

Bangkok Express



James A.
Newman

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2012
Edition



**BANGKOK
EXPRESS**

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2nd edition 2012; ebook

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eISBN 978-616-222-005-0

Print ISBN 978-1-4092-7754-5

Published by www.bangkokbooks.com

E-mail: info@bangkokbooks.com

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Cover by Bangkok based Christian Develter – Cover design by J.A. Newman

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Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

Franco cut the engine and tasted the salt in the air. The sea was calm and blue and green mountains stood atop distant islands. A flock of white terns wheeled in the sky above. Below them Franco could see the colours of fish swimming in the coral. An airplane flew overhead. He turned to face her. "Are you ready?"

"I think so, but I am a little nervous," Alexandra was twenty-three; her blue eyes shifted nervously. Her hair fell in braids and the wetsuit was tight against her body. She wore a small nose-ring that added a touch of bohemia to her beauty. Franco opened the icebox and took another beer Singha. He swigged from the can and then put it down next to the Styrofoam boxes filled with the remains of breakfast. Chicken fried rice with a slice of lime. He wobbled slightly as he stepped over the equipment, closer to Alexandra.

"It is okay to be scared. Fear is natural, don't be afraid of fear. Fear hates to be confronted. Look her in the eye," Franco said. It was just the two of them. The American couple hadn't showed up. Franco thought about cancelling the trip but Alexandra was pretty and the long-tail was already booked. Franco stood up towering over Alexandra and began to check the equipment. He liked the fact that she was afraid. Her naivety made him wise. Her weakness was his strength. She giggled nervously as Franco smiled and whistled while checking the equipment. They snapped on masks. They pulled on fins. The cylinder valve was slightly loose. He turned the wheel counter-clockwise and listened to the hiss of escaping air. He tightened it again. The needle on the submersion pressure gauge was zero. They swung on the aqualungs and clipped them tight. They positioned the regulator mouthpieces and perched on the edge of the boat side by side. Franco held up one finger. She looked up to the blue sky. Two fingers. She smiled. And three. They dropped overboard into another world.

Franco watched a seahorse disappear behind a coral reef. A lone scissortail swam lazily in front of him. Alexandra let her weight carry her down. Franco turned and pointed towards the reef and he dove deeper, twisting, enjoying the feeling of his weightlessness in the blue and green world. Alexandra had fallen deeper towards the seabed underneath a rock formation some twenty-five metres away. Franco spun around and saw the urgency in her movements.

Something was wrong.

He swam over to her. Her hands were desperately shaking the regulator. He checked it. Dead. He adjusted it. Dead. He indicated with his hand that she should follow him up towards the surface. Her body was alert with anxiety. Eyes searching. She thrashed in the water. She was losing the fight. She was too young. He passed her his regulator and she grabbed at it sucking at the oxygen. Franco thought about the next move. Experience had to be earned. You didn't gain experience by not making decisions. Something had to be done. The bail-out bottle. He pulled the pin and watched as Alexandra shot up. The rocks got to her before the surface did. He swam up to her. She was unconscious. He put his arms around her and swam up to the surface. He lifted her small body up to the boat. Her legs were still submerged. She was too heavy. He pulled himself aboard and then dragged her onto the boat and over she fell against the deck like a horrendous catch.

He looked at her dead body. Her shoulder had been destroyed. Blood began to seep through the black wetsuit. He looked at her face. Her left side had been horrendously ruptured. He took off his mask. The nose and the ring were still intact. The rest of her face was a bloody pulp.

Franco felt a wave of sickness and leaned over the boat and lost the chicken fried rice overboard. He started the engine and headed back to the island his heart hammering as he steered the boat towards land.

JOE DYLAN took the express train from Heathrow and then the tube to London Bridge. He walked along the river bank towards Tower Bridge. He watched the boats ferrying sightseers along the river. Joe smiled at the cameras. He had grown up in the city. Man and boy. The place where it rained a year and people ignored each other. A city peopled with ghosts.

Let them take their stinking pictures.

Joe wore a single-breasted navy-blue suit, black brogues and a gold Omega watch that told him he was almost nine. The morning wind blew bitterly across the river. He watched a flock of gulls swoop down and then perch on the banks next to a brood of cormorants; their black wings held out to dry in the morning wind.

Joe knew what it was like to dry out. Simple pleasures replaced the bottles and the crazy women since he made the promise. With sobriety time ran slow. He could observe and reflect on life's hurdles without over-reacting. Joe was present – the past and the future were eternal *now*. A river and a flock of birds were the world. Sure, the ghosts came back to tempt him now and again during his weakest moments but he had no real fear of ghosts. Real people were enough to deal with. The coordinator talked about delaying gratification, then again the coordinator was a lapsed roman catholic who liked to 'fess up in the rooms.

Joe walked across Tower Bridge and joined the business-suited workers heading to their offices and their desks in the square mile. He walked through a cloud of diesel fumes as he crossed the road. The smell of bacon and espresso wafted from a nearby café. He remembered the old days, the restaurants, wine-bars and the cute women. The coordinator had told him to glance in the rear-view mirror but never stare. The women and the drinks had left a huge gap in his life. This void he had filled with the international flights, the hotels, and the assignments. He was a criminal turned investigator who was equally uncomfortable both sides of the fence. He liked a shot and he liked women and now he had to avoid them the same way a preacher avoids the truth. It was almost ninety days.

Danger was everywhere.

Chicks floated along the street and sat drinking coffee in Starbucks. They chattered into iPhones and walked swaying their beautiful behinds. They glanced at their reflections on mirrored surfaces and did their make-up on the train. The pubs overflowed with happy patrons steaming with joy. The windows clouded-over with their booze-filled happiness. Life was spent inside a restaurant looking at a list of items he could never order. He was powerless over the menu. The menu always won. He stopped trying to beat it. The price was small but the cost was enormous. The trick was to not pick up. One drink, line, or one bird was too many, and a thousand were never enough.

Don't. Pick. Up.

Joe glanced at his Omega. Being punctual was an important part of the program. Recovery was a bitch. The steps were necessary. One. He admitted that he had a problem and was powerless to solve it. Two. He came to believe that a power greater than himself was watching over his sorry ass. And three, he handed all his shit over to the heavenly power. Most of the old alcoholics found God, but Joe wasn't convinced. Omnipotence was a tough pill to swallow without a good shot of whiskey to wash it down.

The coordinator liked to lay it on thick. There was the Mexican ship building bandits who found a wreck and burned it. A gang of Nigerian militant youths who stole a small fleet of vessels. The Greeks and their mythological insurance claims. Fraud was happening in every nook and cranny of the globe and Joe was sent out there to document it.

Mary, the secretary, wore short skirts and expensive perfume and she knew how to blush her cheeks.

apply mascara and create suspense. She was a well-built woman who Joe suspected liked to party. She led Joe across the office. She wore an impossibly short skirt that detailed every curve and contour.

"You can go in now, 'e's ready," she said in her cockney drawl.

"Thanks," Joe smiled, opened the door and walked into the coordinators office. It was a large room with a window, a filing cabinet and a designer sofa designed for discomfort. There was a landscape painting hanging on the wall behind the coordinator and a Chinese pot holding dead purple flowers.

The coordinator's grey eyes looked directly at the investigator. "Sit." He took a handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his brow. He was a large man with a luncheon schedule designed to keep it that way. His suits were tailored-made on Fenchurch Street and he had lunch at Caravaggio's. He was a creature of habit. Joe sensed a hint of sadness or shame in the old man's eye. "I have some good news and some bad news, Joe. Which do you want first?"

"Hmm. Give me the bad."

"The syndicate are concerned about your performance, Joe. That case in Mexico made them nervous. They are keeping you on as a personal favour to me. They know about your past. They want me to send you packing."

"And what's the good news?" Joe knew the Mexico case hadn't turned out peachy. The crooks were in government office and there wasn't a thing he could do to solve it. The material evidence was destroyed by an earthquake.

"I convinced them to give you one last shot. I figure you ought to take it." The coordinator stood up and wobbled over to a filing cabinet, opened a drawer and picked out a lever-arched file. Joe found it impossible to sit comfortably. Who had said what to whom? He felt mildly persecuted. He remembered step number three. He handed his anger over to the higher one. The important thing was to keep his side of the street clean. He couldn't control others and trying to do so led to relapse. He let the anger wash through him. The coordinator examined the file with a forensic eye as Joe looked out of the window and counted to ten. One. Two. Three. Cold sunlight glimmered from the glass window on the opposite building block. Four. Five. Six. Construction cranes added more grey. Seven. Eight. Nine. Autumn was sliding into winter and London would soon be Baltic. Ten. "I have an idea that you have been to Asia before?" The coordinator asked Joe.

"Yeah...I had a look around, sir." Joe thought back to the fifteen months he'd hauled a backpack around the third world. There were terrifying bus journeys, pseudo-spiritualism, cheap beer and lots of women. He was hoping to find himself, he did, but what he found wasn't any better or any worse than the version he'd left behind. He looked out of the window again, smiled and said. "Which part particular, sir?"

"Thailand."

Joe's eyes widened. "Yeah. I spent four or five months there after I left the insurance Brokers. You know that, sir. I can speak a bit of the language." Joe remembered a crash-course in a ten-dollar hotel with a bargirl that was as cute as a button.

"That's what I thought, Joe. What can you tell me about the country?"

"The infrastructure is good sir, some of the best roads in South East Asia. The people are open and friendly on one level sir, but it's hard to tell what's going on in their minds."

The coordinator nodded and leaned back on that chair, put his hands behind his head and cleared his throat. He didn't speak but his eyes told Joe to carry on talking.

"Difficult to truly understand the nation however long you stay there, sir. They say that you are born with Thai knowledge and you cannot acquire it as a foreigner. I am not sure that is, however, entirely true, sir."

"I hear they're quite tough little bastards?" The co-ordinator said with a grin. "What about law and order?"

“The Thai police force are a well regimented criminal organization, sir.”

The coordinator chuckled and leaned forward. On his desk was a pile of papers held down by a brass paperweight next to a framed photograph of his insolent twelve-year-old son. “I like that.” He lifted up the paperweight and shuffled the pile of papers. He passed them to Joe. “Read this. You fly out to Bangkok Sunday. I’ve just come off the telephone with Wordsworth at Lloyds.” The coordinator nodded towards the telephone. “They underwrote an insurance cover for a couple of diving schools in the far east. Business they had underwritten as a favour for a Bangkok client.” He coughed onto the back of his hand and continued. “The client is the hotel chain Bluegreen International. Bluegreen bought a multi-million dollar Hotel liability package. The divers’ package was part of the deal. The syndicate have authorised the investigation.”

“They had a claim?”

“They did. A fatality. Finnish backpacker. Name: Alexandra Korksi. Age: twenty-three. Died on a routine diving lesson off the island of Ko Samui. Coverage – full life indemnity, pain and suffering. The Thai brokers on behalf of the family negotiated a settlement of one and a half million dollars and the insurance company paid it, in full, last week.”

“Did they investigate the claim, sir?”

“Yes and no. Mainly no. They hired a local adjuster. In hindsight the adjuster could have been corrupted. The report’s in the claims file. The underwriters saw one and a half big ones for a young European a good price and settled it backed up with the local report and some legal papers. As you know it cost money to check it out properly. You could end up paying double, triple. If it goes to court, you can never stop paying until the day you retire or die.”

“So what’s the problem? They paid it. They learned a lesson. Move on.”

“They’ve had another one. This time an Italian: Franco Dini. They want another two big ones. They haven’t given us any details of the fatality.” The coordinator looked out of the window. “Just a one liner asking for the funds.”

“A bit pricy for an Italian, sir,” Joe smiled.

“Yes. And a bit suspicious. So far we have seen no death certificates, nothing, zip. Niente. We expect that these deaths have been faked, or even worse, assisted.”

“Well Wordsworth should get in touch with the deceased’s families, sir.”

“Well they might be able to, but Bangkok’s not playing ball. They insist all the negotiations go through them. That’s why we need a man on the ground.”

“And who is pursuing the claims in Thailand, sir?”

“The Bangkok retail broker is a guy named Hale. He is a liability for the syndicate. He likes the high-life wherever he’s working. He moves around Asia – Hong Kong, Singapore, and now Bangkok. Be careful with him, Joe. He speaks the lingo and has an eye for the women. Apparently he fell in the bottle in Asia and he has yet to crawl out. He’s a drinker and he is our way into Bluegreen. That kind of man you might be able to manipulate. Be careful. Keep a clear head, if you slip up the syndicate will pull the finance away. Don’t pick up the bottle, Joe. Stay away from whores. The ones that say they don’t want money are the most dangerous, Joe. Keep clean. One day at a time.”

GANTIRA'S LONG hair framed a beautiful smile and a pair of brown eyes that rose upwards when curious and narrowed when angered or upset. She had thirteen different ways to smile and fewer than half of them meant happiness. She tiptoed around disputes where possible and let others dive into disasters if they chose to do so: it was the Thai way to do things.

She picked up the box of Marlboro and slid one from the box and lit it. It was just one of the many habits she had picked up during her days studying tourism in Australia. She missed those calm times. She remembered afternoons reading glossy magazines and drinking cappuccino in fashionable coffee-shops. Polished floorboards and over-sized sofas. She missed the opera house, the sea, and the bridge. She missed the way people spoke their minds without worrying about their faces.

Gantira breathed out a toxic cloud and gazed at the blue smoke spiral up to the ceiling. Franco didn't mind the smoke. Most western men were malleable and bland like sticky rice. Thai men playfully led the way like the front feet of the elephant. Thai women like the hind legs of the elephant were reliable and steady. Europeans were easily manipulated by the elephant.

The bungalow was isolated half-way up a limestone mountain. Palm trees shaded the bungalow from the morning sun. The ceiling fan kept spinning above them. She glanced at the painting of the marina on the wall. It was a large room that led to a balcony. The blinds were tightly closed. She slipped on a hemp dress and then glanced at Franco. He sat up in the bed massaging his brow. If the Thais saw her and Franco together her world would be shattered. The islanders owed her nothing. She was born Thai but had never been accepted as one of them. Her education kept her isolated. The locals took simple pleasures in the downfall of human beings; their victories were sweetest when the rich fell shamefully to their own level. They had pinched-up faces and played cards at night. They had nothing much to lose and were determined to keep it that way. They watched television and believed in what they saw. They were from another world.

She walked over to the blinds and opened them. The French doors she also opened and she looked out onto the golden sands and the blue and green sea below. Song birds sang in the fig trees nearby. The morning was scented with jasmine. The sex was ordinary. It meant nothing more than the chorus of gasps and grunts. It seemed that each thrust was less important and more dangerous than the last. It ended the same way it always did. A cloud of shame hung inside the room.

A dog barked in the distance. The bark was followed by a series of howls from the pack of strays that gathered by the restaurant below. Gantira walked out to the balcony and flicked the ash into a large seashell that stood on the stone balcony table. She looked out across the sea; blue and green fishing boats were returning to the Ko Samui cove. The sun glimmered across the waters. She noticed a lone swimmer far away from the beach.

"I killed her," Franco said from inside the bungalow. She turned and walked back inside. Franco was sitting on the bed with his head in his hands. She sat at the vanity and looked in the mirror; she had a beauty spot on her cheek. She had considered having it removed. There were many such trivial matters that required her attention. A bare thread spiralled loose from the hem of her blouse. She lit the loose thread with the flame from her cigarette lighter and watched it slowly fizzle away to smoke. The room smelled of decay.

"Nobody killed her." She realised the truth was too dangerous for him. She could not meet him again. He would bring bad luck. She glanced at the Italian sitting on the bed and wondered what she had ever seen in him. "It happened," she said standing up.

Franco stood up. His body reminded her of a marble statue she had seen at the University of Sydney.

"I have to go back into the water," He said.

~~"You shouldn't go back. You should leave the island. We have to forget this ever happened,"~~ She told him.

"But, the equipment..."

"It was an accident; you need to stop blaming yourself. You cannot stay here." Gantira put a hand on his shoulder. She remembered that morning. The plan. He brushed her hand aside. "You have to go."

He looked directly at her. His features sharp with anger. "You are lying." He snapped.

"I have money," Gantira walked the five steps back to the balcony and then turned around. "I can find enough for you to leave the island. Forever."

"I don't want your husband's blood money."

Gantira shrugged and managed a smile. He was just a diver. She needn't give him anything apart from a warning. She turned back around and faced him. "There is an insurance investigation," she said.

"I checked the equipment before the dive."

"You did your best, Franco," Gantira said remembering how the equipment had been tampered with shortly before the dive. Jinks smiling as he left the dive centre. "The matter will go to the court. You don't have a work permit. Things will become complicated for you – In the eyes of the law you killed her. You shouldn't have been out there with her. Deportation could be the least of your concerns. I'm saying this because I care about you, I would hate to see you in a Thai prison. Do you know what they do to foreigners in there?"

"No?"

"Perhaps it is better that way."

"I would be locked up for trying to save a life?"

"Perhaps. This is Thailand."

"I need to talk to your husband. He has the power to make this thing go away."

Gantira lit another cigarette and looked directly at Franco. She would have to give it to him in a way he could understand. "Shogun is like the box jellyfish. Each tentacle has half a million injections of venom. The tentacles stretch wide and far and contact results in death." She walked over to a coffee table and picked up his keys. She handed the keys to him. "Leave the island. Today."

Franco slammed his hand onto the coffee table and sent a glass tumbling to the floor. The glass smashed into a hundred pieces. They both looked at the broken pieces. Franco picked up a large shard of glass and held it in front of her.

She smiled. "In Thailand it is desirable to have a cool heart," She took the shard of glass from his fingers. She ran the jagged edge against her forearm. A tiny spot of red appeared. A tiny line of blood trickled down her forearm. She smiled and looked up at him. "Is this what you want?" She stared out to the cove and smiled. "Fate is what happens when you aren't true to yourself, and destiny is what happens when you are, Franco."

She heard him swear and then the sound of the door closing. Footsteps down the steps. He started the bike and the machine growled down the mountain path before opening up with a burst of aggression along the beach road.

JAMES HALE was on his tenth drink inside an aircraft-hanger-sized club called Hollywood full with just as many sharks. Pim worked at Bluegreen. Her father was born into money and she had never been without him or it. She was sweet, just out of university; beautifully-built and nervous. Hale leaned over to her: "You see, Pim, It's really not my scene this. All these high society kids with their expensive haircuts, their sharp suits and their iPhones. In this city you either have the world or you have nothing. We don't belong here. Why don't we split and get a steak?"

"I don't eat meat," she said. Pim knew where she belonged and it wasn't sharing a table with the drunken farang. Her father would hit the roof if he found out she was at a nightclub let alone with a foreigner who had a *reputation*.

"Figures," he said and scanned the dance-floor for any other talent. There were tables and chairs with young hipsters trying their hardest to look fashionable. They shared bottles of Johnnie Red, colas and ice. They were all connected with wireless technology and the old money. They tweeted, they face-booked, they copied and pasted. They were the new generation and they wanted immediate cyber gratifications. Hale had twenty-seven drunken and cynical light-years separating him from this new cyber-savvy crowd. He wished that he'd had their chances, their education, and their hardware. Their haircuts, they could keep. Hale liked his short back and sides just the way it was, cheers very much.

"Opportunities just land at their feet. If they want an iPad it materialises in their hands. If they want a Lamborghini it simply builds itself around them. All they have to do is turn the key and put their foot to the gas. If they crash it, daddy buys 'em a new one in a different colour. Where is the conflict in the sense of ever earning anything?"

"I think they are just trying to have fun...And what's wrong with Lamborghinis and iPads? They are good things no?"

"What's wrong with them? Just about everything... Fun? They are *pretending* to have fun, but look at them. They know the price of everything and the value of nothing, honey. How about that meal?"

"Khun Hale, in Thailand ladies take things slowly."

"That's not the Thailand I know."

"Well, maybe you should get to know our country a little better."

"Or maybe not," he said under his breath. "Excuse me one moment." He pushed through the crowd and headed for the exit. He was itching to get out of the nightclub and into the zone. The zone was a parallel universe. That part of Sukhumvit road where The Street of Dead Artists leads up to the Narai Entertainment Plaza. Men ventured into the zone and got lost for a few days, weeks and months. Some never returned. Some returned broken shells of their former selves consumed by desires, greed, and theft. It was the place where dreams and nightmares were spun, lived, and broken. The carnivals, the fashions, the attractions and the actors came and went but the show mostly stayed the same. Hale felt like he belonged in the zone; outside of it he was just killing time, like a junkie waiting for a fix. He needed the zone and the zone needed him.

Two Thai police officers stood at the exit blocking his path. They wore the tight brown uniforms with guns clipped to their belts. An officer with a neatly trimmed moustache and a blank expression handed Hale a small plastic container. He looked at it and then at the two officers.

"Sample." Said police officer number one. "Sample?" "No sample. No go," said number two. "Are you taking the..." Hale realised that they were indeed and they had the authority to do so. He snorted through his nose like a delinquent child, "You want me to piss in a bottle before I leave?"

"Sample," the officer repeated. "Talkative, aint ya?"

This was unexpected. He took the plastic cup and thought about it. He needed a contingency plan

The line of cocaine snorted at Q Bar was bound to show up in the sample. He pocketed the receipt and headed back up to Pim. She was sat at a table fending off a group of Thai fashion freaks. The hair gelled up like Korean pop-singers. Hale pushed through the mob and spoke to Pim, "I need you do something for me."

"What is it?" Pim shouted over the noise from the trashy pop band live on stage.

"I need your help."

"What?"

"I need you to give me something."

"What do you need?"

"Your urine."

"What?"

"Your urine, pee pee, piss, piddles.' He said, mocking her accent, "I need a sample." Hale passed the container to her. She looked at it.

"Whatever for?"

"They're asking for it at the door. I take it you have no drugs in you?"

"No I don't...never have..."

"Of course you don't. The problem is I do, perhaps, sometimes... I have a little something inside me. I do however have a solution. It involves you. Now, run along to the ladies fill this little cup up and bring it back to me."

"You expect me to do this for you?"

"I played golf with your director the other Sunday. We talked about you. He said something about promotion. We were teeing off at the nineteenth hole. It's all a bit of a blur."

"A promotion?"

"His words not mine. I told him I wasn't sure about it," Hale passed her the plastic vessel. "'Pim's fine lady but lacks basic decision-making skills,' I told him. I say things as I see them." She looked at Hale and then looked at the vessel. She smiled painfully and walked towards the ladies restroom. It was all too easy. Pim returned through the crowd followed by a Thai colleague named Boss. Boss had always confused Hale. He had a guilty expression most of the time and Hale figured there must have been something behind it. He worked for Bluegreen. Boss was the only man that Hale had ever met that had caused him to question the size of rats. Boss had once told him about a theory that rats could grow to any size given enough food and a happy environment. Hale reasoned that there was no limit to their size. Especially in Bangkok. Especially for Boss. He turned to face Pim.

"Have you got it?" "Yes," she handed him the plastic vessel filled with warm yellow liquid. Seeing the small vessel Boss grabbed it from Hale's grasp. A splash of the liquid spilled onto his hand.

"So I see we're playing shots," He said drunkenly. "What is it?" He takes a sniff, "Tequila?"

"Boss, you don't want to drink that. Trust me."

"Why not?," he smelled it again.

"You've had enough already,' Hale put his finger and thumb on the vessel. "Let go."

"No."

"Boss, I'm going to count to Three. Once I reach the number Three you are going to release your grip. Do you understand?"

"Oh, have your rotten shooter!" Boss said defeated.

"Thanks."

"Nobody wants to have fun anymore."

"It's the way of the world, Boss."

Hale returned to the exit and gave Pim's vessel to the police. They took it over to a make-shift lab set up on a table outside in the parking lot. The sample was clean and Hale was free to go. He felt

weight lift from his shoulders as he walked out into the parking-lot to a line of men on motorcycles wearing orange vests.

The quickest and most dangerous way to the zone was by motorbike taxi. At night the traffic was manageable. Hale sat on the back of a motorcycle taxi and gave the driver directions. The driver sped between vehicles, weaved around danger with enough speed to keep his line, no hesitation, no mistakes, no fear. Hale trusted the driver. He knew how to ride – as they sped through the traffic Hale felt a Buddhist sense of calm. The channel between a public bus and a Japanese pick-up was there to be exploited. He held onto the back of the seat and watched the streets rush by; fruit markets, clothing stalls, jewellery stores, fortune-tellers, road-side bars and restaurants. The night hung over the city like an oily canvas. They arrived at the zone and Hale paid the driver and tipped him heavily. The driver had earned it, he was direct and honest. It was these small victories that kept Hale smiling in the land of scams.

Sukhumvit road is a street you smell - burnt chillies and fried vegetables. Beer, cigarette smoke, cheap whore-perfume, raw sewage, barbequed meat, hints of jasmine and incense, massage oils, sliced durian, exhaust fumes. Flashes of neon lit up faces both beautiful and hideous. There were lights, thousands of lights, all different colours. Beautiful freaks, tourists, prostitutes, beggars exhibiting mutilated bodies. The caterpillar man dragged his body along the road using his stumps to pull himself along, a bowl carried in his teeth. Legend had it the whores touched cripples for luck, but Hale didn't believe in legends and cripples. Ghanaian pimps chewed gum, smacked their lips together, and hissed through their teeth. They wore baseball caps back-to-front and gold sovereigns on their fingers. Their women walked up and down the zone in twos and threes calling out *hey papa* and *watcha doing*.

He walked into a bar called the Magic Table, booths, stages, and poles, women dancing on and around them. There was smoke and there were mirrors. Hale sat and drank booze, bought lady-drinks, watched dances, and enjoyed a short-time. She was Vietnamese, white skin, movie-star eyes and the kind of body that dug graves. She was old enough to have put at least five lost-souls through the Bangkok meat-grinder and he didn't want to make it number six. He made his excuses and stood up to leave, she wanted to leave with him, but his heart wasn't in it; Vietnam could wait. Goodnight Hanoi.

It was late September and the city was flooded. Hale took a taxi and looked out of the window. Filthy water collected in areas of lowland blocked drains that refused to swallow any more, and the klongs had overflowed. This year the city had used sandbags to build walls to protect from the great floods that threatened to turn her into Atlantis once again. The rains were relentless. They were waiting for the big flood. The one that would destroy the city. The super-rats and the cockroaches. The diseases; cholera and dysentery. There was talk of moving the capital to higher land. But talk was all that was. He opened the door of the taxi and looked at the water that had risen up to the wheel arches. He paid and stepped out and waded across the road to the apartment entrance.

Hale walked past the apartment porter, his jeans dripping with water. The porter smiled and Hale went up in the lift to the thirteenth floor and to his room. His apartment overlooked the Chao Phraya, the dark oily water reflecting the blurry neon lights from the city.

His desk occupied a space by a large ceiling to floor window that looked down over the river. He sat down and shook the mouse control to enter into the computer. There were two messages.

Asshole,

Time to pay the fiddler.

One hundred thousand.

We had an agreement.

J.

Hale,

Meeting tomorrow morning 9am at Bluegreen to discuss claim urgent new development... Need t

formulate a plan of action.

Regards,

*Boss. *

KHUN SHOGUN took the money from her and put it in his pocket. The beer-bar had been thrown together with palm timber, cheap plastic, bottles, and glasses. Shogun watched the tourists. A ragged crowd for the most part. Foreigners had no idea how to dress. What was the point in having money if you went around dressed as a vagrant?

The beach beer-bar did steady business. Location was everything. The bar only needed one person every hundred to stop and buy a drink. He had another hundred bars just like it to take care of the rest. It was just a tiny fraction of the empire, yet he liked to visit each one to let the workers know he was still around to keep them on their toes.

There was a little blue book on the bar counter. He picked it up and saw it was written by a farang called Peter and was about a Thai boy who played chequers. Somebody had scrawled something in blue ink on the title page. It was a proverb. Like the Chinese proverbs, these sayings were used in everyday farang situations:

Don't put off until tomorrow what you can do today.

It made sense. Shogun stood up from the stool and smiled at Nat who ran the bar at a profit and serviced customers with the vague hope of finding one charitable and foolish enough to make the long-term financial commitment she dreamed about. She was thirty-something and wore her hair in braids. She hailed from Roi Et and knew the interior of every hotel on the island. She had three children, each with a different father. Hope was a currency that had devalued in the crash years ago and in its wake was a cool distrust and resentment of the very commodity that she sought. Companionship with a gullible foreign man was an uncomfortable concept yet it was the only goal worth striving for on the island. She had an alcoholic father who wouldn't work and a bitter mother who enabled him his disentanglement. Some women became nurses, and some became lawyers, and some became loyal wives and mothers. Some never became anything until they landed in the bar and became confidence tricksters using their tits and their lips as the bait.

He left her with her disappointments, her family up north and her sneaky shots of rice whiskey while the punters were looking the other way. It beat the rice fields or working in the factories of Bangkok. She knew her place and hoped to rise above it with a little help from a knight in white shining skin, a visa and a man called Buddha. She believed in black magic and palmistry, but so did the foreign men. She understood that belief was simply a thought that had been held onto for some time, and that faith was a belief that many shared. Consensus was indeed the qualification for madness in a world where the lunatics had been running the show for centuries. She believed that Bangkok and the west offered a new wave of thought that was invisible to the migrant workers from the North East who had passed through and picked their share of the white coconuts who came for holiday and romance. Most people were basically beyond help, she reasoned.

Perhaps all people were.

The road was dusty. The sun beat down on his neck. He took out the key from his pocket and deactivated the lock. The door opened with a slight tug and Shogun stepped into his Toyota pick-up. The air conditioning blasted the cabin with icy coolness as he listened to the engine tick over. The circular beach road snaked around the island and then rose up to Coral Cove past the houses and bungalows that he owned either side of the road. Up in the mountains the road steepened with mature coconut groves to one side and limestone boulders the other. He reached the gates that separated his kingdom from the rest of the island. The gateman pushed a button on the control panel inside his cab and the wrought-iron gates mechanically opened. The road wound lazily up towards his mansion. The mansion stood at the highest point on a gentle slope overlooking the island. Shogun parked the pick-up

stepped out and walked the distance to the front door. He entered the building with a key. The first level was block painted brilliant white divided into eight large rooms. The upper level was teak with five bedrooms and a vast balcony with views across the palm-studded mountains to the south and the lazy curve of the cove to the west. He had a full-time staff of cooks, cleaners, gardeners, hostesses, animal-keepers and fortune tellers. There were four guards and a butler. There was a safe that held his fortune. He paid some of his staff to pour drinks and others to offer companionship for overnight guests.

Shogun walked into his vast main room and smiled at Nok, his ten year old Hornbill who perched inside her gilded cage. Nok has been with Shogun since she was a chick. He had paid a handsome sum from a dealer in Bangkok to bring her to him. Nok was a sign of good luck and fortune. In the grounds Shogun had a small holding of exotic animals, gibbons, slow loris, several rare civets and a fishing cat kitten. None of these animals shared the same place in his heart as Nok did. Hornbills paired for life. Humans never truly paired. He had never met a woman that had filled him with as much joy as Nok. Gantira was decoration and nothing more. A woman's love was fleeting and unreal to a man with money. They could never meet on equal terms.

Gantira was sprawled across a chaise sofa reading a book; beads of sweat on her nose despite the air-conditioning. Her skirt was hitched up. Her legs hadn't been wrapped around his waist for a long time. He watched her slender figure sit up and saunter around the room. It was good for his image to have the most beautiful girl on the island.

Gantira stopped walking. A door the other side of the room opened. Shogun tightened his hands into fists as he saw Franco enter the room. He looked at him as if he were an unfortunate victim inside a car wreck. "This is a surprise."

"I'm sorry..."

Shogun scratched the crown of his head. "Why do you return now? What have you been doing here?"

"Interesting bird," Franco said. He walked towards the bird in its cage and placed a finger on the gilded bars. The creature flinched backwards called alarmingly. Franco turned around and faced Shogun directly. "I had to visit. I have a problem, which I think you can assist with. I am scared. It's a flight or fight situation, Khun Shogun. I would not ask but, you know... I hope I'm not intruding," The Italian smiled and the powerful Thai man mirrored the smile sarcastically and spoke slowly as if addressing a small backward child.

"There is a saying that the west use. *Treat others how you wish to be treated yourself*. Now. Would it be polite of me to travel to your quiet bungalow and spend a few precious moments with your precious girlfriend? Do you have a girlfriend? Do you like Thai women?" Shogun looked at his wife and then looked at Franco. The Italian could not hold his gaze.

"It is not what it seems," The Italian said holding up his hands.

"It never is. Go on," Shogun told him. His thoughts focussed on a reclining Buddha he had seen as a young man in the Ancient Palace. The feet encrusted with mother of pearl. He had spent many hours staring at that Buddha's feet wondering if there was a metaphor beyond his grasp. The glimmer of hope on the dirty feet of a beggar. The wealth of poverty.

"I need more cash," Franco said. His words brought Shogun back to reality. "I will have to ask my family to lie. Pretend that I am dead. It is no good for me. Alexandra. It was not my fault. You..."

"I see. Sit," Shogun motioned towards the sofa. The Italian slumped into the seat. Shogun could see it all very clearly. The answer had presented itself. "Why should we pretend? Let us celebrate your funeral in style." Shogun walked over to a drinks cabinet and opened an ice box and placed two chunks of ice in a glass. Sometimes the beggar did have feet of diamond. Fortune hid in strange places. He looked directly at Franco sitting opposite him behind the table. The table hardwood with a marble

chess set on it. He often played chess with his wife. Never with business associates. To win or to lose would be foolish.

“Funeral?”

“It is how do you say, *finale*? You have come here offering yourself. As my dear wife often likes to say; it’s your fate and my destiny,” Shogun took a bottle of single malt from the cabinet and poured the liquid into the glass.

“But I am helping you?”

“Exactly, yes. That is correct. You will be helping me. You are giving everything for me. I am grateful.”

“*Un bastardo, un figlio di puttano.*”

“What did he say?” Shogun shot a glance at Gantira.

“He’s Italian, they have hot blood. Let him return to his own country and we can all forget this.”

“But, he swore at me. And you?” He turned to his wife again. “What do you know about Italians?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing.” Shogun laughed. “*Niente.*” He glanced out of the window and watched the distant flight of a passenger aeroplane approaching the island. “More guava deliveries,” he said to himself. “The island is being continually fertilised with this scum.”

“Please...” Franco said. “I don’t understand.” His good looks were pitiful. Like he had reached the end of a long race. He was not the winner. “Where do we stand?”

“A drink.” Shogun busied himself at the cabinet and mixed the whiskey for his guest with his fingers. He opened the cabinet drawer, picked up and then slipped a pocket Glock into his trouser pocket. He closed the cabinet drawer, turned around and walked back over to where Franco was sitting. He passed him the drink with a smile.

“*Pezzo di merda,*” Franco said. Shogun smiled again.

“Tell me? Was she good?”

“I came here and she let me in.”

“There are many things that upset me. My wife letting them in is one of them. Was she vocal? Did she wrap her long legs around you and grip you?”

“No, it was not like that.”

“So she was on top, she rode you?”

“No...”

“Listen, Franco. I plan to kill you. It is really quite selfish of me. I know. But there is a reason, you see, just after I kill somebody there is a sudden feeling of freedom, Franco. A sense of rebirth. Another soul has been reborn into the endless wheel of becoming. I light a candle and feel at ease with the world, but it is really nothing, the cycle of life and death continues. We are only spectators in the wheel of fortune. Life is overrated don’t you agree?”

“I promise it was...”

Shogun reached into his pocket and with one swift jerk of the arm he raised the gun and pointed it at Franco. He looked down the barrel. Shogun knew about fear. It comes to a man as a long lost friend. Shogun’s finger tensed on the trigger.

Shogun fired as the Italian tried to stand.

The blast filled the room. Franco fell back into the chair like he had been slapped on the cheek. Shogun looked around the room. A table. Chess board. Black and white pieces lined up ready for battle. Franco placed a finger on the entry wound and then looked at its red tip. Gantira stood looking at her husband and the gun in his hand. He looked at her and then the gun.

“Why?” She said.

“Why?” Shogun walked over to the Italian and fired two more shots into his chest. He then walked

back to the cabinet and replaced the gun in the drawer. "Dead people are less dangerous than live ones."
You didn't see this, Gantira, do you understand?"

"I saw nothing," She said.

"You will not betray me again," He looked directly at her, "Unless you wish to join him."

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