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I WOKE UP FEELING THAILAND.

By D. Bruno Starrs. © 2004.

Chapter 1.

CANDY.

Ah woke up feelin' ... groggy. Nooo, ah had not slept with some fella called 'Groggy'; altho' there wuz that night in '99 ... No, that is entirely irrelevant! What ah meant to say is: Lord Almighty, does my head hurt! Ah tried to remember what happened last night ... get my bearin's back on track. That's right, Jethro an' me wuz knockin' back that ole Beer *Chang* (which apparently means 'two white elephants takin' a shower from a red brick well in the ground' – type beer) with this Aussie backpacker fella who wuz tellin' us about the gold medal what Beer *Chang* won at the 1998 Australian International Beer Awards. His name wuz Barry an' he knew all about it on account of him being, well, Aussie.

"You know, Candy," he said, "Beer *Chang* was actually made by Carlsberg, and when they won the gold medal the Vice President of Carlsberg, Jim Napier, said,"—an' Barry put on this real smarmy voice—"We are now the market leader in Thailand. Awards like this are very important because they take a regional beer out of its background and show the world how good it is'. But the gold medal they were so proud of was also awarded to 83 of the 87 other beers entered in the same category by a bunch of enterprising Australian university students who started the competition so they could get heaps of free piss! No bull, mate! Makes me proud to be an Aussie!"

Barry went on, in between great fits of laughter in which he wuz bent over like some kinda dyin' man, tellin' us that in fact it wuz the more expensive 'Singha Beer'—or Beer *Sing*, as the locals call it—made by *Boon Rawd* Brewery that wuz the leader of the Thai market with over 80% of domestic sales. Man, did Jethro laugh at that information—he always thinks foreigners are jus' plain stupid compared to us Americans an' he figured this wuz typical of the Thais. What with him having all of four days experience in Thailand now, Jethro already considered himself the expert on South-East Asia. Oh, what the hell, I didn't care. Beer *Chang* didn't taste too bad to me, an' it sure wuz cheap!

So there we wuz wanderin' along *Khao Sahn* Road an' people wuz askin' weird stuff like "You wanna drink snake blood?" an' sayin' to Jethro shit like "Good time! Boy, girl, fuckin', no problem!" An' every café seemed to have big screen video with either *The Simpsons* or the Leo DeCaprio movie 'bout Thailand playin'. An' then we met this itty-bitty Burmese fella who kept askin' questions about Texas an' if we wanted to teach him English, an' he kept on touchin' my long blonde hair—which ah seems to recall didn't impress Jethro none. We wuz drinkin' in this outside restaurant where this Burmese fella called Sawayark had no hesitation in pulling his tee-shirt up over his brown, hairless paunch for all to see. He wuzn't the only local who bared their bellies in order to cope with the Bangkok heat. They wuz like dogs with their tongues hangin' out only it wuz their guts.

Jethro an' ah just kept on sweatin' like pigs, which wuzn't so bad coz we'd been laughin' so much at the way the Thai waiters kept prayin' at us that ah'd actually wet myself. They kept on bringin' their palms together like a little church steeple and right up to their nose whenever show-off Jethro gave them a 10 baht tip, an' we wuz playin' it for all it wuz worth. An' the girls were even funnier; they'd do this little curtsy bob-down thingy as they did the prayin' part. Barry said it was called a *Wai*. Real cute it wuz an' Jethro couldn't help makin' fun of them. But we wuz from out of town, so to speak, an' kinda knew we'd get away with some attitude.

"Manna from heaven, my oriental friend," said Jethro, an' ah'd follow-up, shakin' my finger, with "Be not led into temptation, for money is the root of all evil ... an' the best drugs!" Ah don't think they understood we wuz taking the mickey, but even if they did we wuzn't gettin' back any bad vibes so we kept on jokin' around an' havin' a great time, thanks to that good ole Beer *Chang* an' also to the reefer Bazza—which is what he insisted we called him—laid on us right there on the table next to the footpath of *Khao Sahn* road.

But Sawayark wuz catchin' on to our hijinks, coz he spoke some English, an' I think he said somethin' to Bazza coz he disappeared and he kinda told us to cool it; which we did when he bought over some soup with these huge shrimps an' shellfish in it in this kinda silver urn with a little burner underneath. He said it wuz called 'Tommy yummy', or somethin', an' Lord Almighty it wuz delicious! An' ah remember ah put on my best Blanche DuBois Southern belle accent an' said, real theatrical-like, "Why, thank you, sir. Ah have always depended on the kindness of strangers." But the Burmese fella didn't get it so me an' Jethro had ourselves a mighty delicious free dinner. Course, everythin' we

ate so far in Thailand wuz delicious an' so cheap it wuz nearly free; like banana pancakes, *Pad Thai* noodles, chunks of pineapple sprinkled with salt an' sugar ... Ah wuz pretty heavy-boned before ah came here an' ah reckon ah'll be even heavier when it comes time to go home—tho ah ain't gonna try them deep-fried scorpions or grasshoppers. Ah draws the line at eatin' bugs! Then there's monkey brains, which the Thai people seem to believe the consumption of will increase their Intelligence Quotient, which it probably does—to the level of monkeys, that is. Nope, ah ain't gonna touch that shit neither.

Hmm, to think that only six weeks ago we wuz stuck in our trailer with no jobs an' nothin' to do but drink hootch an' smoke crack. An' then we bought a coupla cheeseburgers from the drive-thru in town an' scratched off the free contest sticker an' WOO HOO!—a two weeks all expenses paid holiday in Thailand. But it's a shame that Jethro swapped our plush hotel rooms for that half-kilo of speed on the second day. Oh, yeah, a half-kilo is about a pound; they measure things different here. We'd just met this sweet li'l Thai girl in the foyer an' she an' ah got on real well right from the start. As did Jethro, the sleazy pig. Ah bet he wuz hopin' for a bit of three-way action, coz she wuz real stunnin'—an' tall, too. Jus' like that Sawayark fella, she wuz quite taken by my hair. Ah reckon if Jethro wuz blonde then he woulda seen some action after all ...

Now, what'd she call the speed? That's right—'yaah-baah' ... Hmm, actually, weren't no shame really about the room, on account of that shit wuz A1 grade. An' all we had to do wuz get it home an' we'd be made in the shade!

Yep, it wuz one helluva night, but ah don't remember comin' back to the guesthouse last night, though ... Oh, shoot, well, Jethro'll remember—he never fergits nuthin' when he's speedin' ...

“Jeth, honey!”

There wuzn't no answer. Ah tried to roll onto my side but somethin' wuz stoppin' me.

Hey, just a minute: ah'm tied up in this here bed! With handcuffs! Padded handcuffs! An' ah can remember from the night before at the guesthouse that there wuz a creaky ole ceiling fan, coz we couldn't afford no air conditionin' on the spendin' money we had left, an' this room now has air con—ah can feel it on my boobs, which, come to think of it, ain't the only part of me that's nekkid. That dirty ole Jethro! But ah ain't up to no foolin' around—ah still gotta whoppin' headache!

“Jethro! Ah ain't in no mood for none a your kinky-ass games, babe!”

There still wuzn't no answer. Lazy bum wuz probably takin' a dump—he always fucked better after a dump. Ah twisted around on the bed trying to see where the can wuz; an' then ah saw it. Lord Almighty! There wuz six or seven other beds in the room, each with a blonde, nekkid chick asleep an' tied up in it with handcuffs! An' there wuz an IV feed hooked up to the wrist of each chick! An' there wuz bars on all the windows! Bluish-white fluorescent tubes buzzed loudly above me. An' in each corner of the ceilin' ah could see a tiny little video camera pointed down at us with an itty-bitty red light glowin' next to its lens. An' then I looked down at my own left arm an' there was an IV drip hangin' out of my arm, too!

Ah sure wuzn't in no guesthouse no more. Ah sucked in a big ole lungful of air an' screamed.

Chapter 2.
BAYARD.

From the customs lanes the passengers debouched single file into the milling, teeming mass of the arrivals lounge. There awaited my greeter. She was holding a handwritten placard with 'Ajarn Bayard Q. Threplewood' inscribed upon it, and the seemingly teenaged native Thai teacher of English looked me up and down with nary a thought to concealing her malevolent intent. Ice seemed to form on her upper slopes and her breath misted the glass partitioning of the airport waiting room. The agenda of the comely yet insolent wench was obvious. Put simply, she was to visually appraise this new native English speaker's suitability—my suitability—for the vacant English lecturing position I had been commissioned to fill at her *Rajabhat* (the Thai university where, as a pasty-skinned Westerner, I would earn around five times as much as her probably more deserving and better qualified self). Convinced of my inadequacy, she would then report back to her dean that my passport photo was a misleading forgery: I was either a long-haired hippie or a tattooed criminal and by sending me on my way she had saved the Institute immense shame and embarrassment. 'Saving face', I already knew, is of utmost importance to most Asians.

So here I was, self-consciously toting my ostrich-skin briefcase filled with the compendium of exaggerations and half-truths otherwise known as my resumé, my British passport (authentic) and my Cambridge University degree and academic transcript (also, well, mostly authentic): documents all verifying the details provided in my job application form and curriculum vitae, which was so long it made the Old Testament look like a haiku poem. But these alone would not keep me in the lifestyle I had grown accustomed to, through various loans from amphetamine-dealing former friends and a sizeable Bank of Britain overdraft, and I had pecuniary plans in addition to *Rajabhat* teaching for my new life in Thailand. Bouyed at having collected the rest of my irreplaceable luggage from the conveyor belts and having passed through customs relatively quickly, and filled with the adrenaline that accompanies the beginning of any foreign adventure, I was feeling confident and unassailable. The pretty Thai lady's arrogant demeanour hardly fazed me all.

In the spirit of international diplomacy, I offered the young woman my most captivating smile. As her coffee-coloured brow furrowed I could tell she was as yet immune to my formidable charm and allure, but was nevertheless weakening. Eventually, I assured myself, mesmerised by my masterful Lothario-like manners, the ladies of Thailand such as she would follow me in droves, like moths to a naked flame. Naked being the operative word ...

But her moss-brown doe eyes lingered, unimpressed, upon my shorter left leg, and I knew this was the moment to exercise my well-honed charm. Indeed, had she observed my superfluous nipple I daresay she would have turned tail and ran screaming 'Foreigner is devil! Foreigner is devil!' (or whatever is the Siamese equivalent) at the top of her Buddhist lungs. But my sickly-pale ribcage was shielded from her prying gaze by a chemise of the finest Chinese silk.

I momentarily toyed with the notion of casually mentioning my status as Associate Member of the Fabian Society of Cambridge to gain her respect. This frequently worked back home in Old Blighty with the elderly matrons at the local Municipal Public Library where I had sometimes found myself dossing down after hours between the stacks when my cash-flow was minimal. You could say I had a talent for society but no talent for wealth. Or, in more prosaic terms, a wealth of real experience but limited experience of real wealth.

However, my physical imperfections notwithstanding, it appeared my elegant demeanour and insouciance had wordlessly appeased her critical eye, and she refrained from pointing summarily to the departure lounge and thrusting my return air-ticket back at me. Catching a glimpse of my reflection in the window of one of the myriad of currency exchange offices lining the walls of the cavernous Don Muang airport foyer, I paused for a moment of genuflection and was able to appreciate my dependably elegant sartorial visage. Ah, yes; the good people of Thailand were in for a lesson not just in the English language but also in fashion, grooming and etiquette—British style.

Despite the cramped fourteen hours in a Thai International airliner from cosmopolitan and genteel Heathrow (squeezed between a 6' 7" tall Danish Viking-cum-backpacker, with celtic tattoos on his neck and wearing beach sandals and bracelets, to my left and a bloated, snoring Malaysian grandmother in an over-tight polyester jumpsuit to my right), I still appeared fresh and elegant. My embroidered silk faculty tie remained neatly Windsor-knotted and snugly abutting the base of my starched oxford collar. My pure merino double-pleated and silk-lined fine woollen trousers by Forsyth and Sons (purchased on the strength of a cheque conveniently dated one year in the future—retail staff are such inattentive fools these days!) were only marginally, even trend-settingly, crumpled. Forsyth and Sons, whilst poor judges of shop assistants, were tailors of almost magical expertise, capable of hiding even the most prominent of back humps, paunches or pigeon chests with their custom-made attire. Indeed, when seated, or at least from a great distance, my withered leg might possibly pass

unnoticed, thanks to their excellent stitching. My recommendations to fellow expatriates alone should be sufficient to cancel any debt to their firm.

The flight had been long but I made the most of it. As soon as the plane took off I rushed to the toilet to stock up on soaps, razors, tissues, cologne and combs. Returning to my seat, I ordered the diabetic meal. As expected, they didn't know what diabetic food actually was and brought me everything on the menu. So I got both the chicken *and* the beef. Satiated, I regarded my fellow passengers with critical disdain—male Westerners, mostly, with big dumb bellies, shorts with many pockets, vests with even more pockets, long socks and sandals. Compared to them I looked like neither English football hooligan nor aging German sex tourist, examples of which I knew were in distasteful abundance in this airport I now found myself in, the last obstacle to the world renown temple of hedonism that is Bangkok. There is blood, and other substances, in the alcohol running through their veins, and these men are not in Thailand for altruistic reasons: no seekers of spiritual enlightenment or budding Buddhist monks amongst these despicable sex tourists. The few exceptions were the overly zealous, closed-minded and horribly fanatical missionaries, such as the teenage Elders from Salt Lake City, ready to mount their bicycles, travel to far-flung reaches of the Kingdom and attempt to convert the happy Buddhists into unhappy Mormons. Then there were the oil workers and their ilk, whom, deprived of alcohol and feminine companionship due to the isolated geography of their workplaces, descended upon Bangkok on very personal missions to make wholehearted demonstrations against sobriety and clean living.

I was brother to none of these religious freaks and desperadoes, nor was I here for the cheap sex and drugs. I was here to teach English and would soon be leaving Bangkok and its tourists behind. Still, it is an interesting city. My internet research, which had also landed me this teaching position, advertised on www.ajarn.com, told me there were no official population census numbers for Bangkok because some two million come and go according to how their crops are faring back on their farms. If the rice is still growing then there's nothing else to do but sojourn to the Big Mango. Nevertheless, the figure of 11 million is often bandied about.

My research had also impressed upon me the importance of looking business-like to the petty officialdom of Thai academia, despite the drain on my financial reserves such efforts would effect. As a result, I was the Gentlemen's Quarterly magazine column 'More dash than cash' personified, and this, I knew, would prove my saving grace come what bureaucracy may. British thrift shops were unexplored goldmines to the sartorially select such as I.

So here I finally was, well-dressed and with a respectable mission, in the capital city of Thailand. Established in 1782 after the fall of the former capital, Ayutthaya, to the hated Burmese in 1767 (the ruins of which are located 76 kilometres away), Bangkok's full Thai name is a mouthful; a mouthful that will leave you struggling for air:

Krungthepmahanakhonamornrattanakosinmahintarayutthayamahadilokpopnopparattanaratchathaniburiromudomratchaniwetmahasathanamornphimanawartansatitsakkatatiyavishnukamprasit.

Needless to say, this is the world's longest city name. It translates roughly as 'The City of Angels, the Great City, the Immortal Magnificent Jeweled City of Great Indra, the Great Impregnable Capital of the World endowed with Nine Precious Gems, the Royal City of Happiness Abounding in Royal Palaces, The Great Place, the Immortal Abode of the Gods, the Residence of the Incarnate Deity, the City Given by Indra and Built by Vishu'. Thai town planners are not known for their use of English-style punctuation.

Apart from calling it Bangkok, foreigners also refer to it as the Big Mango, the Venice of the East (due to its complex network of canals), the City of Angels (due to its complex network of working girls faking angel-like sincerity), or, more pragmatically, Sin City. Thais themselves tend to shorten the name to simply *Krung thep*. Thanks to the Andrew Lloyd Webber hit stage musical *Chess*, it is also known as the city where spending one night will 'make a hard man humble'—whatever that might possibly mean. It is a city that fuses traditional Thai charm with imported, soulless Western urbanisation. From being the Venice of the East, Bangkok has degenerated into the Monument to the Toy-oh-tah. Yet towering skyscrapers of glass, steel and concrete often have a tiny wooden shrine at the ground floor door with offerings of fruit and sweets to Buddha and a multitude of animist spirits. It is a city of contradictions and was certainly not my first choice of residency—I was destined for the quieter, less frenetic pace of a sleepy country town known as Chachoengsao. Bangkok, with its crowds, pollution and rip-off artists, is a nice place to pronounce as you pass through (unless you go for the unabbreviated moniker) but you wouldn't want to actually live there. Survive there would be a more accurate term.

My research had also informed me that Chachoengsao is believed to be a relatively new town established in the Ayutthaya period around the year 1549, during the reign of King Maha Chakkraphat, for armed force recruitment purposes. There still stands, in the centre of the city, a brick and concrete

fort with several rusting cannon facing the river. Mention of Chachoengsao town was first found in the historical records of the reign of King Maha Thammaracha, when Thailand was in a particularly vulnerable situation due to the recent humiliating defeat by the Burmese. Phraya Lawaek, a Khmer king, realised an ideal opportunity to remove Thai manpower from there to form his own private work force. He led his army across land and water to forcibly remove a huge number of people from Chanthaburi, Rayong, Chachoengsao, and neighbouring Nakhon Nayok. Eventually Chachoengsao, also commonly called *Paet riu*, was returned to the people of Thailand and is now the capital city of Chachoengsao Province, occupying an area of 5.35 square kilometres. Its area is a low basin suitable for agricultural cultivation; especially rice, which is an economically important crop providing the principal income for the entire province. Thailand, of course, is the world's largest exporter of rice. Chachoengsao is the capital of a vast farming community and boasts very little in the way of tourist attractions, attracting few foreigners. The guidebooks all agreed it was an unattractive town of no interest whatsoever to the visitor. This was a significant motivating factor in my choice of destination: I wanted to get away from the tourists and off the beaten track so as to experience the real Thailand.

But these statistics about Chachoengsao I was sure my reluctant acquaintance already knew. Having passed my initial visual examination, with a cursory "Follow me" the petite, light brown-skinned woman turned on her well-polished heels. I struggled to keep pace with my less than eager Thai greeter as we exited the Don Muang airport, which my *Only a planet* guidebook informed me would process over 20 million travellers a year, and thence onto the concourse outside.

The humidity of the midnight Bangkok air hit me square in the face in the face like a well-aimed slimy fish. I recoiled as one would from an 'Iron Mike' left hook and took pains to wipe the condensation from my monocle in case, sight impaired, I were to blunder into the path of a hurtling motorised tricycle taxi—otherwise known as a *Tuk tuk* or *Samlor*. My new consort advised me to wait for our dedicated transport as countless desperate taxi drivers jostled like crazed, bargain-hungry housewives at a post-Christmas department store sale for our attention and patronage.

Compared to the air-conditioned environment of the airport, outside was like a sauna that something had crawled into a week ago and died.

"My God, it's hot! And what is that awful stench?"

"That awful stench", said my Thai companion, "Is Bangkok. Don't worry, the *Rajabaht* campus is not so odorous."

The concourse outside the arrivals terminal usually provided the first assault on a Westerner's senses. It was the beginning of a phenomenon known as 'culture shock', which resulted in the oft seen foreigner's unabashedly gaping mouth, very much in danger of catching flies—not from vociferous speech but from sheer slack-jawed, dumbfounded amazement. Thailand is so very different to the worlds they have left behind. So incredibly exotic, it can be exciting to simply stand and watch. But I eventually grew tired of leaning against the solid wall of Bangkok smog whilst we patiently waited for our dedicated transportation, so I decided to impress my *Rajabaht* cohort with my self-taught Thai. This was to be the first test of my ability to assimilate, and I drew a deep breath.

"*Khun cheur arai, khrap?*"

This innocent question resulted in my Thai companion giving me what I was later to label 'The Look'. This look says 'You are an idiot, a moron, and probably an imbecile as well'. I was as yet unaware of the frequency with which I was to receive 'The Look' from Thai people. Her dour expression eventually softened, fractionally.

"What did you say?"

Greater scorn could not possibly be packed into four mere syllables, so I smiled nervously. This behaviour, I had read, was perfectly Thai: smile when nervous or otherwise agitated. I was sure I had pronounced my query flawlessly—certainly according to my earlier cogitation. I repeated my question, adding the English version to be safe.

"*Khun cheur arai, khrap?* ... Ah, what's your name?"

As she duly comprehended my meaning she collapsed in a convulsing heap, with a peal of laughter like waves breaking on a stern and rocky coastline, before responding in her near perfect English with an explanation about my mispronunciation—apparently I had asked her if she was called *Aroy*, or delicious. I blushed at my incompetence and she seemed to empathise slightly. Her disdain abated momentarily and, after explaining the pitfalls in learning Thai from non-native Thai teachers, I learnt her name was Keeohwaa-aah. Well, that's how she sang it to me, in the lilting tones that make it nigh on impossible for *Farang* such as I to master. Her name, like my own, was to be preceded in formal speech by the title *Ajarn*, which means Professor.

But this touching moment of communication between us soon ground to a halt as her dour expression returned. It became apparent her extraordinary beauty was only matched by her seemingly arrogant disinterest in me. Indeed, after my initial impression of her tender years had dissipated, I became aware

of the fact that she was, in reality, a very attractive yet deceptively mature woman—probably about 35 years old; some 10 years my junior. Her hair was a glossy bluish black; the colour of sable, straight and immaculate. It hung to the small of her back like a shimmering silk tapestry. Brown, sloe eyes. Full, petulant lips. The faintest smear of pink lipstick and a smudge of shiny brown eyeshadow complemented her somewhat flat but exquisitely shaped nose. Dressed conservatively—yet somehow provocatively—in a white blouse, navy blue knee-length skirt and black pumps, her unstockinged legs were brown and slender, muscled in a healthy but not overly athletic way. A slight sheen lent her unshaved yet utterly hairless limbs a sensuality I was finding most attractive. And exciting. Very, very exciting. She was a no-nonsense kind of girl whose business-like exterior almost certainly hid a wild jungle-like sexuality. Or so my neglected and libidinous id whispered to my rapidly weakening superego.

I considered the possibility of summarising the abstract from my recent paper on Kierkegaard at the Cambridge Alumni Society in London; a place where I had begun to realise I was losing my edge when mere acquaintances asked me to lend them money, having beaten me to the very question I was intending to ask them. But I thought some small talk might serve my romantic prospects better. This was not to be, however, as the evil red devil in my mind thrust his three-pronged pitchfork with deadly accuracy into the soft yielding arse of the sleeping angel of my conscience and effectively drove away any subtlety.

“Ah ... um ... er ... I don't suppose ... Are you married, *Ajarn Keeohwaa-aah*?”

“Please do not talk, *Ajarn Bayard*.”

My attempt at sweet talk had failed like an ice-skater trying to glide across gravel, and I felt my confidence plummet to somewhere around my ankles. Her acidic reply had stung like a studded leather paddle on a bare bottom (ah, that is, according to reports from my close acquaintances in the British House of Lords—that last infirmary of noble yet perverted minds). Not a word more did she utter as we finally boarded the mercifully air-conditioned *Rajabhat* minibus that was to ferry us, and my twenty-two items of embossed Peruvian Ostrich-skin and Northern Australian saltwater crocodile-skin luggage (carefully and cunningly collected from the luggage carousels at Heathrow whilst their owners were delayed in customs), across the 80 miles or so to the country farming township of Chachoengsao.

The dark, moonless night sky and the reckless absence of headlights on approaching traffic prevented me, thankfully, from acknowledging the peril the overalled bandido at the wheel was exposing us to, or from witnessing his bloodshot eyes and maniacal grin. Later, whilst utilising the services of the ubiquitous motorcycle taxis, I would not be so lucky as I learnt the real meaning of expressions such as ‘white knuckle motoring’ and why the laundry staff were reluctant to do underwear for foreigners. But such is the life of an intrepid proselytiser of sartorial style and the Queen’s English that I, Bayard Q. Threplewood Esq. (graduate of Cambridge University with Honours in Inconsequential Semantics), must periodically endure when pressed to escape impatient creditors by taking up employment in a foreign land. For the moment, however, I was content to pocket my eye-glass, cushion my head on my folded Donegal tweed cap and doze.

Sleeping, I thus managed to miss the approaching view of Chachoengsao on the horizon, appearing like three or four fulgent candles in the night sky ahead of us. Nor was I aware we had driven almost all the way through the township to its very outer-eastern edge until *Ajarn Keeohwaa-aah* spoke.

“Here now.” Shaking me with the strength of a *Muay Thai* kickboxer, *Ajarn Keeohwaa-aah* stirred me ungently from my fitful slumber. She doubled her previously manifest repertoire of facial expressions by smiling—if the bared teeth of such a malignant countenance can be labelled a smile—and repeated, “Here now.”

I woke up feeling disoriented. Roused from my torpor, I squinted through the tinted windows and realised the minibus had achieved a state of inertia and that our surroundings were now free of traffic. Indeed, we certainly were ‘here now’, although ‘here’ seemed to be absolutely nowhere in particular.

I climbed out of the minibus and immediately stubbed my good toe on a coconut. Wincing in pain, I clicked my fingers in anticipation of an eager bellhop’s attention but, sadly, none appeared. *Ajarn Keeohwaa-aah* looked at me disdainfully—I was beginning to wonder if she possessed any expressions that did not convey displeasure—and pointed to a squat concrete bungalow across what appeared to be a semi-flooded paddy field.

“There is hotel. Bye-bye.”

Suddenly, the distant, eerie sound of a woman moaning drifted fleetingly into earshot. *Keeohwaa-aah*’s eyes widened with fear and despite—or perhaps because of—the unsettling nature of that plaintive groan from afar, a machismo-like urge to protect her surged through my veins as I

realised I was warming to this initially cold and aloof woman. She furtively glanced about and uttered her farewell again.

“Be careful, *Ajarn* Bayard,” she added, before turning away. She then stopped for a moment. Turning back, she shyly offered me a demure half-smile and lowered her eyes. “Not married ...”

And with that, the alluring *Ajarn* Keeohwaa-aah slipped into the blackness of the Chachoengsao night and disappeared. Apart from the minibus driver, I was apparently quite utterly alone. I shuddered involuntarily. The ebony night seemed like a living thing made up of strange creeping plants and foreign, unidentifiable sounds. Cursing gently I searched hither and yon in vain for a liveried attendant before flipping the crazed minibus driver a 10 baht coin and pointing to the hotel. He examined the coin derisively, expectorated on to the ground and my Italian goatskin spats, and commenced dragging two of my lighter portmanteaus through the mudflats, ploughing furrows that would no doubt assist the rice farmers considerably the next day.

Pausing to wipe the surly driver’s coagulating phlegm from where it had dripped onto my brogues, I eased them off, along with my silken stockings embroidered with the initials B.Q.T., and rolled up my trouser legs, eliciting a shocked cry of disgust from some unseen native hiding in the nearby bamboo thickets as they espied my gnarled gastrocnemius muscle. Uncomfortably aware of being watched, I gingerly limped through the marsh after my driver, hauling my cumbersome luggage behind me like Humphrey Bogart dragging the *African Queen* through a jungle swamp.

Slowly, as my eyes grew accustomed to the dark, I became aware of a five-storey high block of rooms standing behind the concrete bungalow. Not a light burned in a single window. Feeling more than a little unwary, I stumbled after the minibus driver around the corner of the building and into the dimly lit foyer of the *Rajabhat* Institute *Rajanagarindra* Training Hotel.

I noticed with disappointment the absence of air conditioning and plucked from my feet two equatorial leeches engorged with the blood of one Bayard Q. Threeplewood Esq., dispatching them into the green water of the foyer’s fish tank standing next to a towering potted palm. A huge white catfish rose majestically to the surface and greedily ingested the invertebrates. I looked up from the piscatorial banquet in the aquarium, surveyed the spacious foyer ... and froze. I had for all intents and purposes entered the innermost circle of a Dantesque hell. Between me and the sneering lout at the reception desk were dogs: mongrels whom bore all the signs of misspent youth and uncertain heritage.

A huge, snarling pack of scratching curs, their tails twisted high and proud like the corkscrew appendages of swine, they all three raised their gaunt heads as one from their frenzied hunt for parasitic insects and gazed at me with unbridled malice. I checked under my arms for the smell of fear and realised with dismay that I reeked of said emotion (well, it couldn’t be ordinary body odour—in true British tradition I bathed fortnightly, thus my personal hygiene regime was exemplary).

I adduced that bravado was perhaps the best strategy and, with my plucked and shaped eyebrows knitted in steely determination, sized up the pack’s ringleader. Aiming for the mutt’s distended stomach, I swung at the whelp with my good leg. The beast ducked my blow, whimpered, and then promptly attached itself to the drooping nipple of an adjacent bitch, who glowered at me with maternal ferocity. Her milk it guzzled as I strode triumphantly to the desk, proud of having established myself as ‘Top Dog’ so early in the proceedings. The puppy suckled on contentedly, oblivious to the lowering in status it had just received.

Bringing my palms together, I lowered my face and *Waied* at the ragamuffin behind the counter, not realising that in *Waïing* a junior Thai I had, according to superstition, just taken seven years off my life expectancy. Later I would learn that juniors and subordinates *Wai* the more senior and the *Wai* is not necessarily returned; a mere nod towards the lesser ranked individual is all that is normally required. Monks are not required to return a *Wai* from anyone, no matter how highly ranked—even a *Wai* from the King is responded to with just a nod. When receiving their morning offering of food, the monk often doesn’t acknowledge the giver of alms at all.

Having unwittingly committed my first social *faux pas*, I then greeted the desk clerk politely. “*Sawatdee, khrap.*”

The fool looked puzzled and casually returned my *Wai* with a shrug before focusing his attention once again on counting a lost umbrella. I tried again. Louder.

“*SAWATDEE KHRAP! POM CHEUR AJARN THREEPLEWOOD!*”

Abandoning his interest in the ownerless parasol, the youth slowly swivelled in his chair to face me with a supercilious air. He rose to peer over the antiquated cash register and inspected my finery with the same unabashed air of critical disdain *Ajarn* Keeohwaa-aah had earlier employed. Leaning on the counter, he muffled a snigger which I pretended not to notice. But as the sweat from the tropical humidity seeped through my vest, cummerbund and velvet smoking jacket, I grudgingly admitted to myself the oaf’s mirth may have been justified, clothed as he was in approximately 20 grams of breathable cotton. Finally it occurred to the lad to inquire as to my purpose.

“Good evening, sir. Do you have a reservation?”

I replied drily, “Yes, quite a few. But I’ve decided to stay here regardless.” Obviously confused, the boy smiled. I explained further, “I am the new English teacher.”

“Oh, of course, *Ajarn* Bayard, we expect you. Your room is 521 on the 5th Floor. Checkout time is, ah ...” He quickly consulted a manual, before continuing.

“ 12 noon, please enjoying your stay ... sir.”

His English surprised me, but not sufficiently to lose the upper hand.

“What, ho! Young man, be so good as to relay my impedimenta to my allocated bedchamber.”

My sesquipedalian mastery befuddled the dusky-skinned simpleton, who again smiled at me with all the sincerity of a computer keypad and laughed, this time with unmistakable contempt, before proceeding to preoccupy himself with the task of extracting some offending item from his ear. I sincerely wished for a canoe paddle with which to thrash the braggart where he leaned. Had my walking stick not been a replica of an antique, carved from the horn of an imitation narwhal and inlaid with a crust of what might have been emeralds matching smartly the green tartan of my cravat, I would have brought it crashing down upon the mooncalf’s crown in a truly effective English lesson in respecting one’s elders (and betters). I hold inviolate opinions about deportment and will brook no meddling with manners, particularly from counter staff.

Instead, I flared my nostrils and bared my gold-capped front incisors in a menacing leer. Acquiescing, the juvenile delinquent indicated churlishly to the lift at my right, whose entrance I immediately observed was effectively blocked by a pair of giant geckos skittering across the door. Their wriggling perambulations raised a deep-seated irrational fear within me—I detest all wildlife, unless it is served with a salad or mashed potatoes. However, my disgust slowly changed to perverse interest as I realised the fleshy reptiles, in a blatant disregard for the niceties of polite society, were, well ... mating.

One, pale and translucent to the extent its blood vessels could be seen through its scaly epidermis and with its suction-padded toes clamped firmly to the smooth metal of the lift door, was beneath the darker and, I assume, more sensually dominant wall lizard. Their undulating wriggles gradually synched into a samba-like wave. Transfixed by a mixture of repulsion and curiosity, I was eventually snapped out of my voyeuristic trance as, from the pack of foyer hounds, a yellow mongrel appeared and leapt like a frisbee-catching golden Labrador on a grassy college quadrangle, snatching into its jaws the copulating vertebrates thus accounting for what must have represented a sizeable percentage of the mutt’s recommended daily protein intake.

With the wild creatures doing the wild thing now dispatched at the peak of concupiscent bliss, I felt a freshly restored sense of my place as a modern day Marlow embarking on a personal voyage into the heart of this South-East Asian darkness (my Kurtz being English illiteracy among Thai university students). But would I too, I wondered, end up stumbling around some ruined jungle tabernacle muttering incoherently ‘The horror, the horror’? Only time would tell.

Nevertheless, I heaved my smallest bag of toiletries into the lift, entrusting the rest of my belongings to the sneering desk clerk, and hit the button labelled ‘5’ with a flippant air of self-confidence. Turning around, I jumped in alarm, temporarily dislodging my wig, as a figure loomed at me from behind. I sighed with relief as I realised with satisfaction the other passenger in the lift was merely my reflection in the full-length, ornately gilt-framed mirror. It was a source of tremendous reassurance that I was still presentable and, as had been proven by the previous encounter with *Ajarn* Keeohwaa-aah, could still charm the beard off a telegraph pole.

After 11 minutes the lift lurched to a stop on the fifth floor and I made my weary way to room 521. The key I had been issued was attached to a massive nine pound slab of perspex some 3 feet by 4 inches by 2 inches which, I thought, might come in handy were I required to defend myself against attack from another of those rattily-furred canines in the foyer below.

Twisting the key in the hasp, I opened the door, surveyed my accommodation and sighed stoically. Luxurious it was not. A narrow, single bed with straw mattress, plain white torn sheets and thin multi-holed cotton blankets; a tiny, battered black and white TV with a remote control (pristine in its original plastic wrapper); a mouldy bar fridge with a door that wouldn’t close; cigarette-burn spotted linoleum; two mismatched chipped glasses; and a cracked porcelain ashtray were my sole furnishings. My first night in the Land of (insincere) Smiles was to be spent in a hovel. Sighing again, I turned to lock the door behind me and noticed a handbill tacked to it:

‘Please to not take the souvenir which is belonk *Rhajibhat* Hottel. The price list is apply for the purchasing:

Bathtub	2500 baht
Bedsheet	1500 baht
Pillow	800 baht

Bath towel	1200 baht
Glass	90 baht
Vase	500 baht
Ashtray	90 baht
Remote Control for TV	2200 baht'

I suspected that, like many visitors to this hotel before me, I too would be tempted to steal the bathtub; it would make a lovely souvenir of Thailand. Of course, the difficulty of secreting it past the foyer concierge deterred any further serious consideration of the thought and I noted mentally the need to upbraid the *Rajabaht* teachers of Hotel Hospitality with the revelation that their training hotel, still needing more than a little renovation and refurbishing work, might consider the possibility of guests keeping mementoes the least of their problems.

After locking the door, I undressed, folded my shirt and trousers, changed into my fleecy cotton pyjamas, forced in a pair of industrial strength earplugs, and slipped on my eye mask. Fortunately, the exertions of my journey into deepest, darkest Thailand had taken their toll on my energy, and I knew I would slide effortlessly into my first night's sleep in the Kingdom of Siam.

As I lay between the sheets, with a thin cloud of mosquitoes whining a tuneless acapella over me, I pondered the evening's events; especially the fear that had so vividly shown in *Ajarn Keeohwaa-aah*'s eyes as she bade me goodnight in what should have been the reassuring safety of her home town. Her anxiety seemed very real but, I reminded myself, could just as easily have been trepidation about ghosts. I had read that the Thais are renowned for their superstitious belief in *Pee*, and the roadsides are dotted with tiny wooden houses on stilts, built to accommodate the spirits of their ancestors. It is deemed necessary to provide a place for these spirits, dislodged from the earth by building and construction work, to reside in peacefully. The 'Spirit House' should remain untouched by another building's shadow; an impossibility in the crowded city, and this mismanagement of the 'Spirit House' was blamed for all bad luck that followed its human neighbours.

These 'Spirit Houses' are called *Phra phum chaothi*, and although the belief in Guardian Spirits is not endorsed entirely by strict Buddhist belief, they are nevertheless tolerated and incorporated into the Thai world view. Perhaps *Ajarn Keeohwaa-aah* and I had simply heard the voice of *Nang tanee*, the female spirit alleged to inhabit the banana trees.

I brushed aside my curiosity regarding her fear and wondered awhile about *Ajarn Keeohwaa-aah*'s marital status ... and whether she had a dangerously jealous Thai boyfriend. These and other delicate matters would reveal themselves with time, and the occasional tactful enquiry.

My last thoughts before I eventually lost consciousness were, yes indeed: 'Here now'.

Chapter 3.
KEOWAH.

I didn't know what to make of this new English teacher from Great Britain. He certainly was a strange looking man—although *Farang* are always strange looking: dreadlocks on Canadian surfer-types; balding, overweight, almost unintelligible and out-of-breath Scottish highlander-types; straight-out-of-college American boys wearing baseball caps backwards, long shorts and surf sandals, shouting 'Yo, dude!' at one another and looking for no-holds-barred adventure; nervous, middle-aged and greying Australians escaping their overbearing and overweight Australian housewives, 2.5 children they would never see grow into the model citizens they wanted them to be, and house mortgages they would never live to see paid; tattooed criminals on the run from the New Zealand law and already stoned on *Thai Buddha* marijuana or wired up on *Ya ba*; even the odd semi-respectable academic trying to write the great opus of his life or some informative travel novel while clocking up some easy teaching experience on their resumé's before going back home to apply for tenure at a 'real' university.

Yes, I get resentful about *Farang* coming to teach English at Thai universities, or *Rajabhat*. It's so easy for them and they just don't seem to value the opportunity for what it is. Some *Farang* English teachers are so relaxed about their vocations they can't even be bothered getting out of their own way. And so, with their carelessness, they eventually trip themselves up: badly and irrevocably.

I especially detest the backpackers pretending they'll serve a whole year knowing full well they'll renege on their contracts and shoot through to Cambodia or Vietnam in three months or so, leaving their Thai students, whom they see as mere scenery in their South-East Asian travels, seriously in the lurch. They're simply making a slight deviation from the clapped-out hostels of Bangkok's 300-metre stretch of *Khao San* Road, with the odd end-of-month trip to the ecstasy and *Ya Ba* fuelled full moon raves in *Hat Rin* beach at the south-eastern tip of *Koh Pha Ngan*, an island north of *Koh Samui*, before moving on to yet another hedonistic, selfish experience in their new-found third world paradise. They've all seen Leonardo DeCaprio in *The beach* but aren't smart enough to get the movie's real message. Ask them to define a semi-colon and many will tell you it's an intestinal problem. Sometimes I even agree with the sentiment that sees old timer Thais label them *Farang kee nok*—'foreign bird droppings'.

You see, all a *Farang* needs to get a well paid job at a *Rajabhat* is a university degree—in any discipline at all—and a passport from a country where English is considered the native language. Thus there are graduates with majors as diverse as cinema studies and pure mathematics securing one year contracts to teach English in Thai universities and *Rajabhats*.

While many private schools pay more they also usually demand a Certificate in Teaching English as a Foreign Language, or TEFL (which, coincidentally, the private language school can award you after six weeks study and payment of the US \$1,500 tuition fee). But the *Rajabhat* jobs are still highly valued because of the many public holidays and three fully paid non-teaching months. Experience is not necessary and with 41 *Rajabhat* in Thailand there is quite a demand. Thus the variety in age and experience of native English-speaking teachers I find myself working alongside is quite staggering.

There is one feature that most *Farang* English teachers have in common, however: the possession of XY chromosomes. English teaching in Thailand, like nursing or hairdressing, is widely considered the domain of women ... and male *Farang*. Yes, they're nearly all male, seeking the cheap hookers or the famed subservience, docile submission and exotic sensuality of the hard to find 'nice' Thai women. The first women *Farang* usually encounter are uneducated country girls from the poverty-stricken north-east area of Thailand known as *Isaan*, who surprise them with the ability to subsist on fried locusts (*Farang* assume they are killed by DDT, which one would assume the boiling oil does not remove, and this shocks the newcomer).

These beautiful but gormless girls come to Bangkok or some other large Thai city with the intention of meeting a rich *Farang* and sending his money back home to their village-bound families. It is the Thai way for children to take care of their parents, particularly when they become old and infirm. There's no social security or old age pension system in Thailand. Too often, though, mum and dad care not at all how their pretty little daughter comes by her monthly stipends and the girls end up working the bars of Nana Plaza, *Soi Cowboy*, Patpong, Pattaya, or worse. There they half-heartedly dance in bikinis, or sometimes topless, and wait for a generous *Farang* to pay their bar fine and take them away for the night. Depending on their looks and luck, some girls can make a receptionist's monthly salary in one night (with a comfy sleepover in the *Farang*'s plush hotel room), but the going rate is closer to 1,500 baht; which is still a hell of a lot of money to a former *Isaan* villager.

Of course, not all *Farang* are bargirl 'butterflies' and many do actually find the wife of their dreams in the Kingdom. But, once hitched, they philander at the risk of their organs being sliced off for duckfood. The married Thai woman tolerates no infidelity. Nevertheless, most *Farang* come to

Thailand with high expectations of effecting the perfect escape from their previously wearisome existence to a brand new life as an English teacher.

Indeed, Thailand is also a most desirable working destination because of the prestige generally ascribed to members of the teaching profession. *Ajarn* is a title of respect, not just a job description, primarily entitled to lecturers or professors working at the tertiary level, i.e. *Rajabhats* and universities.

There is a 12 year education system in Thailand, consisting of *Prathom* 1–6 (primary or elementary school); *Matiyom* 1, 2 and 3 (lower or junior high school); and *Matiyom* 4, 5 and 6 (upper or senior high school) where *Khru* is the usual title for teachers. Students at these levels can be recognised by knee-length shorts on the boys and pinafore-style dresses on the girls. Additionally, uniformity is required for high school hairstyles: boys have short back and sides and the girls all have identically coifed short bobs. In a private language centre the teacher is also known as *Khru*; but *Ajarn* is the term most commonly used, especially if the teacher is known to have a postgraduate qualification.

All teachers, *Ajarn* and *Khru* alike, benefit on January 16th, the ‘Respect for Teachers’ day called *Wai khru*, which is always held on a Thursday; that day being associated with the planet Jupiter—the planet astrologers describe as the ‘knowledge star’. Every class has a representative boy and girl with a lotus blossom-shaped plaque of flowers especially made for presentation to their teacher. The class representative then comes up with the other members of their class, kneels and makes merit; presenting flowers, joss sticks and candles to their venerable teachers. Symbolism abounds on *Wai khru*. For example, the flowers presented to the *Khru* are *Kem*, which means needle-like, symbolising the wish for the students to be sharp-witted, and the *Makeua*, or eggplant flower, which always hangs low before it bears fruit, hence the students who mentally bow down to their *Khru* will bear the fruits of knowledge. The flowers, joss sticks and candles presented to the teacher represent the *Ratanatri*, or the three jewels of Buddhism: Buddha, his teachings, and the *Sangha*, or the total population of monks. At the end of the ceremony the principal ends the day by blessing a book with a pyramid of white dots, just as the monks do when blessing a new building.

In 1956 Prime Minister Field Marshal P. Pibulsongkram, who was the honorary chairman of the Teachers’ Council at the time, suggested that as teachers were our most esteemed benefactors they should have a day of their own so that students could pay respect to them. Pibulsongkram said, “Since our teachers play an important role next to parents, I would like to propose the idea to this gathering and ask you to consider it in principle. I hope no one will object to this idea.” Certainly no teachers objected. Teachers’ day was thus adopted as a way to remember the significance of those who make a great sacrifice and do great deeds for the benefit of the nation and for the people as a whole. The idea was passed on November 21, 1956, and the first *Wai Khru* was held on January 16th, 1957. This date was chosen because it was on this day in 1945 that the Teachers’ Act was first published in the *Government Gazette*, under which the Council of Teachers was established.

Teaching is indeed a noble profession in the Kingdom of Thailand; unlike some Western countries, where it is a derided occupation. But while many *Farang* teachers are men of letters, most, unfortunately, are men of bottles. Or cheap women. Or some other nefarious vice. Still, I was bemused by this one—his strange apparel aside. I couldn’t understand *Ajarn* Bayard because he seemed both disgustingly arrogant and, well, caring and sensitive too. He was quite an enigma: visually *and* personally. I sensed a real concern for me that night of his arrival when the moaning started, drifting through the still, warm night sky like the plaintive wails of a lost child. But everyone who heard it knew it was not a motherless child crying out for help. And everyone knew it was best to say nothing, pretend you knew and heard nothing and make absolutely certain you did not stand out from the crowd.

Would *Ajarn* Bayard do the wise thing and ignore it, if and when he got suspicious ... or would he too meet with an untimely accident? Or would he, himself, be drawn into the underworld that keeps Thailand’s head economically above water? Despite my initial reservations about the man, I couldn’t help hoping he would be luckier than the last foreigner. That Australian girl Cheryl was marked from the start because she stood out from the crowd so very much. Not only was she a female *Farang*, she also drew attention for asking the wrong questions, and she was young, attractive, white-skinned and ... a blue-eyed blonde.

It might not have been her we heard moaning last night, but I would bet the same people behind her disappearance had something to do with that heart-rending noise. Maybe it was some unfortunate Thai person not pretending to know nothing. Or, more likely, some unfortunate Burmese person not pretending to know nothing ...

I also couldn’t help wondering if *Ajarn* Bayard would ever learn the correct pronunciation of my name, or if I would have to let him know my easier to pronounce Thai nickname, *Moo*, which has the unfortunate meaning of pig.

I also wondered if he liked me ...

Chapter 4.
BAYARD.

Waking slowly, I rose from my sagging palliasse with a smile, despite my uncovered skin's meat-lover's-pizza-like complexion due to the welts from the bites of a veritable menagerie of insect life that sustained itself in the bed's immediate environs. I would have to write 'mosquito net' on my next shopping list. Bright tropical light—so vastly different to the gloom of a British morning—coursed through the threadbare curtains and dazed me as I took off my eye-mask and readjusted my hairnet. Lurching to the window, I thrust the curtains aside and peered out into the distant landscape this relatively high vantage point afforded me.

To my left, I could see gently undulating hills merging into jungle-covered mountains. While not high enough to be snow-capped, they nevertheless appeared steep and meaningful. To my right, only a few tall coconut and sugar palm trees broke the straight line of the horizon. Between the two extremes of my vista, ochre-coloured wooden houses on stilts were trimmed by the azure blue of the early morning sky. I looked down onto the already busy main street of Chachoengsao four storeys below.

There was a straggly bunch of motorcycle taxi drivers on the corner, wearing their tattered numbered vests; a Seven-Eleven convenience store; a Firestone tyre dealership; and, of course, the ubiquitous woman selling dried squid. I had taught English in China and Korea for brief spells before coming to Thailand and everywhere you went in Asia it seemed there was a woman on the side of the road selling dried squid.

Opposite the hotel a three-storey building was under construction, draped in green plastic mesh to protect pedestrians from falling bricks ... and falling bricklayers. The scaffolding was incredibly flimsy-looking bamboo and the bricks were tiny—no more than a quarter of the size of an ordinary housebrick. The mortar between each layer of bricks was at least as thick as the bricks themselves, and I made a mental note not to even consider investing in a condominium once I'd made it rich in Thailand. Unfortunately, as a foreigner, I was not permitted to buy land or operate a business without a Thai partner, which obviously meant marriage. Hmm, my thoughts turned momentarily to *Ajarn* Keeohwaa-aah and last night's unsettling arrival. On the other side of the hotel, I surmised, were the primeval swamps from where we had last night heard the moaning.

Still gazing outside, my thoughts returned to the busy scene beneath my hotel window. I couldn't help but marvel at the variety of strange and wonderful vehicles that were churning up little eddies of dust in the Chachoengsao street, or *Soi*, below. There were passels of *Tuk tuks*: three-wheeled converted motorcycle taxis with a bench seat in the back capable of seating two adult Westerners or a family of ten Thais plus their eight chickens, two trussed up pigs and a crate of Beer *Chang*. Each had a black vinyl roof stretched over a lightweight aluminium canopy, the sides gaily painted and decorated with swirling flames and numerous stickers for such diverse brand names as Jakapad Sound Project, Castrol Oil and Camel Trophy Adventurewear. Thousands of 100 cc Honda Wave motorcycles and even smaller 50 cc Yamaha Pop Dio scooters zipped in and out of the path of larger vehicles, their male drivers hunched over the handlebars with legs splayed while their female pillion passengers demurely balanced side-saddle behind them. Most wore no crash helmets, but one bloke aged about 60 was riding his motorcycle with a novelty fancy dress British policeman's helmet perched on his head instead. I wondered if that vain attempt at head protection would satisfy the less than inflexible Thai road rules ... Probably, if he greased the palms of the traffic cop sufficiently.

A *Soi* dog was cocking its leg and urinating on the as-yet-unstolen hubcap of a haphazardly parked Mercedes Benz. It looked entirely out of place. The Benz that is, not the mutt.

Now and then a motorcycle with a food-stall-cum-sidecar and canopy would slowly chug by, cautiously dodging the potholes in order to keep their stocks of mangoes, chicken curry or icy poles in place. *Songtheaws* (covered pickup trucks with two benches in the back for sitting passengers) were transporting students to their various schools. A wizened little man with a thick layer of white baby powder caked onto his face sat astride a recumbent tricycle as he moved the rusty machine forward by long strokes on a handle, looking like a grotesquely relaxed pervert masturbating his way down the street. The occasional ancient and battered Italian Vespa chugged past but I was most struck by the relative scarcity of cyclists—particularly after my experience of China, where the streets were positively clogged with that nation's mass produced 'Flying Pigeon' brand bicycles. I wondered at the Thai population's dependence on petroleum and how they would cope with the inevitably spiralling costs of fossil fuel.

Plunging fearlessly through the haphazard lot were giant pickup trucks; Isuzu and Toyota mostly, some laden with towering crates of pink, overfed pigs, their heads lowered as if in resigned acceptance of the grisly fate that awaited them. A constant stream of porcine piss showered the road behind these trucks, staining the clothes of the less attentive motorcyclists following. The trucks, pick-

ups and Pajero four-wheel drives ruled the roads, secure in the knowledge that everything smaller would scatter in their unyielding path, which, however, was still conducted at a respectfully low speed of about 40 km per hour.

One thing seemed to be the shared belief of all the drivers below: a stop sign was merely a suggestion to be heeded only if life and limb demanded so. Otherwise, and preferably, it was ignored completely.

There were my future clients: men, women and children who would eventually make me wealthy—by Thai standards at least—as they learnt to speak English via my unparalleled and expert pedagogical services. In Thailand, money establishes position and status, earns respect, and permits entry to the lifestyles of the rich and shameless. This is sometimes referred to by expat wags as the ‘Bahtability Factor’.

Indeed, I felt confident in this quest as I would be selling a commodity I positively worshipped: myself. Whilst some lesser teachers might consider me a pompous martinet, my exacting methods guaranteed results. In my previous term teaching English in Korea it was not uncommon for my students to admit to having learnt English faster with me than with any other foreign teacher they had ever before encountered.

But I knew one thing also: mankind was an awfully gullible lot. Scams, lies and deceits; that’s where the real money was to be made. And the Thais would be no less gullible than mankind elsewhere. It would be an easy matter to persuade them that their children’s future lay in bilinguality. And, of course, for some international business people and tour guides, this was true—but for the most part the people of Chachoengsao would be very unlikely to turn their investments in learning English into any profit. But one should never underestimate the snob factor: ‘If snotty-nosed little Somchai from next door is learning English from a real *Farang* then our little angel better learn from him too’.

The sweat I had produced in copious quantities throughout the night compelled me to augment my fortnightly ablutions with an additional showering. Removing the silicon earplugs and stepping out of my night attire, I gazed upon the bathing area, or *Hong narm*, with dismay. A pair of huge scorpions, black and shiny as obsidian, lay (hopefully) deceased on the cracked tile floor. Reminding myself that this particular establishment was a ‘training’ hotel that probably didn’t have room service, my hand hovered momentarily over the stained receiver cradled by an ancient dial telephone. At that precise moment the door bell rang.

“Loom Service,” a shrill voice rang out.

Pulling on a three-sizes-too-small ‘one-size-fits-all’ dressing gown, I swung open the door, bellowing as I did, “Quick! In the bathroom!”

The chambermaid, a tall and slender yet buxom wench, appeared slightly taken aback. No doubt I looked a little less sophisticated than the previous night. She giggled girlishly and strode purposefully in to my room pushing a gleaming silver trolley laden with a most welcome full English breakfast. The girl lowered her head deferentially in a strikingly sincere *Wai* as she curtsied and brought her praying hands to her nose.

“*Sawatdee ka*. My name Supaporn. I service you now.”

Memories of a Chinese masseuse I had once taught English to in exchange for the ole ‘rub and tug’ surfaced momentarily, as did my trusty member. The girl noticed the tent in my bathrobe and pointed at it, laughing cheekily.

“Is that work permit in pocket, or you just please to see me? Hmm, you want special service, *Ajarn Bayard*?” The lass smiled again, lasciviously, and said, “Special plice for teacher—3,000 baht.”

I attempted the arithmetic but converting exchange rates was not something the mental capacities of Bayard Q. Threplewood Esq. wanted any part of at this time of the morning. Morning glory, that is ...

And this Thai girl was Asian beauty in the rose-budded morning personified. She was round of face and dark of eye. Her figure was athletic yet not androgynous. Her most alluring facial feature was perhaps her left eyebrow, which she could uncannily raise or contort with the greatest of ease and with each position signify a new seductive, playful or teasing emotion. My mind started drifting to the tune of what may have been a sappy Air Supply song. She was a Siamese version of Sunday morning in the park with birds chirping and squirrel’s hoarding acorns. She was a bouquet of freshly plucked wildflowers filling the air with their sweet, overpowering perfume. She was the raisins and chopped apricots in a cold winter morning’s breakfast of hot, steamy oatmeal and I just had to taste her ... juices. My mouth was salivating and I knew I was powerless to resist.

Vowing this would be the last time I paid for sex, as I did every time I purchased the services of a demimondaine, I gently pushed her on to the bed. Ever the gentleman, I considerately brushed aside the cockroaches that were still partying on yesterday’s underwear and unbuttoned her tiny white blouse. Under the pristine and starched shirt was a depressingly tattered and frayed brassiere. The girl

had obviously not expected an amorous encounter such as this. I struggled in vain for almost three minutes with the unfamiliar Asian clasp before, exasperated, she reached behind herself and released the valuables ensconced within. Freed, her breasts seemed to tumble out like a cornucopia of exotic fruits despite their perky firmness, and I eagerly provided fresh support with my hands. I cupped them lovingly, admiring the dark brown aureole of each nipple. As I removed one hand her breast jiggled back into place and I then guided her right hand down to between my legs. This time the shocked gasp of a Thai local was not inspired by disgust but by admiration, and the strumpet suddenly became markedly more interested. She reached beneath the draw-cord of my dressing gown and I girded my loins in lusty anticipation.

“Ahem ...”

A distinctly male throat was cleared and I swung around to take in one of the more amusing sights I had encountered so far in my South-East Asian travels. He was corpulent, to say the least, with a round, bloated, very dark brown countenance spilling forth from a worn-out brown collar. Indeed, everything about the middle-aged Thai man in front of me was brown. His teeth, bared in an embarrassed grin, were discoloured. Not the ugly yellow of a chain-smoker but a somehow typically Thai shade of unfluoridated grey-brown. His face was deeply pitted with smallpox scars or the reminders of a hormonally over-active adolescence. On his chin was a large mole, raised and brown, with a dozen or so coarse long hairs flowing from its middle and resting upon his tightly knotted brown polyester tie. Cursed as he was with a face that would freeze the blood of Attila the Hun, I wondered if even his mother could look upon him without grimacing. His brown shirt was buttoned out of order, which permitted a bulge in his dirty white singlet waist to protrude slightly through the gap. His jodhpur-styled trousers were also a dirty brown colour and the cuffs were tucked into his scuffed, calf-high riding boots. Yes, they too were brown. On his head was a shiny grey motorcycle helmet and CHiPS-style sunglasses. This, combined with the epaulettes on his shoulders and leather holstered gun, made him look like a miniature brown Robocop.

“Meestah Bay-ah. Please to come wis me.”

Before I could object or question, two more midget Thais in similar Robocop uniforms appeared from the corridor, grabbed my shoulders and hauled me off of the girl, out of the room and into the elevator.