

Deals and Crumbs: A Novella Depicting Child Sex Slavery

By Graham Blake

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this capstone to April, who had the patience and faith to help me through such a long process. Also to Juan Carlos, who kept my resolve strong and who reminded me what and who capstone is really for. Thanks to Pete for the many meals he made so I wouldn't have to waste time cooking.

I would also like to thank my Capstone advisor, Qun Wang, who kept my resolve strong during the ordeal. Thanks also to Frances Adler for her hours of reading such long drafts, and Paul Fotsch, my Capstone Professor.

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Research Summary

Introduction:

When deciding to write this story, I began by searching for an injustice about which I feel strongly and personally. My family is descended from people who traded slaves. I wanted to address a modern form of slavery: the use of children in the sex trade. The idea of researching child prostitution in Thailand also occurred to me because it is a problem that is on the outer limits of daily life in this society. Many people know about it but since they are not directly affected, they have the choice to ignore it. My capstone seeks to break the silence surrounding child victims of prostitution in Southeast Asia. Despite the awareness of the issue already raised by many talented writers and established activists, there remains a laissez-faire attitude among this country's population.

With my capstone I wish to address, in a creative way, issues revolving around the perpetrators of the injustice, the victims who are affected, and the community of Thailand. Integral to my work is the post-colonialist relationship between Asia and “the West,” including Europe and America. The story I have written seeks to point out that our silence is partly to blame for the conditions that allow the child sex industry to continue.



Patrick Zachmann, Bangkok, 1991.

The Offender

One of my main problems when researching—and the main obstacle while writing—this capstone, is my standpoint as a white male. The

main group of people who travel to Thailand in pursuit of the child sex trade share my standpoint

as a white male, and this was an issue I didn't want to ignore. Instead, the story I've written revolves around a white male character that represents the epitome of the "sexual tourist." There has been much research done—and primary information available on—these sex tourists in the book Travels in the Skin Trade: Tourism and the Sex Industry, by Jeremy Seabrook. The primary sources contained in the book supplied me with much information on the sex tourists, including motives and histories in their own words. "...I can't find anyone at home. I've been through some women, I can't remember the names of half of them. That's what brought me here.... I love Thai women," says one tourist from New Zealand. Another says, "I think they're very sensual, very skilled, very attractive. They know how to make love by instinct" (Seabrook 21). This sentiment was echoed in the other interviews, that they're all looking for something they feel they can't find back home. Of course this begs the question, why do the men believe what they're looking for can be found in Asia?

There are many deeply engrained stereotypes surrounding Southeast Asia in western eyes, and these stereotypes can affect relationships between people. One of the most blatant preconceptions in this case is the myth that Asian women are inherently more sensual than western women. But the stereotypes don't end with sexuality; indeed, there are innumerable stereotypes involving Asia. Edward Said writes, "One aspect of the electronic, postmodern world is that there has been a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient is viewed. Television, the films, and all the media's resources have forced information into more and more standardized molds. So far as the Orient is concerned, standardization and cultural stereotyping have intensified the hold of the nineteenth-century academic and imaginative demonology of 'the Mysterious Orient'" (Said 26). As Said writes, many stereotypes are perpetuated by the mass media. Therefore I made my main character be of the Hollywood elite, and in the story he is

preparing for a film that plays into stereotypes. While writing this piece, I have had to remain on constant awareness of my own stereotypes concerning Asia, and catch them as they would seep into my writing.



The Victim

An important distinction made in The Sex Sector, edited by Lin Lean Lim, is the inherent coercive

nature of prostitution, especially how the child prostitution in Southeast Asia usually involves a “debt-repayment” or outright sale of children by their parents. Therefore the term “child victim of prostitution” is an important distinction from “child prostitute,” which ignores the coerciveness behind the unique situation of child prostitution. As quoted in Lim’s book, the World Congress Against the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, 1996, said child prostitution “constitutes a form of coercion and violence against children, and amounts to forced labour and a contemporary form of slavery” (Lim 170). The issue is quite widespread worldwide, and it is important to note that it is not unique to Southeast Asia. However, there are estimates that around one million children in Asia are victims of child prostitution (Lim 171). There is great demand for younger and younger prostitutes, especially as the HIV/AIDS pandemic becomes entrenched within the lesser-developed countries. Young prostitutes are seen as “safer” to have unprotected sex with, and very high prices are paid for virgins. The demand is high also

because of a belief (held mainly by Japanese sex tourists) that having sex with young virgins increases one's vitality.

Many prostitutes in Southeast Asia began as children between the ages of 13 and 15 years (Lim 172), although the mean age of prostitutes polled was 23 years. For the most part, child victims of prostitution were bought from their parents or family friends for around US\$800, dealt with like a loan, which becomes the debt they have to "work off" (Lim 180). To find a voice for these people, my story revolves around a young boy, 10 years of age, who was bought from his parents and taken to Bangkok to work in a suburban brothel. I purposely chose a young male character to illuminate that not all child victims of prostitution are female; roughly 10% are young boys (Lim 172). This left a gap in my story, however, leaving the voice of female victims of child prostitution silenced. There is an estimate that between 1% and 5% of Thai women are prostitutes (Culture 23). To fill this void, I created a relatively older character who broke free from the bondage of prostitution to become an activist against child prostitution herself.

The Activist

Much is currently being done in Thailand and all of Southeast Asia to curb the problem of child prostitution. There is currently a set of measures set up to deal with the issue on a preventative level to halt further trafficking of children into the sex trade. These measures include: suppression of the sex trade by increased police awareness and strict punishment to offenders; assistance and protection of child victims of prostitution; and steps for recovery and reintegration for the children and teenagers (Lim 202).

The activist character in my story will be one of the most important, because it is through this character that I can describe the current situation of ignorance and acceptance of child prostitution by the general populous, and describe the measures taken to educate would-be profiteers and victims. The activist will also aide in illuminating the troubles current NGOs are facing within Thailand and the surrounding area, concerning governmental non-assistance and societal ignorance.

Literary Factors

There were many different ways I wished to portray the characters and events in this story. I decided that an effective way to convey my message using three main characters was to use symbolism such as color, clothing and a general location where they are found. My goal is to describe what the character looks and feels like, and also how they feel in their particular situation.

	Color	General Location	Clothing
Sex Tourist (Carl Fletcher)	Reds/Oranges	High Status: Hotels, airplanes, expensive cars.	Suits, leather.
Activist (Sharayu Oonsiri)	Blue/Green/Natural	Middle/Working Class: Crowded office, busy streets.	Sturdy fabric, utilitarian.
Child Victim (Tich-Tahc)	Yellow/White	Lower Class: Brothel, room, sidewalk.	Light colored fabric, second-hand.

This is the preliminary frame I used for the interaction of characters within my story. I introduce each character with a dramatic monologue, set apart from the rest of the text with italics. These monologues are told in the first person and reflect what that specific character is most intrigued with. For example, I begin the story with a dramatic monologue from Carl Fletcher, the man who will go on and become the sex tourist. He is explaining about a movie he wants to produce in Thailand, and through what he says the reader gleans his Euro-centric

attitude and his stratifications of East-West. The activist speaks of her own history within the sex trade, and how she left and began working towards a world without a sex industry. Writing from the point of view of the child was difficult, but I ended up focusing on his thoughts concerning his father.

Conclusion

Although my capstone contains scenes of child physical and sexual abuse, I believe it contributes to an environment of change. The most important goal I have retained while writing this piece is the desire to break the silence surrounding child sex slavery. The child sex trade is an issue that affects everyone, not only the children who are its victims. By showing what might be going through the minds of the offenders, I can bring the reader to understand the interconnectedness we all share, and the responsibility we all have to actively seek positive change. The story that follows represents over a year of planning, research, and writing. There is still much that I feel, as an author, I need to do to truly convey my message. The following story can stand as-is, but I consider it a work-in-progress.

“Deals and Crumbs”: A Novella Depicting Child Sex Slavery

By Graham Blake

*“You see, it’s a love story really. A period love story. An English nobleman on self-imposed exile falls in love with an unwitting and awe-struck native girl. There’s both sides of the story, see? His: a gallant and wealthy villa overlooking the pacific with wild parties and fruitless searches for love. The guy’s always mismatched—really horribly mismatched as it turns out—and one girl after another is kicked out by his butler. Anyway, the guy just wants to fall in love and knows his true love is out there, but all the girls are just after his money and becoming Miss Duke of Earl or whatever. Interspersed with his wild life is her story told in a bunch of flashbacks—character development, you know—and we see all of the oriental girl’s life of hardship and work. She farms rice with one of her many baby sisters on her back and lives with her abusive family while she longs for the rich life she sees over his palace gates. You with me? Her dad hits her and her mother yells at her, and her brothers keep setting her up with jerks. Finally the two of them meet and fall in love at first sight but only after all these things like her family and his butler try to keep them apart. In the end, of course, they get together and finally kiss after you’re sure there’s nothing they can do to make it work. All of this back-and-forth is set to the booming backdrop of the Siamese war. Kind of like *The King and I* only without all the dancing and false depiction of reality. I’m talking gritty settings, evil landowners, public executions, a trip through the jungle, life, death, deception, intrigue. And rising above it all is the beautiful and heartfelt love between a man and a woman. Did you know we’re getting Robert Chase to play the lead roll?*”

Call me sappy, but I really believe in the old, romantic type of love. I just think it has so much more going for it. And imagine how much better it sells. People would lick a good romance off the floor instead of sitting through one of those dreary trial-and-tribulation love stories. But they don't know that, not yet. See, it takes people like me to remind other people what's important. I mean really, would you know what love was if no one had ever told you?"

* * *

The air conditioning only had control over the inner portions of the airport; the closer one got to the exterior doors and the waiting taxis, the more humid and heavy the air became. Blending in with the wave of tourists, security agents, con men, taxi drivers, professionals, and employees were two white American men. One was slightly older than the other, excitedly speaking on a cell phone, his back a little more hunched and his hair a little more thin. He was wearing a wrinkled gray suit and was already dabbing at the sweat on his brow before they reached the exit. The younger man dressed in a light brown leather jacket, had blonde hair, no chin, and long, thin legs. Each man was carrying a suitcase and the man in the gray suit also carried a laptop hugged tightly under his right arm. As they slowed into the bottleneck exiting the cool safety of the airport the younger man asked how he had liked the flight.

“There was turbulence and wind in the middle of the night that only let me get three hours sleep.” His voice was guttural, harsh from years of high-volume use, and rolled out over the sprout of a mid-life double chin. Eyes focused downward, he was trying to reset his watch as they pushed their way through the crowd. “Is it today or yesterday now?”

“I think it’s actually tomorrow for you.” The younger man fidgeted with his keys, folding one after the other around the ring. From time to time he brushed invisible specks from his shoulders, or pushed a loose strand of hair behind an ear. He walked just behind Fletcher,

shoulders stooped to keep a low profile. It wasn't until after the shuttle ride to their car did he say something else. "What do you feel like seeing in Bangkok, Mr. Fletcher? I mean, besides business of course."

Carl Fletcher paused with his hand on the black car door, a gleam of excitement entering his tired eyes. "The Royal Palace I guess, and some other things." He glanced at the younger man as he pulled the handle. "But we can talk about that later."

The drive away from Bangkok Airport seemed out of place to Fletcher and his assistant. It was a modern *superstrada*, concrete pillars darkened through years of pollution holding ribbons of cars over and around each other. The roads all merged with a sort of brutal force, and traffic kneaded into itself through a dense haze of smog, rivaling traffic even from Fletcher's own Southern California. Out of the fog were lifted towers of the modern city of Bangkok, one of the most polluted, over populated, yet still magical cities of Southeast Asia. Between the modern spires of office complexes and sky scrapers there could be seen a few hints of the city as it once was. Next to a modern shopping complex was a small herbal store with bunches of peppers, ginger, and mushrooms hanging from the window. An ancient Thai pagoda, its deck laden with horned yellow fruits, green and yellow striped globes of watermelon, and piles of golden nuts, slid down the river. The spectacle was lost, it seemed to Fletcher, on the schoolchildren in plaid skirts on the far bank. Groups of homeless over there, too, holding a silent vigil, hands extended towards a trashcan, sticks holding browning onions burning in the barely visible yellow flames.

"Have you been looking forward to your trip to Bangkok, Mr. Fletcher?"

Carl Fletcher sat looking at the pagodas and makeshift rafts floating along the river. His eyes kept unfocusing, following the blurred pattern created by the river, showing briefly as

shimmering pewter, only to be hidden as a building or bridge would hide his view; then revealed again. Fletcher felt as if it were rising and falling away, rising and falling away. His eyelids heavy from travel, he imagined it rising and rising until it overwhelmed the road, soaked into the car, up his legs, until he was sitting in the blue, hazy water that was still rising until there was nothing left of the Chrysler limousine except a black roof, which quickly filled up and disappeared. His eyes slowly broke from the river and drifted over to those of his assistant. "I'm sorry Carlos. What?"

A ringing from his pocket stopped any reply, and Fletcher's hand flipped open the receiver with his pinky and held the small phone next to his head. "Yes, this is Carl Fletcher."

The voice was shrouded with static. "Hi Mr. Fletcher, it's me." His office assistant Glori, calling as she was instructed after his scheduled landing. She had begun working for him a few months previously, set up by a Hollywood temp agency to fill the position known to Fletcher up to that point only as "Office Assistant." She was efficient, professional beyond her meager twenty-five years, and always on time. Carl's mind dwelled on her legs, and he thought of them as almost aquatic as he stole glimpses through his open office door. Almost a day didn't pass he wouldn't imagine having an affair with her. "Are you landed?" she asked.

"Yeah, just."

"Did Carlos find you?"

Fletcher leaned his head back on the rest and rubbed his eyes. "He and I are heading to the Hilton as we speak. Did Newline come through with a deal?"

"Yeah right here. Hang on while I send it."

A crisp click cut off the sound and Fletcher was left with slow classical music, almost making him forget he was on hold. He pressed the button for speakerphone and dropped the

receiver to his lap, listening to the music while yawning and stretching. He cracked the knuckles in his wrists and grabbed the phone when Glori came back on. “There, you should have it now. They’re springing for the whole package except they want to use their own guys for the shoot.”

“Did you tell them I already knew that?”

“No sir.”

“They’re idiots. Thank you, I’ll write back today, and if you could proofread and send it tomorrow morning first thing. What time is it there?”

“Uh,” there was a pause and a squeak from her chair, “About twelve thirty at night.”

Fletcher looked at the sun rising high over the cityscape. “Thanks Glori. Get some sleep.” He flipped the receiver closed with a snap and pocketed the phone. The river swelled up and down.

* * *

Check-in was straightforward at the hotel. Carlos took care of everything and even tipped the bellboy. Carlos gave Fletcher the keys and a stack of pamphlets handed out at the desk, including where to eat and where to buy, what to do and what not to do in Bangkok.

The Westin Banyan Tree Hotel was an expensive high-rise in the downtown, designed for business professionals who come to Thailand to spend money and bring capital. In his suite there were three rooms total, including the bathroom – four rooms if you included the walk-in closet. The walls were modern, mid-1990’s shiny cream wallpaper with soft green vertical stripes. There was a thirty-inch television with built-in VCR and small remote control. It was the reigning king of a large entertainment center on the left wall, also occupied by an inch thin and two-foot-wide CD-player, a fax machine, and complementary Internet access. One of the pamphlets in his hand explained the laptop rental agreement for 6,000 baht a day. Next to the

king sized bed was a phone and fax machine. A nearby desk was complete with phone and DSL ports. Light poured in from the huge sliding glass window with private balcony access, complete with a view of the royal palace if you leaned outward into oblivion and craned your head left. It cost 5,000 extra baht for the view.

Fletcher sat on the bed and slipped off his shoes, grimy from the Bangkok International Airport forty-five minutes earlier. He began examining the pamphlets and talking to Carlos. "I'm taking the rest of the day off but you can reach me by phone or e-mail if anything comes up."

"Yes Mr. Fletcher."

Fletcher's eyes came to rest on the cover of one pamphlet. There was a picture of a young boy and girl wearing dirty clothes and with shoeless feet. In bold letters across the top was written: "Child Prostitution is illegal in Thailand!" It was translated into six languages, along with warnings, fines, and possible jail sentences. He stared at the girl's young, exposed shoulder, eyeing a small bump of bone poking outward on the top. His eyes slipped over the skin, the exposed ankles, the thin wrist. "Meet me back here in the lobby at eight tomorrow morning and we'll have breakfast and catch up. I'm going to finish some paperwork and go to sleep. How is the Thailand Government behaving?"

"They always want more money. All sorts of bills for new taxes are laid on me every day. Their Film Commission wants a cut of any potential profits from the film, along with point-seven-five percent of the production costs."

His eyes wandered over to the boy, possibly no more than ten years old. He placed the pamphlets on the bedside table and pointed a thick finger at Carlos. "Fuck 'em, they can't have it. If they pester you let 'em know that we can always shoot in Hanoi. They're even more desperate up there. I'll see you tomorrow." Carlos left as soon as he could, muttering something

about paper work and letting Fletcher sleep after the long flight. Once Fletcher was alone he locked the four locks on the front door and stripped naked. He looked through the wicker basket of soaps and lotions all with the International Hilton insignia embossed into the plastic. The tile was cold and slightly sticky under his feet from all the disinfectant the cleaners used, and small circles of dried water covered the faucet. He picked up a tiny bottle of Sage Body Lotion and twirled it in his fingers. "Hello, Glori," he said, smiling. He set it next to the sink. "Tomorrow."

In the mirror he saw his large stomach, sparsely covered with dark hairs. The hair got thicker the further his eyes traveled south. He began resenting his body, cursing it for growing old and unhealthy. There was a time when he had felt attractive; a time when he was in beautiful youth. But not any more. This trip was, in part, for him to take time away from work; to look into some things his friends had told him. It would be a few weeks to try and reclaim what he felt had been stolen.

* * *

It's exhausting, this... this job, this crusade. I swear sometimes I can't even think anymore, I've become a robot of hate, tears, dread. Sometimes I can't stand to see a new morning; I know it'll just be one more day when all my effort is somehow lost in this city, just diffused into the air. No one cares about it, they just see the money rolling in, wave after wave of crisp American dollars, golden Euros. The police, the government, they see opportunity. I keep thinking that if I can break through, if I can really communicate with the cops and politicians as individuals, then I can affect change. Because nobody would stand idly by while children, little boys and girls are used like... like Kleenex. No one in their right mind could get a good night's sleep while this "business" is going on. I yell and I yell but no one listens. They can't see past the hotels, how well the hotels are doing. They only think about the revenue. Millions upon

millions of bhat every year. Money that lines old men's pockets and pays for their new cars, or their villas up north. Money that's made off the crying of children.

Who are these people? What makes them think they can swoop into our country like a plague, devouring our children, practically killing them, leaving just dried husks where there once was a beautiful little life just beginning to grow. I can still see them at night, images looming out of the fog of memory. They're there in the shadows after the lights are out: grinning, bloated looking men, their skin rough and polluted-looking, a few days growth of beard on their cheeks. When I see them in my mind I don't remember any eyes, as if they were just hollow skulls, dark and sweaty in the dim light. I remember their bodies pumping up and down. I remember their hairy arms straddling me, or trying to cup my still forming breasts, or poking inside me, scratching me with their fingernails and making me bleed.

The worst part: I remember asking for more. They could rarely do it a second time, but they always tip bigger if you tell them you like it. I think that was the worst time, when I had to sit up, hurt and scared, and ask them to do it again.

I think back to those days and I feel anger. No, not just anger. I think back to those days and I feel... rage. Sometimes I imagine myself in a fantasy world where I get to play superwoman, and I run around, saving the children, bashing in the heads of the men with hollow skulls. I fly around, saving everyone, and suddenly I find that it's all better. I know it's childish, but it's one of those fantasies that keeps me going.

What makes me truly sad when I think back is how my parents allowed me to go. I wasn't stolen from my home; I wasn't kidnapped. I was bought. I was bought for 800 U.S. Dollars that I had to work off to be freed. My parents sold me, and then lived well on the money while I was in that hellhole outside of Bangkok. 800 Dollars. I only made about two dollars a client.

So here I am, twenty years later and my life is still consumed by the sex trade, morning to night and I can't stop thinking about it. I don't even know what keeps me going anymore. I've become numb to my rage, numb to my sadness, and it's been so long since I had any real hope I'm not sure what the word even means. I guess I just keep expecting to wake up one day, and suddenly find that everything's better.

*

*

*

Sharayu Oonsiri walked down the sidewalk, shoulders back and head raised, in a dark and forlorn corner of Bangkok. The sidewalk's dark, dirty surface clung to the soles of her shoes, making her soft steps audible in the twilight. In her hands was a short stack of sky blue colored paper, each sheet folded in half, with chunky black lettering copied on all sides. She looked over her shoulder and cut across the street, heading fearlessly into the darker shades of evening within an alley. The sky was blocked at all angles by billboards and signs, colorful banners strung between buildings like they were secreted by the bricks themselves.

Within the alleyway, the remnants of the days scattered clouds all but vanished, except for a thin thumbnail view straight up, squeezed between drying wash and power cables. The ambiance of the alley was only slightly different from that of the street. The ground was still dirty and caked with grime, but there was little trash floating about; it held the feeling of somebody's front yard.

Sharayu looked up as she walked, brushing a strand of her short black hair out of her eyes. Peering down at her were many faces, some just dark silhouettes, others were lit by an occasional streetlight or an indoor glow. Many were children, smiling in the dark, their eyes and teeth flashing white. Sharayu waved up at a little girl, and stuck a leaflet in the jamb of a passing door. She had been down this alley before, but not for a few months. It was just one of the many

tiny walkways of the city, known only by the people who lived there—mostly migrant workers from other areas of Thailand—and also known by a few, select, tourists. She climbed down a short flight of stairs to a dark green door, taking a deep breath before knocking heavily.

A young Thai man in his thirties answered. “Ahh, Madam Oonsiri.” He glanced behind her, up the stairs, and smiled at her solitude. “No police? Those pamphlets do no good, you know. Not many women in here can read.”

“They’re not for the women. Let me in.” She handed the man 100 baht, and the door opened.

The inside of these places had become tedious to her after years of work. The loud music, the gyrating women, the flashing colored lights, the sheepish grins on the faces of the leering men. The room was large, but all dimensions were lost in the darkness. There was a stage at one end, lit from above by a huge rack of lights and below by a row of small half-globes. The lights were so bright in the dancer’s faces they even lit the dust and cigarette smoke floating across the stage. Two women were dancing, one was smiling, the other was not.

The bartender gave her a mean stare, and even yelled at her from across the room, but his voice was lost in the thick white noise of the club. He sent a waitress over to her with a message, but Sharayu slipped the woman some money, some for her, some for the bartender, and was left alone. One noble truth she had learned in her job, money gets you anywhere. She began passing out pamphlets, slapping the rectangles down on each table as she passed. That night was a simple educational run. The pamphlets were written in six different languages. Since only a certain amount of information could be printed on each pamphlet, each one was color coded for its content and purpose. The ones she was handing out were educational, aimed at tourists themselves. The hope was she could make at least a few people rethink what they were doing.

Mostly all the pamphlets did was make the tourists feel uncomfortable and want to leave, and the workers at the club knew this. But they had faith the tourists would return, and the bribe paid by Sharayu Oonsiri would just fatten their own pockets.

She continued because she felt she needed to. There was a void created by so much negative energy, and Sharayu believe she contributed to the side that balanced out. It was going to be a long night, but she wasn't tired yet.

* * *

The second day of traveling was always Fletcher's least favorite. His mouth tasted bitter; his temper was short. He lay supine in the bed for a quarter of an hour after the alarm buzzed, eyes lost in the soft light of the ceiling. There was a steady rush of traffic on the street hundreds of feet below. The sounds of horns, engines, talking, even the crunch from grit under car tires and worn-out sandals, all the noise rose and harmonized en route to Fletcher's suite, until it finally landed on his ears as a soft hiss, a whisper of the city. The small of his back was covered with a fine layer of early-morning sweat, and he felt a dull ache emanating from his spine there. Sitting up, he knew the rest of his body had fared the trials of air travel worse than usual. There was a tickle in the back of his throat that curved around his head and changed into a dull ache just behind his forehead, before wrapping around again to end in a knot of pain at the base of his skull.

A rough hand had scribbled "scout locations today" in hard letters on his open schedule book, the word "today" underlined three times. Fletcher raised himself to his feet, favoring his back, and stood. Looking out the window of his room at the alien skyline made him grow even more weary and homesick. He doubted if he could find a decent egg-white omelet in this country; the idea, for some reason, made him feel claustrophobic. He reminisced delightfully of

his favorite eatery just over the Hollywood hills from where he lived – a little place called Vintage – where the egg-white and shallot omelet with a side of prosciutto wrapped melon would turn his spine to jelly. He doubted Thai people even knew what prosciutto was.

He flipped through a catalog of hotel eateries and cafes while he waited in the elevator, its slow hum blending with the white noise of travel. He was a little relieved to find there were familiar faces in the area: a McDonalds of course, and a Taco Bell, but also numerous clothing stores like Gap, Eddie Bauer, and even a three level Barnes and Noble. Out of his shirt pocket he pulled a photo ripped in rough tears around the edges and printed on glossy magazine-type paper. A wayward tear had ripped through part of the boy's head, separating his eyes. He stared at the piece of paper in the white florescent light, looking at the girl's shoulder, her ankle. He was a movie producer, and knew well the art of propaganda. "They aren't real homeless kids," he thought, "probably actors or models. Probably American." The idea took away an edge of guilt he had been feeling as he searched the little boy's face for signs of make-up. He felt another guilty tingle down below, and in a loud flash he saw a dark room, hazy, and a thin, naked back stretched before him.

* * *

The concierge looked up as Fletcher approached the counter. The man was tall, dark skinned, and with a shaved head. His tailored suit jacket hung easily around his thick frame. He had kind eyes, almost unexpected for such a forceful-looking, imposing man. The darkness of his suit was accentuated by its own cleanness, and the scattering of almost imperceptible dust particles on his sleeve, his lapel, his shoulder. Fletcher tried to size him up as he walked across the lobby, maintaining heavy eye contact, but found it difficult to think at all because his sly, inquisitive look was answered unwaveringly by the man's friendly and gentle gaze. Finding the

man's eyes too peaceful and unnatural to be useful, he analyzed his suit and his build: heavy, fit, obviously careful of maintaining his body which means he has the time to care; that means he has money; if he has enough money to relax then he must like it enough to want more.

“Good evening, sir.”

Fletcher rested his arms on the mirror-finish wood, quickly drumming his fingers; feeling comfortable, feeling in charge. “Hello. I have a question for you.”

The concierge, smiling, blinked. “Yes sir. What may we help you with today?”

“Well, I have a friend. . .”

“Very good sir.”

“. . .and he's new to this city.”

“Indeed.”

“He didn't believe me when I told him how much fun it can be here.”

“Yes, it is easy to be overwhelmed, sir. There is, after all, much fun to be had.”

“Yes. And he bet me a hundred dollars I couldn't find a place here that could excite him.”

Still smiling, but the eyes darker now. “It is dangerous to bet with that kind of money.”

“For some people it is. But this guy's loaded. In fact he loves to throw money around. You know the type.”

“I can spot them from afar, sir.”

“So I came to you because you seem to be the type of guy who knows the area, and being a concierge you probably know a lot of places to send inquisitive guests. But I'm looking for a place that's off the beaten track; someplace you wouldn't tell your wife about if you know what I mean. But not just any place you know, it has to be clean and professional. And if you help me out,” he pulled a fifty-dollar bill from his pocket, crisp and flat except for the fold down the

middle, splitting Benjamin Franklin in two. He laid the bill on the counter. “If you help me out I’m willing to split the earnings.”

“Clean and professional, sir?” The concierge was nodding almost imperceptibly. His eyes unfocused, and for a moment he seemed lost in the middle-distance behind Fletcher. He did not flicker to the proffered fifty—none of the greed or wanting Fletcher expected from a man living in this country—but instead registered something else besides. The crow’s feet around the man’s eyes shifted downward; his eyebrows sagged. Fletcher watched as the man’s chest rose and fell with a breath.

“Yes that’s right. I want him to avoid, of course, any. . . diseases.”

The polite smile melted into blind stoicism. “Of course, sir.”

Fletcher paused and stared at the man behind the counter staring back. He waited for an answer, eye to eye. The humidity seemed to be getting to him, and a bead of sweat formed on his temples. His mind fluttered off into a netherworld of excuses and stories, while his eyes searched the man who was silently looking back at him. He began to feel the blue of the man’s eyes. He could feel it entering him, feel it wrapping around his lies, making his skin feel warm and his bones cold as ice. As the silence grew from a pause in conversation to an uncomfortable pall, Fletcher grew impatient. Perhaps, he thought, he handled the situation poorly. “So what do you say? Can you suggest a place?”

“You could try Jordan’s Sports Bar and Grill in the Hilton lobby, sir. I hear they are very clean and also pride themselves at being the best place to watch international sports in Bangkok, perhaps even all of Southeast Asia. If a sports bar is not to your liking, sir, there is a very fine English tavern called The Last Golden Cannon,” he pronounced the words precisely, and when he now said ‘sir,’ it was spit out like a curse across his tongue. “It is located only a short distance

from here on Quay St. Barring either of these choices perhaps you would enjoy our very own Seafood Bar and Grille.” As the concierge bent under the counter to get three menus, Fletcher wiped a tear of sweat from the tip of his nose. After a moment, the concierge unsmiling and serious, continued “I hear they have a special tonight. Mahi-Mahi, on a grilled Cajun pilaf.”

Fletcher could hear the pulse in his ears. He felt his face was blushed red, and had to work to control his breathing. “He’s fucking with me,” he thought. “This doesn’t happen. I own people. I take millions of dollars from companies in a single word. But this guy’s on to me. No one’s as stupid as this guy makes out. He’ll make me say it and pin the guilt on me.” He considered palming the man another fifty.

“Or were you looking for a massage parlor, sir?”

Fletcher visibly flinched backward. Inexplicably paranoid, he nodded without otherwise responding. The concierge looked left and right, eyes flickering over the lobby, and lifted a brown paper bag appearing to hold five or six pamphlets, sliding it across the counter.

“That will be all you’ll need to know, sir. I believe you’ll find it quality light reading. And who knows, you just might learn something.” The polite smile reappeared on the man’s face, as if it had never left.

Fletcher wondered about how threatened he had felt a moment ago. He slid two fifties back and took the bag. He stepped outside and hopped in his waiting car driven by a white chauffer, pointing to a small section of the city on a fax-paper map. Nervously, he opened the bag and looked at the top pamphlet: “Sex Tourism: The Invisible Cancer of Thailand.”

A familiar little boy and girl in ratty clothes peered up at him. Fletcher’s thick fingers pawed through the rest of them, all with similar titles by groups called “Foundation for Women,”

“ECPAT,” and “Coalition on Child Prostitution and Tourism.” The pamphlets were warnings, all denouncing sex tourism.

“That bastard.”

* * *

When Sharayu returned to her office finally, it was already ten in the morning. The sun had risen while she was out in the red light district, its light keeping her company while she placed flyers under the wipers of rental cars. She had walked most of the way back, nearly eight kilometers, under the rising sun, feeling the energy grow in the streets. She would close her eyes while waiting at an intersection, ignoring the clouds of exhaust, and listened to the steady rhythm of the city. She would strain her ears to pick up every last car and van, every last bicycle and argument as they went by, and could tell what the day would be like; if that day would be the one that changed everything.

She habitually grabbed the mail on her way in, riffling through it as she walked. There were a few other workers scattered throughout the office, a few typing at computers, a few talking on phones. One of the women, for the workers were all women except for one man, rose and followed Sharayu into her inner office.

“This is it,” said the woman in a monotone voice. “This is what you’re looking for.” She held out a white piece of paper, two creases across its spine, letter size and typed.

Sharayu sat at her desk, holding the rest of the mail in her white knuckled fists. “Tell me.”

The woman, a Mrs. Watana, said nothing.

“Shit.” Sharayu sagged, elbows resting on the table. “They didn’t give it to us.” She held her arm out, wrist up, toward the letter.

“They say we’re ‘without need’.”

Sharayu began reading the letter. “Without need?”

“They say our plan seems insufficient.”

“We regret to inform you... unable... Damn it.” She lowered the letter to the desk, reading it a second time. “Three tries in a row.” She turned around in her chair and looked out the window. Mrs. Watana stood patiently. The sky outside was white-hot, the sun glared off the haze and smog, blinding Sharayu’s tired eyes. After a moment her back straightened and she turned around. “So be it. Would you do me a favor and try to find out what they do deem sufficient? We’ll just try again next time.”

Mrs. Watana nodded, and picked up the letter. After she had left, Sharayu opened up a file drawer and pulled out a list of politician’s names and office phone numbers. She picked up her brown rotary phone and began dialing; her day was just beginning.

* * *

He wandered between little shops, down crowded alleys, thinking to himself, “just like in the movies.” He stared at his hefty reflection when he found a pane of glass that wasn’t painted red or had a poster plastered and ripping on it. There was a strange sort of euphoria he felt, seeing the body that presented itself to him every day in the bathroom mirror, with such a different background. The colors he saw were staggering to his eyes. He saw a yellow sign with red letters, the yellow he had never seen before in his life. He saw an eight-year old girl wearing a red coca-cola shirt and dirty canvas shorts filling a water jug from a rusty fountain. He held up his hands in front of his face – thumbs touching – making three sides of a square. This was his frame: his way of cropping any view and instantly making it appear on a movie screen. He stared through his hands at the young girl.

He walked on, periodically holding his hands in front and staring at a building, a gutter, a person, looking for an alley or a wall, seeing where it could fit in his script. Many of the alleyways were useless to him, unless he wanted to press the budget to transform it into the set. The modern Thai economy had permanently altered the city, with makeshift huts teetering over canals, built with discarded plywood, milky plastic sheeting, and hewn timbers as support. He had imagined everything would look primitive and out of date, with wagons tied to horses and beggars in the street. He had imagined it would look like a movie set, and was surprised at how modern it could look.

As he walked he saw the inhabitants of this small, out-of-the-way area of Bangkok as being characters in a movie. He saw the adventurous young man selling black-market cigarettes. He saw a fair lady walking proud towards her destination. He saw old people chewing what appeared to be tobacco. Everyone he saw, every setting he laid foot in, was not Bangkok. It was a piece of a movie set. The people were not people at all, but actors on a stage. There was no life, no reality, for anyone outside of this scene. These were—as far as Fletcher knew or cared—his puppets, his actors he didn't have to pay. He thought how devoid America and the western world was of a true love story from Southeast Asia. He thought about how he would bring it to them. He planned what he would say to Larry King, Barbara Walters, everyone who would love his new movie. The people he saw on the street were his means to an end.

All these areas of the city had been pre-chosen months ago by his company's location scout, a man who was paid handsomely to travel to cities or country sides to analyze the spot for "film-ability," taking into account the logistics of the shoot, the cost of making it fit into the movie, and the cost of restoring it back to normal after the shooting had finished. Eyebrows had been raised when Fletcher said he wanted to go to Bangkok to look at the locations himself. He

insisted it was because this movie was his baby; he wanted to see it through from conception to finish. The truth was wanted to go to Bangkok to look into what his friend, a CEO of a Southern California insurance agency, had called “the most aptly named city in the world.” He had said, nodding, “You should go, Carl—whatever your cock’s desire...”

* * *

Bangkok is beautiful, yet confusing. It can bring to one’s heart desires which are forgotten in the every day shuffle of modern life. Contradictions abound to such a wild extent that they can be taken for granted: in the back of a five-level department store is an alley crammed with homeless and transients from the north looking for work. The river is used as a market place for fruits and vegetables sold from boats, yet the water is so polluted that it has been pronounced toxic. The city’s infrastructure is immense, and at every turn there are new housing projects, new roads, new buildings, and yet it is so over-crowded and the government so corrupt that nothing ever seems to get completed. It’s an expensive city, yet people can live on less than a dollar a day.

In Bangkok, the colors, music, people and smells each become a separate and distinct magnetic pole, pulling at one’s heart, forcing an abandonment of convention. But the confusion of the mass of bodies, the screams and yells, the vibrating streets, the humming air, can easily overpower. One does not command these forgotten streets, one is commanded. The vibrancy and burning light and impassioned faces are the puppeteer’s strings; the traveler’s eyes and heart his instrument. Bangkok is not a place for people who desire control: for control means power over, and power here is imaginary. Instead, Bangkok is for people who can discard the woolen cloak of fears and conceptions and sink into the grit and sandstone and smiles and tears. These

successful few are the ones we see weeping in the presence of beauty; laughing in the face of death.

Fletcher felt fear and animosity to these new streets. He wasn't thankful for street signs written phonetically for his western eyes, and instead dwelled on the fact they weren't written in English. The smiling faces only aggravated him, they made him think he was surrounded by con-men and vagrants. From the back seat of his car, a small television quietly displaying CNN, he witnessed the mugging of a middle-aged Thai man by four young Asian youths. He leaned up as his black sedan rolled by, and saw one of the muggers hit the man in the face, a brutal jab that he could feel in his back; not at all like punches in his movies. The older man's head jerked to the side, but came back and continued talking, trying to reason. The stream-lined sedan moved along without missing a beat; he turned to see out the rear window, but the bodies were already lost behind an electronics vendor.

* * *

The lobby of the Westin is never quiet; this is especially true at three in the afternoon. Sharayu Oonsiri crossed the carpeted floor, the expanse of royal blue lying before her like an ocean. She walked a straight line towards the far wall, eyes focused on the concierge behind the counter. The large man was helping a young Australian couple decide where to spend their day; she eavesdropped until he was finished. He turned once they left, and greeted her with a thin, knowing smile.

“Ms. Oonsiri,” he said, in slightly accented Thai.

“Mr. Carmen,” she replied. “Are you ready?”

“Indeed.”

The two walked over to the hotel's restaurant, and sat under a tree in a darkened corner. "How's your day?" he asked, after they had ordered their lunch.

Sharayu swallowed and looked down at the table, nodding almost imperceptibly. "Alright. We were denied one large grant, but we got a smaller one. A brothel was closed in the east side, and a prostitute was found dead on the west side. Tit-for-tat. Status quo. You?"

He shrugged. "Nothing much, my boss was upset in the morning, but he relaxed."

They were silent until after their food came, enjoying the quiet respite from their day. Sharayu finally spoke, "Have you been handing out my pamphlets?"

He smiled, and dabbed his mouth with a napkin. "Every time someone checks in. Funny story actually, this guy comes up to me today, like someone does every day, and asks for the inside scoop. You know, where to go get laid. Says its for a friend, of course. I swear if these men could hear how repetitive they all sound." He shook his head, "It's like they all read from the same script. Speaking of which, I guess he's a big movie producer, who's making a film about colonial Thailand."

"What about present Thailand? So you told him prostitution's been illegal for thirty years, blah blah blah?"

"No, better. I traded him a stack of your pamphlets for a hundred American dollars."

"You took his money?"

"Sure, why not?"

Her hands clenched in balls on either side of her plate. "Because we're trying to tell these people that their money's no good here, that's why not. He walked out thinking his bills greased the chains, right?" Her voice was slightly raised, eyes strong.

"And then he got outside and saw that he'd been had. He got the pamphlets, Sharayu."

She loosened a little, and leaned closer. “But you can’t trick people into learning. They would rather not learn something than be tricked. He’ll just go out there and ask the closest cab driver, slide him a nickel, and get taken to a club. At the end of the day, he’ll have learned nothing, and consider himself the winner. And he’ll be that much more resistant to the pamphlets next time.” The two sat for a moment, looking at each other, understanding. “But anyway,” she continued, cracking a smile. “You’re buying lunch.”

* * *

The sign above the door was written in Thai, French, and English, in red on white raised lettering. Fletcher had a dry taste in his mouth and a suspicion he was being watched as he made the last few steps up the wooden stairs to the darkened maroon door. He stopped just outside.

“Stay outside Carlos.”

“No way. I’m coming in.”

Fletcher turned and caught a whiff of the acrid, hot chili soup that was sold in Styrofoam cups on every street corner. “I said stay outside.”

Carlos shrugged, his wary fear of Fletcher forgotten, replaced by the smug dominion of someone who knows a dirty secret. “I’m coming in. What’re you going to do?”

Fletcher turned back to the dark rectangle with its solitary brass doorknob, and took a deep breath. The door opened as if by its own accord, and he found himself looking into the eyes of a mean looking middle aged Thai man, wearing a dirty suit that, Fletcher thought, was probably his only one. “You come in or no?” said the man with a squinty, inquisitive look; aged lines and creases striping his forehead and cheeks. Fletcher stood there and blinked, his mind lost in the thinking how this was totally unlike anything he’d ever seen or produced in a movie

before; he never had thought how a frightened man's mouth could taste so much like sand. The Thai man repeated, "You come in or no sir?" as if it were all one word.

Not until the sole of his polished black leather shoes hit the inside did Fletcher notice the sound of a thick, monotonous bass chord that created the rhythm for this inside netherworld. The colors poured out of the walls and ceiling – neon red swirls, red flashing hose lights, planters with decaying ficus' and bright plastic snowballs of monofilament light globes pumping through the fluorescent shades of mankind's imaginary rainbow. All of this faster and in inharmonious ways in which Mother Nature never intended. There were poles of pulsating red and blue that played ornament for the dancing, swirling women with hollow eyes who spun and did impossible back bends. The mirror behind the bar appeared slightly concave – enough so the room was reflected back onto itself as slightly shorter and fatter than it really was.

Carlos led them both to the bar where they huddled and ordered drinks. He tried speaking to Fletcher about anonymity and separation of this world from work, but neither man could hold their concentration as they looked around and absorbed the system they just walked into.

Prostitutes. All of them Thai. Some were wearing loose fitting, sleeveless t-shirts with faded images of advertisements on the chest, others wore only the finest bikini's and sported premium make-up. A literal parade of bodies was patrolling the room, slithering around podiums for topless dancers, stopping in front of some guy and lifting their shirts, or caressing his face with a practiced flick of the wrist. Women – young, faceless women – walked by and strutted, numbers on their hips, until a man brusquely grabbed their arm and led them upstairs. The short stairway was almost always occupied, either with couples walking up or singles walking down. There were small, lit rooms, two of them on either side of the main hall, that were glassed off and radiated a white florescent light. They were display cases, in all senses, perhaps fifteen feet

long and ten feet deep, with three-tier stadium seating inside, inhabited by young women wearing satin dresses; like brides-maid dresses, Fletcher thought. They sat and waited, arms crossed, looking off into the middle distance, and heads only rising when the gray door opened into their little cubicle, and a woman was summoned by a customer.

As Fletcher's eyes adjusted to the light and the colors, he leaned over and said to Carlos "Jesus! Some of these girls are—" He didn't need to finish because he realized the truth, and parts of his mind, equal parts behind a veil of fog and darkness, rejoiced and squirmed. He noticed the heat building under his starched collar and in his sleeves, and could feel the sweat collecting on his forehead. He could feel his own fear; the instinct to remove himself from the situation. He leaned over to Carlos, pointed a stubby index finger, and said "Don't say anything to anyone." He reached out and took the hand of a passing girl: she could have been no older than 14.

* * *

He had seen his wife only briefly before leaving for Thailand; she had asked him to bring back a new rug for the foyer, or "one of those nice Buddha statues." They had met in college at a party and, intrigued by the others' wealthy family, became engaged after graduation. Carl was studying business and finance, and his new fiancée, Wendy, studied pre-law. It turned out their fathers were in the same Yacht Club in San Diego, and they each had a cousin who worked on Wall Street; Carl and Wendy got married as a matter of course.

In these last few years of their marriage, they had become increasingly hostile to one another. There were no more vacations together, no more sailing down to Mexico, as Carl became more absorbed with trying to create the perfect movie and Wendy tried to run the perfect law firm. "Perfect," it seemed, was directly related with how much money they made. At first,

Carl stayed at the office late, crunching numbers and talking with other producers and directors; trying to make a place for himself in the movie industry. Then they stopped having breakfast together, as Wendy had to fight for case after case to keep clients from going to another firm. Their slow disintegration saw them through earthquakes, wars, and a recession, and finally, after five years marriage, they had children. Ann was born first, followed eighteen months later by James. Carl almost missed the birth of his son because he was signing a deal with Miramax and “couldn’t get away.” The children were raised by Wendy for a few months before they hired a permanent nanny, who lived in the guest wing of their large house. That was nine years ago.

* * *

In his mind was the desire to be done with it: to get it over with. Similar to the vertigo one feels as they lean out of an airplane before jumping. It is the desire to pass the point of no return. To free oneself of the obligation of choice. As he grabbed the hand of the fourteen-year-old, he felt a thrill like he had never known before – a knowledge of the taboo, but deeper the knowledge of anonymity – and it inspired him to continue. His mind denied access to thoughts, and it kept him feeling the surrealism of the moment by observing it from afar. He could see his fingers close around the thin, olive colored wrist. He could trace the fingers to the hand, the hand to the cuff, the cuff to the jacket and up to his face. He followed her arm up to her face as she turned towards him, expecting a smooth, elegant silhouette.

A splash of horror coursed through Fletcher as he saw her turn and look at him. For this was not the little girl he grabbed a moment before, it couldn’t be. This was an old woman, almost a corpse, with eyes like a dead animal and half as bright. Her skin hung dutifully, hopefully, and caused wild shadows to accentuate every line and every wrinkle. She was in one instance her own past, present, and future all in one face, and in the next instant, it was all gone.

She looked away quickly, and as she did he noticed again the delicate face of the young girl – her long mascara lashes, the ruby lipstick and her cheek’s rouge – and the vision was shattered. Part of his mind cried while the other, the stronger side of Fletcher, followed and felt a warm yet confusing comfort of revenge. Revenge against his body, his age; the part of himself that was no longer beautiful. While she was leading him to the stairway, he noticed her number. A piece of square red-on-white plastic attached to her hip with a utility tie. The number read “0082”. *My employee number as a young man.*

* * *

Sharayu entered the apartment complex, unsure of what she might find. The entrance was dark and cold, one halogen bulb casting the foyer into dubious green light. Crusty black and white tile lay on the floor in front of her, the grout eroding, and whole areas stripped bare of tile down to a cheap masonite floor. The cream colored walls looked sickly pale, and the hallway, as it stretched narrowly between apartments, was a place eternally dark. She got this address from a worker in her office; it was rumored to be the place many of the prostitutes of nearby clubs and brothels were housed.

Sharayu walked down the hall, and up to the first door that she came to. She paused before knocking, thinking it could be a group of migrant workers. Whole groups sometimes lived illegally in one apartment, dividing the rent. Their fear could make them dangerous when confronted one-on-one. She thought briefly of herself, there, alone, and was momentarily frightened. She knocked lightly.

No answer.

She knocked again, and still there was nothing. She moved on. Finally, at the fifth door she approached, someone answered. “Yes?” came a thin, frightened voice from the other side.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Sharayu Oonsiri, I work for an educational organization. I’m here to help.”

There was a pause. “We don’t need any help.”

“Please, let me talk to you. Open the door, please.”

Silence.

“Please,” she repeated.

The door shifted a little, and opened three inches. One, dark brown eye peered out at her. It was surrounded by eye shadow and a pink streak of eyeliner.

Sharayu smiled feebly. “Hello. My name is Sharayu, what’s your name?”

“Are we in trouble?” the little voice asked.

“No, no no. Not at all. I wanted to talk. May I come in?”

The interior of the little apartment was barren except for mattresses, and of these Sharayu saw maybe five in the front room, and another half dozen in the back. The inside was quite dim and was lit only by a single yellow bulb, casting the room into a hue of pea green. A window on the far wall faced the brick of an alley, and would only see direct sunlight for less than an hour at midday. Sharayu noticed the women had kept the place impeccably clean.

There were four young women in the apartment at the time, some knitting, some sleeping; leaving Sharayu to wonder if the other beds were left empty or if the owners were out working. This was not a place to bring back clients; there were no superfluous decorations anywhere, just a small vase of flowers on the windowsill. The young woman that had answered

the door led her into the kitchen, a small room barely large enough for a two-person table, and Sharayu sat.

“I’ll make some tea,” said the girl, shuffling over to a plug-in kettle and fishing a tea bag from a drawer. She stood with her back to the table as the water boiled and the tea steeped, her loose-fitting cotton garments draped high over her shoulders, and her mid-length dark hair clipped into a bun. Sharayu saw how beautiful she was, her young face completely clear of imperfections, her eyes large and dark. She watched her return to the table, saw her head lowered, her back and shoulders stooped, and felt angry at the place where life had taken her. The anger strengthened her resolution, and as the girl sat down, Sharayu wanted to grab her and shake her and tell her she had a choice. But she couldn’t. Years of experience had taught her not to push too quickly. Not yet.

“Thanks for the tea.” She looked around the room, “You have a very nice place. Do you like it here?”

The girl sipped her tea, holding the bottom of her cup delicately with her left hand. No sooner had Sharayu spoken than she felt self-conscious, thinking the girl lives with empty talk, having to listen to words she didn’t like and say words she didn’t think. The girl sat, and said nothing.

“I work for an organization that helps women and children in your position. In fact, an organization just like the one I work for helped me out, when I was, uh, working like you are. What I do now is just go around and make sure everyone knows their rights. You know. And I make sure you’re being treated well, and fair. Like I said before, my name is Sharayu Oonsiri. I’ve been in your position before, I know what it’s like. In fact, I used to work at a club in the north suburb.”

“That is not a nice area,” said the girl, matter-of-fact.

Sharayu smiled. “No. No it’s not. What’s your name?”

“Sirpita.”

“That’s very pretty. Where are you from?”

“Down south. In a town not far from Rattaphum.” She sipped her tea, and kept her eyes fixed on the table, never venturing up to Sharayu’s face.

“You don’t have to be here, you know. You don’t have to stay. There are places you can go; government funded organizations that will help you.”

“Why?”

Sharayu was confused. “I’m sorry?”

“Why would they help me?”

“Because it’s your right. You deserve to have the government look out for your well being.”

“And who will look out for my parent’s well being?”

Sharayu paused.

“I am sorry, but why is the government helping me now, instead of helping my family four years ago when we were starving and all out of work?” Sirpita was looking at Sharayu, and sipped her tea. “I send around a thousand bhat a month back home, so my parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters can live well. My father has started a business with the money I send home. Where can you send me that will supply for my family in such a way?”

“We have courses that will educate you. You can go back to school, get a higher paying job than you have now.”

“Back to school? For how long? And who will take care of my grandmother’s operation while I’m learning at your school? Do you pay for that, too?”

Sharayu fiddled with her stoneware teacup as she talked, watching the girl across from her become more agitated. “You could get a loan, we have a program—.”

“To be paid back by whom?”

Sharayu stopped, and looked down at the wood grain of the table. “Listen, I know it’s tough. I know it seems like there’s no other way. But think about yourself. How old are you?”

Sirpita hesitated. “Seventeen.”

“And you’ve been in this business for four years?” Silence. “How long do you plan to be in? What will you do once you’re too old?”

“What did you do?”

Sharayu could feel her face blush and her fists clench. “I left before that time came. I got help from people. I did everything that I’m telling you to do and it worked.” She leaned back in her chair, shoulders back and chin up. “I left when I was eighteen. I went to a shelter, and it was... not a nice place. It’s a scary feeling to be out on your own, not only away from your family but also away from your bed and possessions, meager though they may be. I was in the shelter for no more than a week when I was taken in by a woman and her husband. They fed me, they cared for me. I went to school and had to catch up on everything I had missed in the previous ten years. It was boring, embarrassing, but it worked. I was my own person again, whole. When you work at the clubs they take something from you, a little part of you that you barely miss when its gone but it makes everything you do seem a little dull. The colors, the flavors, the sounds, everything is tarnished. They take it from you, the men in the bars, and it’s up to you to get it back. And if you don’t, well... you’ve seen the women who never do. So just

think about it.” Sharayu stood, and placed some thin books written in flowing Thai script on the table. “My card is in there. Call me, and I will personally see to it you are taken care of. And there are many other ways we can help your family; they’d understand.”

“No, they wouldn’t.”

* * *

The previous two days became a blur in Fletcher’s mind. His first, hesitant step into the club seemed brittle and faded in his memory; so much had progressed, everything had intensified, and now Fletcher felt powerless to steer clear of where he was headed. He hadn’t been back to the hotel often, except to change his clothes once and take a long sleep, and now he found himself sitting at a bar in a different, more hidden and out of the way brothel than the one before. He found out about this place from a patron in the dance club on that first day.

“Like this place, do ye?” the man had asked in a thick Australian accent.

Fletcher almost didn’t respond, looking around for an absent Carlos. “What?”

“You like this place?” the man repeated. “You like that young thing?”

Fletcher found the idea of conversation in the brothel ludicrous, like a superfluous element saved only for the real world outside. He looked at the man for a moment, feeling slight revulsion at a bead of sweat forming on his upper lip; becoming slightly self-conscious at the man’s similar age, waist, and skin color. There was no eye contact with the man, who was staring across the bar at the mirror, and Fletcher got the sense that he was about to be sold something. “What do you mean ‘do I like it here’?”

“You know, there’s a place further out, towards the suburbs. Only locals know about it, so they’re all nice an’ clean. No worries.” He shook a finger indicating the negative, and nodded his head.

Fletcher ordered a drink, and thought briefly, enticed by the prospect of a place even more like what he wanted: more taboo, more “anything goes.” His heart fluttered with the idea. “Where is this place?”

The man looked around on the bar surface, before reaching across to grab a cocktail napkin, and pulled a pen out of his shirt pocket. “Here you go mate,” he smiled. “Ask for Tich-Tahc.”

“Tic-Tac?”

He shrugged. “It’s a name. I dunno how to spell it.”

And so Fletcher found the place that very afternoon. A grimy place down a similar alley with a similar door. The man behind the door seemed a little hesitant, and asked for a cover charge, which Fletcher gladly paid. Tich-Tahc, it turned out, was a very young boy.

* * *

Let me tell you about my father. He is a big man, the largest in my village, and as strong as an ox. Every year he plants the fields all by himself, with his own children tagging along at his ankles, helping him throw seed wherever he says. He can manage an ox with no help, and knows always the night before a big rain. He is also well respected in the village, and sometimes the elders will come to him, asking what he thinks.

I remember most a glimpse of my father as he stood, hands on his hips, looking off into the distance. It is as clear as if he stands in front of me now. The sky behind him is very bright, so bright there is no blue; no color at all. And his skin glows like a cloud lit from the back. He used to bounce me on his knee in the evening just before dinner; he said “riding makes growing boys hungry.” There were times when our mother would forbid us to see him. A strong smell like burning flowers would roll from underneath his bedroom door, and he would sometimes stay in

there all day, and when he finally appeared, his eyes were tired-looking and watery. My mother died almost a year ago. She was giving birth to what was supposed to be my third sister, but my father had refused to send her to a city hospital. My other sisters were helping her, it was in late fall at mid-day, just after the rains had cleaned the streets of the village. The sky was clear and the weather was mild as she let out a final yell. Father was in his room with the smell of burnt flowers the whole time.

I am the youngest of three boys in my family, but older than the two girls. My oldest brother, Panut, taught me how to tie a hitch to one of fathers' oxen, but mostly I just helped the women with their cleaning. Father said I was to grow up so I could help my family out more; I've always wanted to help my family.

When I last saw him, it was during an early February morning. The dawn had brought a cold breeze from the north, just enough to chill, and the air was heavy with mist. I remember how the land smelled, mud and grass. "You will go now, Tich-Tahc," he had said. "Go and remember always that you have saved the family. Your duty now is to work for these men," gesturing to the two men standing by a Toyota van caked with mud. One I would later know as the boss-man. "Go and work and be proud of where fate has laid you. For if it were not for you, your brothers and sisters would starve."

* * *

You walk out, to the right, down peeling linoleum stairs and out to the main chamber. You grab a drink from the bar, rum and coke usually, and begin a circle of the room. There is a number on your hip. You walk around sometimes once, sometimes twice, sometimes not even. You feel more than hear the bottom of your sandals stick to the floor. The music is so loud and omnipresent it gives you a headache as soon as you enter, the lights pulse and spin to a rhythm:

enough to make you pass out, or throw up – which has happened before – but that’s fine most of the time because throwing up has become one of the most peaceful activities you can do during the course of a day. Someone makes eye contact and you walk over and offer him a drink – he takes it and stares at you, sweaty and shaking and violent – he just stares, and you know what that means, so you take his hand and lead him back up the stairs and to the left. As you walk up you notice the bright light behind the bar shining through the dividing wall. The wall is made-up of four inch square holes lined in row after row. The light shining through lands on the peeling linoleum stairs and the wall on the opposite side, creating a wild pattern of light circles cutting through the shadow. As you close the door behind you, you wonder how square holes can cast circular beams of light.

You walk out, to the right, and down the peeling linoleum stairs, and out to the main chamber. You grab a drink from the bar and begin a circle of the room. There is a number on your hip. You walk around twice this time, not a good thing if noticed, and you quickly check to make sure nothing is in your hair or on your face. People make eye contact but break it real quick – nervous and shifty back to each other, their drinks, the T.V. Finally someone makes eye contact just a little too long so you go up to him and take his hand – he doesn’t resist. He trails behind you at arms length, big sweaty hand in yours, as you go up the peeling linoleum stairs. As you climb, left hand on the railing, you feel the part where you got a splinter the size of your index finger imbedded in your palm. It appears someone has sanded the area, but you could still lift a small flap of wood with your fingernail if you wanted to.

You walk out, to the right, and down the peeling linoleum stairs. You grab a drink from the bar – gin and tonic – and begin a circle of the room. There’s a number on your hip. Almost one complete circle when a huge Belgian man – too shy last time but you noticed – takes your

hand and ignores the drink. He leads the way, sweating, to the stairs. You jog to catch up and land the drink on a nearby table and notice how the twirling multicolored spotlight globe shines through the clear drink and flashes in multiple colors and angles onto the table beside it. You follow the massive figure up the stairs, calves cutting through the circular spots, moist finger sliding over the splinter of wood. As you close the door you wonder again how square holes can cast circular spots.

You walk out, to the right, and down the peeling linoleum stairs. You grab a drink from the bar and make a circle of the room. You notice, suddenly, that your hand is numb and fingers wrinkled from all the perspiring glasses and all the times you've washed your hands today. You walk slower and try not to make eye contact, but if you get caught you can get in a lot of trouble. You look up and on the second round make eye contact. Your mouth is already stinging with vomit.

You walk out of the room, to the right, down peeling linoleum stairs, and notice a lull in the music.

You walk out of the room, to the right, down peeling linoleum stairs and watch a fly buzzing around a swirling yellow light.

You walk out of the room, to the right, down peeling linoleum stairs, and out to the main chamber. You grab a drink from the bar and begin a circle of the room. There's a number on your hip. You begin walking around and someone, asian but not Thai, keeps eye contact. He has a hair lip that deceives around his stare. You hand him the drink. As you're led up the stairs you notice a pipe with flaking blue paint run up and into the crimson wall, and you wonder if it's for the sink or the toilet. You feel the railing. You notice a moth resting impossibly on the wall and you feel like punching it the way you saw your older brother do back home and make you laugh.

Your calves cut through white spots of light. As you close the door, you wonder how your brother is.

You walk out, to the right, down peeling linoleum stairs and out into the main chamber. You grab a drink from the bar and walk around. There's a number on your hip.

* * *

“Let's go, boy, get dressed. A gentleman is asking for you. He'll be up in a moment.”

Tich-Tahc woke with a start, and his eyes were flooded with light. “A gentleman?” he thought, his mind cloudy with sleep. He knew the boss-man didn't normally refer to clients as gentlemen. He thought about who it could be and pulled on his favorite white t-shirt with a Dell Computer insignia. It was a t-shirt his father had given him as a present.

“My father.”

He rushed around the little room, his private room while at work. Here he was allowed to take rests and naps on slow days. He straightened the sheets; brushed the used Kleenex off the bedside table into a thin metal trashcan. He could hear footsteps coming up the stairs, heavy and hollow, and approaching his room. He licked his fingers and straightened out his thin black hair, and passed a hand over his face to rub off any debris or loose hairs. He looked around; everything was presentable, and he faced the door.

The tarnished handle turned a quarter-turn, and stopped, hesitantly, before turning the rest of the way and opening with the door. Tich-Tahc saw an image of his father, and the words “Let's go home,” dissolve before his eyes. Standing there was a large white foreigner, a *farang*, in a business suit and tie. He was fat like most of the *farangs* who came to his little room, and reminded Tich-Tahc of a wrinkly type of pale white garden grub that ate the roots of fathers' vegetables. The man stood there and looked down at him, a perspiring glass of rum and coke in

his hand. He was looking uncertain if he was in the right room. Tich-Tahc stood there a moment also, hoping the man wasn't the "gentleman" he was told of. But the moment passed, and instead the large, pale man entered and closed the door behind him.

"Good evening, sir." Tich-Tahc said in polite Thai, the way he was told, but the man wrinkled his brow and cocked his head to one side. With no response, he instead delved into the small amount of broken English he had learned from the boss-man and other clients. "Hi man. Come, come."

The man raised his eyebrows and entered the room, the door shutting behind him with a metallic click. He removed his jacket as he stood, glancing around the room. His eyes lingered on the plain walls, the ceiling, the paint flaking from the floor and collecting in the corners. He undid his rust-paisley tie, sliding the knot slowly down the tail until popping off the end and disintegrating into normalcy.

Tich-Tahc understood the signs, and bowed his head, thoughts of his father gone. He took off his t-shirt and slid it under the bed, keeping the stranger from seeing it. He didn't undress more; the boss-man said let the men do that part. So he stood with head and shoulders bowed, and analyzed the layers of paint flaking from the floor. There were many layers for it was painted more than once a year, and each time the color was decided by what was least expensive. It was an eggshell white at the time, and scuffed with black streaks from shoes. The deepest scratches were by the legs of the bed, and in one he could see down four layers; of white, yellow, teal and orange. He thought he could see a little purple peaking out.

"Hey," said the man, now sitting on the bed in a white t-shirt that stretched over his stomach and blue and white striped boxers. "Come here."

Tich-Tahc, still looking at the floor, shifted over in front of him, arms hanging loosely at his sides.

“Closer.”

He moved closer, only a couple feet separating the two, and stood. The man’s strong hands reached out and took Tich-Tahc by the shoulders, pulling him in, and kissed him. Tich-Tahc could feel the man’s tongue enter his mouth, and could distinguish the repulsively familiar taste of sour milk and coffee. He stood there, eyes closed, ignoring the man’s tongue exploring his mouth, and the large hands on his hips. Finally the man stood up, moving in shaky jerks, and dropped his boxer shorts to the floor, then reached over his head to tear off his t-shirt. He climbed on the bed and beckoned Tich-Tahc to follow.

The child stood there, already shirtless and wearing only a pair of unwashed shorts and flip-flops. He looked up from the floor at the man waiting on the bed, and stepped forward. “I know what you want to do,” he thought. He unbuttoned his shorts and let them fall in a heap around his ankles. “In half an hour, I know it will be finished.”

He climbed onto the bed, not looking at the man, trying not to notice his belly hanging like a pregnant cow’s; how it lay, bloated, on the nylon comforter. What disgusted him the most was the amount of hair all the tourists had, and how their legs were as hairy as under their arms. He lay next to the man and waited, the universe around him slowly becoming dulled. The room dimmed, the colors on the walls and in the faded and crinkled posters hung over the bed became dark shadows of their original hues. The blanket he lay on and the hand that stroked along his body blended into distraction. Tich-Tahc’s attention and focus, all of his thoughts, were of elsewhere. He was in a dusty yard behind his family’s house, he was kneeling in the dirt, looking

at a wagon hitch. As the man climbed on top of him, he was listening to his brother teach him how to tie a hitch knot.

* * *

Half an hour later, Fletcher was finished. He rolled onto his side on the bed, and felt the lightness of sex dissipate from his chest. He looked up at the ceiling and took a deep breath, briefly worrying he had a heart attack, and then relaxed. He looked over at the boy, who was laying motionless on his stomach, and asked, "hey, you ok?" The child turned his head to Fletcher and said nothing. "No English? I said," he spoke slower and with more volume. "Are-you-o.k.?" He gave the boy a 'thumbs-up' sign. Tich-Tahc blinked and swallowed, a meek smile was all he could manage.

Fletcher rolled on his back, breathing heavily. He reached over and lay a hand on the boy's rear-end. The two lay in silence while Fletcher's mind wandered around, from the boy next to him, to the job he was neglecting, to the city and club owner and back to the boy. He daydreamed for a while, and thought about how shocked he was when he first came in the room.

He was expecting a girl. He knew the prostitute would be young of course, he could tell that was the point when the man at the other bar had told him. But he had never expected a little boy. After coming in and sitting down, he had begun to realize that this was what he was looking for in Bangkok. The idea of sleeping with females had been intriguing, especially some of these Thai prostitutes who knew so how to love, like his friend back home had said. He was excited, also, to try sex with a minor as long as he was here, just to see what all the hype was about. But this had rekindled a desire he had suppressed for years. He remembered as a teenager being attracted to really young girls, sisters of guy friends and girlfriends, as how he even eyed his niece while at a company picnic. But the thoughts had always given him what he thought of as

unnecessary guilt. He avoided young girls and was mean to them when they were around as a way to save him from himself. “And now I can explore my fantasy as much as I want,” he thought, “and no one gets hurt.”

He scooped his watch from the bedside table and looked at it. Still fifteen minutes left. “Hey kid,” he said, “You wanna earn a little extra dough?”

* * *

Sharayu was ecstatic. She was in the rear of a brothel, one that was known to offer the sexual services of children. It was a place she had tried repeatedly to close down, and had their name in her “most wanted” pile on her desk. She had called the police on the establishment numerous times, but the kickbacks handed out by the barkeeper were always more substantial and effective than her own pleas to the law. The police and lawmakers knew of the place only as a parlor and café, and during the raids the police would never venture into the back rooms. It was in one of these rooms that Sharayu now sat, with a young male child no older than ten years.

“You don’t have to be here. You don’t have to stay. When I leave here today, I want you to understand that you can follow me. I know of places where you’ll be helped out, where you can be friends with children your own age. No more customers. Do you like the sound of that? No more working? You can be in school, and play all day long. You can live with other children and laugh and play.” She felt desperate for this, she wanted the boy just to say yes. “Come with me.”

“But I have to pay the man for my parents.”

“No, no you don’t. Listen to me. That money that your parents got isn’t legal. Do you know what that means? That means that you can leave and no one can do anything to you. It will be o.k.”

“My father said I was saving the family.”

She flinched hearing the echo of her own father from so many years ago. “I know. I know, little one. But,” her face was becoming flushed again. She could only see white hot anger as she tried to form her words. She took a breath and slowed down. “Your father was... Your father is mistaken. You see, he didn’t know, I think, what this work would really be like.” She paused again and breathed. “The men who took you lied to your parents, see? So it’s ok not to pay the money back because they lied.”

Tich-Tahc looked up slowly, and Sharayu could see the look of indignation on his face. She had seen the same look on the faces of all children who thought they were protecting their family. “My father said not to come home until I work off the money. The boss-man here told me if I leave before I pay the money, my family will be cursed forever. I will not let my family down.”

Sharayu lowered her head. She knew that if she said anything more, the boy would turn off, and she would never get him open again. She had to tread so lightly that she felt she could barely even continue the conversation. “What about the men here? Surely, you don’t like them?”

The boy’s face darkened, and he slouched forward slightly on the bed. His eyes were fixed on his hands, then glanced up to the corner by the door. “They bring me nice things sometimes. They tell me I’m nice. Sometimes one will take me out for the night. There is a restaurant we can go to around the corner. It’s nice, too. I like the deserts. It can be fun.”

“But Tich-Tahc,” she said, scooting next to him on the bed but not touching, letting him keep his personal space that was taken from him so often. “It’s not always nice, is it? In this room, when the men come here. It’s not fun.”

“No,” he stared past his dangling hands at the floor.

“And it’s not fun when they hold you down, is it Tich-Tahc? They’re mean and make you do stuff you don’t want to do. Not really. Even though the boss-man tells you to say you like it, you really don’t. It’s not fun when they make you touch them, is it?”

“No.” His voice was halted, emanating like a hollow bark from the back of his throat.

“Or when they touch you? When they do things you wish they didn’t, it’s not fun anymore. You wish they would stop, and you pray they would stop. You pray and you pray, and nothing happens. They don’t stop, do they?”

The little boy held his head in his hands, tufts of dark hair sprouting through his fingers and sticking up at all angles. She could see his back shudder and shake though the thin fabric draped on his back, and her heart broke. She realized she had crossed a line she had never crossed before. Her purpose of getting this child out of this place had superceded her respect for his barriers. She realized she was intentionally trying to break his spirit because she wanted him so desperately to leave the brothel, to escape the grasp of the sex industry. And now there was a crying boy next to her, young and fragile, who had been hurt to the core and what was left, she was taking. She hated herself at that moment, and for the rest of her life when she thought about that instant, on the thin, uncomfortable bed, she would get a shameful chill.

She held him for a while, until he stopped crying and began to stiffen. The hour she had paid for was nearly up, and she knew not to expect any leniency from the club owner. “I’m sorry, Tich-Tahc. I have to go. Say the word and you can come with me.”

He wiped his cheeks with the back of his hand, and moved a few inches away from her. “No,” he said. “I can’t go until I pay.”

In desperation, Sharayu blurted out “What if I pay for it? I’ll... I’ll give you the money and you can pay for it yourself. And then you can do anything, you can come with me to the school, you can go home.”

“Nut says this place is better than home. He’s my friend who works here, too.”

“Well, that’s Nut’s choice. But you can make your own choice.” There was a harsh knock on the door, and a large face with peppery hair peeked in.

“Buongiorno, signorina,” said the man, his sea blue eyes locking on Tich-Tahc. “Vai via.”

* * *

“I think I’m in love.” Fletcher was back at the room, a small heap of papers lying near the fax machine, a constant flash from the message light. Love. He stared at his reflection in the mirror, pawing his cheeks, regretting the age they showed. But at the core of all his thought was Tich-Tahc; his eyes, especially. Fletcher had paid handsomely for the opportunity to keep him for eight hours, sleeping, waking, beginning again.

“He loves me too. I can see it in his eyes.” He lowered his head, thinking back. Yes, he knew Tich-Tahc loved him as well. The evidence was in the eyes; in the touch.

He walked to his bed; the sheets all tucked in and clean, and lay down. The feeling Fletcher held for this boy was more than he ever had for his own children, because, although he had never really admitted it, he didn’t look forward to seeing his children. He didn’t romanticize the future of his daughter, or consider his son worthy of overt concern. He was excited for the next dawn, for he would be one morning closer to seeing the boy’s face at a revealed chocolate bar, or feeling the touch—almost adult-like in its precision—and hearing the boy’s sigh.

Restless, Fletcher stood and walked through the office, past a whirring fax machine, and out onto the balcony, where he stood naked three hundred feet over Bangkok. He stared outward at the skyline and toward the setting sun, hands folded over the rail. He stared at the city as a whole – the huge skyscrapers, the gilded temples, the low-income housing, the gutter – and as the city maintained its quietude under the purple sky, he began to see outside of his frame. His mind toyed with the idea that capturing reality on film is like trying to sample a Picasso by viewing one brushstroke. The cityscape before him was filled with so much detail, so much life, Fletcher felt he could stare at it forever and never tire. He wanted to see how the silver of the twilight river played with the gold streetlights; how the sky enveloped the spires of the temples; how the jets banked and curved, leaving moisture trails and puncturing the clouds.

He wanted the boy to be there, next to him. He wanted to stroll around the city and smile with him, to take his sad, innocent face to all the exotic places in the world; to see all the beautiful sites he could. He wanted to touch the boy's defined jaw line, feel once more his thin lips and shallow nose. Caress his sunken abdomen and fill it with delicious and rare foods.

Three kilometers away, the boy was being raped.

* * *

The boy was clenching his jaw. He was squeezing his fists. He was staring at the familiar corner next to the little chamber door, where a candy wrapper laid dormant for over a week now. He hated that corner, that candy wrapper. He hated most what would come next.

The Italian behind him wasn't thinking of the word rape (*violare*: to rape, *ha violato*: he raped, *sta violando*: he is raping). Instead, he was thinking in colors. There was a lightness in his soul that didn't exist except in moments such as this: moments of perceived control and abandonment. The quest for this feeling had taken him to and through many drugs and had

finally led him to here. He felt as though there was a sustained explosion in his genitals – as though a bomb had been caught in mid-blast. He was sure if he opened his eyes, beams of white light would leap out of his skull and shoot through the room. The feeling stayed, stayed, stayed, and was gone. The lightswitch behind his eyes was flipped. The explosion in his groin dissipated. The boys hands remained clenched.

The Italian looked up at the ceiling, and at the boy in front of him as if he were lost. His breathing was heavy and erratic. The loose skin over his chest shook with every exhale.

* * *

That night, while he slept under the soft glow of the city, Fletcher dreamed. He was home; he was eight years old, in a field at a friend's house when he grew up. But it wasn't a field anymore, the dream shifted and instead he was ankle deep in fresh, dewy grass on his friend's lawn. He could feel his socks slowly dampen as he walked. He moved away from a gray house, his friend's; past a shiny blue Ford Bronco with a spare tire on the back, and toward a garden. He remembered the garden of his neighborhood's youth: his friend's mother worked on it incessantly while her husband, a doctor, worked on other people. The dream sharpened and became vivid: he could smell the yellow tulips, like a spice, the various herbs and scented geraniums, he could see the little white hairs on the lamb's ear sage. Looking up, he could see through the dark, gunmetal-blue sky overhead at the stars beyond, which bounced with his step. As he walked he noticed a rabbit hole near the lettuce, and caught a glimpse of movement. He was afraid, but it felt familiar so he did not run. A little black furry head poked out of the hole and looked at him: a skunk. *It's so cute*, he thought. *But perhaps it will come out and squirt me, then I'll smell really bad.* He edged away, keeping an eye on the skunk as it slowly emerged from the hole. *It's coming after me*, he dreamed. He ran, but because it was a dream he couldn't

run far or fast. He turned to the skunk, who was tottering behind him, and grabbed it by its neck and squeezed, he squeezed until it stopped moving, and then brought it inside. *Look, Dad, I killed a skunk. Is that wrong?* Just then the skunk moved a little. His father, a caricature with a big head and accentuated features, laughed. *Forged tough to last you longer. Break its neck Carl, it's the only way.* But Fletcher, the child, looked down at the skunk and felt guilty. *Break its neck Carl.* He looked at the skunk's face, and saw his stuffed animal from when he was a child. Maybe he could still set it free. Maybe it could still be all right, it could still live. *Break its neck Carl.* He wondered why he cared if the skunk sprayed him. Maybe it just wanted to be friends. *Break its neck Carl.* Maybe it had a life of its own. Maybe it had a family. Maybe it was never going to spray me. *Break its neck Carl, now.* So he wrapped his hands around the skunk's neck, feeling the bone and muscle in his hands, and twisted.

* * *

He rose the following afternoon to a sharp beep coming from the fax machine, followed by a whirring of paper and motors. "It's been almost three days," he thought, "since I checked my e-mail." His cell phone was still in a jacket pocket, batteries long-since worn out. It had become just a wall of silence for Glori, calling incessantly from five thousand miles away. He lifted himself off the bed and stood to stare out the window.

A thick haze had enveloped the city, causing buildings and skyscrapers to melt into a yellow fog of nonexistence after nearly half a mile. The river reflected the afternoon sun in a rippling strip of orange glare, outlining slivers of boats that cut through the water like black teardrops. The pane of glass he rested his hand on was quite warm, heated by the midsummer's day on the other side.

Fletcher's world seemed much more centered after he had gotten some sleep. The empty, drugged feeling dissipated. His room temperature was set to a comfortable sixty-eight degrees, and if he closed his eyes he could feel the air around him. Not humid, not hot, but just right. The same temperature of airplanes, hospitals, and his office back in Hollywood. He felt more like his old self then, not at all the child-like, curious man from the previous night. He licked his lips and tasted the dryness of the inside of his mouth. "Time to get back on task," he thought, nodding silently. "Time to get back to it. Focus." And for a while the boy was pushed aside by his mind, silenced until later.

He walked over to the fax machine, pulling the complementary robe over his shoulders, and picked up a small stack of paper in the receiving tray. There were responses to grant requests, signed agreements from casting agencies, insurance company forms to be read and signed, and numerous other documents and letters that needed a signature or a denial. He began a pot of coffee and ordered room service, relishing the safety and anonymity of being a guest at the large hotel. A thought struck him, and he leaned across the desk and grabbed the phone.

After three rings, Carlos answered in Thai.

"Carlos? It's Carl Fletcher. What's new that I need to know?"

"Mr. Fletcher? What do you mean? We haven't heard from you for days, we were getting—."

"None of your concern, Carlos, none of your concern. Talk to me. What's new?"

During the whole day, Fletcher felt lighter and lighter, beginning when he grabbed his stack of work and began signing and reading, signing and reading. After his phone call with Carlos and later with Glori, he felt as he hadn't felt in years about his work. It was fun again. He felt as though he really had talent for film business. He could call up a tedious client or a

demanding vendor, talk with them for a few minutes, and would have them eating out of his hands. In a matter of hours he had coordinated with the set director for a site he had chosen, had renegotiated a contract with the cinematographer, and set up an interview with internationally acclaimed film-star Robert Chase.

He felt a change in his attitude around five o'clock, when looking outside he caught a glimpse of himself in the reflection on the window. There he was staring back, a hunched-over, balding white middle-aged man in a bathrobe and bare feet, a days worth of beard hugging his chin. Fletcher felt his anger rise, seeing that vision super-imposed over the red sunset of Bangkok. "Just another businessman in Bangkok," he thought. Then his thoughts drifted to the boy. His ballpoint pen remained poised over a dotted line on a form.

He tried to recapture the lighthearted feeling he had lost. He signed some more papers, called a few more people, but was suddenly unsure of himself. He no longer really knew what he was reading or signing, but felt like he was doing so on instinct. He felt the people he talked to on the phone were having their way with him, and maybe he was the one being agreeable or too easy. The next call he tried to strong-arm the owner of an inexpensive catering company, and before he knew it he had lost the contract. His thoughts drifted back to Tich-Tahc. Soon, he couldn't think of anything else.

An hour later he was dropped anonymously at the door of the brothel by a muddied taxi. The dark orange door perched above a short flight of stairs, lit from above by a single light in the dark street, casting ominous shadows across its frame. He pushed open the door, not wanting to stand exposed outside for any longer than necessary. Inside was the same brothel as before, but it seemed quieter, as if the music couldn't be loud enough to penetrate the sticky air.

He felt like practically a regular in the little room. There were a few faces scattered at some tables, guys sipping from beer bottles and eyeing the women, others getting lap dances, others climbing the stairs in the back. Fletcher walked to the bartender and asked, “Is Tich-Tahc available?”

The bartender lifted a dry-erase clipboard and scanned the names. “No yet. Top of the hour. I sign you in.”

Fletcher paid him with some new cash he had withdrawn on the way over, and ordered a drink. He turned and watched the show, thoroughly uninterested at the women gyrating up on stage and with all of his thoughts on the boy in the room. He leaned back against the bar and waited, checking his watch: twenty minutes. His eyes wandered around, looking at the stairs, the other customers, the women dancing. He could make out a girl of no more than fifteen performing oral sex in a far corner. He considered it, but decided to save himself for the boy.

* * *

The large German man, towering well over six feet in height and half that in width, walked out of the room, tossing a small tip on the floor where the yellow candy wrapper lay. Tich-Tahc stood and entered a small bathroom, its door hidden in the wall in the opposite corner of the room. The closet-sized room had a toilet and a sink, and only enough floor space for one person; his feet were in the same square foot whether he was in front of the sink or sitting on the toilet. He knelt on the floor, and jammed his index finger towards the back of his throat, just like his friend Nut had showed him to do. It took a few attempts before a stomach full of noodles and semen spat into the bowl. He sat there, enjoying the coldness of the ceramic bowl, enjoying his little bathroom all to himself, and hoped there would be no more men for at least an hour. Finally he stood up and flushed the toilet. He pivoted on his heels and stuck his mouth under the faucet,

taking big mouthfuls of water and spitting them out. After his taste was as clear as he could get it, he began to drink. He drank and he drank until his stomach hurt and he finally stopped. A young boy's face stared back at him from the foggy mirror. It stared back and was expressionless. Tich-Tahc stared back, through the mirror, and thought of the woman's words. He thought about leaving, getting out. He could explain it to his father, and he would understand that this place was worse than he had thought. In fact, Tich-Tahc was certain that his father would be enraged at the horrible treatment of his son. He would come down to Bangkok and kill the boss-man, and kill the men who kept staying in his room and who hurt him. His father would take just revenge and would cry for Tich-Tahc, and Tich-Tahc would forgive him.

A noise came from the main room, and the child's heart jumped and then sank. He locked eyes again with the child staring back from the mirror, and gritted his teeth. "I'm leaving," he thought, his vision faded with red. He spun and stepped out into the bedroom.

Sitting on the bed with a drink in his hands was the white American from before. The one who kept staying there and buying all his time and giving him little trinket gifts he hated. The man looked up and smiled, placing his drink on the bedside table and saying something in English Tich-Tahc could barely understand; something like "where have you been?" only in their slang.

Tich-Tahc spoke back in Thai and gestured with his hands. "Go away! I'll tell on you and you will all be in trouble. There is no more! No more." He edged around the bed, keeping out of arms reach, trying to get the t-shirt his father gave him. The man didn't respond, and instead stood up and took off his jacket. This time Tich-Tahc spoke some of his unpracticed English, "No! No. No. No." The man stopped unbuttoning his shirt and tilted his head, droning out

something else Tich-Tahe couldn't understand. The child was behind the bed now, t-shirt just inches from his outstretched arm.

Finally the man just said, "Yes. Yes. Yes." He grabbed the boy and pulled, sliding him so quickly on his back across the blanket he felt it burn. The man's large hands were powerful against the little boy's clothing; his shorts were ripped down the center in a loud tear, and his underwear were yanked down his legs and off his ankles.

Tich-Tahe clasped his t-shirt in a crumpled ball between his hands. He began kicking up at the man, his little legs pumping like he was riding a bicycle. Most of the kicks landed in the man's stomach, but one hit him square in the forehead.

The man jerked back and blinked, rubbing his head with the palm of his hand and staring incredulously at the child. Tich-Tahe slid back against the headboard, naked except for the t-shirt in his hands, his eyes wide with fascination: he had never fought against any of the men; he hadn't known he could. He felt powerful, that at least he could fight back. He could tell them physically that he didn't want to do what they came here for. "Now go away!" he yelled in Thai. "Go back to where you come from and leave me alone! Leave all of us alone!"

The man stood there, hand to his head, and looked down at the bed. His face lost its look of bewilderment, and its lines hardened. Creases sunk into his forehead, around his mouth and eyes. He lowered his hand and unbuttoned his pants, letting them fall to the floor. Quickly following were his socks, boxers, and silver watch. He stared at Tich-Tahe as he pulled his t-shirt over his head and wadded it up into a ball, throwing it baseball style at the boy's frightened face.

Tich-Tahe looked around, his back to the corner of the room, feeling cold but not wanting to put on his father's t-shirt. The man towering above him, naked and skin blushing with red, stood with his fists clenched, staring down. He said something through clenched teeth, his

monotone language sounding pointed and precise. He said something else, louder this time, and pointed a stubby finger towards Tich-Tahc. The boy looked towards the door, feeling a sinking feeling in his chest, hoping for someone, anyone, to come in at that moment. He could feel the man's anger electrifying the air and charging the room with nervous tension. Tich-Tahc couldn't think with the man staring down at him, yelling the same incoherent words over and over. He wanted to say something, he wanted to run but there was no way to get around the pillar of anger between him and the door. Finally a large hand swooped down and caught Tich-Tahc at the base of the jaw, whipping his head around and tossing his whole body against the wall. The man reached down and grabbed the crumpled t-shirt from the boy's hands, ripping it up and away. Tich-Tahc held on, and was almost lifted off the bed with it, but lost his grip and fell back. He started crying.

The man jumped on the bed and, kneeling, grabbed the boy's shoulders and spun him around backwards. Tich-Tahc began to yell, "Help me! Help me! Someone help me!" But the man wrapped a large paw around the boy's head, covering his mouth as he sought penetration. Tich-Tahc's yells turned into screaming, the only noise coming through his nose as high-pitched hums, until the man pinched his nose shut with his index finger and thumb. Tich-Tahc flailed his arms, kicked his legs but could find no purchase; the man grabbed his wrists together and held them behind his back. He tried screaming louder, but he could only make muted noises behind the thick, meaty palm. He couldn't breathe in. His head was pulled back, arched almost between his shoulder blades. The man was pumping ferociously now, suspending Tich-Tahc a foot off the bed, all the while yelling in his English and grunting.

Tich-Tahc could only feel pain and panic. He needed a breath, just one cool breath of air and he felt he would be o.k.

He was in a field. The sun was high in the sky, almost at mid-day. A warm breeze slid over his skin, carrying the scent of poppies and over-ripe fruit. A bird was singing its familiar song from the treetops. Tich-Tahc looked up and saw his father, silhouetted by the sun, his strong figure standing with arms at his hips and face looking off into the distance. Tich-Tahc sat in the grass, looking up at his father, and smiled.

* * *

Fletcher gasped for air, his body feeling empty. He felt numb and still had the same longing he had had an hour before, some vague, nameless need that he had expected would be dutifully fulfilled. But everything was as it was; sex with the boy had achieved nothing. He didn't even feel like he had enjoyed the orgasm. Everything seemed unbelievably dull, from the color cast out by the dim yellow bulb, to the rhythmical sounds emanating from the dance stage. He lay there, on top of the child's body, and listened to a man's grunting from the next room.

He stood up and arched his back, stretching towards the ceiling. His breathing was shallow, but not rapid. He looked down at the child and slapped his bare buttocks with his large, flat palm. "What was that about? Huh? Don't tell me 'no, no no.' I pay your goddam livelihood. I bring you stuff to play with, who else does that for you? Ungrateful bastard kid."

Fletcher walked to the hidden bathroom door and entered, washing his hands and yelling. "No tip for you this time. Not with that attitude. You better learn some goddam respect and be ready for me next time. I work hard for my money. I don't want to pay no 3000 baht for a kid who gives me lip." He splashed water on his face, smearing soap over his neck and forearms. Eyes closed, he shouted over his shoulder. "Look, I'm sorry if I was rough. But you need to learn respect for your elders. I can take care of you, you know? Take care of your family. You want me to buy your mommy a present?"

Tich-Tahc, lying motionless on the bed, said nothing.

“Dammit, kid,” he said, toweling off and leaning on the bathroom doorframe. “I know all you Thai’s really speak English, so don’t bother playing dumb. What? You think I’ll feel sorry for you and give you your tip back? No way, I know how it works. You people need to learn your lesson.” Fletcher paused as he looked at the child. One of his arms was draped over the side of the mattress, falling into a pool of sheets that had been torn off the bed and lay on the floor. His small back lay curved slightly, a small valley traveling from his waist to between his shoulder blades. Fletcher walked over and nudged his hand with his foot. “Hey kid?”

* * *

Sharayu was in the back of a dark room, its ceiling lost above her in darkness. A small fire glowed from the center of the room, dug into the soft dirt floor and with small rocks around its perimeter radiating heat. She sat there, in the semi darkness and felt a warmth in the room that could only emanate from other sleeping bodies. There were forms lying around the edges of the room, their silhouetted shapes softened by thick woolen comforters. She rose and hugged the heavy blanket around her shoulders.

The sky outside was overcast, nothing clear from horizon to horizon. The pre-dawn light gave it a greenish-yellow color, accented by blue gray changing to white towards the east. She could sense the comforting presence of a huge mountain to her back. The same mountain she ran around with her brothers and sisters as children. She turned and watched feathery clouds form from one of its many valleys, and wondered if the weather would bring rain. She briefly recalled living in Bangkok, and with that she woke up with a start.

It was late in the morning, on her first day off in two weeks. Sharayu lay in her bed, spreading her arms and legs out to all corners, feeling the soft Egyptian cotton sheets slide on her

skin. "Today's the day," she thought. The clock read a little after noon; next to the glowing red numbers was a small glass of water and a rose. She smiled, and rolled on her side.

An hour later she stepped out of the shower, toweling dry in a haze of steam, and her mind already thinking about her work. There was much she could get done, she thought; much that needed to be done that day. She poured herself a hot cup of green tea, and sat down at the messy dining room table she used as a desk. Then she stopped herself. Today was her day off. She supposed she should relax, do what her co-workers told her and go see a new Indian movie or the latest Hollywood release. She thought about going to check in on the women in the shelter. "Maybe they need an extra pair of hands down at the clinic?" She had to keep reminding herself to just stop, to think about other things than work. She thought about what else she could do.

"I could take a walk by the river," but she knew she would end up checking in on the street girls who sold themselves by the docks. "I could read in the park," but she knew that if she were already in that sector of the city, she might as well stop by the office. She turned on the television, and flipped past CNN and some daytime Thai game shows before turning it off and standing up. Her house seemed strange to her at this hour of the day. She was at work so often, she had forgotten how sunny the living room became at mid-day. She adjusted a few plants, moving them into direct sunlight, and watered her favorite fern. The phone was sitting next to her lime-green couch, and the number to her office, she knew, was in a one-touch memory button.

She retreated to her bedroom, made the bed, folded her and her boy friend's clothes, and opened the shades. Her computer was in this room, on a small desk, and she turned it on. She turned it off before it even finished booting.

“I’m addicted,” she said to herself. “It’s work or nothing for me.” She decided to go see a movie, although she really didn’t want to, but allowed herself a phone call to the office first, just to make sure everything was running smoothly.

Mrs. Watana answered. “Bangkok Organization to End Sex Trafficking, how may I help you?”

Sharayu thought her voice sounded strained. Probably knows it’s me calling to bug her, she thought. “Hi, it’s me.”

The voice lightened, and became mock-stern. “What are you calling for, Ms. Oonsiri? We can run this place without you for a day, you know.”

“I know, I know. I just wondered if there was anything new. Any mail I should know about? Anything to sign?”

“No, we’re fine. Some sad news though, another prostitute died last night. At the club in the north side, where you went yesterday.”

“What?” Sharayu sat down and picked up a pen and paper. “How old was she?”

“It wasn’t a she, ma’am.”

Her blood froze and her spine stiffened. Not the same boy, she thought, not the same boy. “How old was he?”

“Nine years old, I’m afraid. We’ve all been a little depressed about it around the office, if you want to know the truth. We were worried, did you talk to this boy yesterday?”

Sharayu didn’t know what to say. “I don’t know. Did you get a name?”

“No, ma’am.”

Ten minutes later she was in a taxi being taken to the north district. There was only one police car outside the brothel when she arrived, and pedestrian traffic in the alley was unaffected.

It seemed like a normal day to her; she had difficulty imagining a death here just last night. She got out and entered the club. It was nearly deserted except for some waitresses and two police officers; no tourists dared enter with a police car parked in front.

“Where are the children?”

A police officer turned, his young face lit from the side by a glowing disco-ball. “They’ve been taken away.” Sharayu knew the young officer, she had dealt with him a few months back during an unsuccessful raid on another brothel.

“Who was killed?” Her steady stride slowed to a crawl as she approached the men. The bar owner sat in front of them, his hands in cuffs behind his back. “Did he do it?”

“I didn’t do it, ma’am! I didn’t do it! It was a white foreigner! A *farang*! A movie producer I heard him say! I’m telling you!”

The officer turned back to him. “Shut up! You can prove nothing! Who’s to say you didn’t kill the boy and then point fingers at the tourists?”

Sharayu knelt by the man, a person who had repulsed her every time they met, a known owner of a bar that sold the services of young children. She saw his wrists squirm in his handcuffs, and noted they were much too tight, making his hands turn a pale blue. He looked up at her, his eyes pleading. “Are you telling me the truth?” she asked.

“I swear, it’s all true.”

The police had had enough. One each grabbed him under an arm and heaved him out of the chair. “We can continue the questioning at the station.”

“But wait,” she pleaded. “What about the foreigner? The movie producer?”

The officer shouted over his shoulder as they walked towards the door. “There is no movie producer.”

“What was the boy’s name?”

“Tich-Tahc. He had no last name we could find.” The door opened and a beam of white daylight flooded the bar, overpowering the spinning globes and the chrome dancing poles, illuminating the deteriorating varnish and the stairs leading up to the rooms in the back. The waitresses held up their hands to block the glare, and in an instant, the light was gone.

* * *

Fletcher ran down a small alley, feeling conspicuous and filthy, his shirt tails hanging down and his tie gripped like a threatening serpent in his hand. He was feeling overwhelmed. Fletcher felt the need to hide from everyone. He wanted to hide from the Club, from the concierge, from Carlos and Glori. He needed to hide from the police, the government, the country. He had to get back home where he could be anonymous. He needed to never see his wife again, or his family. How could he face his son again? Or his daughter?

As Fletcher ran down dark streets away from the city center, a dark, icy hand grabbed his gut and twisted. Until this moment, the idea his son was near the same age as Tich-Tahc was a thought that only dared to dance on the other side of the dark cloud in his soul. He lost the rhythm of his step and stopped. He clutched his fists to his temples and tried to block any thoughts of his son, of the boy, of himself, his act; he forced himself to think of the problems in the script or the areas of the city or the shoot. But Tich-Tahc’s thin back was stretched before him in his mind. The boy’s cold fingers, dangling over the edge of the bed. He leaned against a brick wall, and tried to breath.

“What did I do?” Thoughts flushed through his head and he couldn’t tell if he was standing on a sidewalk or if he was sleeping in his hotel. He squeezed his eyes shut and thought about how the boy had screamed, and how he had held his head and neck back. Fletcher looked

down at his left-hand palm, the one that had killed. “No!” he shouted, startling passer-by. He held his head again, palms over his ears, and lurched forward. He couldn’t hear anything over the roar of the city. He couldn’t think of anything but the seed in his mind that was growing faster than he could run. “Don’t think it. Don’t think it. Don’t think it.” But finally it got through and he thought of himself and the boy having sex; the boy and his son; himself and his son. He collapsed and heaved his stomach over the pavement and the gutter, one hand on the cobblestone curb, in two, monstrous retches, and thought if he could just find a place to hide everything would be o.k.

* * *

Sharayu rushed into the lobby of the Banyan Tree hotel, skirting by tourists and business officials alike, looking into their faces, wondering who was the one she sought. She ran over to the check-in desk where the concierge was standing.

“Hello,” he said. “Did you get my rose?”

“Do you remember telling me about the movie producer? The one you took money from?”

“Movie producer?”

“Yes. The one who tried to bribe—.”

“Oh, sure. What about him? He checked out about an hour ago.”

She stood, looking into his eyes, feeling lost. “He’ll be wanted for questioning by the police. I think he killed a little boy.”

The concierge blinked. “My god. He had some contact information while he was here, a man named Carlos Villalobos. I guess he did seem a little nervous.”

“Where did he go?”

“He didn’t say.”

Sharayu walked towards the revolving exit doors in a trance. Her mind was, at the same time, racing with ways to catch the man, and deadened by the knowledge that he had already gotten away. A foreign man with that type of money to throw around, he would be impervious to contemporary Thai police. She walked outside, under the blue sky and its dark filter of smog, and hailed a cab. She had his name, slipped to her by her fiancée, and so could find the name of the production company. She had the name of his contact in Thailand as well, so she could try reaching him that way, too. But she knew that the Thai law was very strict, and to be charged a pedophile, the person had to be caught in the sexual act. But more, she was very familiar to the blindness the authorities gave when truant tourists were involved. She felt like crying, but didn’t. After all, one more brothel had been closed, but at the price of a young child’s life. She couldn’t rest. Not while there were more illegal brothels and clubs, not while children were molested and enslaved. There was much to be done.

* * *

Fletcher was sitting in the first-class waiting area of the Bangkok International Airport. The room was in the bowels of the large building, and had no outside windows. He was in a corner, his back to a cushioned wall, facing the door. He was imagining a group of police coming in at any moment, asking the bartender, perhaps showing him a mug shot. He imagined what he would say to them. They didn’t have evidence, of that he was sure. Of course they could prove he was in the room, and sure, he was the last one with the boy, but nothing that could prove beyond a reasonable doubt that he had killed the child. “Of course,” he thought, “This is Thailand. They’ll probably cane me and send me to a prison camp for the rest of my life without trial.” He gulped down his second rum and coke, enjoying a drink that wasn’t watered down. He

looked around at the other passengers, all first class flyers, who dotted the room. They were men, mostly, and a few women with gold jewelry and blonde hair. His eyes narrowed, and he scanned everyone's face, looking for any possible police who were waiting to nab him if he tried to leave. To Fletcher's satisfaction, everyone was white.

He rose, gathering his belongings, and headed for the door. His mind was flustered with paranoid thoughts of people watching him, perhaps speaking on cell-phones to unseen officials on the other side of the door. But there was no one outside the door. Just a regular hallway that connected the first-class lounges with the rest of the airport. A few people were walking by, mostly passengers, and a couple of Thai security at the end of the hall. He straightened his posture, pulled back his shoulders, and strode confidently down the corridor. His mind flashed on a thought he used to entertain as a child: "If you can't see the monster, it can't see you." He walked past the guards, took a left, and proceeded under the skylights of the international terminal.

The incoming flight was delayed in its arrival, and Fletcher watched it taxi to the gate and stop, as the large boarding ramp attached itself to the side of the hull. "This is it," he thought. "An escape back into my homeland. Safe and clear." As the plane began to unload, Fletcher anxiously stood and walked over to the gate, relishing his anonymity among the identical first class passengers. He watched their shoes clump up the ramp, all shiny and polished like his. The suits were somewhat wrinkled, as he knew his would be after the day-long flight. Many people had their passports out and ready, all American-blue, but most just walked with their laptops and briefcases gripped in their hands. There was an electrified feeling in the air. Fletcher could see the excitement on their faces, the look in their eyes. He flashbaked to his own arrival a couple weeks earlier, and remembered how his own face must have looked.

A feeling like cold wire tightened in his chest, as he watched the businessmen walk past him. These men were looking for something, the same thing Fletcher was looking for. Each one had the appearance of the guilty; Fletcher knew what they would do, where they would go. He could already picture them in the little clubs and parlors around Bangkok. He could see them watching dancers, and could taste the stale peanuts they would eat with their watered-down drinks. He imagined them choosing their lays, like he had, by number: "I'll take number eighty-three." "I want that cute one, number twelve."

The men walked into and out of Fletcher's vision, their eyes fixed on a point at the horizon. They arrived knowing what they wanted to find; they were in Bangkok, they had money.

"I know you," Fletcher whispered. "I know all of you."

Appendix

Research Prospectus

Section One: Working Title of Capstone and Topic Description.

Thailand's Child Sex Slavery Dilemma and how it affects the victim, oppressor, and community.

I plan to write a creative writing piece in the form of a novella to describe the affect of child sex slavery on the community of Thailand/Bangkok, the children who are its victims, and the white males who make up the offenders. I plan to tackle each group separately, and have one character act as the representative for their whole group. The one character, while being represented, will not be the only character of that type; I'd like to have protagonists and antagonists in each character stratum.

The offenders will be represented by one character of the working name Carl Fletcher. This character will be a movie producer from Hollywood, California, who is in Thailand for the purpose of filming a period romance movie. By using this type of character I hope to integrate the post-colonialist sentiment of the "orient" as mythical and submissive: he travels to Thailand to exploit its natural beauty, people, and labor. The character's position as movie producer will also symbolize the enormous amount of focused wealth the United States has, and how this wealth can blind its owner to other people's suffering.

The primary victims will be represented by one boy who is enslaved at a "club" in Bangkok. The boy will be the epitome of the children who are stolen and trafficked for sex slavery. His history will be representative of many children's histories, beginning with his family

and how he was enslaved. Because of this character's position as sub-altern, his voice will be heard mostly in internal monologue.

The community will be represented by one activist, a woman who escaped from the brothels and began a life of protest. She will be modeled after a real-life African activist who was given to a local priest as a sex slave as part of a local tradition, and later escaped and began a crusade against the custom. This character will represent the moral and legal voices of reason.

I believe my topic is important because it will further illuminate a horribly immoral practice that, while well known, is still happening today. My story will take place in the present-day, with careful attention given to the prevalence of this problem as well as the resulting blindness of western society.

Section Two: Learning Outcomes to be Integrated.

MLO 2 – Research: In researching this story, I will be (and already have been) reading and finding other primary sources and secondary sources of information, such as books on Thailand's history, art, culture, and beliefs. I'll also research critical analysis on post-colonial epistemology. In order to have well rounded characters, I will also research their prospective backgrounds: the history of sex slavery around the world, and the history of Thailand's tourism (ie, what demographic of male actually signs up for this immoral type of tourism)

MLO 8 – Creative Writing & Social Action: The process of writing such a "long" short story in itself will satisfy the requirement of creative writing. I will address many social issues as well, focusing on the accountability of the western culture.

Culture & Equity: I will address issues behind the cultures of Thailand and most of Southeast Asia, delving into their history and culture, and how these work together to bring our modern day

Thailand. I will also research the culture of colonists and how their history has affected Southeast Asia.

Section Three: Research Questions

- What is child sex slavery, and how prevalent is it?
- Who are the primary victims, where do they come from, and what do they have to go through on a day-to-day basis?
- Who are the offenders, where do they come from, and what influences their blindness?
- Who comprise the community, and what do they lose/how are they harmed by child sex slavery?
- Does the community, conversely, have anything to indirectly gain from child sex slavery?
- How are the characters and their inter-relationships best conducted on a literary level?
- What is important to reiterate about Bangkok; what is its history?
- How does the history of Thailand influence the current practice of child sex slavery; how does post-colonialist Thailand deal with the issue?

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