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RED-LIGHT NIGHTS, BANGKOK DAZE

Sex journalist William Sparrow grew up in Chicago and worked in a variety of industries before relocating to Asia in 2002. He became the Editor in Chief of one of Asia's leading sexuality websites, *Asian Sex Gazette* (www.asiansexgazette.com), and began reporting on issues of sexuality from cities across Asia. William has a regular column, "Sex in Depth", in *Asia Times Online* (www.atimes.com). He currently lives in Thailand with his wife and daughter.

Red-light Nights, Bangkok Daze is his first book.

Red-light Nights, Bangkok Daze

William Sparrow



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Published in 2008
by Monsoon Books Pte Ltd
52 Telok Blangah Road
#03-05 Telok Blangah House
Singapore 098829
www.monsoonbooks.com.sg

ISBN: 978-981-08-1076-4
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National Library Board Singapore Cataloguing in Publication Data
Sparrow, William, 1975-
Red-light nights, Bangkok daze / William Sparrow. – Singapore :
Monsoon Books, 2008.
p. cm.
ISBN-13 : 978-981-08-1076-4 (pbk.)

1. Sex-oriented businesses – Asia. 2. Prostitution – Asia.
3. Prostitutes – Asia. I. Title.

HQ231.85
306.74095 -- dc22 OCN244366449

Printed in Singapore

12 11 10 09 08 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

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Foreword

Welcome to William's world

By Simon Tearack

According to the world's oldest cliché, prostitution is the world's oldest profession. The claim is unverifiable, but whatever the truth, it seems likely that mere hours after an unnamed cave woman hit on the idea of exchanging sex for an extra chunk of mastodon steak, an enormous peripheral industry arose consisting pimps, *mamasans*, and publicists. Moments after that an even larger industry of tribal and religious leaders, living off the avails of suppressing the sex industry and harassing its purveyors and their clientele, emerged.

Mastodons are now extinct; everyone else in the above paragraph is still doing a roaring trade. And nowhere are there more prostitutes, pimps, bargirls, *mamasans*, erotic dancers, and erotic masseurs and masseuses than in Asia; and nowhere is the array of anti-sex crusaders, opportunistically moralistic politicians, hand-wringing clerics, and contradictory and hypocritical sex laws more bewildering.

For the past few years, the multicolored canvas of sex and sexuality in Asia has been portrayed in all its aspects—the good, the bad and the ugly—by William Sparrow on his website AsianSexGazette.com. Asian sex sites abound, of course, but ASG shunned pornography and blazed a new trail: “sex journalism”, a rare attempt at honest, agenda-free coverage and analysis of

actual news events linked to the sex trade and sex practices in general, on the world's largest, most populous and most diverse continent.

ASG's rapid increase in popularity was quite understandable. Asia, especially East and Southeast Asia, had long been known to Westerners as a sexual playground, with its vast platoons of friendly, extremely attractive women falling over one another to please male (and female, if the price was right) sex tourists. Yet mainstream media only reported the negative, sensational stories—about horrors such as under-age prostitution, human trafficking, disease, and sex slavery—to a degree that any objective traveler knew was misleading at best and sheer malicious fantasy at worst. Yes, those vices exist, but the bulk of the sex trade in Asia is nothing more than the business of pleasure, with well-paid sellers and satisfied customers. On ASG, writers had no need to fear reporting this simple truth, and those whose sensibilities, religion, morality or sheer hypocrisy made the truth unpalatable had no need to log on.

William Sparrow himself, like several of the site's contributors, has no bones about admitting his own indulgences in the sexual smorgasbords of Thailand, the Philippines, Hong Kong, China, and elsewhere. They, like many visitors to and expatriates in Asia, believe that recreational sex is a commodity to be bought and sold like any other human indulgence as long as it does no harm to the seller, or the buyer. And vicarious pleasures are indeed to be found on ASG by the envious Internet voyeur.

However, ASG shuns nothing but censorship itself, and its readers will find intermixed with stories of the brothels in Shenzhen, Singapore, Tokyo, Phnom Penh, and Mumbai, the lesbian shows in Bangkok's Soi Cowboy, the titillations of Makati's P Burgos Street, the high-rolling hookers of Wan Chai, Macau, and Singapore, and the gentle yet courageous sensuality of the

horny Muslim women of Malaysia and Indonesia, the darker tales of sordid exploitation, of poverty, sexually transmitted disease, lack of sex education, and of the malfeasance and incompetence of governments and their accomplices in organized religion.

This book excerpts the writings of William Sparrow himself, and so in a sense only gives a taste of the panorama to be found on his websites (ASG has recently launched affiliate sites concentrating on other regions of the world), or on the general Asian news-analysis site Asia Times Online which, at the time of writing, runs a regular column by Sparrow. But it is bittersweet, not for the timid of palate.

As a self-styled sex journalist, Sparrow tells all. This is not about personal conquests; human frailty is as much a part of sexual adventurism as prowess is. Nor does he fall into the all-too-common trap of worshiping the women (Sparrow is proudly heterosexual) of the sex trade, though many sexually oppressed Western men fleeing the “liberated” but frigid, overindulged and often overweight creatures who dominate the “other half” back home understandably mistake Asia’s nubile little sex machines for goddesses. No, divine though they seem, they are human too, often falling prey to greed, or malice, or just plain stupidity (“But you said you would marry me if I sucked it!”).

The aim of journalism is above all to inform, hopefully to educate, certainly to entertain. This book, it is hoped, does all of the above.

Simon Tearack is the nom de plume of a Western journalist now living in Thailand who has edited and contributed articles to Asian Sex Gazette.

Red-light nights, Bangkok daze

Spending an evening in the tawdry red-light districts of Bangkok with old friends and new ones, some may begin to ponder the decadence and depravity on offer and the people who participate in one of Asia's most renowned sex tourist destinations.

Promised a tour and a night out with the guys, we planned to meet in Patpong, the central red-light district possibly as well known for its fake designer merchandise as its very real sex shows, go-go bars, and beer bars, all teeming with girls seemingly eager for male companionship.

Pondering the possible value for this article and other "research" I was doing, I considered for a moment checking out one of the sex shows I had so far avoided since first going to Bangkok years before. The fleeting experience I had had was, in essence, walking into one such establishment, getting a momentary look at the talent on stage and then fleeing; to me there are just some things you don't want to see being done with fruit or Ping-Pong balls. Not to mention that I feel there is nothing sexy about the female vagina being used as a bottle opener.

Shuddering at the thought of that experience, I chose instead to visit a pub-style bar on Patpong Soi 2. Unlike the many beer bars on the *soi* that are of the open-air variety, this bar is set low, with few windows, and even at the height of day the bar remains dimly lit.

A homey bar where the music is rarely raised to more than a dull background din, it has long been enjoyed by those looking for a refuge away from the blaring discos and go-go bars of Patpong. Some use this location as a place to relax after an exciting night out on the *soi*; I was there to warm up slowly for the night ahead.

When I entered the small bar, a boisterous coo sounded from the girls, most of whom knew me, and they jumped from their seats to greet me. Momentarily, I was concerned for an older gentleman at the end of the bar who seemed to have had his pacemaker reset by the sudden and unexpected excitement.

The few patrons in the bar took a moment to study the newcomer suspiciously, but they decided quickly that there was little reason for excitement and went back to nursing their drinks. The bar's *mamasan* smiled and *waied* me (the *wai* is a Thai greeting of respect, made by pressing one's palms together in a prayer-like motion). I returned the gesture and then quickly found the elder *mamasan*, who had piled herself into a dark corner of the bar; she is unmoved by much and my arrival thus far seemed unnoticed. I *waied* her and smiled; she gave an almost imperceptible nod and the faintest smile seemed to cross her face. Elders and those held in high esteem or respected are not expected to return the *wai*, but I had now officially arrived.

The girls say Patpong is quiet these days. They would never refer to their bar specifically—they expect it to be quiet—but Patpong has seen better days. “Not so many customers lately and police make problem [at the] bars too much,” one of the girls who had worked this bar for years told me.

Interesting, because this very bar, for what it lacks in pretty girls, fresh faces and a happening crowd, has always enjoyed a certain favor, it seems, in the eyes of the law. When all the other bars have shuttered for the evening, this little pub crawls into the wee hours of the morning undisturbed by police so long as the

customers want to stay.

The inevitable questions about my wife, who is Thai but was notably not with me that evening, came quick and fast. I assured them she was well and sent her regards. One of the “girls”, who probably passed her prime at some point during the Vietnam War, tried in her sexiest voice and broken English to point out to me: “You in Patpong and go out alone tonight, I very lucky!” She groped me improperly just as I choked on a swig of beer.

“Not tonight, dear,” I said to her with a smile. She pouted, something not easy for a fifty-year-old, but she did her best to pull it off.

The girls here are friends and have helped at times when I have needed it and I have tried to return the favor when I can. I have become an adoptee to this strange, dysfunctional family and it is a relationship that I hold in high regard.

Over the bar there is a wall covered in photos of babies and toddlers. I noted that there were a few more since the last time I was there. I took a moment to count the photos, or rather the babies in the pictures, and came to a total of about seventy-three. These are the “bar’s babies”, the *mamasan* will tell you proudly—babies had by girls who have worked at the bar and since gone off to greener pastures, usually in the form of marriage to a customer of foreign origin, a *farang*.

She has been collecting the photos and adding them to the wall for more than twenty years, far longer than many bars in this red-light district last.

“You have baby, you give me picture, okay?” she said; it was more of a directive than a request.

Smiling, I confirmed that I would, though I did take a moment to consider that my wife has never worked here. I think. Anyway, this is not a woman to split hairs with.

I thanked them for everything and soon after draining my

beer, promised to visit again.

Finding myself again roaming the streets, I decided on a livelier go-go bar and figured that with sixty or so girls and thirty or forty customers, I could blend in and enjoy some anonymity. This assumption would prove incorrect.

Heading for the back of the bar while being groped by innumerable women, I finally located a seat, ordered a drink, and got comfortable. On the sizable stage before me twenty or so gorgeous—and some not so gorgeous—girls wriggled away to booming Western pop tunes dressed in tiny bikinis. I found that I might have chosen my seat poorly; this corner spot at the back had put me far too close to the DJ and his formidable sound system. The base shook my seat and rattled the very soul. But I tried to relax anyway, enjoy my beer and take in the “ambiance”.

A journalist needs contacts, and innumerable stories have been built on the leads, tips, and sources from people whom I regard as friends who have given me information over the years here. Yet a red-light district is also a place where a man wants to enjoy a measure of anonymity.

I didn't notice the familiar photographer making his way through the bar until he was nearly in front of me. This man makes his livelihood plying the streets of Patpong taking “holiday snaps” of tourists and selling them. Obviously these are not your average Disney-type family holiday photos. Many are lurid, sexy keepsakes that I imagine many of the men hide—if they keep them at all.

I was probably distracted by the girl on stage who kept smiling at me flirtatiously—she was an unusual example of a bargirl in that she had designer glasses and braces. Firstly, the expense of braces and glasses is often forgone by bar girls, who are there because of their financial woes to begin with; and secondly, it gave her a young “schoolgirl” look. I decided immediately that

she probably does well, very well.

Abruptly, I became aware of the photographer, who seemed just as surprised to happen upon me in the crowd. He stopped short for a second and gave me a respectful *wai*, to which I nodded and gave a smile. He waved, gave a quick smile, and continued wading through the crowd, hoping to make a few bucks.

As quickly as it had happened I realized its effect. Although a few of the *farang* customers in the crowd seemed to notice, the action was not lost on the numerous bar girls dancing on stage, or the nearby *mamasan* keeping a watchful eye on all that was happening in her club. The set soon ended and the girls on stage began to exit, only to be dutifully replaced by another two dozen girls dressed in bras and G-string panties. For many of those exiting the stage, I found that I was a target of opportunity and interest.

Four or five girls descended, cooing, groping, complimenting, and questioning me: “Handsome man!” “What your name?” “Big man!” “Where you come from?” “You buy drink for me?” “What you do Thailand?” The *mamasan* was poised nearby, I assume just in case I decided to yell, “Champagne for everyone!” She could probably issue the drink tab faster than a trader on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange.

At about the same point I became aware of the number of customers who were eyeing me inappreciatively and suspiciously. I thought I overheard a Brit nearby say, “What’s up with this fucking punter?”

The girls needed to be dispersed, and quickly. To my delight the “schoolgirl” was among the girls who were now attempting to suffocate me with their breasts. Grabbing her, I asked her name and offered to buy her a drink—all while speaking in Thai.

She seemed a bit shocked at my ability to speak her language, but played the part of being sheepishly flattered. It also effectively

dispersed the crowd. I had chosen my companion and they knew that this *farang* was not going to be buying a half-dozen lady drinks—this one was not a greenhorn.

“*Farang chalat mak!* (This foreigner knows too much!)” one of the girls scoffed playfully as she walked off.

Left alone with the schoolgirl, I was able to grab the opportunity to probe a little deeper with an impromptu interview. After some initial niceties and her taking the requisite six seconds to drain a tiny US\$3 Coke and request another, which I provided, she finally started to answer some basic questions.

“I am from Bangkok,” she said rather assertively, which in itself was also a rarity. Most of the girls working the bars are from farms outside the city, from the farmlands of the Northeast known as Isaan, and are seeking an escape from rural poverty. But it was plausible; from all initial indicators she was more refined and worldly than most other bargirls and her complexion was nearly white—something the tanned farm girls hold in high regard as a beauty and status symbol.

To queries about family she was less forthcoming, but I soon stumbled on to a subject that she was keen to speak about: education. She claimed to be a student in one of the local universities, where she studied travel, wanting to become a stewardess, or at least work for an airline.

“If not, maybe I can become a travel agent. I want to travel!” Her story seemed to be panning out, her English was among the most flawless examples I had encountered in a long time, and at her age had to be a product of good education. If not, she had this role-play thing down cold, and was milking the schoolgirl angle for all it was worth.

“My parents took me to Malaysia when I was younger—it is very beautiful. We also have gone to Cambodia. I did not like it too much. Cambodia is very poor,” she told me authoritatively,

as if I might not have heard. Many Thais struggle against poverty so international travel, even to neighboring countries, is unheard of, so once again her story seemed solid.

“So why are you working in a bar? Is it to pay for school?” I asked.

Apparently such a notion—that a bargirl could make enough funds to pay for a university education—was absurd, and just the look on her face told me this.

“No, my parents pay for school. But they cannot pay for much more. I work here to take care of myself and buy things I want. I bought these glasses and had my teeth set,” she said, fingering her glasses and smiling broadly. “What do you think? Good?”

I conceded that they were nice. She began listing things she was thinking about getting; among them was the popular nose job to “fix” her flat Thai nose and make it more beautiful like a Westerner’s nose with a more pronounced bridge.

Suddenly some kind of unheard “two-minute warning” sounded and she realized she had to go dance again. At about the same time, she also noticed she had barely touched her second lady drink—all this talking had led her to neglect her duty of draining as many of these as possible on a customer’s tab (for which she would receive a commission).

Seeing this coming, I pressed a couple of folded THB100 notes into her hands. She smiled a metallic beam of joy, hugged me roughly, and then began bouncing a few times in a manner that is hard to explain before playfully kissing my cheek and taking to the stage.

It was a good time to make an escape. I settled with the *mamasan*, who was disapproving that I had failed to barfine one of her girls. She looked me over with a final look of suspicion and walked off in a huff.

Something tamer was in order, and the guys would be

meeting up with me shortly. I settled on a beer bar, which is a standard open-air-style bar popular throughout Thailand. The girls there are generally fully clothed, the prices are lower, and the girls are usually not overly friendly in such an open environment. It also offered the advantage of allowing me to watch out for my wayward mates as they made their way through the carnal humanity of Patpong.

I might have chosen poorly again—I have a marriage to keep together, mind you. A seat was had and a beer obtained. Since it was still relatively early, the bar had few girls. Most of them hovered around me, testing my Thai, cooling me off with a little moist towel. Massaging, planting an occasional kiss and, as always, groping. With girls in places like this I use Thai immediately and it generally impresses them. It also, as planned, led to the inevitable loaded question: “How did you learn Thai?”

“*Mee mia khon Thai laeo* (I have a Thai wife already),” I said, flashing the wedding band as evidence

There was some initial disappointment, but it was fleeting. The girls regrouped and tried a secondary approach.

“*Mai bpen rai, chan bpen mia noi khun kuen nee* (Don’t worry about it, I will be your ‘small wife’ tonight),” one of the notably cutest and sexiest girls proclaimed.

A weary growl escaped me—she was very cute. I bought her and her friend each a lady drink and for a few moments it stopped her from propositioning me.

Taking a *mia noi* is a practice in Thailand whereby a man takes a lover or mistress, usually much younger than his wife. It is reserved for middle- and upper-class Thai men, as the man must be able to provide financial support both for his primary family and his mistress (and each one after that). Polygamy is illegal in Thailand but still not uncommon in the upwardly mobile classes of the country. In earlier days it was not unusual for a middle/

upper-class man to take a wife of equal standing, then choose a *mia noi* of his liking, only to be augmented by a “slave girl” that he could “purchase” from a destitute family to work as a maid. Nevertheless, the maid could be called upon to produce children, not to mention sexual gratification of her beau as he desired.

This phenomenon gained some attention years back when some government ministers calling for greater transparency of their membership asked that personal finances be disclosed. There was an outcry among the ministers, but not because they feared it would expose graft; rather that it would make taking and keeping a *mia noi* impossible. In what later would become a soundbite of this controversy, one minister declared, “It is a man’s right to have a *mia noi*!”

While it may be a right among Thai men, it certainly does not apply to *farang*. Thai women seem to have figured out that in our Western culture, such a practice is taboo and thus forbid their *farang* husbands from having a *mia noi*.

The bargirls obviously know this, but it does not stop them suggesting the arrangement. But as a *farang* married to a Thai, taking a *mia noi* would be at my peril.

While I was considering the implications of having a *mia noi*, my mates showed up. Thank god.

As my friends started to arrive, I could pretend not to be taken by the cutie who continued to massage my thigh and occasionally kiss my cheek. As each of my mates arrived, they were greeted and attended to in the same affectionate manner.

I was told that Soi Cowboy is much more of a happening scene these days than Patpong or, in their opinion, Nana Plaza. So a plan was forged to relocate our motley gang to Soi Cowboy for more entertainment.

A brief taxi ride and we spilled out on to the glittering street of Soi Cowboy and went first to a bar that seemed to cater to a

Japanese fetish. The girls at this venue dress in uniforms similar to Japanese schoolgirls, but the key here is that one article of clothing is missing: the panties.

Girls dance sexily on the mirrored ground-floor stage and on a second floor, which has a glass floor. Patrons—mostly Japanese—sit below and crane their necks at the girls dancing above, getting a sexy, though fleeting glimpse of the girls' nether regions.

It is a recipe that has spelled success among Japanese tourists and the bar was packed. Finding a seat was nearly impossible and made the view less interesting. We moved on to another bar.

The next bar was more the typical go-go-style venue, with the girls dancing naked on a central stage. There were bar stools situated around the stage and booths set back from it—all of which seemed to be occupied. We decided the up-close-and-personal seats stage side would suffice.

Beers and whiskeys were ordered as the girls jiggled, shimmied, and danced seductively and occasionally flirted with us.

Soon the lights came up slightly, the music changed from booming pop tunes to a slow and more erotic R&B blend, and the girls on stage made their exit. I assumed it was just another rotation of the girls on stage, but I was wrong.

The lights were again dimmed and stage lights above from the second floor alerted us to a half-dozen naked women, four of whom were snaking their way down the poles set around the stage. Once on stage they began a seductive dance among themselves, with the girls paired off in two couples. It was a lesbian show.

The couple immediately in front of us was stunning. One of the girls was the all-natural Thai girl, small breasts, thin, long legs, and raven hair. Her partner was no less stunning, though less natural, as she had had a breast augmentation that, while not excessive, gave her a more curvaceous figure than most Thai women's. She, of course, had the same long legs, dark-brown

hair, and brown eyes.

The girls swayed sexily and rhythmically to the music, concentrating more on one another than anyone around them. They kissed tenderly, running their hands through one another's long, black, silken hair. Soon each of them was licking, sucking, and biting her way along her "lover's" body, breasts, and thighs. Playfully they feigned this foreplay a bit longer before dropping to the floor in a mutual embrace. They took turns performing oral sex on one another in myriad positions. These girls were not faking these acts: our stage-side seats offered confirmation that they were in fact performing oral sex on one another.

I admit I was transfixed by this performance, and finally one of the girls noticed me staring at her slack-jawed. She giggled and whispered something to her partner, then demanded: "Ice?!" She held out her hand to me and I realized that I was sitting with my drink poised halfway to my mouth, where it had stalled. I downed the whiskey in a single gulp and slammed the glass on the stage; she smiled coyly and scooped a handful of ice from the glass, took a mouthful and rubbed the rest over her lover's body while sucking on her breasts.

This exhibition of lust culminated in all four girls—two of whom I had barely noticed up to this point—coming together as four writhing bodies of lesbian loving. In all my years in Bangkok I had never seen a show performed quite so lustfully.

The lights came up and the music changed sets. I commented to my friends that we had chosen our seats wisely in this instance. The beauty with the augmented cleavage blew me a kiss as she exited the stage, toweling herself off. A new troupe of dancing girls took the stage. I needed a drink.

Meanwhile one of my friends was deep in conversation with a bargirl who clearly understood less than 1% of what he was saying, but she smiled affectionately and said, "Yes, *chai, chai,*"

at key moments. Another was trying to figure out what a bargirl thinks of South Asian men. The verdict: positive, if he can pay.

Another one of my friends who had joined me announced that he was leaving. We protested as best we could and even the random bargirl attempted to tackle him back into his seat, but he was off for the evening. A good time had by all, but he too had a wife at home and would be a good boy on this evening.

I assisted one of the remaining mates by speaking for moment in Thai to his chosen partner for the evening. I determined quickly that she was “just off the bus” and could speak little English. No matter, she liked my friend.

“*Khao naalak, khao phut Engrit faneg lao mai kao jai, choap!* (He’s cute, talks a lot in English I don’t understand, but I like him!)” she said.

I was happy to see one of the girls from the lesbian show approaching me. Was I beckoning her, or was she circling her prey?

I bought her drinks as we all began considering a move to an “after hours” nightspot, as it was getting late and the go-go bars would be closing soon. My augmented angel, whom I now knew as Ao, was keen to come along, so I struck a tentative deal with her and paid her barfine. My friends did the same and we now had companionship for the evening.

The girls slipped away for a few moments to change from their G-strings in to some street clothes. When they returned I considered for a moment that Ao’s outfit was still hardly appropriate—heels, an ultra-short miniskirt that did not hide the fact that she was wearing a G-string, and a shirt that was seemingly more of a corset, but it did accentuate her cleavage nicely.

We moved to a bar off Soi Cowboy that stays open until the wee hours of the morning. We concentrated on beer and the girls

turned their attention to food.

Settling in, I chatted with Ao. She seemed content with her free food and drink, and the THB1,000 (US\$25) arrangement I offered for her company and conversation. She spoke openly and seemed to prefer English to deciphering my basic Thai—fine with me.

What unfolded was a somewhat standard tale one often hears from these girls. She was from the Northeast region known as Isaan, her family are poor rice farmers and she came to Bangkok to work and help herself and her family. Thais are very communal in caring for their family. It is not unusual for a girl who plies her trade in these bars to send most of what she earns back to the family to support them, and even an extended family that may consist of children born to their siblings, but whom the siblings cannot support.

She claimed to be twenty-two years old and had worked the bars for three years. She said she liked it, but I pressed her on this several times. Conceding that the work was tiring and emotionally stressful, she agreed that it was not easy, but that she would rather be doing this—for the money she earns—than staying at home and working in the rice fields. Besides, she said with a devilish grin, “It is a lot more fun.”

Speaking of fun, it was time to get to an issue that, for me anyway, was quite intriguing: the lesbian show. I asked her if she liked doing the show.

“It is okay, we make more money, the girls who make [show],” she said. “And customers like [it, so] I get better customer, and can ask man pay more.” The devilish smile returned. “Did you like the show?” she asked flirtatiously.

“Yes, yes I did,” I admitted. What she had just said about her rates and customers begged another question, though; I asked if she was often bar-fined with her partner and asked to go with

customers for a threesome.

“Yes, we do that a lot too!” she said, rolling her eyes and laughing. Luckily her laughter and the bar’s music drowned out the reflexive whimper that escaped me as I conjured up a mental image. I found that she was looking at me coyly again—time to get back on track.

The show was so real and the girls so taken with one another that the next set of questions was automatic: Did she like women, or at least her partner in the show?

Her partner turned out to be a very good friend who had been at the bar almost as long as she had, and it was where they had become close friends. Apparently, the *mamasans* had chosen the prettiest girls and those who had naturally paired up through friendship for the possibility of working the lesbian show. I surmised this was to avoid rivalry and to build upon existing relationships.

“She is very good friend, but we [are] just friends!” she scolded me. “I like man!”

I decided to take a different angle. I asked her about Thai men. She said she was indifferent to them, but pointed out that they could not take very good care of her (by her standards, of course). I had stumbled on to something here, because as the conversation flowed she offered, without being pressed, that she had lost her virginity to a Thai man when she was fifteen. It turned out he was not very good to her and was soon having sex with someone else. As I pried more and more, I found that the experiences she had had with Thai men had been mediocre at best.

Switching back to women, I asked about her relationship with sisters, female friends, and girls at the bar. The last query bore fruit.

“There was girl who worked [in the] same bar as me. I went with customer one night. I like him very much. He good man and

very nice to me,” she said with scorn that only because I have a Thai wife alerted me to what was coming. “He come back bar one night and I go with customer already. This ‘lady’ take customer me!” she said on the edge of a pouting rage.

I knew better than to launch into a line of questions about the fact that she was in fact with a customer already—loyalty is for the man, not the working girl.

“What happened to the girl?” I asked. It turned out to be the right question.

“I don’t know,” she said, seemingly dropping the topic with a devious glint in her eye. “She not work bar same me anymore.” She said this with the type of satisfaction that can only be described as a sort of alpha-female standing among the girls of the bar.

Alpha-females, as I have come to call them, in the bar trade are the most beautiful, command the highest prices and generally fall into a clique consisting mostly of other “alphas”, or occasionally a young newcomer they see as having potential. The quieter, plainer girls work to steer clear of drawing their angst, as being on their bad side can make the workplace unbearable for the non-alpha. *Mamasans* will even cave in to alpha-girls’ demands, occasional unannounced days off, and prima donna attitudes as they are big earners and attract customers.

Another girl taking an alpha-girl’s previous customer is seemingly a capital offense in this world and behind-the-scenes catfights can be common.

The conversation came full circle to her partner: “So your partner would never go with your customer?”

“Partner” confused her for a second and I was rewarded with a name after an explanation. “No, Jin would never go with a man I go with already, and I not take customer her,” she said as a matter of law. So, I couldn’t take Jin, I thought; but when presenting this question, Ao decided I could, if I took both of

them and Jin wanted to go.

Probing her relationship with Jin further, I asked about their friendship, and was regaled with tales far too tame to relate here. But when something resembling the endearing emotion of love appeared in her eyes, I again probed their physical relationship. Asking how it felt for her to perform those very sexual acts with her friend, I moved tentatively toward the truth I sought.

“She is good friend, and yes it is same sex. But not same because show, and we do many times. Sometimes it feels good, but it is mostly just trying to do the show and have fun.” She shrugged it off.

“What about when you go with a customer together? Then you are with a man and I am sure you guys continue your ‘act’. How does it feel sexually for you then?” I asked.

“Sex with man I like, I tell you already,” she said, thinking that I might be drunk, or just not so clever. “When we go together with customer, same working, is more good two lady go with customer—man finish very quickly!” She giggled again.

Good, she was having fun again. Tempting perilously thin ice, I pried again, asking if she had ever had a sexual experience with Jin that was not with a customer, just themselves. She looked momentarily skittish. Maybe I had gone too far—she took much longer than usual to speak up again.

“One time we go with customer, he very handsome and funny, we like very much. He [was a] young man, but he drink too much!” She was pouting again. “He take off everything [and he] shower with us and go bed. We come out *horng nam, khao bpai norn laeo!*” (When they came out of the bathroom, he was asleep already.)

It was good that she was beginning to open up and had suddenly switched from broken English to Thai with me—she was talking to me on the level. It was easy to find out what happened

next. “*Tom arai?* (So what did you do?)” I asked playfully.

They tried everything to wake him up, short of setting him on fire. Apparently he had paid them a lot; they liked him and wanted to make sure that he felt he’d got his money’s worth. Jin performed oral sex on him while Ao kissed him, playfully slapped him, and slithered up his abdomen, grinding her genitalia across his torso.

“DRINK PLEASE!” I called out abruptly and reflexively.

All of this was to no avail apparently, as this poor bastard slumbered on and the girls sat back frustrated. Frustration that was mixed with lust. (For readability, Ao’s account follows in English.)

“I don’t know what happened, but I found myself in an embrace joking with Jin about the guy and wishing he was awake. She asked me if I was horny and I admitted I was. Jin did not say anything but kissed me and smiled. Then she started kissing my breasts too; at first I was startled, but I did not stop her—it felt good!

“Soon she was eating my pussy and it was too much, she does it in the show and I have had men do it and I cannot come, but it was only a minute or so and I came. I just lay there stunned for a few minutes and Jin held me. I felt really good.

“Jin knows I do not like to perform cunnilingus so much, so I tried to help her masturbate, but she stopped me and told me it was okay, that she just wanted me to feel good.”

I found I was having a hard time not falling out of the chair at this point. She once again noticed my slack-jaw expression and showed a moment of trepidation for having said too much. I reassured her it was okay and she was her giggly self again within seconds.

Not for a moment, even a second, of this evening had the fact been lost on me that I was sitting with possibly the sexiest,

personally demure, and overtly sexual woman I had ever met in my life. As the evening developed and she pecked me on my cheek, or dropped an affirmative hand on my leg, I was aware of the one hundred or so Western men who looked on, occasionally with jealousy—and possibly with hatred. As a Western man, I appreciated the company. This woman exuded sexuality, in every sense of the word.

Liquor flowed, stories were exchanged and friends renewed their bonds. This was not just a place for the tourist, or rather the sex tourist, but it was also a place where expats, and Thais themselves, gathered for an escape from the reality that is daily life. These girls offered that escape, through fantasy and the fantastic. The boundaries were indeed usually limitless and through a mix of money, monogamy, and maturity a limit was defined by the individuals themselves.

There was nothing wrong with these girls or the situation in which they found themselves. By and large—at a level I can say with a measure of experience—the girls were here voluntarily, knowing what was on offer and what was at stake when they entered the profession. Of the women I spoke to, I could only rarely find a one who was willing to have sex without a condom; sex education has been effective in Thailand. Asked about abuse, the women would not tolerate it; from the bar staff or from customers.

Am I advocating prostitution? Saying that sex work is the way beautiful young women of Thailand should unequivocally accept without question? Absolutely not. But I will say without spinning the numbers that this is a tourist and domestic industry that, with or without intervention, is going to continue to flourish.

Feminists may cry foul, anti-prostitution campaigners may decry what I say. I understand. Maybe, sometimes they have not actually met the girls spinning this trade and are simply pushing

a moralistic, holier-than-thou viewpoint. They may not have had the chance to balance the negative with the positive outlets and effects it can have for many of these women. In some cases it could even be viewed as an opportunity for them in a society where few exist.

I was again reminded that I was the prey and this woman the hunter as she leaned into me and kissed me tenderly and romantically. My friends had gone and we walked slowly down the now-darkened street of Soi Cowboy. The evening was coming to a close. Ao asked again if I would take her with me, again pouting. I kissed her again and got into the taxi. In a whiskey-induced daze I decided that it had been yet another very good night in Bangkok.