



PLASTIC CITY

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On the other side of paradise, the rituals of morning began. Downstairs on the street curb, the other vendors waited for a ride to take them to the pier or other touristy places to sell their goods. Upstairs in the sixth floor walk-up that he and his sister shared, Anurak gathered up his work supplies: massage oils, suntan lotions, introduction to Buddhism books, wet wipes, and breath mints. He avoided the mirror but it called him and then trapped him. His shoulders were still inverted and thin. His body had yet to be built out and sprout into masculinity, and now his hair swept down into his eyes. With a little lipstick and makeup, he could turn into a teenage girl. Life would be easier for him if he pretended to be a girl but then he would not be a businessman. He wanted the power and the glory and all the things that came with masculinity from the world outside Pattaya City. He put his hair in a manly ponytail and continued packing all of his work materials into his satchel: three disposable cameras, two extra large swimming trunks, two extra small swimsuits, a small notebook, and a new suit.

Anurak made sure his section of the living room was cleaned. He folded his bed sheets and tucked them into a box and he washed the dishes. Even though his sister Ploy works at night and she had a large and empty bed, he slept on the couch. Her excuse, “I spend my nights laying around with foreign smells and foreign beds. When I come home, I want everything to be the same.” Her rules had made him feel like a houseguest, but he had to follow them because it was her apartment and she was paying the most rent.

The sun barely out and he was already drenched in sweat. The air felt like syrup and he paused to breathe. A group of monks pushed him to the curb as they walked in unison. They walked from business to business ringing their bells and praying for those who offered food or cash in return. He hated the monsoon season. It made life in Pattaya City unbearable because he was usually out of work. If he did find a job during the monsoon season, it was always work he thought beneath him. Many monsoons ago, Anurak believed his hard work would connect him to a social network full of rich people, and supply him with his dreams, but he sobered up. The rich kept a bouncer and a policeman and karate experts outside their circle. They'd allow him to move down but they'd make sure to break his legs or soul on the way up. As soon as the monsoon season settled, he'd be on a bus to Phuket to be with his girlfriend. She had told him life in that city was different - the circle was wider without so many hoops to jump.

He walked along Naklua Road to avoid the tourists. His small community was the only space in this city that remained outside—way outside—the tourists gaze. The migrant workers, the street children, the aging prostitutes, the vendors, the young girls searching for jobs, the tuck-tuck drivers, and anyone who did not have connections to the pumpkin vine all lived on the other side of paradise. The tourists never wandered in these back streets.

He walked slowly. Two girls started arguing on the street and he crossed to the other side to avoid them. The hookers formed a circle for the pending fight, causing Anurak to increase his speed. He would not be a witness to another drunken hooker rumble. He heard one of them yell “fight” as if they were back in primary school. He looked for the voice to match the face. It was his sister, Ploy. An outsider, looking at this display of rancor would assume she came from a bad home, like most of the working girls. But their mother was a housewife who only wore long skirts and their father made an honest living. Anurak wished he could save Ploy from this fight, but he'd already lost her to the streets. In a few weeks, he would pack up his things and leave for good this time. He'd make his departure look like her fault. “I am leaving because you have dragged our family's name in mud. Who can look at us with respect?” Anurak told sister during their last argument.

Ploy often told him that she did not have any professional choices. She could be a secretary and be broke, or she could sell her body and be broke, but at least as a prostitute she could send money home to their parents. Anurak stayed in Pattaya City and did not become like the rest of the people who drank and drugged at parties, and pretended they were foreigners. Unlike these people, Anurak and Ploy had choices. But she chose to fall under the spell of this unreal lifestyle. Anurak wanted to live a simple life: save his money and work really hard.

He walked to Main Street to fetch a tuk-tuk to the pier. When he boarded the truck, he saw that it was filled with old white men and their hookers. He sat next to an American guy who was accompanied by a young hooker. The guy was bald, his stomach fell out of his pants, and spit gathered at the edge of his mouth when he spoke. He wore the uniform of a middle-aged American vacationing in South Asia: white beaten-up sneakers, white tube socks that reached his knees, shorts wider than a fisher's net, and a tight polo shirt.

"What do you guys do for Christmas?" The American asked the hooker.

The hooker smiled.

"Do you buy gifts for your family?"

The hooker smiled again. "We don't have Christmas in Thailand."

She looked at Anurak. It was the type of look a magician gives to his assistant during a sold out performance. He pulled out his phone and tried to fade to the background.

"But people all over the world celebrate it." The American went into his fanny pack and took out a washrag. He wiped his face and sausage neck. "It's hotter than the devil's ass."

"Just a little American humor," he slapped his tights. "We all need to laugh now and then."

"Ha," the girl answered. "Ha. You are funny." The girl reached into her purse and fished out her phone.

Anurak knew the working girls only pretended to like the men, but he could not understand how they kept their performances going. "They act as if they know everything," his sister Ploy once said about these men. "And they smell. It's like sleeping with a fish." He only had eight hours of performance within him and those hours were used to

smooth over the tourist on the beach, so he could get paid well. After that, he treated them like regular people. But even on her days off, Ploy and so many of his friends wore a pretend smile on their weary faces.

Anurak looked at the American.

“Merry Christmas,” the American said to Anurak.

The other passengers looked up. “It’s good to be alive,” the American smirked.

Anurak flashed a quick smile, and then looked out the moving truck to avoid further conversation. He did not like the American because he knew he was somebody with that accent and white skin, and he was not ashamed to show it off. He could’ve been somebody but when he graduated Secondary School, his family was deep in debt. They had housing loans, farming loans, farm equipment loans, and a lifetime of embarrassment from their misfortunes. They could not afford his college tuition. With limited work options in the countryside, Anurak followed his sister’s path and moved to Pattaya City. He planned to work for one year, save up all his money, and then reapply to his favorite college in Bangkok. But after three years, he was still too poor to enroll in college and his dreams of becoming an engineer fizzled. He was now pursuing a new dream that he thought would guarantee him success—starting his own business. He had enough start-up capital for a small business—a very small business—but he would make it work.

At the pier, the tourists took pictures of things that did not deserve pictures: street signs, boats, food, stray dogs, and vendors and their raggedy children. As Anurak walked away from the crowd, a woman pulled him aside.

“Excuse me, photo?” she asked. “Please.”

He shrugged, but the woman had already gathered her family to take the picture.

“Thank you,” she said, handing Anurak the camera.

“One, two, three, spaghetti,” he shouted.

The family chuckled. He took a couple rounds of pictures and walked away. He hated to put on a performance so early in the morning.

The ferry to Ko Lan Island was unusually packed for a Wednesday. Anurak stopped working on Wednesdays after his first year living in Pattaya City. On Wednesdays, the tourists were depressed and

did not make efforts to buy more or laugh more. An American tourist once explained this phenomenon to him. “People in America don’t like Wednesdays,” the man said. “We call it hump day because it makes us sad.” Anurak usually stayed home on Wednesdays, catching up on research for his business and learning new English words. But he needed all the extra cash for his move, his business and an engagement ring. He wanted to make a respectable woman out of his girlfriend. Anurak suffered from motion sickness and he combed through any available space in the packed ferry. He found a seat amongst the tourists and slid into the space.

“We aren’t sardines,” the woman sitting beside him said. “This is ridiculous. They can’t ask us to pay so much and then pack us in here like this.”

Sardines? It was a new word for Anurak. He studied the woman, trying to understand the context. She was a pale white woman with a face like an accordion folder. She stood up and called one of the crew members aside. “You can’t fill up the ferry like this,” she pleaded. “We want to arrive safely.”

The crew member smiled. “Ah. Okay.”

She returned to her seat. “These people are something else. They smile and then do the opposite.”

Her friend shrugged and returned her eyes to the guidebook.

“They are so bloody fake,” Accordion Face murmured. “When we get off I’ll complain to the captain.”

Accordion Face smiled at him. “You have a beautiful country,” she said. He ignored her and wrote the word, “Sardines” in his notebook. Perhaps, he’d use the word during his conversations with tourists.

The ferry departed and the tourists took more photos. A tall Black girl and a white man wiggled their birdlike bodies into the seats opposite Anurak. “Success,” she said, lifting her hands in the air. “I told you we would fit.” They took out their cameras and took pictures of the floating scenery. Next, she took a photo of her feet and the white man took a photo of his teeth. She giggled, slapped her thighs, and giggled again. Then, they took more pictures of their body parts.

“Excuse me, can you please take a picture of us?” the Black girl asked. “Please.”

Anurak sighed. There were so many tourists onboard to ask, yet they chose him.

“Just one photo before the background disappears.”

They walked to the ferry’s entrance. First pose: the Black girl licked the white man’s face. Second pose: the white man kissed the Black girl’s nose. Third pose: they stood like a normal couple with hands interlaced and smiled into the camera’s eye.

“Okay, monkey pies,” Anurak shouted. “We’re finished.” They laughed as expected.

The white man reached into his wallet. “Please, for all your trouble.”

“No, thank you,” Anurak said. “It’s no trouble.” He was waiting for the man to offer once more. He read online that tourists weren’t found of eagerness.

“Marius, you have offended the man,” the Black girl said. “These people aren’t focused on money like you.”

The Black girl snatched the wallet.

He hated both of them. Instead of returning to his seat, he joined the other vendors who occupied the engine room for a cheaper fee. It was standing room only and he held the railing with all his life as the waves curled within his stomach.

On Ko Lan Island, he went to the vendor’s storeroom tucked behind the restaurants where the tourists never wandered. Most of the vendors were already at the stockroom getting ready for the day. “Wow, you’re here on a Wednesday?” Bam asked Anurak. “I guess everyone trying to save up before the monsoon.”

Anurak came out of the storeroom wearing his new work outfit: a bowtie with a white shirt tucked into black trousers.

“Bond, James Bond,” Joseph said in English.

“I am a professional,” Anurak said, straightening his bowtie. “The tourists like this stuff.”

“The internet has lied to you again,” Joseph screamed with laughter. “Anyway, James Bond, stand still so I can snap a picture. I have to show my wife this mess.” A deep shame grew within Anurak, but he posed for the picture. Joseph was connected and Anurak needed to respect him. The rest of the group started snapping pictures, until

Joseph told them to stop, afterwards Anurak rushed into the storeroom to change.

“They don’t care about your looks unless it’s native,” Joseph said, pointing to his monk’s robe. Joseph’s job was pretending to be a monk enjoying a day at the beach. He made money by asking the tourists to donate to his temple when they pleaded with him to take his picture. “Anurak, you keep asking for advice, but you aren’t taking any of it.” Joseph was right, but everyday he felt like an important man wearing his costume. Anurak just wanted to feel the same.



Most of the vendors went to the beach to make their first sale, but Anurak stayed behind with Joseph, investigating the scene. He had started taking business classes from Joseph about six months earlier. Joseph traveled abroad and knew what white people liked. He figured these classes would be useful when he moved. Joseph’s business lessons were told in anecdotes that never fully made sense. But Anurak was a committed student because Joseph owned a house, both of his daughters were in college—technical college, but it was still something—and he owned two motorcycles. He wanted to be in Joseph’s position. He could not be like his father, or his grandfather, or his uncles who were all poor farmers without ambition.

Joseph surveyed the beach. “The turtle has legs,” he said. “The sea has fishes.” Anurak took notes. “The Buddha sleeps with his eyes wide awake,” he continued. Anurak took more notes. He would decipher his notes later this evening. Joseph strapped his expensive-looking camera around his neck and walked toward the shore.

The vendors moved through the white sand and beach chairs to peddle their wares to the sun worshippers. The men and women wore large hats to shield themselves from the sun. The sun was everywhere. The women wore long shirts, slippers and socks to avoid any type of tan. They yelled out the items they were selling. “Get your fresh corn here,” one of the vendors shouted. “Coconut water is good for you; come get it,” another screamed out. The tourists lathered themselves up in suntan lotion and took more pictures. They were either reading, listening to music, or looking at the waves flipping in and out. Anurak

walked along the shoreline to study the crowd. Joseph had taught him to make quick stereotypes of the tourists in order to know what they might buy based on their personality type.

A Chinese couple shouted for him to take their photo. “Excuse me, take photo, please.” Anurak declined. The Chinese were too cheap. They bargained for everything and expected everyone to speak Chinese.

He walked closer to the beach chairs and started yelling. “Massage! Massage!”

“Massage, sir?” He walked by a couple who were creaming themselves with suntan lotion. “Massage, madam?”

They did not respond.

The Chinese couple motioned again for him to take their photo. He gave them his middle finger. “Screw you,” he said. He had always wanted to shout this statement to a tourist. The couple stuck their middle fingers at him. Then, he returned the gesture, again. The Chinese couple and Anurak exchanged the gesture a few more times. Finally, he returned to the throngs of sunbathers.

Anurak walked up to a bald guy who was reading a magazine. He narrowed his eyes to gage the magazine. It was nothing serious, he thought. Just a men’s health magazine with an overly muscular white man on the cover.

“Massage for the gentlemen?”

The guy looked like an egg. He did not have a neck and his head sat nearly neckless on his broad shoulders. He covered his eyes with his palms to shield the sun’s glare.

“How much?”

“Different prices for different parts of the body.” Anurak placed his basket on the sand. “You look like you need a good foot massage.”

The guy sat up. “Um, I can go for foot massage.” He closed his magazine. The guy on the magazine cover was shirtless in a pair of tight black shorts with a huge bulge. “How much?”

“For you, I’ll give a good discount.” He inspected the egghead man’s watch and his other items. He looked like he had more money than the English-teacher types or the old men who cashed out their retirement savings and moved to Thailand. “Five hundred for a foot massage. The normal price is three hundred Baht.”

“Um, I want to bargain with you, but I don’t have the energy today.”
“It’s the best price in town.”

Anurak positioned himself for the massage. He did not know if he should start out with a joke, his fake family stories or if he should be silent. Some of the tourists liked silence when they were getting massaged. They said it made them more Zen.

“Nice weather we’re having,” Anurak said. “The forecast for today—sunny, tomorrow—sunny. And the next day, lots of sunshine.”

The guy did not laugh. Anurak repeated the joke. He still did not laugh. There was something wrong with this guy. In regular tourist circles, these jokes would kill. Who was this guy, a Frenchman? His jokes were always of poor taste for the French.

“Where are you from?”

“I am from Serbia.”

“Oh,” Anurak said. “It’s a beautiful country. I have seen many pictures on the internet.” He’d never seen Serbia on a map. “The mountains in your country are beautiful.” Anurak said, hoping Serbia had mountains. “And the rivers are beautiful.” He wanted to remember the name of the country to research it later.

“You are talking about Midzor Mountain. I have hiked that many times in my childhood.”

“You fall in love with Thailand as yet?” Anurak poured massage oil into his hands and started working it into the Serbian’s feet. “It’s like paradise here, right? Different from your home country.”

Egghead picked up his magazine. “Don’t worry about selling me anything. I do business throughout Asia.”

“So you really love Thailand, then?”

He covered face with the magazine.

Anurak looked to see if the Serbian was wearing a wedding ring. He wasn’t. On his left finger, there was not even a spot where a ring used to be. Anurak looked at the magazine’s cover again, and he figured that the bulge told him everything he needed to know about the Serbian. He karate-chopped Egghead’s legs, a massage trick he learned on YouTube.

“So the sun’s coming down and night’s coming soon, and then beers for the rest of the night.” Anurak stopped massaging him. “You like beers?”

The Serbian lowered the magazine. “Save these moves for a novice. I have heard that one also.”

Anurak read online that tourists loved hearing stories about the Buddha, as well as rags to riches stories, and ancient Thailand history. During his first couple of months working on the beach, he told the tourists true stories about himself and Thailand. But they did not care for his personal history. This history made them fall asleep during their massages, and they often neglected to tip him. Then, he started making up history, and they stayed up. They called their friends over to hear the stories, and they tipped him well.

“You know my grandmother used to massage for the Queen of England.”

“Really,” the Serbian said. “That’s a really original story. You know when I was in Cambodia last month, I heard the same story.”

“Ha,” Anurak said. “You are really funny. You know we have a huge problem in Thailand with immigrants. They come here to steal our jobs, women, money, and now they are stealing our stories.”

“Yea, well, what a problem.”

He did not understand the egghead’s refusal to participate in these stories and he began massaging in silence. Anurak looked into the distance and saw Joseph touring the beach with a bunch of white beachgoers following him. They were begging him to take a picture of him and he was refusing. The more they wanted a picture, the more they would donate to his temple. Joseph walked further into the crowd, and more beachgoers joined his trail.

“A monk on a beach, you don’t see that often,” the egghead remarked. He took his camera and snapped a picture of Joseph from the distance. “You should be like that monk.”

Without any more stories to tell, Anurak massaged in silence. He thought about what to make for his dinner. He was always thinking about dinner, even before he had breakfast. It was the loneliest time of his day, eating in front of the television every evening. Sometimes, he’d called Somchai to keep his company, but she was always busy at work.

The massage was almost finished and he karate-chopped the egghead’s legs again, just to pass the time.

“So you want a lady boy for the evening?” Anurak asked, cleaning his hands with his wet wipes. “I can get you someone clean.”

“Nah. I already got one for the night. But maybe you and I, tomorrow night.”

“Ha,” Anurak said. “Ha. I am off the market.”

He was supposed to leave a departing joke, but the egghead did not give him a motivating tip. “I will give you a tip even though you didn’t give me one. Head over to Mr. Chow’s bar for the coldest beers on this island.”

Anurak headed through the throngs of tourists to make his next sale. The vendors moved up and down selling their items. He noticed some new vendors on the beach and greeted them. They did not acknowledge him. They looked like foreigners and they sold things that were not needed on the beach: socks, bed sheets, curtain rods, and tea-pots. A woman dropped her suntan lotion in the sand, and he chased one of the foreign vendors to try to pick it up first. He won the race. He cleaned the bottle of lotion with his wet wipes and handed the lotion to the woman. “Oh, you did not have to,” she said. “Thank you, anyway.” He tried to make a sale, but she quickly became engrossed in her conversation with boyfriend, and stopped noticing him.

He walked on.

“Massage. The best on the beach.”

They did not look up from their beers, suntanning, reading, or gathering their Zen. He hated this part of the job. He was invisible until they needed him.

“Massage!” he yelled. “Good Thai massages.”

“Hey, we know you,” the Black girl called out. “You are a photographer and you do massages, how cool.”

“I am a man of many talents,” he said, wiggling his fingers. He dropped his basket on the sand. “I have the fingers of God.”

The Black girl giggled as expected. She leaned forward in the beach chair. “How much?”

“Perhaps the fingers of Buddha,” Marius said. He laid his book on his chest. “It sounds more appropriate because this is Thailand, and you know, not so many Christians.”

“Ha. Ha, Marius,” she paused. “Ha.”

“Have you seen pictures of the Buddha?” Anurak interrupted. They were silent. Eyes fixed on him, mouths agape, ready for a laugh. “You’ve never seen his hands?” He asked again. They looked confused, the way Anurak had looked the first time he heard the joke from a drunk British man. “You never see his hands because he’s too busy wanking off under his robe.”

“Ha,” they both said. “Ha, ha, funny.” They stretched the word funny out to make it seem as if they were really enjoying the joke. He should have used the joke later on in their conversation.

“So, how much is the massage?” The Black girl asked.

The couple looked like they were a step inside and outside of poverty. Maybe they were backpackers or English-teaching people. He needed to set the price at an appropriate level that would make them feel as if they were gaining something, but at the same time make them feel as if they were wealthy folks, seeing that they could afford a massage on the beach.

“For a full-body massage, um, give me two hundred.”

“Wow,” Marius said. “A bit pricey.”

He picked up his basket and angled his body as if he was walking away.

“Marius, you are offending him!” the girl shouted. “I will take a massage.” She fished through her beach bag and pulled out four hundred Baht. “Oh, Marius, you can get one as well.”

“Oh, yes, please spend all our money,” Marius chided. He reopened his book.

Anurak put the money in his pocket and cleaned his hands with his wipes. He began his practice, and the girl moaned before his hands touched her back.

“Don’t get too relaxed,” Marius shouted through the wall of the book. “I am still your boyfriend.”

Her back tensed up. “So now I mean something to you?”

She was friendly and settled quickly to his touch. The couple did not look well traveled, so Anurak felt he could tell his stories again. He told them that his great, great, great, great grandfather massaged the Buddha. Whenever he told this story, he added lines, or substituted them, depending on the day. The girl loved it.

“Really?” She asked.

“My great, great, great, plus a few greats were slaves,” she sighed. “OMG! It’s good that you have a history.”

“Oh, I heard about that slavery thing,” he said. “Crazy.”

“Yea, like epic crazy,” she said.

He told her more stories, and she gasped and laughed like a studio audience. He was only halfway through the massage, and he had already established trust. He’d learned by observing Joseph that foreigners loved charity, so he worked his business plans into their conversation.

“So do you know you have the pleasure of being massaged by a future business leader who will be on Forbes’ list?”

“Super cool?” She yelled. “What kind of business?”

“I will be selling a lifestyle,” he said.

He told her that at first he will sell massages and simple, inflatable beach chairs and toys. Then once he made a name for himself in Phuket and had more money, he will expand. He will sell life-size inflatable floating Buddhas and other historic figures for adults and children. Finally, he told the girl, he was going to start the first floating massage business. He’d massage clients in the water while they were resting on one of his inflatable beach chairs.

“The world will know my name,” he said. “From Bangkok to Pattaya City to Phuket, they will all know me as The Plastic King.”

She frowned. “Do you think that type of business will work?”

She sounded just like his sister. “Yes, of course. I am not a stupid person. I finished Secondary School with high marks and I was accepted to the top university in Bangkok.”

“Um, I am not saying you are a stupid person. It’s just—” She bit her lower lip.

“Forget I ever said anything.”

Marius looked up from his book. “How can you massage with all the waves?”

He’d spent a year researching and creating his inflatable business plan, but he never thought about the waves. He even interviewed tourists and they all confirmed that beach toys on the beach was a good idea. But they never mentioned the waves.

“Dude, your business idea does not make much sense.”

“Are you a business owner?” He asked Marius.

“No. I am a high school History teacher.”

“Well, we should all stick to our jobs.”

“I think it’s time for another beer,” Marius said. He sat up, and put on his shirt that hid a thick scar on his abdomen. “Want anything?”

“A baby. A wedding proposal. Stability.”

“Okay, I will get you a beer.”

“Hurry back for the massage.”

“So excited to be touched by a strange man,” Marius said as he stood up. “A fantasy of mine since childhood.”

Anurak gave Marius directions to a few places with the coldest and cheapest beers. As Marius walked away, Anurak karate-chopped the Black girl’s shoulders until she moaned and then worked on her lower back. He moved his hands around her lower back until she winced, “Ouch.” He learned that “ouch” meant it was the spot that most needed massaging.

“Men suck,” she said. “I wish I was not committed to heterosexuality.”

“Heterosexuality.” He did not have his notebook, so he quietly repeated the word until it lodged into his memory. It was one of the many words he wanted to research at the Internet café when he returned home.

The Black girl talked about the same things all tourists talked about—romantic relationships, family life, work life and life. Her present stress was Marius-related. Whenever tourists started talking about this personal side of their lives, he blocked them out and searched for his Zen.

“What do you think?” The Black girl asked. “Are you listening to me?”

“Um, love should not be so complicated,” he said. “Love is supposed to set you free.”

“Wow,” she said. “That’s deep.” She stood up and hugged him. “Seriously, that’s really deep.”

“I have the fingers of God and the wisdom of Buddha.” He pulled the Black girl back down into the umbrella’s shade. “You are too dark for this sun.”

She opened her mouth to speak, but Marius' arrival disrupted her. He returned with a case of beers.

"Babe, you should get your massage." She took a sip of the beer and sat down in her beach chair. "I am finished and I am feeling so relaxed."

Anurak stood on the sidelines with his hands in his pocket, waiting for Marius to sit down. "Yes, Marius I am ready to give you the massage of a lifetime."

"I don't want a massage. Just get back the money from him and let him leave us alone."

Anurak knew that if he had to return Marius' portion, he'd have to work through lunchtime. His goal was to make at least eight hundred Baht a day. "Marius it seems to me that you really need a massage to relax." He hoped his desperation did not show.

The girl sat up, and took off her sunglasses. "You know what, I am tired of you embarrassing me." She dumped her belongings into a large beach bag. "You just don't know how to love. You just don't know how to love without it being complicated." She growled. The sunbathers sitting on the side pretended to read their books, but they were listening. "I am getting too old to love someone who will never be able to love me the way I want." She drank the rest of her beer and walked away.

Marius sat down and took off his shirt.

"The sun's coming down, night's coming soon, and then I will go to the bar street, drink some beers and party." Anurak put some massage oil on his hands and moved towards Marius.

Marius opened another beer. "Goodbye."

At the storeroom, the women were sitting under an umbrella reaplying their makeup. The men were speaking about the same topics from yesterday and the day before and the month before: annoying tourists, their plans to get rich, and the sexiest woman on the beach that day.

"I saw a really cute girl today," Anurak said. "Her body was amazing; she was just too dark."

"Then she was not cute," said Joseph. He had taken off his monk's robes due to the heat. He looked less powerful in shorts and a T-shirt. "Agh. Today was a waste of my time. I am going home early before the storm catches me."

“Yea, that’s a good idea.” He counted to twenty and then changed the topic. “Did you have a chance to look over my business plan?” He had given the business plan to Joseph for advice days ago. “You know I am moving soon, and I just want to make sure it’s on the right track.”

Joseph patted him on his back, like his father often did. “You have to see and understand your limits. Stick with what works for you. Right now massaging works, so stick with it.”

“But it’s a good business plan. It’s really good.”

Joseph folded and packed his monk costume into his bag. “It may sound sad, but my limits have granted me a house, two educated children, and expensive things.” He put his arms around Anurak’s shoulders. “I did not push against my limits.”

Anurak looked into the distance and the waves were sucking the swimmers deep into the ocean and spitting them out raw on the shore. He wanted the wave to move its way to storeroom and stuck him under as well.

“But I am just an old man,” Joseph said. “I am an old man who dresses up like a monk for money. I may not know the world like you.” Joseph put on his wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses as a disguise from the tourists. Now he was just a regular man on the beach. “Go home early before the storm catches you and make you sick,” he told Anurak. Then, he walked away.

Anurak walked down to the shore with many feelings. According to the free business class he took online, he was not supposed to have feelings. He tried to push them away, but they moved through his body.

“Massage,” he yelled. “Massage!”

A Thai woman summoned him with one finger like she was calling a pet. He walked past a couple of volleyball players to get to her chair. He wanted to give her a good price, but he could tell that man laying beside her had money. He quoted a ridiculous price, five hundred Baht for a full-body massage, and then she agreed.

He started his practice. He thought about telling her the stories he told other tourists, but then he remained silent. She would know these were all untruths. She probably had her own stories as well.

Waves of doubt flapped inside his chest and stomach, and he wanted to escape everything. “Is that your boyfriend,” he said in Thai. “Is he Chinese, Korean or is he from some other funny country?”

She giggled. He did not expect this reaction from her. “He’s American. Half, half.” She looked at the man. “He’s not my boyfriend, just a friend.”

“How did you meet him? At the bar drinking and dancing?” He performed a little jig for the girl.”

She screamed with laughter. “You are so funny.”

He was not being funny, and he was not even turning it on as heavy as he could.

“I met him in nursing school,” she said. “I go to nursing school in Pattaya City.”

“How much is he paying you?”

She giggled. “I’m a nursing student,” she said. “We met at my school.” She put on her headphones and closed her eyes.

Ploy has also pretended to be a nursing student in Pattaya City. For many years, the family believed she had a reputable life until Anurak moved to the city and discovered the truth. He could not tell their parents about her lifestyle because their lives were already full of embarrassment, and they were so proud to have one of the few daughters in the village who did not move to the city to sell her body.

He touched all her ouch spots and karate chopped her for an hour in silence. When she gave him a tip, he turned it on automatically, “Remember you were touched by a Thai God.” She did not laugh.

Anurak walked through the thick groves of overly tan, overly drunk tourists, trying to make a sale. They were mostly slumped in their beach chairs with ugly sleep in their faces. He walked up and down the sand, searching for a not-so-drunk person to buy his services, but he could not find anyone. It was truly Wednesday.

“Massages!” he yelled. “Yummy Thai massages.”

A tourist pulled him aside. “How much?”

Anurak inspected the guy. His sunglasses and watch were expensive. “For a foot massage three hundred and for a full-body massage, seven.”

“Five hundred. That’s cheap,” the guy said. His English sounded harsh, yet pretty. “So you will come to my hotel. It’s not very far from here.”

“What?” He puffed up his sunken shoulders to appear tough. “Not everything is for sale.”

As he walked away from the man, he realized his emotions were too quick. He should have offered to find the wealthy pervert a lady boy. Ploy would have ignored his comments and found the best way to get money out of the guy. She often accepted more dates from the broken down, overweight, and smelly foreigners because they compensated her well due to their disfigurement. She hated them all equally, but their money helped with the rent and took shame from their parents' eyes. He pushed through the crowd looking for the guy, but he was gone.

The grey clouds moved from the edges and were finally in full view. Out, way out in the ocean, the burnt orange of sunset appeared to touch the water. To foreigners, the sky was beautiful and they grabbed their cameras for a good shot, but Anurak knew the future of grey clouds. In his skin, he already felt the crackling of thunder. He decided to walk over to the beach bar to pick up his daily beer commission from the owner. He also collected money from the hair-braiding lady. On Tuesday, he'd convinced four of his clients to get their hair braided. "You'd look so pretty with it," he said. "It's the thing to do when you are on the beach in Thailand." Lastly, he stopped at Ricky's surf shop to pay his daily vendor fee. Ricky did not work for any governmental agencies. He owned a surf shop and he had lots of connections. About two years ago, Ricky implemented a fee for all vendors. He said it was for maintenance of the beach and the storage room. The vendors did not protest, including Anurak.

Afterwards, he went to the pier to catch a ferry back to Pattaya City. He stayed away from the other vendors because he needed to think about his day. According to Joseph, "a wise fisherman always inspects his fish." He took this to mean that reflecting about his day was an important part of the job. After today, Anurak would not use Joseph's business services because he now saw Joseph as a rich man with a poor man's vision. He would continue to enroll in free business classes online, and build his empire alone. He wanted to find a way to integrate to make every client feel a part of his brand. When he became The Plastic King, the negative comments from Joseph and others would cease. In business, visionaries and stubborn people get the last laugh.



The rain finally hit the ocean, and the ferry rocked as if it did not have a captain. The ferry was empty and so the vendors were able to sit on the main deck for the same price as the engine room. They all huddled to the center of the ferry to avoid getting wet. “Did you hear the news?” A vendor who sat next to Anurak asked. He shrugged and returned to his notes. “Everyone is talking about it. An Italian man raped a bartender who worked at a nearby beach. The pervert asked him for sex and of course he denied because he’s not a lady boy, then the guy pulled him into an abandoned room and raped him.”

There are so many lady boys around,” Anurak said “He could get a free or really cheaply?”

The vendors began recalling their terrible encounters with tourists. He hated this conversation because it dragged them away from any social network. He thought about a quote he found on the internet: “Smart people talk about ideas, average people talk about things, stupid people talk about other people.” He continued to review his notes. A story Ploy had told him jogged on his mind. Her friend, a working girl was beaten up and then gang raped by a bunch of tourists. “She laid on the street for hours crying and nobody helped her. When she regained her strength, she stumbled home in her panties and purse. At least they left her with that. She went home, cleaned herself up and the next day she was back on the streets.” Like a novice, he asked if she had called the police. Ploy busted out laughing. “You watch too many American movies.” He looked up from his memory and the vendors were stilling regurgitating their stories. A bottomless feeling enveloped him. If something happened to Ploy, he would not be able to protect her. If something happened to him, he would not be able to protect himself. The ferry rocked and moaned from the waves. He realized, they were all doomed because they lived on the other side of paradise.

The rain was pouring in Pattaya City but the nightlife remained in full swing. The working girls walked the strip. The massage girls called out to pedestrians to enter their parlors. A brigade of old white men with knee-high white stocks strolled through the strip looking for the best of everything. The bars played loud club music and dancers gyrated on the outdoor stripping polls, inviting costumers to enter. Anurak could not find a taxi, so he had to walk home. He pushed his way

through the crowds of Russian families, lady boys, vendors, men selling Ping-Pong and Donkey shows, and old men with their young hookers. The bottomless haunting feeling grew stronger inside him. He did not want to have feelings but pushed people in the crowd out of his way. He hated backpackers, and regular tourists, and hookers and men who took advantage. He hated the monsoon. He pushed anyone who stood too close out of his way. He hated his future. He hated the fact that he could not protect his life. He hated the limits life granted him and he could not fight against. He shoved the rich men in business suits as they walked in front of him. He shoved the children as they played in front of him. The more he pushed people aside, the more they gathered in front of him, and the more he felt the darkness of the city enveloping him.

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