he had nodded his head and bowed and looked at the ground to her satisfaction, she handed him the money. He ran off and came back with baht change, which she counted three times, and even made him go back to replace a worn bill.



“OK, we go now,” she said, and we got back in the tuk-tuk. We stopped at a store that sold only rice, huge white burlap bags that must have weighed 90 pounds. A little man threw our three bags on his shoulder one by one and carried them to the tuk-tuk.

“For family me,” Sophar said. It went on like that for a while. We stopped and bought big tins of cooking oil and cans of condensed milk. I didn’t see the difference, but I let Sophar pay with my money. When I went to carry our supplies to the tuk-tuk, she reached out and touched my arm to stop me, as two store workers ran over to carry them for us.

At the next store, Sophar directed a clerk to stack two cases of beer into the tuk-tuk, which was now almost tipping over it was so full. She paid.

“Wait a second, one of those cases cost less than a Lady Drink!” I said.

“Oh, Nohm, you so *lop lop*,” Sophar said, but didn’t correct my math. It seemed like an awful lot of beer for a day trip, and we hadn’t bought water yet, but it was obvious she was the boss on this mission.

We kept driving on the road out of town, and just as I was about to ask if we were going the entire way in a tuk-tuk, it pulled into a dusty parking lot. A car was waiting for us, a rusty 1980’s Dodge Lancer that used to be blue but was now mostly covered with primer. There were bundles and boxes and barrels tied to the roof, and the trunk was bursting with more, held tight with a rope. Five islanders waited outside the car, holding up umbrellas and pieces of cardboard for shade.

I was confused about why they were all there, but Sophar ushered me into the back seat and got in next to me. The five islanders all climbed in the front, shoulder to shoulder across the car’s bench seat. We drove off.

Sophar explained that when an islander rents a taxi, they only pay for enough space for them, not for the whole taxi. It would be such a waste to pay for petrol and drive all the way out to the province with free space in the car – that made no sense. But she knew that as a westerner, I took up a lot of seat and required a certain standard of comfort, so she went first class and booked us the whole back seat.

She even paid extra for them to turn on the air conditioning in the car, though it was on so low and blocked by so many bodies that it was actually hotter than if we had opened up the windows. But I just smiled and nodded in appreciation because I knew they’d never turn on the AC for themselves.

When we started driving, I couldn’t help but notice something suspect in the front seat. The island woman who was in the driver’s seat, crammed all

the way against the window to the far left of the car, kept turning around and talking to Sophar, chatting pleasantly for ten minutes at a time without even looking at the road.

The car seemed to drive on its own, dodging tuk-tuks and speeding into oncoming traffic, pulling far onto the dirt embankment to avoid construction. Upon further examination, she didn't even have her hands on the wheel, because she wasn't driving at all. Her husband, to her right on the front seat, was the one doing the driving, reaching over with one hand on the wheel and extending his left foot to hit the gas or brakes. The fact that our driver was half way to the shotgun seat didn't seem to bother anyone else, so I just made my peace with Buddha and hoped for the best.

"How long is the ride to your village?" I asked Sophar.

"Not long – sometime two hour," she said. "But bus maybe all day."

We followed the dusty road out of Dragon Town for an hour, where homes and shops turned into factories. Outdoor markets sprung from every open area of the earth, where people sold bundles of greens and dirt-crusted vegetables. A boy squatted and cooked meat on the rim of a car tire, the fire built beneath it. Everyone was covered with the red dust and wore sweaters and long pants with socks, sometimes even masks, despite the heat. It looked like some futuristic colony on Mars.

"You need stop?" Sophar asked me.

"No, let's keep going," I said.

By the end of the second hour, the busy red markets turned to green rice fields. They were all around us. Sometimes the rows ran perpendicular to the road and I could watch them zoom by like giant green train ties. But when they lost their symmetry it all blended together, with the occasional flock of palm trees the only break in the emerald blanket.

When the car pulled over at a pagoda, everyone got out. The temple wasn't cleanly painted and shining in gold like in Dragon Town, but crumbling bare white concrete and faded wood. Everyone took off their shoes at the entrance before stepping inside. The monks greeted us, skinny men in orange robes with shaved heads. I followed Sophar's lead and knelt in front of the big altar, a Buddha in lotus pose. Incense was lit and my fellow passengers put oranges and bread and fake dollar bills and a few baht on the altar. After prayer, we got up and went outside.

"Pray Buddha bless our ride province," Sophar explained. We got back in the car and drove on down the bumpy road.

“You like massage, Nohm?” Sophar asked. She said something in her language and the people in the front seat, including the man driving, turned around, faces pursed to see my expression.

“What? What massage?”

“Road massage,” she said, and everyone in the car laughed at the local joke for when you’re tossed around going over a bad road.

As the way from Dragon Town tapered from highways to two-lane streets to single semi-paved roads pocked with potholes, I saw more rice fields in remote dusty villages than I ever thought possible, workers hunched under round bamboo hats. A field that had been flooded by the typhoon was now completely covered with pink and white flowers.

“This would be nice to go hiking,” I told her, motioning to the rise of unblemished green hills behind the fields.

“Oh, no can go,” she said.

“Why? It’s beautiful. Why not?”

“Lan’ mind,” she said.

“Land mine?”

“Many lan’ mind still in bush,” she said. “Every year hurt child no arm no leg. Better stay road.”

Whenever we passed a villager, they stared into the car like it was a stretch limousine, their jaw dropping when they saw not only rich city people, but also a foreigner behind the glass.

In total, that two-hour ride to the province took closer to six – a rough, teeth-jarring affair. I was choking from the heat and dust and a little car sick, but dared not complain. Sophar sat up straight and spoke to the people in soft, confident tones. She was different than in the bar. Going back to the province after working in the big city, she was now someone important.

“Nohm, Nohm wake up,” Sophar said, touching my arm. “We stop now.”

The car pulled over at a gas station. We all got out of the car and I stretched my back. The other people from the front seat said goodbye with smiles,

bowing and wishing me luck, and untied and carefully handed down their things from the roof.

I took the cap off my water bottle and poured some in my hand, wiping it all over my face and the back of my neck. Sophar told me that we still had some more driving so we got back in and drove again, the husband and wife now the only ones in the front seat, switching seats so he could drive properly.

We turned onto a smaller dirt road and followed that for another 40 minutes into the countryside, though we probably only covered 10 miles. Red clay dust rose into the air behind us, creating a cloud as far as I could see in the rearview mirror. When we crossed a bridge across a dried creek, we had to wait for an approaching horse cart to get through.

I couldn't tell what was a store and what was a house, as they were all one-room cement boxes at best, with islanders lounging out front watching the road. Each store had a single red cooler with icy drinks. The store's shelves were filled with only a few dusty items, bunches of bananas and lottery and phone cards hanging from the doorway. One "fancy" store had a glass display case out front, though it was bare save for a pair of scuffed black dress shoes and an iPhone case.

The driver went slowly, leaning forward in the seat so his face almost touched the windshield, his brow furrowed with concentration as he navigated ruts and washouts in the road. He had to stop where a herd of cows crossed in front of us, their ribs poking through stretched skin, the bells on their collars jingling as a barefoot boy whipped a rope at the air behind them.

"The cows rule the road, huh?" I said to Sophar. But she didn't hear me, staring out the window. "Sophar."

"Oh, yes Nohm?"

"Are you excited to see your mom?" I said.

"Yes, happy back province," she said, gazing out the window again, watching a hot afternoon dream about a past life roll by. "I just hope she still live."

## **The Beer Label Lottery**

"You felt OK, *bong*?" Sophar asked, noticing I was more than a little green from the ride.

"I'm fine," I said, pouring sweat despite the AC. The car turned again onto an even smaller dirt path, slowing as it navigated under an ornate gateway arching 15 feet high, announcing in red and gold letters that we'd reached her village. There were no other cars or even motos on the path, just a few people walking and children on bicycles giving a ride to friends on their handlebars.

Sophar said something to the driver and the car pulled over on a patch of wild grass.

We got out of the car and Sophar paid.

"Come, Nohm, this way," she said.

"What about all the stuff?" I asked, pointing to our bundles in the back of the car. "Aren't we bringing everything?"

She held out her hand, urging me to catch up.

"No problem for you. Come on, *bong*."

We walked into her village. It was something out of a movie set, so sun-kissed and simple. In each yard stood a bamboo bungalow, built on wooden stilts to keep it off the ground, with a hammock hanging in the shade. Laundry was spread out on fences in the yards, intertwined with purple and yellow flowers. Canvas tarps adorned the ground of each yard, with piles of brown kernels spread out to dry on top.

"What is that?" I asked.

"Rice," Sophar said.

Skinny dogs with no collars trotted up to us to get petted. Skinnier children ran up to us as well, some of them shirtless, others with hand-me-down turtlenecks or heavy flannel shirts two sizes too big, but not a pair of shoes between the lot of them.

The village children formed a circle around Sophar, jumping up and down with excitement, hugging her legs and chattering, pushing each other out of the way as they clamored for her attention. She made sure to talk to each child, rubbing his or her head and asking about their family. As we

walked down the red sandy lane, she handed the little girls her purse to carry. Each girl insisted on putting at least one of her little hands on the handle, proud to be the valets for their new superstar.

The children were shy with me at first, failing to even make eye contact when I said hello, scampering to hide behind Sophar. They'd never seen an outsider so up close, she reminded me. But as we started walking, they jockeyed to stay near, tripping over each other as they investigated the new big, pale, sweaty attraction. I handed a little boy my backpack to hold and he beamed like I'd just given him the keys to a new car. He put it on his head and carried it – the first one he'd ever held, Sophar reminded me, as he'd never been to school.

*"Cena,"* the brave boy said, pointing to me. *"Cena."*

"What does that mean?" I asked Sophar.

"I think I no understand," she said.

We walked down the ever-narrowing path, passing three lots where islanders lounged on bamboo platforms built in the shade of banana trees. They slept or sat cross-legged, eating rice out of tin pans or playing with their babies, who never seemed to cry. The islanders all waved to Sophar and said hi, then looked me up and down with warm, curious smiles. Through the grove of trees, I caught a peek of vast rice fields, burnt and browned from the sun because it was the end of the dry season.

"You know everyone here, huh?" I asked.

We passed a bigger bamboo bungalow that also had an outhouse with a tin door strung shut, which I hadn't seen at any of the smaller bungalows, and a wooden rowboat perched on its side against a palm tree.

"House sister me," Sophar said.

"Really? Your sister lives here?" I said, wondering why she wasn't taking care of their mother. "What's the boat for?" I hadn't seen a lake or even a river within hours.

"Rainy season all water," Sophar said, waving her hand across the horizon. "Water all rice field and house and road. People need take boat to go to village."

The last house, where the lane ended, was her mother's, on the frontier where the jungle overtook the village. I stopped walking and looked.

“My mother house,” Sophar said, beaming with pride.

It wasn’t what I expected.

Sophar’s mom’s house was a square two-story concrete shell – some sort of supply building or military bunker a long time ago. A section of concrete on the north side was blasted out, charred black in the pattern of an explosion. When she saw me looking, Sophar explained that it was from a bomb that looks like a jackfruit that a man threw during the war.

“Grenade,” I said.

There was no front door to the building, just a square opening in the concrete as big as a garage bay. There were no real windows, only a few square openings in the concrete where birds flew in and out.

I looked up to see if there was a roof on the building, but it was too tall for me to see from the ground, even on my tiptoes.

“Come, welcome please,” Sophar said, leading me inside. We walked through the big opening, the circus of children cramming in, too, without bothering to wait for an invitation. It was dark inside so my eyes took a moment to adjust.

The walls were the same unfinished gray concrete as outside. There was a concrete stairwell with no railing leading upstairs to an open loft that spanned about half of the floor plan. Above that, I could see open sky. Most of the flat roof had been ripped off by the typhoon winds, leaving only a few bare wood beams and shreds of black tar paper. A plant sprouted from a crack in the concrete wall near the opening where the roof had been, its green leaves reaching toward the sun.

When my eyes adjusted to the dark room, as the afternoon sun had dropped behind the roofline, I looked around. It was completely without decoration, save for a tattered map of the world on one wall, and a small black-and-white television set with an antenna. The only furniture in the house were two red plastic chairs at a plastic card table and a knee-high bamboo platform against the wall. That is where Sophar’s mother sat.

She looked much older than I’d expected, her face creased with the wisdom and worry of everything she’d seen in her lifetime. Her long hair, flowing and silvered, caught the only sunlight in the room. She wore only faded and dirt-smeared pajamas that hung from her bony frame. She couldn’t have weighed more than 90 pounds, her legs folded beneath her as she took deep, peaceful breaths.

When she saw Sophar, her face lifted, smiling not with her mouth but with her endless black eyes.

Sophar approached but didn't hug her mother. Instead, Sophar bowed deeply, taking her mother's frail, earthen hand in hers. Sophar touched her mother's hand to her own forehead and closed her eyes. Her mother let out a choked laugh and patted Sophar on the shoulder, and then they hugged, careful not to squeeze too tight.

Sophar introduced me to her mother in their language. The silver matriarch held my arm and looked into my eyes for a long time, much longer than I was comfortable with, talking to Sophar without breaking her gaze. I smiled, then bowed my head, too. She patted my face softly, running her hands across my cheeks.

Then she laughed, a sound like birds taking to flight, instantly met with the echo of children's laughter. I looked around and saw that the room was now filled with the children, crowding to get room on the plastic chairs, on the stairs, or sitting on the second floor landing to watch the proceedings, their little legs and feet dangling over the edge of the concrete.

*"Anak trauv ban svakom,"* Sophar's mom said, and though I didn't know what it meant in their language, her eyes translated: I was welcomed.

Sophar addressed the children, who immediately jumped up and ran outside, then came back carrying our things from the taxi. She instructed them to bring everything into her mother's kitchen, arranging the boxes and jars and cans carefully on the bare concrete shelves. Actually, the kitchen only consisted of the shelves, as there was no running water in the house and no stove and, of course, no refrigerator. I realized I'd seen no electricity lines running to the house at all, or to any of the houses.

"Are you so hot? You want beer?" Sophar asked me. She gave one of the older boys a few folded baht notes and he ran out, returning panting with a block of ice wrapped in a cloth. She put the ice in a tin box and packed half a dozen beers in there with it. Soon, she cracked a beer and handed it to me. The beer was lukewarm but still a relief.

When Sophar emerged from the kitchen, the children watched her intently, sitting in a circle on the concrete floor. Their eyes widened and mouths salivated as she produced treats for them. They oohed and ahed at the sweet crackers, loaves of bread, and the cans of sweet milk. She opened one of the packages and gave half a cracker to each child, which they chewed intentionally so it would last.



Sophar presented the things to her mother, too, like another daughter might show a good report card to their mother. Her mom couldn't see well enough to read the labels, but she understood what the things were, showing her approval with a glowing smile as she patted Sophar's hand.

The children lugged in the rest of the beer cases. Sophar broke the outer plastic on each case and handed out the cans. Each child got three or four cans of beer, even the toddlers who were just old enough to walk.

"Damn, y'all start 'em young 'round here," I said, but she didn't understand. But the children didn't open the beer cans, they just attacked the labels, ripping them off in one motion and holding the paper up to read something printed on the back.

"Win money sometime, free beer," Sophar said, explaining the system of the beer lottery to me. The daily newspaper always ran photos of people who had won ridiculous sums of money or a new moto or even a free house from the beer can lottery. In the photos, they always held up the winning label, smiling widely with perfect white teeth, skin so ivory that they looked like models from Hong Kong, not everyday beer drinkers. In fact, no one knew anyone personally who'd won those things in the beer label lottery, only free beer sometimes, but they still believed in it.

Even Sophar's mother peeled a label off, which took her a long time. I watched the excitement in their faces and then the inevitable disappointment when they didn't win. Sophar took another beer from the ice and gave it to me. I took a gulp. Soon the cans were all bare gray aluminum, but not one of them had won. But the melancholy only remained until the children scooped up the labels and started throwing them at each other and up into the air, the pieces coming down like confetti.

"Come see," Sophar said, taking my hand. She led me around the back of their house. In the back yard, the sandy soil and wild grass sloped to a grove of palm trees, and then the green and brown grids of rice fields beyond. The green was so impossibly bright and alive that it looked like an artist's brush had just painted it.

Sophar walked me to an overgrown garden in their yard, with three rows of weeds springing forth from the dirt. She pushed the weeds with her flip-flop, disappointed at its state of disrepair since she'd left. We moved on to a square well made of red bricks that sat in the center of the yard, with a wooden shade cover over it and a bucket hanging from a rope. On the other side of the yard stood a concrete outhouse with a tin roof.

“Toilet,” she said, obviously proud since most of the people in the village didn’t have one, relieving themselves off in the jungle or a field. I remembered her first night at the bar, when the other girls sent her outside to the toilet because they knew she was from the province.

We sat out in back of the house in the shade, and Sophar visited with her mother. They talked a little, but kept quiet sometimes, too. Sophar combed her mother’s hair and cut her fingernails and washed her face and neck gently with a cold rag. It was even hotter outside, but at least there was a little breeze.

I watched the rice fields, the sun pressing red and hazy over everything. A water buffalo grazed, its legs half submerged in brown water, swatting flies with its tail. Silhouettes crossed back and forth against the smoldering horizon, with bundles of dried stalks on their heads bigger than they were.

Sophar soon got to work, too, squatting down and weeding her mother’s garden with a hoe on a bamboo pole, piling up fallen tree branches and brittle palm leaves still left from the typhoon. I watched her work, squatting in her flowery dress with no hesitation, digging her hands in the sacred earth.

“Do you want some help?” I called out, hoping she’d say no, because I couldn’t fathom doing anything but sitting in a puddle of sweat and drinking lukewarm beers.

“No, *bong*,” she said, smiling and waving as she drew a bucket of water from the well, sprinkling it on the newly pruned garden. Her mother stood up and steadied herself. I reached out a hand to help her, but she walked over to Sophar and bent to pick up the hoe that lay on the ground. It took her a long time to pick it up. Once she had it, she walked over to the garden and let its blade fall into the soil, leaning on it to move it only a few inches. After that, I got up and helped, too.

Adults from the village soon started coming by the house to visit. They’d heard Sophar was giving away sweet bread, there were plenty of beer can labels to peel, and they could see a real live Mosquito in a basketball jersey dying of heat stroke. I realized that it might be the first time a western man had come into their village that wasn’t in military fatigues and holding a gun.

I squirmed in my seat, meeting the eyes of 20 villagers opposite me who stared, taking in every detail. Every once and a while, they’d discuss something and point at me, then nod their heads in consensus. I laughed nervously and they pointed to their mouths.

“They say you teeth good white,” Sophar said. “Think teeth no real.”

Emboldened by the adults in attendance, the village children circled closer, sitting Indian-style in the dirt around me, their gaze never wavering. To relieve the awkwardness, I held out my hand to high-five one of the boys. He punched my hand, bringing a chorus of giggles from the others, and the boy next to him raised his fist for a high-five. Soon they all were standing and crowding around, each expecting a high-five. Unfortunately for me, they thought it was some sort of contest to prove their strength. So each little boy and girl, no matter how small, wound up and punched my hand with all of their might before running to get back in line. I jumped around and fanned my stinging hand in mock pain, which delighted the children even more.

The kids high-fived me until my hand was ready to fall off, and then switched to pummeling my shoulders and insisting I pick up seven of them up at once and swing them in circles, a laughing pile of sweat and red dust. All of a sudden, I felt a sharp sting on my ankle, and then my foot. I looked down to discover that my feet and legs were covered in fire ants, as I was standing directly on top of an anthill. It felt like being prodded by a hundred lit cigarettes at the same time, but I’ve never heard children laugh harder than when I danced around, swiping at the ants and using every curse word in the book until the pain subsided.

It was the hardest I’d worked in a long time.

Seeing how red-faced and sweaty I was, a boy in overalls handed me the giant leaf of a banana tree, showing me how to hold it at the stem as a sun umbrella. Sophar looked on approvingly throughout the afternoon, making sure I was OK. Per her instructions, I had drunk many beers, since the well water wouldn’t be safe for my stomach. Her main concern was keeping me cool so I didn’t pass out from heat exhaustion, because then they’d have to drag my big body away and dig a hole to bury me in, and it was way too hot to dig.

I still didn’t feel the slightest buzz, though it was embarrassing when she had to escort me into the outhouse and give step-by-step instructions for how it all worked.

There was a square concrete basin about waist-high that held water. When it got low, they filled it up with well water using a red plastic bucket. The toilet was a concrete seat with a board on top with a hole in the middle. There was no toilet paper, and Sophar explained people just scooped water from the bucket to clean themselves. When they wanted to bathe, they just drew a bucket from the well and poured it all over themselves right outdoors, the women wrapped in a sarong. They air-dried quickly.

As the afternoon melted into dusk, the sun slipped to touch the palm trees. The merciful breeze picked up, sweeping the smell of burning brush to us across the rice fields.

“What you want eat dinner?” Sophar asked.

I had no idea what my options were, but I was guessing there was no nearby western restaurant.

“Whatever you want,” I said. “Whatever you normally eat.”

“We eat dinner special tonight,” she said. A scoop of rice and a small dried fish wouldn’t do for this occasion, for there was reason to celebrate. So she took out carefully folded baht notes and handed them to the older children, who ran to the corners of the village to buy supplies.

Sophar collected dry wood with the help of the other children, and someone brought back a smoldering coal. She made a fire in a circle of rocks right there behind the house, as I sat and watched with her mother, who held my hand. Sophar got their big black metal wok from the kitchen – the only cooking pot they owned. When a child returned with a baggie half-filled with cooking oil, Sophar broke it open and poured it in. Then a baggie with strips of red meat showed up, and a baggie of cherry tomatoes, and one of onions, peppers, and then fish.

“What’s with all the baggies?” I asked her.

“Bag-G?”

“Those plastic things that hold the food,” I said, reaching out and touching one. “Why don’t you just buy regular sized stuff at the store?”

She explained that in the province, there was never enough money sitting around to buy, say, a full bottle of cooking oil for \$2, as that might be a few days’ wages. And the nearest grocery store was far away, anyway, so everyone in her village just bought and sold things in mini baggies – one serving size for each meal – which only cost a few cents. Except for the beef, which was a luxury brought out only because I was their special guest.

Sophar picked green onions from her mother’s now-neat patch of garden and cooked it all in the black cauldron. Rice appeared, and they scooped it all into a metal bowl for me to eat. I thought we all would eat together, but Sophar and her mother wanted to watch me eat and see if I liked it.

The people in the province didn't use utensils, scooping their food with their fingers, a glob of rice, or wrapped up in greens. But they did find a big cooking spoon for me, which I used to dish the grub into my mouth.

I was shocked the moment I put the food in my mouth. I could really taste the essence of the wood fire and freshly grown vegetables, the savory richness of it all. Save for a few bugs that flew in there, which I chalked up as bonus protein, it was one of the best meals I've eaten in my life.

Once she saw that I was satisfied, Sophar put more food in my bowl, despite my protests, and then scooped out food for her mother. She watched as her mother ate.

"I think she no eat when I go city," Sophar confided to me.

Of course they were poor before the typhoon, but there was always something to eat, even if it was just a fistful of rice or a ripe papaya. But now, many of the crops were ruined and there was no money to buy things at the market unless Sophar sent money back.

Even then, her mother was too weak to walk over and collect the money at the village Wing office (their island version of Western Union), or to buy things and carry them back. The village children would look in on her every few days, but often discovered she hadn't eaten in a day or two. She seemed resigned to it, day by day slipping away, somewhere in between life and death.

Maybe she didn't want to burden Sophar, or she'd seen so much suffering that she was just finished, but she now exuded a warm aura of peace. She was letting go, but her heart was full. I could see the good times and moments with her family replaying like a grainy home movie in her eyes.

Seeing the village and the house and her mother, I finally understood why Sophar had been so upset.

When the rainy season began in earnest, soon, water would pour right into the house through the missing roof. It wasn't uncommon for rain to fall every day for months during the monsoons. Sophar told me that since their house sat on the ground, and not on stilts like the other huts, it always flooded with the surrounding fields. When the first floor became submerged, they had to move up to the loft on the second floor, where they slept and lit their cooking fires and went to the bathroom in a bucket they emptied out of the window.

The previous year, they'd had to stay up there for almost a month with nothing to do but wait for the water to recede. They could only get supplies

when a neighbor came by on their boat, rowing right through their open door and docking at their stairs.

The rains would come again soon, but with no roof this time, there would be nowhere for her mother to take shelter, nowhere for her to get dry. At her age, and in her state of health, she wouldn't last long.

## **Wrestling Isn't Real**

After dinner, the villagers who were still hanging around went inside. From what I could tell, no one had formally invited them to dinner, but the food was shared between anyone who wanted to remain, without question. With the help of one of the taller boys in overalls, Sophar got her mom standing and led her into the big room, laying her down gently on the bamboo platform. She draped a sarong over her torso.

The sky was almost without light now, an ephemeral glow still clinging to the shapes of objects, fireflies sparking in flight outside the big open doorway.

The only power source in the house was a car battery, sitting on the floor next to the 1970s black-and-white television with rabbit ears. The car battery also powered the one bare light bulb that illuminated the first floor, its wire leading across the ground and twisting around a screw on the wall, and then up to the ceiling.

I was horrified when I saw a four-year-old pick up the jumper cables and start playing with the car battery, but they got it hooked up with a few blue sparks and the television came to life.

I asked Sophar how it worked. They connected the car battery to two jumper cables and that flowed into a converter, and then an extension cord for the outlet. The battery usually lasted about two weeks before it ran out of juice. Then, they'd put it in the basket of their bicycle and bring it to the village, where they'd swap it out for a fully charged one. With that car battery, they could turn on a light at night, charge their cell phone if they had one, and the kids could watch television on special occasions.

There were only two kinds of programs in the province. One kind was a bad soap opera from Thailand and Vietnam, where everyone had impossibly whiney voices and there was always a bully with serious eyebrows who tormented a young couple in love and when they fought back someone got stabbed in the stomach. Whoever got stabbed was always wearing a white shirt – which I thought would teach them not to wear a white shirt if you were a young couple in love being tormented.

There was always a really poorly done dream sequence in the soap operas, where a witch sat on the main character's chest as they slept, threatening to claw out their heart while a dry ice machine worked in the corner. The women liked those shows.

Then, there was wrestling. I mean like U.S. wrestling, the fake kind – WWF or, now, WWE. The children lived for it, enthralled by these oiled-up giants

in skimpy outfits who flipped through the air and beat each other senseless with chairs. It was good family fun, even for the babies in the bunch, when they weren't busy playing with beer cans and car batteries.

"Cena," they said, pointing to me. I looked at the screen and John Cena was flexing and sweating in the ring. He was famous among the islanders because a few years earlier, he had been paid a million U.S. dollars to make a terrible action movie that was released only in Asia. Of course he couldn't speak the language, so he just stood there mostly, grunting and scaring the bad guys when he flexed his muscles in between grand explosions and dodging gunfire.

"Do they know it isn't real?" I asked Sophar, pointing to the TV.

"What you say?" she asked.

"Nothing. Never mind," I said, feeling like I'd almost just murdered Santa Claus.

Once the television was turned off, not because they cared about bedtime but they wanted to preserve the car battery as much as possible, we were in absolute darkness. We often use the word "darkness," but few of us truly experience it. There were no streetlights or car headlights in the village, nor even the glow from electronics or far off city lights.

Even if they were lucky enough to have a car battery and one light bulb, the villagers didn't turn on their lights much after dark, as there was nothing to see – and they didn't want to invite witches who would sit on top of them as they slept, like they saw in the soap operas. So everyone in the province woke up and went to bed with the sun.

"Nohm *bong*, OK we stay tonight? We go city morning time?" Sophar asked me, though I wasn't expecting a taxi to show up – even though it was only around 8 PM.

"Of course," I said. "Be with your mother."

Sophar bathed her mom with cool wet rags on the bamboo platform, where she slept with no pillow or blankets. She nestled there comfortably, alongside some of the village kids who happened to fall asleep around her, and Sophar too, on this night.

Before retiring, Sophar put me upstairs in the loft on a bamboo platform of my own, under the small section of roof that was still intact and next to one of the window openings in the concrete where it might be cooler. I took the sweatshirt from my backpack and balled it up as a pillow. I was exhausted



from the heat and the day's activity, which felt like a week, dozing off at once to a symphony of chirping crickets.

## **A Soft White Damn**

I woke much later to someone shaking my shoulder. It was Sophar.

“Nohm, you sleep?” she whispered. “I no can sleep.” I could only see the moonlit flow of her figure beneath her sarong, the midnight waterfall of her hair.

“Come up, talk me,” she said.

“What time is it? Talk where?” I asked, rubbing my eyes as I swung my legs down.

“Shhhhhh,” she said, grabbing my sweatshirt from the bed. I stood from the platform and followed, quietly, her gray figure visible if I focused and stayed close. She brought me across the second floor loft, under open night sky where the roof was gone, the concrete floor cold under our feet.

She brought me to the corner of the building, where a small concrete staircase led up to the roof. I guess that when they built the place, they wanted easy access to the roof for a lookout or a sniper. But now, the staircase walked us up into the stars.

“Come on,” Sophar whispered, showing me where to put my hands and feet as I stepped up in the dark.

We came out on top of the building, just a narrow concrete landing where the stairway ended, only half the size of the bamboo platform I had been sleeping on. All around us was blackness, like a bottomless pit, where the roof had been torn off by the winds.

We stood on the concrete platform and looked at the sky, a dark sea of diamonds.

“Wow,” I said. “That’s beautiful.”

Sophar laid my sweatshirt down on the landing. She sat and invited me to sit next to her. She produced a couple of cans of warm beer and handed me one, taking a long drink.

“Shoot, I didn’t win,” I told her after stripping off the label.

“Thank you, Nohm,” she said.

“For what? We didn’t win.”

“You help family me so much. My mother like you very much.”

“Really? I felt bad I couldn’t say a word to her. But I’m happy to hear that.”

Sophar and I passed the beer back and forth and talked. If we rolled three feet in either direction, we would fall a long way down. But if we stayed right where we were, we were safe. The whole province slept before us, the palm trees and huts and rice fields and even the far off rising ridge of mountains.

“See that one? That’s Orion’s Belt,” I said, pointing to the constellation. “And those three below are his sword.”

“Why you joking me?” she asked. “Star no can have name.”

We talked that night, still in whispers so they couldn’t hear us on the first floor. Sophar told me many things and I listened. She told me how she had been born the youngest of seven brothers and two sisters. When she was a little girl, they all lived in a simple bungalow in the village, working hard farming the land. They were poor but there was plenty of food and they were happy.

When civil war broke out on the island, soldiers showed up in the village one night. They took away her brothers and her father, as well as many other men. The soldiers said they were needed as workers, but none of them ever came back. After that, her family had no work and no money and no food, the same as everyone else.

There was never enough, especially in the dark year right after the war ended, when people didn’t speak much. The children scavenged in the fields, capturing frogs and bats and putting them over the fire. During the rainy season, they would stick their little hands into holes in the mud where snakes would bite them, making it easy to pull them out and then throw them on the fire. But a lot of people had it worse, eating insects or even making soup out of tree bark and wild grass to keep from starving.

Sophar told me how her mother had no money after her father was taken away, so they couldn’t stay in their bamboo hut. They lived for a while beneath a tree and then went to the pagoda. Many poor families sent their boys to become monks at the pagoda, and some times they let women and girls sleep on the floor, sweeping and cooking in exchange for a ball of rice a day. But the pagoda was full and couldn’t take more girls.

Desperate, Sophar’s family squatted that night in a concrete supply building that the army had abandoned after a grenade hit it. The villagers

considered it cursed, but no one ever came back to reclaim it, so Sophar's family stayed.

She didn't own any clothes until she was five years old. Sophar and her sisters collected discarded cigarette butts from the floors of bars and cafés on the main road, putting all the tobacco remnants together and rerolling them into one new cigarette they could sell. One day she was walking in the outskirts of the village where there was an army bar. One of the men called her over. He was drunk and pulled out a knife and tried to put it between her legs. She ran away, but after that she wore a long t-shirt she stole from a laundry line.

Her sisters were older, so they'd grown up during the worst part of the war. Her mother had no breast milk when they were babies. So Sophar's sisters grew up malnourished, skinny and always sick. Her oldest sister had polio and her legs never developed right, and even now she could only walk with a severe limp. She was lucky enough that some man wanted her, so she was married now and lived in another province.

Sophar's other older sister used to live in the village – in the house with the boat she had shown me. She was married and had children, but she always drank too much and never wanted to be home to care for them. One day she left. She wrote them a letter saying that she was moving to Thailand to try to find a job.

After that, her husband left to find work in the city. So their children were left alone in the village. Sophar and her mom tried to care for them. They were some of the kids I'd played with that day, as well as other orphans in the village. Everyone did their best to look out for them and gave them food when they came around, but they didn't go to school and they were always filthy.

As time carried them further from the war years, things did get better and there was more food. Sophar was the first to be able to go to school, even if it was just the village school where they taught lessons under a tree, writing letters in the dirt with a stick. But that was still better than most people in the village, so Sophar could read and write in her own language and knew her numbers and understood that there was a world far greater than just the province on the island.

And Sophar told me that her world got even bigger when she came to Dragon Town, and met a Mosquito living over the bar who showed her a photo of his family one night.

"Look, same-same snow," she said, pointing to the reflection of the silvery-waxen moon on the sleeping rice fields, treetops and bungalow roofs.

“What?”

She stood up, excited by her new fantastical discovery. “Look, Nohm, I see snow!”

I looked, trying to imagine it drifting down and dusting the ground. I really did try to see it, but I couldn’t – there was too much heat in the world for snow to be anything more than a legend.

“‘The snow doesn’t give...’ how does it go?” I said to myself.

“What you say?” she asked.

“‘The snow doesn’t give a soft white damn who it touches,’” I said. “I think that’s it.”

“Why you say bad word? You OK, *bong*?”

I laughed. “Yes, it’s a poem. About snow. A line in a poem. By E.E. Cummings.”

“I like po-em,” she said. She closed her eyes, hands outstretched, feeling the snow fall on her, graceful as a ballerina even though she was barefoot on the rough concrete, her death waiting patiently below if she took one wrong step. She whirled around slowly, her silhouette swallowed by the giant moon behind her, mocking her smallness compared to everything else in existence.

“Be careful, Sophar,” I said.

Soon, she stopped spinning and opened her eyes, the dance over. There was no more snow.

“You know, Nohm, some time it hard for me feel,” she said.

“Feel what?” I asked, sitting up.

“Now I work bar, many time I no feel. Nothing inside,” she said, touching her chest.

I didn’t know what to say.

“When I live province I want marry man nice, have baby. But now I just bar girl.” Her arms dropped to her side and she looked down.

“Don’t say that, Sophar.”

“No one want bar girl. No one want Sophar now and no good for family me.”

“You’re helping your mom, your family. That means everything. You’ll find a good man. I promise.”

She smiled and wiped her eyes.

“When I girl, want be teacher,” she said, sitting back down next to me.

“Really? You wanted to be a teacher when you grew up?”

“What ‘grew up’ mean?”

“It means when you get older. More years,” I said.

“Oh. Yes, I want be teacher grew up. I want teacher children and help poor children have no family. Have no dad, like me.”

“Maybe you still can? Don’t they have schools for that?”

She looked in my eyes and smiled warmly, excusing my childish dreaming on her behalf.

“You never know,” I said. “You could still do it. You can still get married and be a teacher. These hard times won’t last forever.”

“No, I work bar now, better I no feel,” she said. “I only work for mother me.”

“Please, Sophar, don’t be sad,” I said. “Here, why don’t you look up at the snow with me again. Look, isn’t it so beautiful?” I motioned to the night of stars, which were now all falling snowflakes.

“It no snow, Nohm,” she said, resting her head back down and closing her eyes. “Sophar know that. It not soft white damn.”

## **Back to Life**

We fell asleep like that, on the roof, under the stars. It was actually chilly close to morning, so Sophar lifted my arm and snuggled her head against my chest, my arm draped around her. Only when the sky started to soften behind the rice fields did we wake up and climb down. She tiptoed downstairs to sleep beside her mother for the rest of the early morning, before the heat overtook the province. I went back to my platform on the second floor. I realized I'd forgotten my sweatshirt upstairs on the roof, so I laid my head against the hard bamboo.

We stayed in her village in the province for three days and three nights. It went by so fast, but it also felt like an eternity. There was nothing for me to do but sit there, give out high-fives, and let the children try out their wrestling moves on me, and there was nothing for them to do with me but feed me beers to try to keep me cool.

When I couldn't stomach any more beers I asked if there was something else, and Sophar said something to the tall boy in overalls. He snapped to attention, rolled up the legs of his pants, and ran to a palm tree on the outskirts of their yard.

The boy produced a frayed rope and put one foot through the looped end, tying the other around his other ankle, binding his feet together. The boy hugged the tree and then pressed his feet against the trunk, held together by the rope, and started climbing. He moved his way up the tree like that, hands reaching and then setting his feet and pushing off, until he reached the basket of palm leaves and brush on top. He disappeared into it and I could see nothing but his feet and hear rustling. Soon, one coconut fell to the ground, and then a second and a third.

The boy worked his way back down the tree, untied his feet, and presented the coconuts to me, proud of his catch. Barely 10 years old, he took out a machete, held the coconut against a rock, and chopped the top off with several well-aimed hacks, then gave it to me. The opaque water wasn't cold, but it was about the most refreshing thing I've ever drunk. When I was done, he took the shell and clawed out white meat from the sides and handed it to me.

It was nice and quiet and slow in the village. In the morning, the sky was clear and you could see the green hills clearly. Purple and yellow butterflies swarmed the yard, landing on the barbed wire fence. The outside world didn't exist. I didn't even bother charging my phone when it died, though truthfully, I was more worried about the car battery exploding if I plugged it in. Sophar worked in the yard and cooked, teaching the little girls who followed her by turning her tasks into a song.

She sat with her mother and made sure she ate. I didn't know if her mother knew that Sophar was sneaking away to rendezvous with me every night, but she seemed to like me, often taking my hand in hers and patting my face while laughing.

Arrangements were made with the village men to rebuild the roof, and on my last day they brought wood and buckets of tar and tools in an ox cart, unloading it in the front yard. On our last afternoon, Sophar assembled the children in the back yard around her mother and I, and took a photo. I still have it.

On the third morning, the same car came to get us, and we headed back toward Dragon Town. This time, the back seat felt bigger and the air conditioning made me shiver. Once we got closer to the city, the paved roads looked so crowded, the buildings towering over us.

"I'm enjoying my road massage," I told them, and we all laughed.

The car dropped us off in front of the old market that had burned only a week before, the charred embers and piles of trash, beggars, and the swarm of motos familiar but not quite feeling like home anymore. Sophar flagged down a tuk-tuk, put my backpack in it and said something to the driver.

"You go you hotel now, Nohm."

"Where are you going?" I asked. But, of course, I knew.

"I go bar. Work tonight," she said.

"OK," I said. But I didn't want to leave her, in the desperate jungle of the city, where there were so many sharp things that could hurt her. Already, I could see the tenderness of the slow, green province fading away, that happy little girl who loved playing in the rice fields and wanted to teach kids disappearing. I should really say something good, I thought, something comforting. I had a bad feeling about it all.

"See you soon, Sophar," I said. She smiled and waved from the back seat of the taxi as it pulled away.

I went back to my hotel and showered, then dropped off my clothes, wet and covered in red dirt, at the laundry. I sat on the bed, feeling the cool air, and scrolling through the photos on my camera. There was one I hadn't seen, of one of the little orphan girls posing with my sunglasses on, holding her teddy bear.



That night, I went to a café to catch up on emails and work, plugging my phone into the computer to charge it. When it came to life I saw I had a voicemail, unusual because everyone I knew sent a text, a Facebook message, or just barged into my room without knocking when they wanted to talk. I listened to the voicemail. It was Mamasan.

“Norm?! Norm, are you still in the province? You’re with Sophar, right?” she said, her voice shaking. “Have Sophar call me, or please come by the bar when you get back. Something bad happened. It’s Ava.”

## **Killing Days**

I called Mamasan back, but when she didn't answer, I grabbed a tuk-tuk over to the bar. The girls were inside, still dressed in their casual daytime clothes even though it was 8 PM. Mamasan wasn't there. A few of the girls were crying, holding each other. I glanced behind the bar, but Ava wasn't there. No one was.

"What the hell is going on?" I asked Apple as she walked by. "Mamasan called and said something about Ava?"

"She dead, Nohm. He kill her," Apple said, her voice shaking, fists balled so tight her hands were turning red.

"Oh my God, is it true?" I asked Hiandbyebye, who was sitting next to us. "What happened?"

They said it was true. Ava had been killed. They had seen it, or rather they had seen the guy who did it at the bar. The rest was already front-page news.

A guy had come into the bar, a 19-year-old U.S. Marine who was on the island as part of a weeklong exercise. The Marine was very drunk that night, as young military men on 24-hour leave tend to be. He talked to Ava for a while, and they laughed and hit it off. Ava thought he knew. She'd hinted at it, but maybe he was too drunk and didn't understand. But he said he liked her and wanted to be with her, so they did a couple shots, he Bar Fined her, and they left together.

They couldn't go back to his Naval ship, docked on the backside of the island, of course. So they checked into a guesthouse near the bars where you could pay for a couple hours, the Peleliu Hotel. Ava left her ID at the front desk, as is required with any Taxi Girl, and they went up to his room.

Thirty minutes later, the staff saw the man come downstairs and storm out of the hotel, alone.

When they went up to the room after check out time, the door was ajar. They found Ava's body inside. She had been strangled and pushed face down into the toilet. She was naked, except for a towel that had been placed over the lower half of her body. Shortly after, the police found the man and arrested him.

It had happened two days earlier, while Sophar and I were in the province. In that short time, the news of Ava's death had spread among the bar girls, ladyboys, and mamasans in Dragon Town. Even the freelancers walked

across the unspoken borderline to place flowers on the ground in front of Candy Bar.

“I fucking have something for fucking Army guy,” Mony Giggly said, brandishing the straight razor they kept behind the bar in case of trouble.

“Our sister gone. For what?” the girls sobbed, collapsing into each other.

I couldn’t believe it. I didn’t know what to say to them.

But some of them refused to cry. They didn’t talk, their eyes red, squinting as they went about their chores of sweeping up and washing glasses like it was any other day. Those were the ones who I knew were the angriest.

They wanted to avenge their sister. They didn’t have to say it – I could see in their eyes, how they looked at the men who came into the bar but quickly left, their drunken laughter now mocking the girls’ helplessness. The girls needed money, now more than ever, but they couldn’t snap back into character. Not tonight. Not yet. They wouldn’t forget. If nothing was done to avenge Ava, their lives might as well not matter, either.

That night, the islanders gathered in front of the police station. They carried candles and someone had a photo of Ava blown up on a sign. Her family was there. Her father cried and her mother spoke to reporters through tears, demanding justice for Adam. Adam, that was her birth name.

The people chanted the name and called for the police to release the Marine from the jail. They wanted to rip the man apart, right there on the street. That would be the only real justice. But they wouldn’t release the Marine.

They waited. For two days, the people in Dragon Town waited. We all did. They didn’t smile and they didn’t sing as they worked, and they didn’t make polite chatter on the street. Ava’s family demanded to know what was happening, but the police and government said nothing, and even the newspapers printed nothing more about the murder.

And then the islanders were still in front of the jail, but the Marine was gone. Mamasan only found out from Tin Tin, who came into the bar that day to collect the taxes. The U.S. government and the Navy had struck a deal with the Prime Minister for the Marine’s release.

In the early morning hours, when the streets were empty, the man was escorted out the back door of the prison with a sweatshirt over his head and ushered into a tinted Range Rover. They drove him to the port, where

he was handed over to his country's waiting military police. The MPs brought him aboard the ship, and then it left the island.

Tin Tin didn't know what kind of payout or political favor the Minister landed in the deal with the United States, but there would be no punishment, not even a trial for the Marine who killed Ava – the man who strangled her and drowned her in the toilet and then lay a towel over the lower half of her body to blanket his own shame. There would be no justice for Ava. It was like she didn't even count, her life just a poker chip thrown into the pot by the rich and powerful.

"We are awaiting the results of the autopsy," a statement read on the back page of the newspaper the next day. "But our initial investigation indicates that it was a suicide."

But an unjust silence is the loudest thing you've ever heard, so by the end of that day, the news of the Marine's release blazed through the streets faster than any fire, until every single tuk-tuk driver, shopkeeper, and street peddler knew about it. The monks at the pagodas lit incense and reminded themselves of their vows.

"Norm, you should leave the island as soon as you can," Mamasan told me that afternoon. "I don't think this is going to end well."

Something was happening. We could all feel it, like the panicked cats. Mothers kept their children home from school. The police doubled their presence in the areas around the bar streets and the old market, near where Ava was murdered. I heard someone had thrown a rock at the police, but they grabbed the wrong man, breaking his bones with their clubs as his wife screamed for mercy.

"Don't go on the streets outside of the tourist areas anymore," Mamasan told me. "And don't walk around at night."

"OK," I said.

"And don't shave," she said, taking my chin in her hand and turning it, looking at my profile. "Maybe wear a baseball hat."

"Why?"

"So they won't think you're a Marine."

## **Things Fall Apart**

I knew it was time to heed Mamasan's warning and get out – even without my passport, if need be – as I now knew there were ways to get off the island and sneak into Thailand or Cambodia if one had money. But I'd give it one more try to see if I could collect my passport before trying desperate measures. So the Thursday after we got back from the province and found out about Ava, Sam Sam took me to the Department of Immigration to pick up my passport.

"Good go early in morning, Sir Worm," he said.

We showed up at 9 AM when they opened, but there was already a crowd of people around the block, tussling in line and anxious to get in.

"What the hell is going on?" I asked Sam Sam. "Why is everyone here?"

But either he didn't know or couldn't translate.

"Everything is free today," a distinguished Asian man in a neat polo shirt and khaki pants said to me, his accent faintly British.

"What are they doing?" I asked.

He lowered his voice and leaned in. "This government knows it has problems, and they don't want any more unrest," he said.

"*This* government? What other government is there?" I asked.

He casually looked around to make sure no one else was listening.

"So they made everything free today – all of their fees. It's an old trick they use to keep the people happy every time there's trouble, or before an election," he said.

We introduced ourselves. He was an exporter who worked in Hong Kong and was trying to get his business visa extended.

"But the others," he said, motioning to the other side of the crowd, where I noticed more of the common islanders were congregating in line. "They are here for their salaries," he said. The man explained that the government was finally disbursing the monthly pay owed to teachers, nurses, and other civil workers that was regularly days or weeks late – or didn't come at all. "Any way to quiet the people, you know? Good luck!"

I got in line among them and waited another 30 minutes, but was further away from the door than when I'd started, with all the new people showing up and pushing through.

"Come with me. Over here, Worm," Sam Sam said. "Give me 300 baht."

He took my arm and led me through the crowd on the side, quickly and with authority. We reached a security guard, and Sam Sam bowed and then slipped him the money. The guard nodded and ushered us the rest of the way inside.

It was cool inside the halls of the big building. I let Sam Sam lead me down the halls, but I already knew the passport office. There was still a long line outside that office, but it was more orderly now, as these were mostly rich people applying for tourist visas to Thailand or Korea, or visas to do business in Jakarta or Dubai just to get off the island for a little while – and maybe to carry some of their gold or money to a secure foreign bank.

We waited, but the line never moved. Right before noon, they gave out cards with appointment times for the next day. I was given a card for 11 AM. Sam Sam talked to the woman who gave me the card. He slipped her 60 baht and she went back and checked my name against their list. She returned and said something to Sam Sam.

"She say you get passport tomorrow," he told me.

That night after dinner I went to the travel agency near the hotel to book a flight. They asked me to sit down and served me tea while they looked on their computer and went over the departing flight schedule and prices from Sihanoukville Airport on the mainland. It took a long time because their websites were overburdened, and the phone lines to the airport were busy.

"We have two Cathay Pacific flights to New York, first stopping in Taipei, on Saturday and Tuesday," they said.

I told them to book the Saturday flight but they couldn't process it without my passport, so I told them I'd be back.

"But hurry, please, because all the flights leaving are getting full."

The next morning at 11 AM, I was back at the Department of Immigration with Sam Sam. It cost me another 300 baht bribe to get inside the building, but I was able to enter the visa office with my appointment card and finally got up to the counter. They charged me \$5 for every day I'd stayed past my original tourist visa – a slap in the face, since the reason I'd overstayed was

because they wouldn't give me my passport back – but I didn't care. The lady slid my passport across the counter, that gorgeous, life-giving navy blue booklet with a gold eagle embossed on the cover below the words "United States of America."

"It's been ready for a long while," she said. "Why didn't you pick it up earlier?"

I practically ran out of the building, and Sam Sam whisked me back to the travel agency. The Saturday flight was full, so I paid for the flight on Tuesday.

"We only have a middle seat left," the woman at the travel agency said. "Will that be all right?"

"Yeah, sure," I said. "Jesus, I don't care."

## **Maybe**

On my third night back from the province, a dozen army trucks rumbled into the city. They stopped in front of the Royal Palace and soldiers got out. They unrolled huge racks of barbed wire across the streets and put up yellow barriers to slow traffic, checking the identification of everyone who came and left, searching the trunks of some cars.

Sam Sam drove me where I needed to go in the city, carefully avoiding areas that were impassable because of protests or that might not be safe for foreigners. But the islanders weren't too interested in taking out their revenge against tourists. They wanted blood, but it was to be spilled from their own people.

"Did you hear, sir?" the woman working behind the desk at my hotel asked, trying hard to contain her excitement.

"What's that?"

"A car bomb went off at D Mall last night. It killed a little girl and hurt a few others."

"No, I hadn't heard," I said.

The Prime Minister went on TV that night. In English – for the benefit of the international media – he announced that there was a treasonous faction on the island. Political opportunists were trying to upset the balance of law and order. These traitors were the same political group who had committed terrible acts during the war.

In order to ensure everyone's safety, there would be a curfew enacted in Dragon Town, from now on. No one was allowed on the streets after 10 PM. All of the bars, restaurants, and establishments that weren't government-approved had to close their doors by that time.

"We are a peaceful party and only care about helping our people," the Prime Minister said, wearing a blue suit with a red tie. "We are committed to unity and prosperity for the island. Progress!"

The older people who were watching shook their heads, as it all sounded familiar.

When news of the escalating violence on the island hit the Internet, the boats that came in carried few tourists – just a handful of European backpackers who didn't care if there was a Travel Advisory Warning as long as the price was right, some Australian sex-pats who were too drunk



and desperate to mind, and a few nervous honeymooners who'd tried to cancel but couldn't get their deposits back.

"I don't know how we can survive," Mamasan told me when I stopped by the bar for lunch on my last day. "I might as well close my doors."

If things were hard for them before, they would be damn near impossible now. A few of the girls had already left in the middle of the night, taking what few dollars they had and retreating back to the provinces. At least things were quiet there, and they could be with their families.

It was the same everywhere. That week after the curfew the hotels all dropped their prices, but few still had guests. The smaller bars started going dark. Some tried to make it, but the scattering of tourists who were left didn't have the same appetite for vice before 10 PM.

"It's the girls. I worry about them," Mamasan said, as I sat across from her as we ate. "I know where they go from here."

When she finished talking, the bar was quiet again except for the sound of girls sweeping up and washing glasses.

"I know they think I'm hard on them, but I try to protect them, to teach them," she said. "I tell them to save their money for when they get older, so they don't end up like me."

"Like you?" I asked.

"Yes, of course, Norm," she laughed, a sound that seemed out of place. "I was a bar girl, too."

"Really, you were?"

"Of course. You think I was born a Mamasan? And it wasn't so nice and safe like the girls have it now."

"I didn't know..."

"Why would you?" she asked.

She turned away from me, looking out the front door. An ice truck pulled up outside, the shirtless man wearing a leather apron hacked away at the blocks of ice with an axe. She watched him for a long time, the violence of it, his fingers only inches from where the sharp blade landed.

“Well, I was. And now I do this,” she said. “And I know I’m going to hell for it.”

“What?”

“I said I know I’m going to hell for what I do. But what else can I do? What do I have? A bar girl who no one wants, who is too old and not pretty anymore...”

She touched her fingers to her scars, as if exploring them for the first time, her eyes vacant in a memory. I thought maybe she forgot I was there.

“Is it OK for me to ask what happened?” I asked. “To... to your face?”

I was worried I’d made her mad, but when she turned back to me, her eyes had softened, maybe in relief.

“Yes, it’s fine, of course,” she said, matter-of-factly. I waited for her to talk but when she didn’t, I almost asked again. Then she spoke.

“Like I said, I was a bar girl – and you may not know it now, but I was pretty then. But it didn’t start that way. During the revolution, my father went to fight. My mother had no money and couldn’t feed me, so she sold me to a rich businessman from a different province, a man who said he would make me a housekeeper. He didn’t make me a housekeeper.”

“Jesus,” I said.

“I was only 14.”

She pushed away her bowl of food and called to a girl for something.

“The man took me here, to Dragon Town, and put me to work in one of the soldier bars near the garbage dump. I worked there for a few years. There was a young soldier who liked me. He always gave me a bullet as a tip. I always saved them and hid them with my things.”

“A bullet?” I asked.

“Eventually, I sold the bullets and put together enough to buy my way out of the bar. I got a job at a factory.”

The iceman stopped hacking and the truck started and rumbled away. It was quiet again, so Mamasan lowered her voice.

“It was hard work and I didn’t make much money, but I was happy that I wasn’t in a bar. I planned on saving money for a year, and then I’d be able to go back to my family in the province, to take care of my mother, and one day get married.”

One of the girls brought over two shots of whiskey, placing them in front of Mamasan, and bowing before she backed away. I was surprised; I’d never seen her drink.

“At the factory, there was a man. An older man. He was married, but he took to me for some reason. He followed me around and asked me to be with him. He said he loved me and would leave his wife. But I didn’t want him, so I said no. I didn’t want trouble, I told him – I just wanted to work and save so I could go back to the province.”

She picked up one of the shot glasses, turning it so the whiskey swirled up to the edge, but careful not to spill any.

“Even though I turned down his advances, someone told his wife and she thought we were having an affair. One morning I came out of my guesthouse at five in the morning and started walking to the factory to work. His wife was there waiting for me. She looked crazy. She started saying crazy things. I told her it wasn’t true – that we weren’t doing anything, but she didn’t believe me. She had a bucket with her. I told her I didn’t do anything, and soon she calmed down and walked away.”

Mamasan paused, putting the shot glass back on the table, looking at the sunlight passing through the amber liquid.

“But when I walked around the next street corner, she was there. She threw the bucket in my face.”

“What was it?” I asked. “What was in the bucket?”

She pushed one of the whiskey shots across the table to me.

“It was acid. Sulfuric acid, I think they call it. They sold it right in the stores. Still do. She threw it at me, and I turned away. It got my arm but I had a long shirt on. It got my face, here,” she said pulling back her hair and moving the burnt side of her face into the light, and then the burnt back of her hand.

“Oh my God,” I said.

“After that, I couldn’t go back to my family in the province. I was too ashamed. And I would be just another mouth to feed. So I came here, back

to Dragon Town – to the only way to make money I knew. But I got smart and got a few girl friends to work for me. I got a small loan from a customer, and a few years later I had a bar. Candy Bar.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said. I looked at her face. Her eyes looked tired, but I could almost see her younger self, before all this, before the acid and the bars and the cruel world caught a hold of her.

“So that’s why I do it. I do it for them. For the girls. I try to help them make money to give their families, to teach them so they don’t have to become like me,” she said. “They can do better.”

“I understand. Wow, thanks for telling me,” I said.

She nodded.

“Well, now I know so much about you,” I said. “But I realize I never really told you anything about me – about my life.”

“I think I know who you are,” she said. “By now.”

I didn’t know if that was good or bad. It must have showed on my face because Mamasan smiled.

“You are a frog, Sir Norm, not a scorpion,” she said.

“Thank you. I mean, I hope so.”

“You are,” she said, pretending to sting my hand. “I know these things.”

She held up her shot glass.

“To you and your swim across the river,” she said. “Just you don’t forget all about us when you go home.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that,” I laughed. “You guys are pretty unforgettable.”

“Haha, yes, that is true,” she said.

“Maybe you will even tell our story one day,” she said, nodding to the girls in the bar. “Tell *their* story, to the world.”

“Maybe I will,” I said, holding up my shot glass.

“To Dragon Town,” she said.

“To Dragon Town.”

We touched glasses and did the shot.

## **Shuffle**

“When you come back?” Sophar asked. I could feel the strong whiskey mix with the sun, making me a little dizzy as I stood in front of the bar with her. She’d come downstairs to say goodbye after I ate lunch with Mamasan on Sunday, two days before my flight.

“I don’t know,” I said.

Honestly, I hadn’t even thought about it. My only focus for the last two months was surviving, and then finding a way off the island – not what I was going to do with the rest of my life. And the trouble was growing worse on the island. Some were worried it was slipping toward another revolution, or at least a military coup. No one could say how long the trouble would last.

When she first came downstairs, Sophar didn’t notice me sitting at the corner table. I watched her. She was busy explaining things to a new girl that had just started living there and working in the bar. The girl was deaf and used to be a freelancer. She made odd sounds when she spoke, which already was a turnoff for the bar customers. We all knew the girl would bring in less money, but I guess Mamasan still took her in despite the fact that the bar was hemorrhaging money now. But I wasn’t watching the deaf girl.

Sophar pointed things out patiently to the girl, taking her hands and directing them, teaching her how everything worked, writing things down when needed. The girl looked a little overwhelmed, but not nearly as scared as someone else I’d seen walk through the front door on my first night there.

“You fly home you country?” Apple asked me as I waited for Sophar to finish, breaking my thoughts.

“Yeah, I’m taking the ferry off the island Tuesday morning, then flying home.”

“Fly Australia?”

“No, remember, I’m not a kangaroo. I’m from U.S.A.”

“U.S.A.?”

“America? Remember? Obama?”

“Oh, America. So that why you talk so funny, guy.”

It wasn't an emotional goodbye for the girls. I don't know what I was expecting, but they just shrugged and went back to what they were doing, wished me good luck, or asked if I could leave my iPhone for them. The Mosquitos always left, and new ones always came in. As much as I liked to think I was special, that I was their brother, their friend, I was just another tourist who got to return to my paradise, where things were always easy and there was plenty to eat.

Except maybe for Sophar.

"You come back fast see Sophar," she said once she noticed me and we walked outside to talk, squinting in the sunlight.

Things felt different after Ava was gone. The rage the girls felt about the Marine getting away tainted their laughter, like a drop of poison in a well.

"So what can I do?" they always said with a shrug, waving a white flag to the feeling of being stomped on, discarded, and forgotten. There was nothing they could do with their indignation but swallow it, yet again. They wouldn't forget, but the girls were too busy to spend much time thinking about it – and definitely didn't want to talk about it with me. They had their own problems.

They were scared, trying to make the same money in half the time – and with half the tourists, now that the curfew closed everything at 10 PM. The girls sent out texts and Facebook messages every afternoon, trying to rustle up any business from old boyfriends who might still be in town. They didn't even care if they were Butterflies or Helicopters. But none were biting.

There were protests almost every day now, demonstrations in front of the Royal Palace with flowers and incense, bandanas, and flags. At first there were men, women, and children at the demonstrations, which they held in the morning when it was still cool. They held signs demanding salaries to be delivered on time, worker's rights, and a repeal of taxes. Some foolhardy tourists even joined the demonstrations, thinking it was cool to take a selfie in front of a protest in a foreign country, a good story for their friends back home.

But now the protestors were mostly serious-looking men. The bandanas went over their mouths and they carried sticks and bottles instead of signs. They met later in the day, the heat matching their intensity. They knew their mere presence would make the police suffer, as they had to line up against them wearing full riot gear under the sun.

When Sam Sam drove me around, venturing far from my hotel on only the most necessary errands, I saw more people wearing gray shirts and blue shirts again, like they had during the revolution.

“Don’t go down there,” Mamasan said to me.

I didn’t. I felt the temperature rising. Every day, the protests got bigger, but so did the line of policemen in front of them. That morning I’d read in the city’s English-speaking newspaper that police had busted up a strike at a factory outside of town, beating the workers mercilessly with their clubs until blood flecked their own faces. Several workers were killed, and someone started a fire at the workers’ adjoining shantytown.

I knew there was only so much the island people could take before they started chewing their way through the bars of their cage. When their daily lives were more intolerable than any consequences they might endure for striking back, they’d reach that point of no return. It was one thing when Ava was murdered, but once the government called it a suicide in the papers, the people’s anger started boiling over.

So it was a grand surprise what Sophar said to me that day.

“I give you money back for lo-an,” she said.

The roof was now being built on her mother’s house back in the province, so she’d be safe once the rains came. Sophar thanked me every time I saw her and showed me a photo that her neighbor’s daughter took with her cell phone. But now, she wanted to pay me back.

“I no have all money, but I get for you,” she said.

“Don’t worry, there’s no rush,” I said, as I’d never expected any money from her. It wasn’t the money that I was thinking about.

As much as I wished things could be different since we got back, as much as I wanted life to be simple and slow and green like our time in the province, talking on the roof under the moon every night, I knew it didn’t work like that. Instead, Sophar had to jump right back into her life as a bar girl.

“I try get money. Pay you before you go on airplane,” she said, looking me square in the face, but quieting her voice as Hiandbyebye walked out of the bar and past us into the street. “Sophar no lie you.”

“It’s really OK, Sophar, just pay me back whenever you have it,” I said. The reality was that I could use the money, as work had been slow for me the



last few months, and I'd just charged my expensive plane ticket back to the U.S. on my credit card. But I knew that my problems weren't even a grain of rice in someone else's bowl.

"No, I pay you now. I get money what I can. Sophar no cheat," she said.

"Of course not," I said, "No one called you a *bow-pra*."

"How you know that word? Who tell you that?" she asked, shocked.

"I don't know, I just heard it around I guess."

I told her that I trusted her, and that of course I didn't think she was a liar or a cheat, and it was OK if she didn't have the money because the bar was slow, but she wouldn't hear it.

"I say mother me I pay you," Sophar confessed. She explained that when we'd left the province, she promised her mom she'd pay back her nice, but very sweaty, foreign friend for the roof. Now that I was leaving, Sophar was adamant that she honor her mother's wishes before I left, maybe for good. There may be plenty of sins in Dragon Town, but going back on her word to her mother wasn't a line she'd ever cross.

"Tomorrow night see me 9:30, *bong*, I wait you," she said. We were to meet the next night on the roof of the bar so she could pay me back what she had.

That would give me plenty of time to get back to my hotel before curfew, where Sam Sam could throw my bags in his tuk-tuk and take me to the ferry station for the last boat off the island. The ferry would get in around 2:30 AM, so I'd get a couple hours of sleep on the airport floor with my backpack as my pillow before my 6 AM flight took off. It wasn't the ideal itinerary, but I wasn't complaining.

I didn't know what to do with my last day, after all the goodbyes were said.

I packed my one big yellow duffel bag again, but there was far less to pack this time. I looked in the closet, and in all the drawers, and under the bed to make sure I didn't miss anything.

"I come you hotel tonight, Sir Worm," Sam Sam said. "Take you ferry."

I handed him my watch.

"A gift for you, so you're not late," I said.

I didn't feel like leaving the hotel the rest of the day. I should have jumped in the ocean one more time, but it was a long walk and I didn't want to get my swimsuit wet and have to pack it like that. I should have made my way down to visit Franzi or thank Marlon again, but I didn't.

Instead, I just stayed in my air-conditioned room, checking emails and watching movies, and then turned the channel to the BBC. It only lasted a few seconds, but they mentioned the island, warning tourists and foreign nationals to stay clear because of unrest. That evening I called down to room service and ate at the hotel.

After 9 PM, I started walking toward the bar, following the beachside road and passing in front of the Royal Palace. Islanders were gathering to look at the new billboard of the Prime Minister that had just been unveiled the day before, after his speech. I had walked by many times over the last weeks, but it was always covered in tarps and scaffolding, so I thought it was just another building going up.

As the islanders looked up their eyes narrowed and their mouths tightened. There were whispers, and then those whispers grew into sharp words, and then shouts. I still couldn't speak their language, but I finally knew these people. I could feel what they were saying when they stopped and saw the grand edifice, the coppery taste of disbelief in their mouths, drawing their children closer without realizing it. They'd seen this before, and they knew the cost.

When I heard a bottle break on the sidewalk, I knew I should keep walking.

I passed into the busy bar streets that led away from the beach, pausing at a sidewalk restaurant. A familiar street kid was chewing on a razor blade for the benefit of a table of tourists. He managed to make a little commotion, just as planned. While they were distracted, his little sister snuck up and lifted their iPhone off the table, the tourists too drunk and distracted to notice.

On the corner, I passed a group of men playing cards. I didn't know if they were Blue or Gray, or whether they would be trouble for a foreigner. They looked up at me and asked if I was a Marine, but seemed satisfied and went back to their game when I spoke a few words of their language.

I made my way toward the back entrance that led to the roof above Candy Bar, the one that Mamasan showed me on my first day there, since I didn't want to have to walk through the bar and say goodbye again. I found the opening to the alley and went through the green metal door and up the stairs, and then I was in the courtyard. It was quiet, the moonlight my only companion. I waited for Sophar.

I went to check my watch but I didn't have one anymore, so I checked my phone; it was 9:23.

I looked around the courtyard at the hanging laundry, the rows of padlocked shacks, the knee-high altars to Buddha the girls tended every morning, their prayers drifting with the incense smoke over the roof ledge to the city streets below.

I thought about them all: about Mamasan and her story, and how she'd let me stay there when I had nowhere else to go. I thought about how she'd taken in the deaf girl. I thought of Ava, who only wanted a chance at a happy life like everyone else. I thought of my friend Sam Sam, who didn't bother charging me and looked out to make sure that I was safe.

I recalled Franzi at the hotel when the typhoon was blowing in, and of course Marlon, who saved me from the streets after the storm. My thoughts turned to the endless children sprouting from the street every day, and then the children in the province – the tall boy with overalls who was intent on taking care of those around him. I thought of Sophar's mother, and what I'd seen in her eyes, and what her daughter sacrificed for her. And Sophar. Mostly, I thought of Sophar, and the impossible choice she had to make because of me. In order to honor her promise to her mother and pay me back, she'd have to keep selling herself in the bar. But now that her roof was fixed, I was the only thing keeping her from moving back to the province, to be with her mother during her last years, where she could enjoy that simple green life and pretend that everything else was just a bad dream.

I snapped to attention when I thought I heard footsteps, but it was just the wind. I looked at my phone again. It was 9:29. But this time, I finally knew what I could do to make it better.

I walked away.

I left the courtyard and didn't look back, making my way down the stairs and out the green door, in a hurry to disappear before Sophar showed up and saw me.

I looked out on the empty street before I left the alley, running back toward my hotel. I ran past the pagoda, past the sewage station where the poor took refuge, along the row of flags that were left as a gift from the UN, and right by the old high school, which had been turned into a torture prison during the last revolution, toward the G11 Hotel.

I ran faster when, somewhere, not far off, I heard the diesel motor of a truck and the boot heels of men.

## Only Two Ways Down

I only stopped running when I came to the Royal Palace. A crowd had formed in front of the billboard of the Prime Minister, the same place I'd stood only 20 minutes earlier. The traffic on the street was at a standstill, motos and tuk-tuks and a few cars jamming into every free space, but no one getting anywhere. I'd seen plenty of traffic jams in Dragon Town before, especially as everyone tried to get home before the 10 PM curfew, but this one was different.

People even spilled out onto the sidewalks, making it impossible for me to walk by. Everyone was pointing and yelling, and more people gathered. The front wheel of a moto nudged another moto, jarring the driver, but for once, they didn't get out and argue.

They all were looking up.

"Look. Look, do you see?" someone said behind me, a hand pointing over my shoulder at the 40-foot tall likeness of the Prime Minister.

"What?" I asked.

"There, there."

I glanced back and saw that it was a monk speaking to me. He was young, with a freshly shaved head and rimmed glasses, his orange robe not yet faded by the sun or dirtied by the earth. He held a folded newspaper under one arm. There was something wrapped in it. I hadn't expected the voice to come from him. He must be from the city, or educated, I thought, because his English was good.

"I don't see it. What am I looking for?" I asked the monk, turning back around and trying to spot what everyone was looking at. I followed the line of his finger into the air.

Then, I saw it. High up on the outer frame of the billboard, by the Prime Minister's left eye, a man was climbing.

"Holy shit, what's he doing up there?" I asked, watching him scale up the side of the billboard, only one flip-flop still on, the legs of his jeans rolled up.

"I don't think I know," the monk said, contemplating the situation. "I heard someone say something about a tuk-tuk driver smoking *yaba*. Maybe he's crazy now?"

The spans between the rods were taller than a person, so the man had to jump with arms outstretched to grab each rod on the frame. The crowd oohed every time he leaped and caught the next bar with both hands, half hoping he would make it, but maybe secretly waiting for him to slip and miss one. But he didn't falter, and with each new bar he'd pull himself up, his feet dangling in midair. He was almost to the top.

The people watched. I didn't know why the man was climbing the sign. Maybe he was smoking *yaba* and went crazy, like the monk had heard, or maybe he meant to deface the billboard and would start smashing out the lights and tearing at the Prime Minister's face at any moment.

Or maybe, for once in his life, he just wanted to be higher, to see the streets and the people and his life the way they must look from the heavens. But probably, he was just desperate not to be low anymore.

"How will he get down?" I asked, turning back to the monk behind me. He looked up at the man and calculated. More people crowded into the streets and the traffic was completely stopped now.

I could hear the approaching wail of sirens. A dozen police officers ran toward the billboard from different directions, shouting and blowing their whistles, bursting through the crowd, their eyes on fire with the viciousness of the acts that would follow.

"Well, the way I think about it, there are only two ways down," the monk said, taking off his glasses and cleaning them with his orange sleeve, glancing at the police pulling their batons as they reached the base of the billboard and then at the man so high up, gauging the distance to the hard pavement below.

"And both end about the same."

The End.

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