

Private Dancer

*Also by Stephen Leather,
published by Hodder & Stoughton*

Pay Off
The Fireman
Hungry Ghost
The Chinaman
The Vets
The Long Shot
The Birthday Girl
The Double Tap
The Solitary Man
The Tunnel Rats
The Bombmaker
The Stretch
Tango One
The Eyewitness
Hard Landing
Soft Target

STEPHEN LEATHER

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BANGKOK 1996

The Year of The Rat

PETE

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

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

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

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

BRUCE

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

BIG RON

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

PETE

I don't know if it was love at first sight, but it was pretty damn close. She had the longest hair I'd ever seen, jet black and almost down to her waist. She smiled all the time and had soft brown eyes that made my heart melt, long legs that just wouldn't quit and a figure to die for. She was stark

naked except for a pair of black leather ankle boots with small chrome chains on the side. I think it was the boots that did it for me.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nigel drank his Singha beer from the bottle and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Pete, let me give you a bit of advice. From the horse's mouth. They're all hookers. Every one of them. Pay their barfines, take them to a short-time hotel, screw your brains out, then

pay them. But whatever you do, don't get involved. Trust me, it's not worth it."

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

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

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

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

NIGEL

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

Pete seemed a nice enough guy. Bit quiet, a bit serious, but a few months in Bangkok would loosen him up. He'd been sent to Thailand to update a travel book, one of those guides you always see in the hands of backpackers looking for a cheap place to stay. It was his first time in

South East Asia, so I took it upon myself to show him around the sleazier parts of Bangkok.

There are three main red light areas: Nana Plaza, Patpong and Soi Cowboy. The Plaza's my favourite. Soi Cowboy is too quiet, the girls are almost never topless and they don't do shows. Patpong is full of tourists: the shows are good but there are too many touts trying to pull you into their bars. Nana Plaza is where the expats go. It's more relaxed and, in my humble opinion, the girls are prettier. There are a couple of dozen bars on three floors, all overlooking a central area where there are outdoor bars. The outdoor bars are good for a quiet drink, but the real action takes place inside. Zombie is the best, but I'm a big fan of G-Spot and Pretty Girl, too. As soon as we sat down, Pete started eyeing up this girl. She was dancing naked, except for ankle-length boots. Nice body, lovely long hair. Face was okay, too, but I never look at the mantelpiece while I'm stoking the fire, if you get my drift.

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

PETE

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

down shyly and extending her right hand. We shook hands, the formality almost ludicrous considering that she was still topless. “Hello,” I said. “How are you?”

“I’m fine, thank you,” she said. “And you?”

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

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Joy,” she said.

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

“Cheers,” she said, and we clinked glasses.

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

“How about I pay your barfine?” I offered.

“You want go short time with me?” she said.

It wasn’t what I’d meant—I’d just wanted to keep her next to me for a while—but I didn’t argue with her. Besides, if I didn’t pay her barfine, I was pretty sure someone else would. “Okay,” I said.

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

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

The hotel had been her idea. It was on the first floor of the Nana Plaza complex, less than fifty yards away from Zombie. I was staying at the Dynasty Hotel in Soi 4 but I didn’t want to take her back there as I knew that the staff would only gossip. There was an old guy at reception reading a Thai comic book and he charged me four hundred baht for the

use of the room for two hours and ten baht for a condom. He didn’t even look up as he took my money. Joy took the key and went straight to the room. She’d obviously been there before.

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

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

“So I not see you again?”

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

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

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

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

“I hope you come back to me,” she said.

JOY

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

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

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

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

He didn't ask me how much he was supposed to pay, and before we left the room he gave me a thousand baht. I told him it wasn't enough. He looked confused. I suppose one of his friends had told him that a thousand baht was the going rate. Most of the girls will do it for a thousand, some will even go short-time for five hundred, but I never do

it for less than fifteen hundred. And if they want me to stay all night, that's three thousand. Anyway, I told Pete that he had to pay me fifteen hundred, and he did.

ALISTAIR

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

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

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

he has my nose?” he kept asking.

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

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

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

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

correspondents around the region had been instructed to do likewise, and then Pete would collate them and then intersperse them with travel tips and hotel stuff which we already had. It would be an upmarket book at the top end of the spectrum to our backpacker's guide to the region and I was sure Pete would make a real go of it.

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

PETE

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

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

“I not think you come back, Pete,” she said.

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

“I think I not see you again.”

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

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

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

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

“Okay,” I promised, “I’ll give you the money.”

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

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

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

“All night, okay?” I asked Joy.

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

In the morning I gave her fifteen hundred baht. She shook her head. “All night, three thousand baht,” she said. My heart fell. I’d sort of hoped that she felt that I was more than just a customer. I gave her the extra money.

“What about your gold?” she asked. I gave her another three thousand baht.

She put her hands together as if she were praying and pressed her fingertips to her chin. It was a ‘wai,’ a Thai gesture of respect or thanks.

Any annoyance I felt at her demands for money evaporated. She looked so cute, so childlike, that I just wanted to gather her up in my arms and protect her from the world that had forced her to sell her body.

JOY

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

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

The other thing farangs like is for you to laugh at the stupid jokes

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

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

NIGEL

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

The movie was a fairytale. An urban myth, a work of fiction. It never happens. It doesn't happen in LA and it doesn't happen in Thailand. It certainly doesn't happen in the go-go bars. That movie's got a lot to answer for. It raises expectations that you can find love with a prostitute. Well you can't. I never have, anyway. And I don't know anyone who

has. I do know dozens of guys who've married bargirls. Some of them took the girls back to the UK, some of them set up homes in Thailand. Without exception it's ended in disaster. Not just broken hearts, but major financial losses, too. You can't trust them, you really can't. You can't leave them alone for a minute: they'll sell you out without a second thought. There isn't a Thai bargirl alive who can't turn around a piece of land or a property within forty-eight hours. I've warned Pete countless times but I can see it's going in one ear and out of the other. I wish there was some way I could explain to him how dangerous it can be getting emotionally involved with a bargirl, but like all of us he's gonna have to learn from his own mistakes.

PETE

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

A couple of days back I was sitting with her in the bar when a

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

PETE

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

I asked her why.

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

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

She nodded. “Big problem, Pete. Really.”

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

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

There were already a dozen or so people in the VIP room when we got there, mainly Thai men in their twenties. Two of them were Joy’s brothers, the rest were cousins, she said. They were introduced to Nigel and me, but they seemed more interested in the bottles of Johnnie Walker Black Label that Joy had ordered. I was older than all of them but none waived me and I wasn’t sure if that was a sign of disrespect or because they thought that as a farang I wouldn’t expect it. Joy’s father arrived after

an hour and I waived him. He seemed surprised and I got a half-hearted wai in return. Joy had said that he was sixty but he looked older, a thin, wizened man with bony arms. He sat in a corner and one of Joy’s cousins handed him a tumbler of whisky.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

JOY

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

Park waited outside until Pete and Nigel went. I saw him sitting on his motorcycle when I went out to get a taxi for the farangs and he started pulling faces, trying to make me laugh. I met Park the first week I worked in Zombie. He's one of the DJs, he's twenty-five and he comes from Udon Thani. His sister works in Spicy-a-go-go and she's become quite a good

friend of mine. Park's really good-looking and he's got a great body. He and his friends work out at a gym during the day and they're always comparing muscles. It's really funny when they get competitive about their looks, they're as bad as girls sometimes. His stomach is really hard, like a turtle's shell, and his skin is really smooth. He was going out with another dancer when he met me but he chucked her and said he wanted to go out with me instead. At first I said no but he kept after me, pestering me until I said okay. The reason I said no was because he had a bit of a reputation. Mon warned me about him, she said that Park made a beeline for any new girl if she was pretty and young, but he told me that I was different, that he really liked me. He didn't try anything on the first time we went out, either. We went for a meal after work. He didn't have any money so I had to pay, but I didn't mind that. The DJs earn even less than the waitresses, and besides, I'd been short time with an old Swiss guy and he'd been really generous so I had two thousand baht.

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

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

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

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