

The Bahrain Incident

By

Mobi D'Ark

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The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead is coincidental and not intended by the author.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

As of November, 2014, "The Bahrain Incident" is the author's only published story set exclusively in the Middle East.

Although this is a work of fiction, the events and circumstances as described herein are based on the personal experiences of the author who lived and worked there in the early 1970's.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mobi D'Ark was born in 1946 in Hampshire, England and grew up in post war, economically depressed East London/Essex. He left school at the age of sixteen to become an accountant and had a 40 year career in the world of global finance.

During this time he lived and worked extensively abroad, primarily in South East Asia, West Africa, The Middle East, and North America. He concluded his career back where he started - in the city of London.

Taking early retirement in 2,000, Mobi turned his hand to his first love, creative writing, and over the following 14 years he has written a collection of six Thai-based novelettes, a children's novel, a crime novelette based in the Middle East and two full length novels, both of which are mainly based in Thailand.

Mobi has lived in Thailand since 2002.

OTHER WORKS BY MOBI D'ARK

A Lust for Life (A Novel) *

Madju-Raj; The messenger of Death (A Novel) *

From Thailand with Love (A collection of 6 six short stories/novelettes) *

The Remarkable Adventures of Terry The Tom Cat (A children's novel)

*Available on Amazon-Kindle

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THE BAHRAIN INCIDENT

One

It was a cold, grey, November afternoon, and I was struggling along Oxford Street, making my way towards Bond Street tube station in London's West End. My head was bowed against the sharp wind and I almost tripped over an unkempt, elderly man standing by the station entrance. My immediate reaction was to cover my pockets, as the bustling and cosmopolitan Oxford Street crowd was a notorious hang out for pick pockets.

'Can't you damn limeys look where you're going?' the man shouted at me, in an obvious American accent.

'I'm sorry, but if you insist on standing in front of the station like that, I won't be the last person to bump into you,' I replied with some irritation.

The old man showed no sign of moving on, and I looked him over. He was of medium height, had a gaunt figure and a craggy, sunburnt appearance. He looked to be in his late sixties, and the large white cowboy hat, which I almost knocked off his head, told me that he was a long way from home. There was something about him that looked familiar – I couldn't place him at first, but then I suddenly realised that he reminded me of someone, I once knew, many years ago. After a few moments of reflection, I determined that the man who was stubbornly blocking part of the station entrance was almost certainly someone that I hadn't laid eyes on for some twenty-five years.

'Gene... Gene Hammond?' I asked.

He stared at me, with a puzzled and perplexed look on his face.

'It is Gene, isn't it? I insisted, even more sure that I knew this man.

He nodded, but continued to gaze at me blankly.

'Gene, I'm John Roberts– come on man – you must know me!'

The name seemed to slowly permeate its way into his consciousness. 'My God –John Roberts? Not John Roberts from the Arabian Gulf?'

‘How many Goddamn John Roberts do you think there are in this world? You Texan son of a bitch!’ I replied, mimicking his broad Texan drawl.

‘I can’t believe it. Hell John, no wonder I didn’t know you, I ain’t set eyes on you since...How long is it?’

‘At least twenty-five years, Gene.’

‘But how in hell did you recognise me – especially in the middle of this crowd of shoppers and tourists?’

‘Well apart from almost falling over you, you haven’t really changed that much –you’re just a lot older. And you’re still wearing that same ridiculous Texan cowboy hat. I’d know that hat anywhere.’

We shook hands and exchanged pleasantries. I suggested that we had better adjourn to a nearby pub, as we obviously had a lot of catching up to do – about a quarter of a century of news. He was strangely reluctant at first, and tried to excuse himself by saying that he didn’t drink these days, but I wouldn’t take ‘no’ for an answer, and I insisted that he join me for a drink, even if it was non-alcoholic.

As we took a short walk around the corner to the “Red Lion”, the memories of those years working in the oil business for Texas Oil and Exploration Inc., or “Texo” as it was known, came flooding back.

I first met Gene in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, which in those days was the oil centre of the breakaway province of Biafra in the civil war of the late sixties. He was a lowly rig superintendent, and I was an even lowlier third accountant in a team of three expatriates and about a hundred local clerks, or “pencil pushers” as the oil men called them. We became friends during those wild and dangerous days, and a few years later, when both of us had progressed in our careers, we met once again, in the insufferably hot, backward and alien world that was the Middle East. It was a corner of the Middle East that had recently changed its status from being part of the British protectorate known as the Trucial States, to Abu Dhabi, part of the newly created, independent United Arab Emirates.

Gene had been recently installed as the resident general manager, and he took an instant dislike to an Aussie who was his Chief Accountant; so in true oil field tradition, the poor guy was promptly fired. Gene asked for the “long haired limey”, who used to work with him in Port Harcourt, to be immediately flown in to replace the fired Aussie.

It was no sooner said than done. One day I was overseeing the accounts of a drilling barge that Texo was constructing in Rotterdam, and the next I was being whisked across the sand dunes in a dilapidated land rover to a base camp situated far out in the hot and humid Arabian Desert.

Gene and I had soon renewed our former friendship, and incredibly, I found that I loved my job in that “God forsaken hell-hole”, as the American oilfield hands were apt to put it. I revelled in my new-found authority, and in the opportunity to prove myself alongside my old comrade from Africa. The huge prefabricated camp that Texo had assembled in the middle of the Abu Dhabi desert was the largest centre of population in the whole country, and it was a wild and primitive existence. Working hours were twelve hours a day, seven days a week; the drilling never stopped, and neither did we. In the evenings, we would sit out on the wooden steps of our caravans and drink cold beer. We would talk, joke, argue and sometimes we’d even fight. For some unaccountable reason I loved every moment.

For me, the only fly in an almost perfect “ointment” was the odd occasion when Gene had too much to drink. This usually happened very late at night when most of the hands had retired to their bunks; but those remaining would witness the transformation of Gene from a genial, if somewhat voluble and outspoken manager, into something much darker. There was a point during his late night alcohol consumption when he suddenly seemed to snap, and woe betides anyone who crossed him when he was in that mood.

There had been a few nasty incidents late at night when, at the merest suggestion of an insult, Gene would suddenly launch a physical attack on one of the remaining drinkers. Every time this happened, I took my life in my hands as I pulled him away from his hapless victims before too much damage was done. I was probably living a charmed existence as for some mysterious reason, he never went after me and always allowed me to drag him off and escort him back to his room.

But after all, we were living in the proverbial “wild west” of the Middle East, and anyone who went to work in such God forsaken hell-holes had to expect such behaviour from time to time. It was all part and parcel of exploring for oil in those long ago days, and what was a few broken noses or split lips amongst friends?

All these memories were bombarding me as we found ourselves a couple of seats in the “Red Lion” and started to reminisce in earnest. Names were dragged from a past that had been buried in our sub-conscious

for over two decades. I found it a slightly eerie and unnerving experience, as my life had undergone many changes since those lunatic days of long ago. After an hour of almost non-stop recollections, there was finally a lull in the conversation, and Gene asked me what I was up to these days.

‘Oh, I’ve been working here in London for the past twenty years, but I recently took early retirement. I had a pretty good job, so I’m doing Ok. Now what about you Gene? Retired I assume? And what are you doing in London?’

It transpired that Gene was in his seventies and had been back in the States for many years. He was on a ‘once in a lifetime’ whirlwind world trip, so it was certainly a strange coincidence that had resulted in us meeting that day in Oxford Street. He told me that he hadn’t been out of America for a very long time, and that this was his first venture abroad for many years, after which he would be settling down to a quiet life of retirement back in Texas.

Gene then looked at his watch and suggested that it was time that we made a move. ‘Well John, it sure was great seeing you again. I’m real sorry that I didn’t recognise you, but I’ll never forget those times we had together.’

‘No Gene, neither will I. But before you go, I insist that we have a chat about the “Bahrain Incident”.

“Bahrain Incident”? I don’t recall that.’

‘Now Gene, don’t try to tell me that you can’t remember anything about that guy who got into trouble in Bahrain – what was his name? – Steve?... Steve Garvey?’

‘Steve Garvey? ... “The Bahrain Incident”? ... Well John, now you come to mention it – I guess I do recall somat about that there “Bahrain Incident”.

Two

The year was nineteen seventy-three, and I had been working in Abu Dhabi for just over two years. About one month prior to the “incident”, I had been granted the dubious pleasure of moving into Abu Dhabi Township from my previous home – my beloved caravan - which was situated some fifty miles out in the virgin desert.

Ever increasing oil revenues meant that the township of Abu Dhabi was rapidly developing, and the oil companies, in their wisdom, had determined that their administrative centres should be based in town, and not scattered throughout the desert.

The green shoots of civilisation were springing up in the new capital, and even in those early days, the town already boasted a couple of hotels, several restaurants, a small western style food store, and - of course - the obligatory British Club. The club was a sprawling, almost ramshackle building that nestled on the hot sands and looked out onto the steamy Arabian Gulf, and was the favoured haunt of mainly middle aged, British expatriates. So being British, I had the questionable honour of being a member of this hallowed establishment, although my visits there were quite rare.

It was during one of my infrequent visits to the British Club one evening that one of Texo’s Arab employees came bursting through the lounge door, waving frantically in my direction.

‘What’s that bloody rag head doing in here?’ asked one of the more objectionable obviously racist, ‘Colonel Blimp’- types who frequented the club.

Arabs were not allowed in the lounge, or in any place that alcohol was being sold or consumed, but I knew the man. It was Mohammed Zaben, a very well educated Jordanian, who was one of Texo’s senior managers. I went quickly over to him and we walked outside, where we could talk in private.

‘John, we have a big problem, one of our Americans has killed a girl.’

‘Killed a girl! What on earth do you mean? Who’s killed a girl?’

‘It was an Assistant Driller – Steve Garvey. I received a phone call from one of my friends in the Abu Dhabi Police department – they’ve been

asked to arrest Garvey when he arrives back at the airport, as he is suspected of killing some girl in Bahrain. That's all I know.'

Bahrain was a small island State, a few miles down the Arabian coast, and many oil companies, including Texco, used it as its main R & R centre for its expatriate rig hands. The regime in Bahrain was more liberal, and the men could let their hair down without fear of breaking the law.

But Bahrain's main attraction was the ample supply of young ladies from the Seychelles, an African archipelago in the Indian Ocean. These young, very dark skinned young ladies had been coming to live on the island for many years and were only too happy to befriend the hard drinking, sex-starved, Americans with money to burn during their days off.

Texco leased a substantial, twelve-bedroom fully staffed guesthouse on the island, and its men flew to and from the island every Tuesday, on a 'two weeks on, one week off' basis. The day was Tuesday, and a quick look at my watch confirmed that the flight from Bahrain was due to touch down in about ten minutes. 'So what's going to happen when Garvey lands?' I asked Mohammed.

'The police are waiting for him and he will be arrested. They will hold him until they receive more details of the killing, and if they are satisfied that there is sufficient evidence to arrest him as a suspect, they will hold him and extradite him back to Bahrain.'

'Is there anything we can do?'

'Not tonight. I will make a few calls in the morning, and hopefully we'll be able to go and see him sometime tomorrow – after I find out where they're holding him.'

'I'd better let Gene know,' I said, 'and I think I also ought to contact the American Embassy – they need to know what's going on. Maybe they can help.'

'Yes, that's why I rushed round here to tell you this evening, I hope you didn't mind me disturbing your evening of leisure.'

'Of course not Mohammed,' I said as I hurried back to my apartment to make contact with Gene out at the base camp.

Although he now had a house in town, where his wife and son had recently moved into from the USA, Gene still spent most of his time in the desert, and he left me to run the small town office. I cranked up the short

wave radio, but to my surprise, he wasn't there, and the radio operator didn't know where he had gone. I re-tried the radio every thirty minutes, and with some relief, finally made contact around midnight when at long last I was able to pass on the bad news on to Gene.

'Goddam these stupid motherfuckers!' he shouted into the radio, 'Hell John, you'd better try and see Garvey in the morning and get his side of the story. If he's innocent we'd better ask Mohammed to get him out of that jail ASAP! It sounds like real mess. What am I supposed to do for a drilling hand? – He's due back on duty at seven in the morning.'

A typical reply from the rough and tough manager I had got to know so well.

'I'll see what I can do Gene. I'll also let the American embassy know – maybe they can do something.'

'That God dammed bunch of Washington piss pots is useless. I'll be real surprised if they can do anything to help!'

Notwithstanding Gene's poor opinion of his fellow countrymen, I did manage to leave a suitable message at the embassy, and eventually grabbed some sleep, wondering what the next day would bring and whether I would be allowed to visit Garvey.

*

Mohammed knocked on my door early next morning, to update me on the incident. Steve Garvey had been duly arrested when he landed at Abu Dhabi International airport, and was now being held in a local 'stockade' somewhere off the airport road.

'Is he all right Mohammed?'

'I don't know, John. We can't see him until this afternoon; I've arranged a visit for three pm, I think we'd better take some food and drink just in case.'

'Just in case what?'

'In case he hasn't been fed. It's a bit primitive out there you know.'

'God, I hope he's OK. Do you know anything more about what happened?'

‘Yes, according to the telex sent by the Bahraini Police, a naked young girl from the Seychelles was found dead in Garvey’s room, stabbed through her heart, but Garvey had already left, on his way back to Abu Dhabi. They just missed him at Bahrain airport, hence the request to the Abu Dhabi police at this end to hold him.’

‘Doesn’t sound too good does it? Still we’d better not pre-judge. I mean, what man in his right mind would kill a girl and leave her to be found in his own bedroom? Did they find the weapon that was used to kill her?’

‘No sign of it anywhere, although they are still searching.’

‘Even so, he must have known he would be the number one suspect. Or maybe he thought that if he skipped the country he’d be safe?’

‘Maybe, John. Actually there isn’t any official extradition treaty in force, but the states out here co-operate on an informal basis, and it seems to work well with locals.’

‘So if there’s no formal treaty, who decides if there’s enough evidence to send Garvey back?’

‘It’s really at the discretion of the local Police Commander – Ahmed Sharif – I know him quite well.’

‘That might be useful.’

We adjourned to the office to await our late afternoon appointment at the stockade.

*

“Stockade” wasn’t a bad description of the place where Garvey was being held. Three o’clock in the afternoon was just about the hottest time of day – probably around one hundred and ten degrees in the shade, with nigh on a hundred percent humidity. As we alighted from our air-conditioned Toyota, the heat hit us like a furnace and when we entered a dark and dirty tin shed, where there was no air conditioning, the temperature must have been at least ten degrees higher. Even though I was wearing a light, short sleeved shirt and cotton trousers, I immediately broke into an uncontrollable sweat in the stifling environment.

As my eyes adjusted to the gloom I made out the ridiculous looking figure of a bespectacled, middle-aged, portly westerner wearing a heavy

blue surge suit, His face was dripping with sweat and he looked extremely uncomfortable as his horn rimmed glasses kept sliding down his sweat-stained face. He waddled over and introduced himself.

‘Mr Roberts? I’m...I’m... Jack Rochester, from the US embassy.’

It seemed hardly possible that that he could dress so inappropriately in the unbelievable, afternoon heat. I was beginning to understand Gene’s earlier disparaging assessment of his home country embassy staff.

‘Good afternoon Jack, I assume you received my message then?’

‘Er...yes, we did. Now, this man... er Garvey, he is a US citizen is he?’

‘Yes, he is.’

‘Do you happen to have his passport? Just to be sure, I mean.’

Rochester was starting to irritate me.

‘No, I don’t have his passport. He had it with him – he was arrested getting off the plane!’

‘Oh yes, I was forgetting.’

‘But I can assure you, Mr Rochester, that he is the genuine article, a full blown American citizen,’ I said with some exasperation.

‘Yes... er...well, shall we go and see him then?’

Mohammed spoke to the two Arab police guards and we were shown through a barred door at the back of the hut into a small pen. The cell area was open to the elements, with no roof, sand under foot and not a single stick of furniture. The sun blazed down unremittingly, and the only shade was in the far left-hand corner, where we saw the crouching, half-naked figure of a dirty and forlorn looking man – Steve Garvey.

I had only met him once before, very briefly, when he had first arrived in Abu Dhabi a couple of months ago to take up his new position. He was in his early twenties, and it was his first overseas job. I remembered him as a tall, quietly spoken, slightly rugged-looking man with fashionable long, blond hair. But I hardly recognised him as I walked over to where he crouched in the sand. His head had been shaved, his face and body was smothered with dirt, and he was covered in bruises. He gave no indication that he had seen us and continued to stare ahead, as if in a trance.

‘Steve, I’m John, from Texo’s office. Are you Ok?’

He finally turned to look at the three of us.

‘John? ... Oh John, yeah man, thank God you’re here. Have you come to get me out?’

‘We’re working on it Steve. This is Jack Rochester from the embassy, and this is Mohammed, who works for us.’

‘You gotta get me out John. I can’t stand another day in here. I’ll die man! It’s so hot and the bastards keep beating me up and telling me to confess to some crazy murder I know nut’n about!’

As I gave him some food and water, which he hungrily gulped down, Rochester asked him if he had his passport with him.

‘Does it look like I’m carrying my passport? Those Arab bastards took it off me when they grabbed me last night. Ask them!’

‘Steve,’ I said, ‘tell me what happened in Bahrain. It might help us to get you released if we know exactly what happened. The Bahrain police say there was a dead girl in your room.’

‘I know they do. They’ve been trying to beat a confession out of me ever since they threw me in this ass-hole of a cell. They say the girl was found in room number three on the first floor – but that’s not my room. I always stay in room six on the second floor. The God dammed bastards are trying to frame me. I don’t even know the girl who got killed. I’m not interested in those girls – I just stay alone in my room and listen to music and read.’

I turned to my colleague, ‘Mohammed, we must get Steve out of here. This all sounds like a terrible mistake.’

‘I’ll go and talk to the officers out here and see what I can find out,’ he said as he walked back into the tin hut.

‘What about you, “Mr Ambassador”? Can’t you help one of your citizens in trouble?’ Steve asked, in his slow drawl. In spite of his extreme predicament, he was still capable of being sarcastic in the face of inept diplomatic bureaucracy

‘There’s...er... nothing much I can do today. I will have to ask the Consul if he can talk to someone in the Emirates foreign ministry. It’s going to take a few days I’m afraid, and that’s only after I verify that you are in fact an American citizen!’

‘A few days! I’ll either be dead or back in Bahrain on a murder charge in a few days! Get the hell outa here and leave me alone!’

Rochester looked totally out of his depth and stood staring at Steve.

‘I think you’d better leave, Mr Rochester. You obviously can’t help.’ I said.

Rochester shrugged his shoulders and shuffled away in his sweat-stained suit, and that was the last any of us saw of that unbelievably inept, low-level embassy official.

So it was down to us to do something, but when Mohammed came back with further details of the alleged crime, our spirits sank ever lower.

‘All four of the guesthouse staff have given evidence to the effect that they saw you arrive with the girl on Monday night at around ten o’clock and that the two of you spent the night together, in room three on the first floor. The body was found late yesterday afternoon, when the staff went to prepare the room for the next visitor, just after you had left Bahrain to fly back to Abu Dhabi. So I’m afraid that makes you the number one suspect’

‘They’re all lying! It’s all bullshit! I never slept with no girl, and I sure as hell didn’t stay on the first floor. I was upstairs all night alone in my room – you gotta believe me!’

‘But why should they all lie Steve?’

‘Shit, it’s Amin, that Lebanese camp boss,’ Steve replied, referring to the man who managed the guesthouse. He’s always playing around with those Seychelle girls and trying to get them into the sack. He’s a nasty piece of work. I’ve heard stories that he beats some of those girls if he can’t get his way with them.’

‘So what are you saying Steve? Do you think it was Amin who killed the girl?’ Mohammed asked.

‘It must’ve been him – cos it sure as hell wasn’t me, and that’s the only reason they’d all lie – to protect him – and their jobs. You know how they all stick together John.’

It certainly sounded plausible. Steve looked at me so earnestly that I was very inclined to believe him. He didn’t appear to be the violent type, and he would have been completely crazy to kill the girl, if everyone saw

him arrive with her. And in any case, why would he want to kill her? I turned to Mohammed.

‘Mohammed, I think Steve’s telling the truth, but how do we prove it and how do we get him out of here?’

‘I don’t know, John. All I can do is go and talk to Ahmed – my friend the commander - and see if I can persuade him to release Steve.’

‘Well, you better be mighty quick about it. I’m not sure I can stand much more of being locked in this hole.’ Steve said.

Mohammed and I decided we had better get going, so we hastily made our farewells to a very unhappy and apprehensive prisoner, and promised we’d get back to him later that day.

*

The first arrival at my apartment that evening was Gene, hot and bothered, straight from the desert and still wearing his trademark white Texan hat. I brought him up to date on the Steve Garvey situation.

‘Hell John, we must get him out of that jail or he’ll die of heat stroke, that’s if the guards don’t kill him first.’

‘I know. Mohammed is over at the police commander’s house, to see if he can arrange his release. But with all that evidence against him, frankly I don’t hold out much hope.’

We had a few beers and dissected the situation from every imaginable angle. A couple of hours later, we were starting to worry about what had happened to Mohammed, when to our relief the doorbell rang, and in he came, beaming as though he just won the lottery. No wonder, as walking behind him, was the very bedraggled and pitiful looking figure of Steve Garvey.

‘Steve, thank God you’re out. Come on in. How did you manage it Mohammed?’

We walked through to the lounge and Steve took his bag directly to my bathroom for a long overdue clean-up.

‘John, he’s been released into my personal custody. He’s still in serious trouble, and they’re still planning to send him back to Bahrain tomorrow.’

‘I don’t understand, Mohammed. Didn’t you explain to your friend that the guesthouse staff must have been lying, to protect the camp boss?’

‘Of course I did, but it’s Steve’s word against four of them. Which side would you believe? Ahmed didn’t even want to let him out of that terrible stockade. It took me three hours to persuade him, and if Steve isn’t returned to the police station at noon tomorrow we’ll all be in serious trouble.’

‘That’s just great!’ Gene said, ‘And what’re we supposed to do now? Just stand by and let them send him back to Bahrain, where he’ll end up in some primitive Arab jail on trumped up charges?’

‘It doesn’t sound as though we have much choice. Unless....’

‘Unless what?’ I asked

‘Unless... we can find some strong evidence that contradicts the staff’s version of events. If we can find something that brings an element of doubt into it, then Ahmed is prepared to refuse extradition on the grounds of conflicting evidence.’

‘But how do we find that? And by noon tomorrow! It’s impossible.’

‘What’s impossible?’ asked Steve as he reappeared from the bathroom, looking much refreshed.

We recounted the situation as Mohammed had explained it to us.

‘Yeah, I figured as much. So what’re you all gonna do? Coz I’ll tell you one thing. I ain’t never going back.’

‘Gene,’ said Mohammed, ‘if Steve doesn’t report back at noon tomorrow, not only will I personally be liable to arrest, but the authorities will close down Texo’s operation.’

‘Well you’re just gonna have to figure a way out of this – I ain’t going back – I’m innocent and I ain’t gonna end up in some filthy jail again. It ain’t right. I’d rather die,’ he said in a cracking and highly emotional voice.

‘Calm down Steve, calm down.’ Gene said. ‘Have a beer and relax and we’ll talk about it. There must be a solution.’

Mohammed said, ‘Gene, I have to go home. I’ll be there for the rest of the evening, so call me if you come up with any ideas.’

Mohammed left, and the three of us sipped our beers. Steve still seemed to be in a very emotional state, so I put on a tape in the hope of

calming him down. It was a good move, as he visibly relaxed, and after a few minutes he started to speak in his more familiar, soft tone.

‘That music is so heavy man – who is it?’ Steve said after a while.

‘It’s Crosby Stills and Nash,’ I said. ‘They’re great aren’t they?’

‘They sure are. I used to listen to them in “Nam.”’

‘I didn’t know you were in Vietnam Steve,’ Gene said.

‘Well, I don’t talk about it much. I was drafted in when I was eighteen and did a tour out there. I was wounded and got discharged on medical grounds.’

‘What was it like?’

‘It was hell man. It was pure hell. If you think that stockade back out there in the desert was bad, you should go to “Nam”. Nothing but fucking jungle and monsoon rains. It was always hot and steamy, with mosquitoes giving us malaria, and everyone going down with dysentery. And if that wasn’t bad enough, there were the crazy fucking sergeants sending us on suicide missions ... and there was the God damned “Cong”.’

“Cong”? I asked.

‘The Vietcong. They were everywhere. They were in the jungle, in the towns, behind our lines, in front of our lines, and even underneath us – in tunnels, miles under the ground. They were everywhere. Life for them didn’t mean nothin’. They’d sacrifice ten of them just to kill one American. Damn near every friend I ever had out there was killed by the Cong. I was the only one of my section to make it out there alive. I still have nightmares about it all.’

Gene and I sat back and let Steve ramble on about his experiences in Vietnam. The talking seemed to be cathartic, and he gradually became more relaxed as he recounted his traumatic experiences in that terrible war. Finally, he told us how he came to look for work in the Middle East.

‘And after I got back, I decided to make a clean start. I wanted a new job outside America, cos I sure as hell wasn’t welcome back home. All us vets are hated – and no one wants to know us. And now look what’s happened? I’m about to go to jail in an alien country for a crime I know nothing about. It ain’t right, and I’ll tell you sommat. There ain’t no God up there – if there was, he wouldn’t allow this kinda injustice.’

‘Steve, I said tentatively, I hope you don’t mind me asking, but this afternoon you told us that you never have any girls in your room. You said you always stay in your room alone, reading.

‘Yeah, that’s the way it was. Why d’yer ask?’

‘Well... without putting too finer point on it... why no girls? You’re healthy man in your late twenties, you’ve been working in an all-male environment for weeks, why? Aren’t you interested in the girls?’

He stared back at me, but said nothing.

‘I persisted, ‘I’m sorry to have to ask you this Steve, but it may help your case. Are you gay? Or maybe you’re a racist? Do you have a problem with black women?’

He looked at me in astonishment and then laughed. ‘Me! Gay! Me! A Racist! Now I’ve heard everything. Hell no John, I ain’t no racist – I’ve bedded women of just about every colour under the sun, from milky white, to mud brown to jet black, and I’ll tell you what, if I had to choose, I’d choose a black woman every time... they’re so full of ...of...sex...’

‘Then why? If what you say is true, why do you shun these girls in Bahrain? From what I understand they are stunning.

‘Stunning? Yeah they sure are stunning, and I’m sure they’re all great lays.

I was becoming more and more confused. ‘But...’

‘Hell John, you never give up do you? You wanna know why I ain’t interested in those girls in Bahrain? I’ll tell you. I’m not interested, because ever since I came back from Vietnam I can’t get it up! I can’t get a goddam hard-on! There! So now you know; so shudup about it.’

For some reason I couldn’t let it go. I had to keep pressing him, even though he clearly had no desire to discuss the subject further.

‘So you mean you’re impotent, Steve, is that it?’

‘Impotent? I’ve never heard it put like that, but yeah, probably. When I was shipped back from Saigon I was in a pretty bad state – mentally as well as physically, and I saw a ‘head shrinkers’ for about six months. When they decided that most of my marbles were back in shape, I applied for this job out here, but I never got over my phobia about women and sex. Whenever I have tried to have... er... relations, it always ended in disaster. The doc

said I may get over it one day, but it could take a long time – maybe years. So meanwhile I have to live with it. And that, John - and Gene – is why I never go with those girls in Bahrain and why I could never have killed one of them.

I had to know more. ‘Steve, your medical records back home – do they back up what you have just told us ...about your...sex phobia?’

‘Sure they do, no question, it’s all there with the head shrinks. But them medical records back home in Texas ain’t gonna do me much good over here in “ayrab-land” are they?’ It would take weeks to make contact with the vets hospital and have them mailed over here – and by that time I will probably be dead or dying in some Bahraini hell-hole.

I could see tears forming in his eyes as he blinked, and slowly closed them. Within a few seconds he was fast asleep.

‘John, we are going to have to do something.’ Gene said. ‘I’m convinced Steve’s innocent. I know that bastard Amin over in Bahrain – he does have a bad reputation with the women, and I’m sure that killing one of them is not beyond him.’

‘I agree. I’m sure Steve didn’t kill anyone. He’s simply not the type.’

‘And I know what the poor bastard went through in Vietnam. I’m sure he’s not the only ex-vet with mental hang ups. Jeez! My own son is over there, John, and whenever he’s back home on a furlough he never tells anyone where he’s been. The way them folk treat our men back home ain’t right. It’s a disgrace! They didn’t ask to be sent out there – it’s not their fault. We owe him John.’

‘Yes, I think we do, Gene.’

‘And in any event, I don’t believe we’ll ever get him back to that police station tomorrow, and I certainly don’t want us to be shut down.’

‘So?’

‘So I have an idea. John, do you know who was on the flight from Bahrain with Steve last night?’

‘Let me see, it was Sid Brown, Pete Jackson and Gerry Ball Jr.’

‘Get hold of Sid and Pete on the short-wave, and tell them to get their asses into town.’

‘When? tomorrow morning?’

‘Hell no, tonight. We need them here tonight. They are going to be our witnesses.’

‘What are you talking about Gene?’

‘We’ll get Sid and Pete to say they were drinking with Steve all night, so he couldn’t have taken the girl back to the guesthouse, like the staff is claiming. And then we’ll have them confirm that yesterday, they all met up in Steve’s room on the third floor before leaving for their return flights and there was no sign of any girl there. The police report says she was found covered in blood on a bed in a room on the first floor, so that puts Steve in the clear.’

‘You can’t do that Gene! It’s ... it’s lies... it’s perjury!’

‘If Garvey’s room really was on the third floor, that part is no lie. Anyway, what’s a little perjury compared to the life of an innocent man? Come on John – this place ain’t civilised, like back home. There are different rules and different standards out here. We have no choice – we have to do it. Mohammed told us that the Abu Dhabi cops won’t extradite him if there is any conflicting evidence – and that’s what this will be – evidence challenging the guesthouse staff’s version of events.’

‘But won’t the cops think that Sid and Pete are lying to save their friend?’

‘Maybe, but it don’t matter. Don’t ya see? We’re bringing in an element of doubt, and as there’s no official extradition treaty, that should be enough to persuade Mohammed’s cop friend to refuse the request to send Garvey back.’

I sat there thinking for a long time.

Finally, ‘I guess you’re right Gene, as usual,’ I said with a wry smile. ‘We have to try. I’ll get on the radio and start the ball rolling. Then I’ll call Mohammed and tell him we’ve come up with some new witnesses. I wonder if he’ll believe me.’

‘I think you’ll find that it doesn’t matter whether he believes you or not. Either way I guarantee that he’ll act on it.’

*

‘I’ll never forget what you guys have done for me. You’ve given me another chance at making a new life for myself and I owe you – big time.’

‘It’s all in a day’s work, Steve,’ I replied, smiling, as I shook his hand.

Steve walked across the hot, dusty runway apron and was handed his passport by a solitary police guard before climbing up the steps of the Boeing 707 which was about to depart for the long haul back to the USA.

Mohammed was waiting in the departure lounge with his friend Ahmed, the local Police Commander. Ahmed was holding the recently signed witness statements from Sid and Pete.

‘Ahmed has already informed Bahrain by telex that we have released Steve. He will send a copy of the witness statements later.’

‘Does Ahmed believe those statements, Mohammed?’

He stared into my eyes as though he was trying to read my mind. Then he looked at Gene, who stood still, saying nothing his steely eyes revealing nothing, and finally he turned back to me again.

‘Who knows John? Who knows? The main thing is that there was enough doubt about it and we got him out. That’s the result that you wanted, isn’t it, John?’ he asked.

‘Yes Mohammed, that’s precisely the result that I wanted.’

‘For now, Steve is a free man, so let’s make sure he gets out of here before the Bahraini police come back with a new request – or new evidence which contradicts those rather strange stories from Sid and Pete’

‘Why strange?’

‘Didn’t it strike you as a bit odd that Sid and Pete would walk up two flights of stairs to meet up with Steve before going back to Abu Dhabi?’

Mohammed held my gaze and gave me the most quizzical look I have ever seen.

Three

We had been re-living those extraordinary events for over an hour and it was getting very late. I could see that Gene was becoming very agitated and anxious to call it a night.

‘Well John, I hate to break up the party, but I’ve got a real early start in the morning, so I think I’ll be on my way.’

‘Only a few more minutes please, and I’ll personally put you into a taxi. Now, just to conclude on “The Bahrain Incident”.

‘What more is there to say? That was the end of it all - when Steve flew back home to the States.’ Gene said.

‘Well, it was certainly the last I heard about it for quite a while.’ I replied. ‘As you know, I was transferred to Indonesia soon after that, but one night, about two years later, I ran into Sid Brown in one of the local beer joints in Jakarta. The beer-talk got round to our times together in Abu Dhabi, and Sid mentioned the spurious witness statement that we had persuaded him to sign. He told me that at the time he had no problems about going along with it, as it could just as easily have been him in that jail - framed by some Lebanese camp boss. He said that he would have expected anyone to do the same for him, in similar circumstances, and that they all had to be there, for each other. Then he asked me why I thought the Amin, the camp boss had wanted to frame Steve, and I told him that Steve had reckoned it was Amin who had killed the girl. But Sid told me that he couldn’t have done it.’

‘Why is that?’ Gene asked.

‘Because, although Sid signed a statement to say he was with Steve all night, the truth is that he spent most of the night drinking with Amin, so he couldn’t have killed the girl.’

Gene stayed silent for a few moments as he absorbed this ‘new’ information. Then finally, ‘So that puts the suspicion back on Steve. Maybe he did kill her after all.’

‘Yes, when Sid first told me that he was with Amin all night that’s what I started to think. At first, I thought that we’d helped to free a killer and I was very upset, as up to that moment I had been convinced of Steve’s innocence.’

‘Well, it’s all water under the bridge now, John. It happened a long time ago. You have to let it rest.’

‘You know something Gene, after I ran into Sid that night I tried very hard to track you down, as I wanted to tell you what I’d found out. But I couldn’t find you – you seemed to have disappeared.’

‘I screwed up real bad, John. I was fired and went back home to Texas. That was about three months after you left. But why look for me? There was nothing I could do about Steve. It was too late – you’d never have got him back to Abu Dhabi to stand trial.’

‘That’s not the reason I wanted to see you Gene. There was something else Sid told me.’

‘Oh? What was that?’

I looked at Gene for a long time, before I eventually replied.

‘Sid told me that he thought he had seen your white hat, the one with the ‘GH’ logo, in the guesthouse that Tuesday afternoon, before he left to return to work. He couldn’t understand how it could have been there as he knew you were out in the desert – so he assumed it must have belonged to someone else with a similar hat.’

Gene sat and stared at me.

‘But you and I know that your hat was unique. It was handmade in Houston, and it’s very distinctive – no one else had a hat like that, with your initials sewed to the front, did they?’

‘What’re trying to say? That I was in Bahrain?’

‘Yes Gene, I think you were in Bahrain.’

‘That’s a load of bullshit! – How could I possibly have been in Bahrain? I was out at base camp!’

‘You weren’t there when I first called. You only turned up much later, and no one out there knew where you’d gone. I remember it so clearly, as I was desperate to tell you about the girl being killed.’

‘And how the hell do you think I got back from Bahrain? Did I swim? If I took the plane back to Abu Dhabi, someone would have seen me, and my name would have been on the flight manifest.’

I stared at him for more than a minute. ‘I puzzled over that for a long time, Gene, but eventually I realised how you could have got there – and back. You were very friendly with those guys from Bristol helicopters, weren’t you? And they flew all over the Gulf. I bet you hitched a ride to Bahrain directly from the desert base camp and back again.’

He looked at me. ‘It’s pure conjecture – you’d never prove it.’

‘No, I could never prove it. Even two years after the event I couldn’t have proved it. Let alone now. But I know you did it.’

‘Did...what?’

‘I’m sure you were the killer. You must have killed her that afternoon, sometime before Steve left the guesthouse. But I don’t know why. Why did you kill her Gene?’

The colour drained from Gene’s face, and he put his head in his hands. I waited a long time for him to say something. Eventually, he lifted his head and looked at me. Suddenly, he looked very ill.

‘You might as well know, as there’s nothing anyone can do. You’re right, John. I did kill that girl.’

The suspicions I had been nurturing for nearly half my life had finally been confirmed, but I still felt a sense of shock.

‘But why Gene? For God’s sake why?’

‘I had been having a light-hearted fling with her. It was just a bit of fun. You know how it was out there in the desert with no women; a man has to have his release. Then that day, I was getting tanked up on beer and my buddy at Bristol was flying to Bahrain on business and he offered me a lift. I was planning to spend the night with her, but the sorry bitch went through my pockets when I was taking a piss. She found a letter from my wife, and then demanded money or she’d write and tell my wife what I’d been up to. Well there was no God dammed way I was going to be black mailed by some Goddamn whore, and one thing led to another. I was drunk and I lost my temper. You remember how I can be when I’m drunk, John?’

I still recalled those drunken fights that used to break out in the desert when Gene was really tanked up. I nodded back to him.

‘There was a steak knife on the dressing table, from my meal earlier in the day. She wouldn’t stop demanding that I pay up or else, and I flipped. I

picked up the knife and plunged it into her heart. It was a moment of madness; I didn't really mean to do it but it was done and I had to save my skin. Anyway, the bitch deserved it!

'No one deserves to be killed, Gene. And what about poor Steve Garvey - you tried to frame him didn't you?'

'All the guesthouse staff lied to the cops – they said what I had told them to say. They all valued their jobs too much. I took the steak knife with me and threw it out of the helicopter in the middle of the desert when I flew back to Base Camp. You may not believe this but I knew there was no extradition treaty between Bahrain and Abu Dhabi. I really believed that as long as they didn't discover the girl's body until Steve flew out later that night – and I had left instructions to that effect - then he would have been free and clear.

'But he wasn't 'free and clear' was he?'

'We got him out in the end, so no harm was done.'

'And what if we hadn't? And anyway, God knows what effect that experience must have had on him. It probably ruined his life.'

'No, that's where you're wrong. I've checked on him from time to time. When he got back to States he went back to college, and then he joined a computer company. These days he's riding pretty high, and I gather he's got more money than he knows what to do with. And he's married with kids, so he must have recovered from that sex phobia he told us about.'

There was another long pause, and then he continued. 'No, John, apart from that double-dealing whore, the only person whose life I really ruined, was my own. After I knifed that girl, my whole life went on a downward spiral. I started to drink more and more and was given a strong warning from my boss in Houston to sort myself out or else. Then one day I really took my eye off the ball. I was responsible for a blow-out on one of Texo's rigs, so they fired me, and when the word got out that I caused a blow-out, no one would hire me. I drank even more, and my wife left me. I've been alone ever since, eking out an existence as a roustabout back in Texas. It's been a rough life, John, these past twenty five years, but the truth is that maybe I got my just rewards. It sure was a mighty bad thing I did that day in Bahrain.'

‘Well I can’t say that you haven’t deserved it, Gene. But I’m puzzled; how come you’re on this trip around the world? If you’ve been so destitute, how on earth can you afford a holiday like this?’

‘I sold my home. It realised enough cash to finance this trip - my ‘goodbye’ trip.’

‘Why? What’s the point? What are you going to do when you go back to the States? Where are you going to live?’

‘Do? I don’t know; and where? I care even less!’

He sat staring at me and I felt a shiver go down my spine. All of a sudden he looked very old and very sick. He must have read my mind.

‘I’m dying John,’ he said with a weak smile - almost a grimace, ‘my liver’s fucked – I’ve got sclerosis of the liver - less than three months to live, so the docs tell me.’

We looked at each other. What could I say to a man who had killed a girl for no good reason and had falsely tried to plant the blame on an innocent work colleague?

Was this his karma? Was it his fate to die from one of the most painful and dreaded diseases?

I wasn’t going to rush to judgment. How could I be so sure that in a given set of circumstances, and fuelled by alcohol, I might not have done something equally as rash?

And what could Gene say to me, that he hadn’t said to himself a thousand times over the past twenty-five, undoubtedly very miserable and guilt-ridden years?

The End

FROM THAILAND WITH LOVE

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Dr Jak – A saint or a sinner?

Thai ghosts? – bah.. humbug..

Glyn – The alcoholic who loved too much

Drum – who trod the fine line between fame and fortune and disaster

John and Som – worlds and cultures apart, but brothers in suffering

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From Thailand with Love

1. **The Good Doctor Jak**

The Country Hut Crossroads is not a hut. It's not at a crossroads. It's not even in the countryside – well not when you consider that the town of Rayong is a pretty big place, even if it is well over one hundred miles down the coast from Bangkok.

It's one of those Thai places with an English name which doesn't quite make sense, yet at the same time, evokes more of a meaning as to what you will find inside than most conventional English names may tell you.

Its location is on the main road towards the edge of town, the English name standing out among the myriad Thai signs in their distinctive Sanskrit-based script.

It was a pub, although it wasn't quite like any western pub I had ever seen before, and it was quite large, with a conventional bar and an extensive area for tables and chairs, with nooks and crannies and all sorts. Western memorabilia from the Fifties, Sixties and Seventies decorated the walls; posters for fifties American musicals, Carnaby Street signs, and the like.

I was there with Eddie, revelling in the incongruity of a pub in provincial Rayong which was promoting a group of young Thai musicians with shoulder-length hair, playing sixties and seventies rock 'n roll.

The music was surprisingly good and brought back memories of a miss-spent youth – for both of us but especially for Eddie, who in a past life had played the guitar in some nameless seventies rock band.

Eddie was a long standing friend from the really good old days in Bangkok in the late sixties, when the average westerner had never even heard of Thailand unless you happened to mention the name 'Siam'. We had gone our separate ways for many years and had only recently met up again, quite by chance. Our trip to Rayong was a business cum pleasure excursion, and was part of a tour around Thailand to renew old acquaintances.

We were both in our mid-fifties and Eddie had put on a lot of weight and gained considerable respectability since those mad hippie years of long hair, sex, drugs and rock n' roll.

Song requests were welcomed, with CCR (Credence Clearwater Revival) being among the most popular. We made our fair share of requests as we sat in the corner sipping our Carlsbergs. For some inexplicable reason CCR's hits in particular, were requested over and over again; 'Proud Mary', 'Have you Ever Seen the Rain', 'Down by the Corner', and so on.

'I haven't been here for a couple of years' I told Eddie, 'but it doesn't seem to have changed at all. It's almost as though it's been here since the seventies.'

But of course, that was nonsense, as it was only opened five years ago by some rich local entrepreneur who must have been indulging his memories of a miss-spent youth in Europe and the States.'

'What made you bring me here today?' asked Eddie – 'seeing as you don't frequent the place anymore.'

'Well, it's a kind of anniversary, and anyway I thought you might appreciate its special ambience.'

'It's great, but you've got me curious John – what anniversary?'

I suppose that all along I had brought Eddie here so that at last I could share with someone the story that had unfolded in this pub some two years earlier.

It didn't take much prompting, and with the help of a few more Carlsbergs, I was soon immersed in my tale.

It must have been some two and half years ago that Prasit, my local branch manager, based in Rayong, first brought me to *Country Hut* to meet his friend and our host for the evening.

I found the place fascinating, and the two of us weren't there very long before Prasit's friend joined us; a well-dressed Thai who looked to be in his early fifties. Prasit explained that the gentleman was his close friend and introduced him to me as Doctor Jakimar Chevalit. Everyone called him Dr Jak.

Dr Jak was a respected doctor at the local hospital and had been practising there for many years. In fact, he had been there so long that it

seemed as though the whole town knew him. He declined to drink any alcohol, and was content to sit and chat and listen to the music.

After a while some young lads at the next table spotted him, and they all ‘wai-ed’, bowed with hands clasped in a prayer fashion, greeting him with affection. They had all had occasion to use his services; he had probably even delivered many of them into the world, as he was a general practitioner in the widest sense of the word.

It wasn’t long before the intrusive ring of the ubiquitous mobile phone interrupted the music and disturbed our conversation. It turned out to be the first of many calls – all of them to Dr Jak. He would deal with some of them at the table and sometimes he would have to go outside due to the noise of the music. Upon return, he apologised for the disruptions and explained that he was on permanent twenty-four hour call at the hospital. The nurses had been told to call him at any time if they had any concerns with patients.

I asked him if there wasn’t anyone else who could take the calls, but he just smiled and said that he preferred to deal with them personally.

After half an hour, another call sent Dr Jak rushing back to the hospital, but with the assurance that he would be back later. After he left, Prasit explained that Dr Jak had been assigned to Rayong Hospital from Bangkok some twenty years ago under the Thai system whereby every doctor is required to do a two year spell ‘up-country’, post-qualification. Once they had completed their obligatory stint in the provinces, most doctors would then return to Bangkok and start to generate serious earnings.

For some reason, Dr Jak had decided to stay in Rayong, and had been a fixture at Rayong hospital ever since. He had been Prasit’s close friend for many years and, when he heard that his boss, an Englishman, was coming to town, he had insisted on taking us both out.

The Carlsbergs kept coming; the music was getting better and better.

*

It was quite late when Dr Jak re-appeared and apologised profusely for his long absence. We didn’t mind – we understood, but somehow he appeared to feel guilty for leaving us. It didn’t seem quite right. We were having a good time, getting drunk, listening to music, and Dr Jak was out there working, saving lives. Yet he was the one feeling guilty!

Yet another call sent Dr Jak rushing off again, and considering the hour I thought it unlikely that he would return again that night.

We'd had a skin-full, and we were thinking about leaving, when Dr Jak finally made it back, which was just as well, as neither Prasit nor I were in any state to drive.

A considerate gentleman to the end, Dr Jak insisted in driving the two of us to our respective abodes for the night, Prasit to his home, and me to my hotel. When I was safely back in my room, I lay awake for hours puzzling over this truly virtuous man that I had met in such a strange setting.

*

At the office the next morning I asked Prasit whether Dr Jak was married or whether he had a girlfriend.

'No wife, No girls,' was the abrupt reply.

'Is he gay?' I asked.

'I don't know. If he is, he never flaunts it – or indulges as far as I know. I've never seen him with anyone except friends and ex patients.'

'Why does he like going to *Country Hut Crossroads* – he doesn't drink – he doesn't bring any girls there – and he's always rushing back to the hospital?'

'Well, he likes the music, which is one thing. But then he doesn't really have a proper home. I went there once to drop him off when his car broke down. It's just a tiny, almost empty room in a wooden house on the edge of town. There's a threadbare mattress on the floor, and that's about it. He usually catches a few hours' sleep at the hospital, and the rest of the time he's in the pub where we met him last night, keeping an eye on his ex-patients, and sometimes finding new ones.'

'What do you mean – finding new ones?' I asked.

Prasit smiled sheepishly. 'That's how he met me. I suppose you could say that if it weren't for Dr Jak I would be in a very sorry state by now. I certainly wouldn't be working for you, and it's more than likely that I would be long gone.'

'That sounds a bit dramatic. Tell me more.'

'Well to cut a very long story short, you could say I was sliding down the slippery slope to hell – two bottles of whisky a day, four packets of cigarettes, missing work more days than not, getting into drunken brawls. You name it, I was doing it. I had long since given up any attempts to change my lifestyle as I had decided it was all down to fate – *karma* as we

call it. I believed I was being punished for some terrible misdeeds in my former life.'

He was referring to the Buddhist belief in reincarnation. I pressed Prasit to relate how he had managed to turn his life round. He certainly wasn't teetotal, but as a rule he was content to just have the occasional beer or two. He never touched whisky; he was a non-smoker and was one of the brightest and most diligent Thais I had ever employed.

He was a good and trusted manager, who treated his staff fairly but with compassion and had a first class reputation amongst the local business community. Over the past few years, I had grown to like and respect this quiet, unassuming and honest person and was most intrigued by what he had just said about his past life.

'Quite simple really - Dr Jak took me under his wing and he got me thinking straight. He made me feel that it was his life's mission to save me from myself. It took a while, but in the end he succeeded in bringing me to my senses. And here I am today, a reformed person - all thanks to Dr Jak.

'He does it all the time. When he's not ministering to the sick, he spends his time saving drunks and no-goods from themselves. People like me. You westerners would say he is very virtuous. Some Thais think he has made so much merit in this life that he will be well on the way to nirvana in the next.'

Business was booming in Rayong so I became a fixture in town for a while. Many evenings were spent at the *Country Hut Crossroads* where Dr Jak and I became good friends. I got used to his frequent telephone calls that would send him rushing off, and also to his habit of leaving our table to join strangers who were looking a bit the worse for wear. I became fascinated with his unerring knack of befriending them and then helping them to solve their problems.

As I got to know him better, I started to press the good doctor to tell me why he had never married. It was none of my business really but I wanted to satisfy my curiosity. Somewhat frustratingly, he had a way with questions that he didn't want to answer, and he would just produce an enigmatic smile and change the subject. I finally came to the conclusion that he probably was gay but had no desire to come out of the closet, and probably never would.

I suppose I would never have become any the wiser regarding his sexuality or anything else to do with his background if it hadn't been for one fateful evening.

As on many previous occasions, I had met Dr Jak at *Country Hut* to listen to the live music and have a few drinks – Carlsberg for me and Diet Coke for the doctor. He was looking particularly weary. He explained to me that he hadn't slept for two days due to so many emergencies at the hospital and was feeling pretty exhausted.

'But I can't sleep, I'm still on call,' he said somewhat dejectedly.

Prasit joined us and I asked him if there wasn't any way we could persuade Dr Jak to let another doctor at the hospital to take his shift.

'Leave it to me, John.'

Prasit took out his mobile and made a couple of calls and then proudly announced to Dr Jak - who by this time was half-asleep - that he was officially off duty for the night. Dr Jak started to protest but I could see his will weakening, and reluctantly he agreed to turn off his phone and leave the night's emergencies to others.

I asked Dr Jak if he had ever drunk alcohol.

'Oh yes, I'm not teetotal you know. I just can't drink when I'm working – and I'm nearly always working.'

'Well not wishing to encourage you into something you may regret, may I offer you a glass of beer,' I suggested somewhat hesitantly.

Dr Jak seemed to consider this for many minutes before finally he smiled a tired kind of smile and said:

'Thank you, John. That would be very nice.'

The three of us sat sipping our beers and although Dr Jak only had two glasses, it soon became obvious that his long abstinence from alcohol and his extreme fatigue had conspired to exaggerate the effects of the small amount of alcohol he had consumed.

It is often said that coincidences, which occur in real life are often stranger than the coincidences which are created in fiction. The Thais have far less problem in accepting this concept due to their belief in *karma* – or pre-ordained fate.

What happened that evening, after Dr Jak started to get prematurely drunk, was something I will never forget. It was either one of those

incredibly true coincidences, or it maybe it really was karma – destiny. I will never know.

A rather shabbily dressed man, about the same age as Dr Jak, but almost skeletal in build suddenly appeared at our table.

The exchange in Thai, roughly translated, went something like this:

‘I see you haven’t changed your habits then – Dr Jak?’ the man said, in a very sarcastic tone of voice.

Dr Jak nearly jumped out of his skin when he saw the stranger. After a few moments he seemed to recover his composure and sat there, staring at him, speechless and motionless.

The stranger went on, ‘Drunk again eh? You made all those promises. They were just lies!’

Dr Jak sat and stared. The music faded out. Complete silence descended, and it seemed as though everyone in Country Hut was following the drama.

‘Tonight I went to the hospital to find you, and they told me that you are on duty tonight. And what do I find? You are here, in a pub, drunk!’

Not a word from Dr Jak. I couldn’t understand why the doctor didn’t tell the man that he was off duty?’

‘Prasit,’ I whispered, ‘tell the man the doctor is off duty?’

‘I doubt whether he would believe me. And anyway, I must confess I told him a little lie earlier on. The hospital couldn’t find anyone to cover for him so he’s actually still on duty; but for once in his life, I wanted him to relax for a few hours.’

‘You lied?’ I asked, astonished.

The stranger started shouting.

‘How can you be a doctor on duty if you are drunk? You haven’t changed at all after all these years. All those promises! All those promises, just lies! Lies! Lies!’ the stranger continued, in an increasingly hysterical manner.

Dr Jak continued to stare, and I noticed that his eyes started to well up and tears started to run down his cheeks.

The stranger suddenly picked up the mobile phone next to Dr Jak and shouted, ‘How can you answer this phone when you are drunk? Tell me, how can you? I want to know?’

Then he looked at the phone and realised it had been turned off.

There was another long silence. The stranger stared at the phone and Dr Jak sat there with the tears still on his cheeks.

Suddenly, the stranger's anger seemed to disappear, and in a much more controlled voice he said,

'You know what, Dr Jak? After twenty long years I came to find you to tell you I forgive you, that I can't spend the rest of my life with such hatred in my heart. And now this....'

Suddenly he hurled the phone at the wall and it smashed into pieces, and he started to leave. As he reached the door he turned around.

'I can't forgive you, and I can't live with this hatred. It will be our karma.'

He left, closing the door very quietly. The band started playing again.

*

During the very long night that followed Dr Jak helped us to piece together the happenings of some twenty years previously when he had first arrived as a junior doctor in Rayong to do his two-year 'stint' in an up-country hospital.

A LUST FOR LIFE

‘A Lust for Life’ is the story of Toby Stark, a saga of 210,000 words, spanning five decades, and five continents, with most of the action taking place in South East Asia, primarily in Thailand.

It is the tale of a troubled, hard drinking Englishman who was born to an abusive father in post war, economically depressed London, and whose considerable escapades take him to America, Canada, Africa, The Middle East and Indonesia, before arriving in Thailand where he decides to spend the remainder of his life.

Along the way Toby lurches from poverty, to wealth, and back to poverty again; is subjected to spells in many of the world’s jails; wins and loses countless women - including five wives, four of whom are Thai - and develops an unhealthy addiction to alcohol.

In later life he becomes inextricably involved with two beautiful women from rural Thailand.

The first is ‘Ying’, born in impoverished circumstances in Eastern Thailand, and at the age of eight witnessed her gangland father being shot down in front of her. Ying’s eventful life takes her to Bangkok at the age of twelve to work as an indentured servant, and later to the south of Thailand where she suffers constant abuse by the father of her child. She eventually escapes and moves back to Bangkok where she becomes a popular hostess at one of Bangkok’s nightspots.

The second is ‘Na’ was also born into incredibly poverty in the North East of Thailand, and moves to the resort City of Pattaya at a very young age. Despite her appalling suffering at the hands of paedophiles and other criminal elements, she survives to become a highly sought after ‘working girl’ in one of Pattaya’s premier red light districts.

The two women meet by chance and reluctantly join forces to try and save Toby from almost certain death in a Pattaya jail, after he is arrested for causing a fatal road accident.

Their efforts to rescue him and their subsequent adventures are an exciting, roller-coaster of a ride, which exposes the sordid underbelly of Pattaya’s criminally controlled, lawless, sex industry where death, human trafficking and unspeakable depravity are the order of the day. The thrilling and shocking climax of the saga is both uplifting and distressing.

‘A Lust for Life’ leads the reader deep into the dark side of Thailand’s corrupt and morally bankrupt society. It explores the fatal culture clashes that are experienced by thousands of eager westerners who flock to

Thailand, only to learn that their dreams of happiness in a tropical paradise are largely an illusion.

It also delves into the causes and the punishing effects of alcoholism in both eastern and western civilizations.

At its heart, 'A Lust for Life' is a novel of abuse and its long lasting effects, of desire, of love, of greed, of adventure, of heartbreak and shocking violence - the bread and butter of daily life in the exotic 'Land Of Smiles.'

Read on for a taster of '*A Lust for Life*' which is also available on Amazon-Kindle.

A Lust for Life

Chapter One

Na parked her rented Honda motor cycle at right angles to the kerb, next to three other bikes which were similarly parked, and then eased her weary body off the warm machine to join the roadside queue for her nightly fix of *somtum*.

It was 3 a.m., and she was parked in Second Road, in the heart of *Sin City*, Pattaya, Thailand; but despite the hour, the town was still wide awake – buzzing with life. The streets, restaurants, bars, massage parlours and brothels were all bustling with frenetic activity. The night was still alive with punters; foreign tourists who were out for a night on the town and unwavering in their desire to squeeze every ounce of illicit pleasure from this most infamous of red-light metropolises.

Then there were the Thais; thousands of them - of which Na was one - mostly temporary residents in this ever expanding city, who were also out in force and equally full of unwavering determination to squeeze every hard earned dollar and cent from the inebriated, sex-crazed punters.

She was moderately drunk and very hungry. Three in the morning may not have been particularly late by Pattaya standards, but it was late for her. She usually clocked-off from her job as a hostess at *Kismet*, one of Pattaya's more discerning Gentlemen's Clubs, at around midnight.

On this particular night there had been a group of high rolling, very drunk customers who had been reluctant to leave. Her American boss had prevailed upon the few remaining ladies who had not been 'bought out' for the night, to stay past their normal finishing time and provide some extra, late night entertainment.

At first, she had welcomed this request, as she was very short of money and she hoped that one of the western foreigners –*farangs* - from the drunken group would take her back to his hotel. The thirty dollars or so that she would earn from a short time fuck would come in very handy. In the event, she had been obliged to allow the drunken, pot-bellied slobs to paw her for the best part of three hours and all that she had to show for her

personal degradations was a lousy two hundred baht – six dollars - her cut from the few overpriced drinks they had reluctantly agreed to buy for her.

Na was almost broke. She hadn't slept with a customer in days, her rent was overdue and her mother and her two kids were waiting patiently in her room for her to return home with some food. She looked in her purse and counted two hundred and thirty baht. By the time she had bought her *somtum*, there would be less than two hundred baht remaining to feed her mother, her five year old daughter and her one year old baby son; just enough for one meal.

It was already September, and for some reason, in 2012, the tourist low season seemed to go on forever. The small funds at her disposal, together with the ever upward spiral in the cost of food, meant that her family would be hungry again long before she had a further opportunity to earn some more money, when she clocked back on to work the following evening. She wasn't overly worried – it wasn't in her nature to worry too much about tomorrow, and anyway something was sure to turn up.

Her main thoughts at that moment were centred on satisfying her craving for *somtum pala*, which was at that very moment being pounded out in the chipped mortar in front of her by the ancient *Issan* woman. She could worry about feeding the family later. She was typical of most Thais; if she allowed herself to worry about all her problems at the same time, she would never be able to laugh and joke her way through the day, never be able to *bai tio* – go out and enjoy herself with her friends. Most of all, she would never be able to smile her magic smile and work her wicked wiles on the stupid *farangs* who came looking for sexual gratification at her place of employment.

No, tomorrow would take care of itself – it always did. It was the Thai way; just live for today and not worry too much about what may happen tomorrow. But even the irrepressible Na felt a little weighed down with life's misfortunes as she sorted out her bank notes and coins to pay for her food. If things didn't improve soon, she may have to pay a visit to one of the dreaded money lenders. She knew that once she allowed herself to get into the hands of the local Chinese loan sharks, it would be the start of a very slippery and dangerous slope. She had been there before and she knew only too well how it could end if she wasn't very careful.

She had just chalked up three months as a hostess in *Kismet*, one of the newer Gentlemen's clubs that had recently sprung up in Pattaya's more affluent suburbs and it had been her first regular job for quite a while.

These types of club normally operated from noon to midnight and mainly catered for well-off, married, European residents, who were seeking a bit of day time distraction. In addition to the regular expatriate customers, there was also the occasional group of well-healed tourists that were brought by tour guides looking for a ‘punter’s commission’.

It had been just such a group that had prevented Na from going home at normal closing time on this particular night. When she first started there, her personality and good looks had made her one of the most popular hostess three months ago and she had been in much demand as a drinking companion by the mainly retired patrons. Unfortunately, not many of the regular customers were interested in having full blown sex – or even a *blow-job*.

It wasn’t that they couldn’t afford it – after all, the going rate was pretty much the same as anywhere - it was just that they were of an age when their testosterone levels no longer raged as they once did. As a result, the needs and desires of these elderly gentlemen were a little different. Most of them were quite happy to sink their generously endowed backsides into deeply piled, leather couches, sip their gin and tonics and enjoy the cuddles of pretty ladies, a third of their age who sat on their laps. Heavy groping was all that a majority of Kismet’s patrons were after. Sex in one of Kismet’s beautifully furnished, private rooms that were provided for the purpose - was simply not on their agenda

This wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, as these well-heeled westerners would often spend more money during a brief visit to Kismet than many of the younger, sex-mad foreign punters who patronised the *Walking Street* bars. Often the client’s drink bills alone ran to several thousand baht; far exceeding the amounts spent by a typical tourist in one of the less salubrious short-time bars, downtown. The girls at Kismet worked very hard for their *ladies’ drinks commission*, and their tips. Occasionally, they got lucky and landed a younger man who was looking for a proper sexual encounter and was happy to pay generously for it, but for the most part, they had to rely on their drinks and trusted to fate that they would receive generous tips. It was the luck of the draw.

But after only three months at Kismet, most of the regular customers knew Na by sight, and this familiarity seemed to reduce her drawing power as a paid companion. The punters still greeted her warmly, but then they would make a beeline for one of the newer, younger ladies waiting patiently at the bar. She was fast becoming part of the furniture and as a

consequence, her income had tapered off quite alarmingly. She had grimly concluded that she would soon have move on – yet again.

The old woman snapped Na out of her reverie as she handed her the freshly prepared dish of spicy papaya salad laced with tiny black crabs together with a second dish containing raw vegetables. Na needed both hands to carry the two plates to the kerbside table and she was still a good meter away from a vacant stool when her sleepy senses were assaulted by the ominous sound of metal crunching against metal .

It was the disturbing, deep, metallic thud that occurs when vehicles collide. She instinctively spun around in time to see a low-slung, black saloon careering into the side of a second moving vehicle after it had bounced off a nearby parked vehicle. The second vehicle was one of the ubiquitous *Baht Buses* that plied the streets of Pattaya; a converted pickup truck with specially fitted bench seats in the back to transport paying passengers. It was hit with such force that it tumbled over onto its side, spilling its helpless occupants out across the road. The smoke in the air was palpable, and the black sedan buried its nearside front wing into a third, parked car and finally ground to a shuddering halt.

An eerie silence descended over the scene of the carnage. For a fraction of a second, it seemed as though Sin City had ceased to function; for a brief moment in time, no-one moved and no one uttered a sound.

The shock of being so close to a serious accident caused Na to lose control of the plastic dishes of food, which spun out of her hands and bounced on the hard surface of the road scattering their contents in every direction. She recovered from her initial shock and started to take in the enormity of the scene of carnage that lay in front of her. Some of the passengers had been thrown completely clear of the pickup truck and lay on the ground in unnatural, twisted heaps. Two more victims were hanging half in and half out of the overturned vehicle, and she noticed that the shirt on one of the dangling bodies was turning a bright shade of crimson.

Then she glanced at the car. It was somehow familiar to her – it was a BMW – a car she had seen before somewhere. Yes, she knew that black BMW - she recognised the number. She closed her eyes in a vain attempt to obliterate the bloody scene from her mind; to eradicate what lay in front of her and the realisation of who had caused it.

‘My God,’ she shouted, ‘I know that car! I know that fucking car!’

Her unsatisfied craving for *somtum* temporarily forgotten, Na hurried over to the smouldering car wreck to confirm what deep down she already knew. A large crowd had gathered around the badly damaged vehicle, but she pushed her way through in unladylike fashion and peered in through the darkened side window. One glance was enough; she knew him well enough. It was Toby – that bloody drunken Englishman who had given her such a hard time.

‘What a bastard!’ she said out aloud. ‘What a fucking bastard!’ You crazy, drunken, bastard! How many people have you killed Toby?’ she screamed through the window at his still form, which lay slumped across the steering wheel.

She turned round to look at the scene of carnage – at the dying and badly mutilated bodies that were strewn across the road. Then she turned back towards the car and the perpetrator of this outrage.

‘I hope you’re dead, Toby, I hope you’re fucking dead! Because if you’re not – your life won’t be worth living, I can promise you that!’

She remained transfixed to the spot as the smoke and dust started to clear from the scene of the accident and the full extent of the carnage became even clearer. The BMW had careered into two parked cars which looked as though they had been ripped open by a giant can opener and the third vehicle, a converted passenger-carrying pickup truck, was lying on its side; with the roof of the driver’s cab partly caved in. She could see that the driver was still at the wheel, but it was impossible to know for sure if he was alive or dead. She then turned her attention back to the BMW. The front end and nearside were so badly mangled that it was difficult to imagine that it could ever be brought back to its former glory, but the remainder of the car was relatively unscathed.

It seemed to Na that the eerie silence lasted for ages, but in reality, it was only a few brief seconds. The one-way traffic behind the scene of the accident had come to a halt; most of the drivers had cut their engines and were climbing out of their vehicles to get a closer look at the horrific scene ahead. The uneasy peace was suddenly broken by an injured passenger from the converted pick-up, who let out an agonising screech of pain. It was coming from a young lady who was lying on her back in the middle of the road - her legs splayed out at an unusual, almost grotesque angle. But it was her head that drew the onlookers’ compulsive attention. It was dripping with blood from a nasty gash on the side of her forehead; the poor girl was clearly in a very bad state.

It was almost as though the unfortunate woman's screams of pain became the signal for a general commotion to begin. Other passengers from the overturned pick-up started to join in with an unholy chorus of wailing and moaning. People streamed out of the nearby bars, shops, restaurants and from the backed up vehicles, to gather at the scene of the accident and see what could be done to help the injured. Na joined her fellow Thais and did what she could do to help the victims. She tried to make them more comfortable and helped to cover them with makeshift sheets that the nearby workers had rustled up. She had forgotten that she was hungry. The shock of what had happened had jolted her to her very core, especially as she now knew the identity of the person who had caused this terrible accident.

Two taxi drivers tried their best to force open the front doors of the BMW, but without success; both doors were locked and wouldn't budge. Na saw what they were trying to do and left off from helping the injured to join the two men who were peering inside the heavily darkened widow. She could just make out the figure of a *farang* inside, his head lying at an odd angle against a partly deflated air bag. He was unconscious, and as she looked closer, she knew that her earlier suspicions were correct. One of the men tried smashing the side window with a brick he found on the kerbside, but the toughened glass didn't even crack. By now, something akin to a lynch mob had surrounded the car and they were all trying, in different ways, to smash their way in, but the doughty BMW was having none of it.

Inside the car, Toby was slowly regaining consciousness. At first, he didn't know where he was, but as he came to, he suddenly felt sharp stabs of pain in his legs, arms and face. He opened his eyes, looked at the airbag and realised that he was in his car and that he had been in bad accident. He had no recollection of what had happened. Through his pain, he tried to think back and his memory gradually started to function again. The last thing he remembered was walking along Beach Road, very drunk, looking for a friendly prostitute to take home with him. What was he doing in his car? How had he got there? How had the accident happened? He couldn't remember a thing after that drunken stagger along the beach. Where the fuck was he?

Then he looked up at the screaming Thais who had surrounded his car and were shouting and gesticulating at him. What were they shouting? He couldn't make it out. He closed his eyes momentarily in a futile effort to clear his head. But he felt so woozy and lightheaded, and then he realised why. The one fact his brain was able to register was that he was still very drunk. He was still pissed out of his mind, and he had been driving a car

that had been involved in a serious accident. He knew he was in very deep shit. He opened his eyes again. ‘They don’t look very friendly’, he thought to himself.

He realised they were screaming at him to unlock the door so he instinctively reached out to release the door lock before quickly thinking better of it. ‘That might not be a very good idea,’ he told himself, ‘those people look like they want to string me up!’ He removed his hand from the side of the door and sank back down into his seat, which provoked an even louder uproar from the angry crowd outside. His aches and pains were suddenly forgotten and he almost jumped out of his seat in panic when he saw the crowd trying to break the windscreen with a huge lump of concrete they had found nearby.

‘Jesus fucking Christ! They really mean to have me!’ he said under his breath.

He was in imminent danger of losing control of his bowels when he caught the sight of two uniformed policemen, who were trying to force their way through the angry crowd to the side of the car. Never in his life had Toby been so happy to see the sight of two Thai cops. He watched in desperation as they came up alongside the driver’s window, and angrily gestured to him to unlock the door. ‘Will I be safe?’ he asked himself. He soon realised that if he didn’t do as he was asked, sooner or later they would succeed in breaking in, so with much apprehension, he flipped the lock and the door was immediately swung wide open. The pains from his injuries returned with a vengeance when the two cops dragged him brusquely out of the car. Somehow, he managed to stand upright and the crowd instinctively backed away – staring in bewilderment at the lone perpetrator of the carnage that lay about them.

He was a pathetic mess. Strands of blood-caked hair were stuck to his face and there was a nasty gash on his temple. There was several days’ of stubbly growth on his face and his beer-stained shirt was splattered with his own blood. The shirt was unbuttoned, revealing a sweaty, potbellied stomach, partly covered by his filthy, wrinkled jeans, which looked as though they had been slept in for the past week. To complete the picture, his filthy, bare feet revealed black, broken toe nails.

He gazed at the scene and despite the fact that he was still very drunk, the awful realisation of the mayhem he had caused started to dawn on him. He blinked his eyes in disbelief as he took in the sight of the four wrecked vehicles and the plight of the wounded and dying who were scattered all

over the road. ‘My God!’ he muttered, ‘Holy fucking God! What the fuck have I done?’

The sound of a siren pierced the air. Two ambulances were fast approaching the scene of the accident, driving the wrong way down the one way road. It was the only way they could get through, as by now, the road behind the accident was backed up with traffic for several kilometres, but in front, it was empty. Toby watched as the two ambulances parked up alongside a police truck which had arrived moments earlier and the drivers and medics ran over to the scene.

He knew how these freelance rescue teams operated. The ambulances, which belonged to the notorious *Sawang Boriboon* organisation, were little more than glorified pick-ups, run by a privately owned outfit that received commissions from local hospitals for delivering the sick, injured and dying to their doors. The more exclusive the hospital, the greater the commission, but they had to make sure that the patients had the means to pay, or the hospital would refuse admission and the ambulance operatives would get nothing for their trouble.

The medics from the first ambulance rushed over to administer rudimentary first aid to the injured passengers and two medics from the second ambulance ran over to take charge of Toby. They had taken in the sight of a BMW with its injured *farang* driver and surmised that there would be an excellent commission in this if they could get him to the upmarket *Royal Pattaya* hospital. Toby breathed a sigh of relief as soon as he saw the medics approach. ‘This is a stroke of luck,’ he thought. Despite the presence of the two policemen, Toby knew that he was still in dire danger and the situation may yet get out of control. The crowd were shouting at him in an increasingly hostile manner and he spoke enough Thai to know that they were very angry and upset with the all the mayhem he had caused. It was by no means impossible that they would take the law into their own hands and attack him, even kill him. It had happened before.

He wondered if he could persuade the two medics to take him to one of the cheaper hospitals – he knew he couldn’t afford the fees at the *Royal Pattaya* – as he was pretty much broke. He suspected that his injuries were quite serious, and it was probably only due to his drowsy and inebriated state that he was able tolerate the pain and remain standing. He needed to get out of there and into the emergency department of a hospital as soon as possible. Will they be able to whisk him away, before the hostile crowd turns into a lynch mob?

The decision was taken out of his hands. The two policemen still had a firm hold on him, both to prevent him from running away and to stop him from falling over, and were not about to let anyone take him from them. They had arrested a drunken criminal and they were going to take him to Pattaya police station where he would be formerly charged. They impatiently waved the medics away; their boss could decide later whether he should be sent to hospital,

‘I’m... I’m injured! I need a doctor!’ Toby objected, ‘please let me go to hospital...’ he pleaded with them in Thai.

‘No! You will go to the police station and my Lieutenant will decide what to do with you,’ one of the policemen snapped back at him.

‘Go and take care of the injured passengers over there,’ the second policeman shouted at the medics.

‘Please, please I beg you... let me go with them...’

Na, who had been watching the proceedings with interest, decided to intercede. She pushed forward towards the policemen and Toby caught sight of her, recognition dawning. He smiled a weak smile of relief at the familiar face, even though he vaguely recollected that the last time they had met, they had departed on very bad terms. ‘Any straw in the wind,’ he thought. He decided that the arrival of Na must be a lucky break. Yes, his luck was definitely changing, now he had someone to help him. He tried to listen as Na spoke to the police in fast, angry Thai, but couldn’t make out what she was saying, so in desperation, he interrupted her.

‘Na, thank God you’re here. Please tell these cops to let the ambulance take me to hospital. Look at me, I am badly hurt – I need to see a doctor. I won’t run away. I promise.’

He fumbled in his pocket and produced a plastic, laminated copy of his passport. ‘Here, give them this.’

Na looked at Toby’s pathetic, drunken face and the plastic card that he held out to her. She took it, gave it a cursory glance and threw it onto the ground in front of him.

‘Help you?’ Why the fuck should I help you?’ she snarled at him. ‘You weren’t very nice to me – were you – you drunken bastard! And now look at what you’ve done!’ waving her hands towards the scene of destruction in front of them. ‘You can’t get away with it, not this time, Toby, I’ve told the cops to put you in *cook* and throw away the key. I hope you fucking die!!’

Toby was completely bewildered by her stinging remarks as they slowly sunk into his alcohol-sodden brain. 'Why would she do that? I was very good to her, before... before it all went wrong...' he thought to himself.

The two policemen wasted no time in dragging Toby to the waiting police pick-up truck where they half carried and half threw him into the back. He lay there in agony, knowing without doubt that he was in the worst trouble of his life. How the fuck was he going to get of this? He was left lying in his own blood for a few minutes while the police took notes and chatted to yet more police who had just arrived at the scene.

He was in serious shit and he was wondering who in hell was going to come to his rescue when he heard a voice, shouting at him in English. His heart missed a beat; it sounded like a *farang*. He lifted his head from the floor of the pick-up and looked outside. Two, middle aged *farangs* were staring at him.

'Hey geezer!' one of them shouted, 'are you the driver of that Beamer?'

'Yes, I am! Thank God you're here. Look, I've had a bad accident – I'm injured, but these fucking cops won't let me go to hospital. They're taking me to the police station – it's only just round the corner. Can you walk round and meet me there? Maybe you can call my wife for me? Please... lend a hand to a fellow Brit, will you...?'

'Meet you there? Lend a hand? Mate - you must be fucking crazy! You just caused a mega accident and killed fuck-knows how many Thais and you want us to help you? Look at you! You're a fucking piss-head... and ... look at what you've done! I hope you rot in jail, you stupid, drunken motherfucker....!'

The man spat into the road in front of him in disgust, and the pair stormed off into the crowd. Toby's last chance of help faded away into the darkness of the early morning.

MADJU-RAJ; THE MESSENGER OF DEATH

Set in England and Thailand, this 110,000 word novel commences in a tiny, poverty-stricken village, deep in the heart of rural Thailand where two innocent youths are mercilessly shot, before the action switches to a sleepy village in the English countryside, where an elderly Englishman is brutally murdered in his own home.

Are the two crimes connected?

Perry is a shy, young, struggling author who lives in the picturesque English village of Fawnhope and becomes captivated by Suneenart – Sunny – a young Thai woman who comes to live in his village. She is the most beautiful woman he has ever set eyes on, but her capricious and enigmatic nature mean that his clumsy attempts to woo her are continually frustrated.

A second murder and a motiveless house trashing prompts the pair to team up and try to solve these apparently unexplainable crimes.

Their inquiries take them from England's 'green and pleasant land' to the lawless slums of Hat Yai in the south of Thailand. From there, the action moves to the opulent Oriental Hotel in the heart of Bangkok and thence to the wild-west of 'Issan-country' in the north east, where the ruthless authorities still exact summary justice.

Their adventures lead to many life-threatening escapades, both in Thailand and back home in England, and with Perry's help, Sunny slowly pieces together the intriguing jigsaw of events that led to the murders.

Along the way, Perry learns some uncomfortable and disturbing truths that lie beneath the surface of Thailand's thin veneer of civilised society and the democratic ideals that they love to espouse.

Not without humour, the tale swings from light-hearted banter to dreadful tragedy and ultimately to poignant sadness, as we learn about the past tragic events that have helped to shape the lives of the main protagonists.

"Madju-Raj, The Messenger of Death" is a tale of romance, murder, and oriental intrigue that will keep readers glued to the narrative until the final page

Read on for a taster of “*Madju-Raj; The Messenger of Death*”, which is also available on Amazon-Kindle.

Madju-Raj; The Messenger of Death

PROLOGUE

Thailand - 2003

A dusty, potholed track, some ten kilometres South of Thailand's North Eastern provincial capital of Khon Kaen, leads to the impoverished village of *Sang Yun*. The single track, which would present a serious challenge to all but the most robust of vehicular suspensions, is the only viable route along which motorised transport can reach *Sang Yun*. However, for most of the *Sang Yun* residents, the preferred means of travelling to and from their village is to trek on foot around the raised perimeters of the paddy fields. A few fortunate souls, who are lucky enough have access to water buffaloes, have yet another way to go. For them, the most direct, but not necessarily the quickest route, is to travel straight across the water-laden paddy fields, sitting legs akimbo on the ungainly, lumbering beasts of burden.

During the monsoon season, when the dusty, rutted track becomes transformed into a swirling torrent of water, the water buffaloes come into their own. On such occasions, these beasts are the only means of contact with the outside world - often for days at a time - and most of the *Sang Yun* villagers become marooned in their tiny village, having no choice but to anxiously await respite from the torrential rain storms.

But now it was mid-May, the height of the dry season, and the rains were a good three months away. Afternoon temperatures climbed to over 40 degrees Celsius, and even the weather-hardy locals were starting to wilt under the scorching and unremitting sun. Very little activity took place in the middle of such days, but every now and then, an ancient, rusty two-stroke motorcycle would gingerly make its way along the inhospitable track, carrying its precarious human cargo.

One such machine was carrying a typical complement of four, carefully placed passengers: the man was driving and his wife was huddled close behind, leaving just enough room for their teenage daughter at the end of

the pillion seat. Nestled on the handlebars was their youngest daughter, a small girl of barely three years of age.

They were making their way out of the village, to Khon Kaen municipal hospital. The thirteen-year-old girl was painfully thin and emaciated. She had been ill for weeks and was now too weak to work. The father was determined to get his daughter back to work at the fireworks factory as soon as possible - before some other, equally young but healthier girl replaced her.

The unfortunate child's paltry earnings were a vital source of family income and the situation had become critical. It was an earlier family financial crisis that had turned her father into an amphetamine user; a highly addictive drug which was so readily available in this lawless district of the Northeast. It was inevitable that once he was addicted, he would become inexorably drawn into petty drug dealing, in a frantic effort to fuel his craving; but he was desperate to kick the habit and he needed his daughter's income more than ever. He must quit. *They* had warned him that "*he would be dealt with*" if he carried on dealing - and that was three weeks ago.

The man's two teen aged sons were about to leave their wretched shack to return to yet more back-breaking labour in the paddy fields when an unfamiliar pickup truck pulled up outside the dilapidated family homestead. The dark grey vehicle was devoid of markings, which was unusual for this corner of the world; and if the brothers had bothered to look closer, they would have been also surprised by the absence of a registration plate. But their attention was elsewhere. Their frightened faces were transfixed on the three burly, serious looking men who climbed down from the air-conditioned front cab. They were dressed in khaki, but wore no insignia that might have indicated which branch of the armed services or police they belonged to - if any.

The visitors stood in the middle of the track and glowered menacingly at the brothers, their faces already glistening in the stifling midday heat. After what seemed an interminable silence, the largest of the three, who was the leader, snarled, 'We're looking for *Tongpoon*. Is he here?'

'No, he's not here today,' replied the younger brother.

'You lie - where is he? I demand to know!'

‘He is on his way to hospital with my sick sister,’ the eldest brother informed the stranger.

‘You are lying,’ the man repeated, with a sneer. ‘Since when does a stinking drug dealer care about anyone but himself? Who are you?’ he demanded sharply.

‘I am Tongpan,’ the twenty-year-old replied.

‘*Tongpan!* You are the one I want!’ he snapped, looking at a piece of paper in his hand.

‘No,’ replied the younger brother, ‘you asked for *Tongpoon*, my father.’

‘*Tongpan!* *Tongpoon!* It’s the same name! He is the one!’

‘No, no my father really is *Tongpoon*. My family called me Tongpan because I look like him.’

‘I don’t believe you, and even if it’s true, it’s of no consequence. I’m not driving all the way out here again after some miserable, worthless drug dealer. If you’re his son, you’ll do well enough.’

‘Do? Do for what?’ asked the elder brother.

‘*Tongpoon* was warned to stop dealing,’ the stranger snarled, ‘but he took no notice.’ He took a step closer to Tongpan, and pulled a pistol from his trouser pocket.

The younger youth immediately stepped in front of his brother. ‘No! Don’t do it! I beg you! He is not *Tongpoon*, I swear it!’

‘I told you, I don’t care – now, move out of the way!’

‘No! No! It’s not right!’ screamed the youth as he tried to shield his brother from the stranger.

‘Move!’ shouted the stranger.

The two youths stood motionless.

Without hesitation, the man pointed the gun at the younger brother's head and pulled the trigger, and the youth collapsed in front of him. He then turned to the older brother who had been cowering nervously behind. Once more the gun exploded and the second youth fell down, on top of his brother.

Their task accomplished, the three visitors climbed back into the pickup, relishing the cool air that blew onto their dripping, sweat-stained clothes as the engine roared into life. They slowly made their way out of the village, along the rutted track that led back to Khon Kaen.

The man with the gun was called *Bunchit*. He was also known by another name: along with others, he was known in these parts as “*Madju-Raj*, The Messenger of Death”.

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From a vantage point on his porch, out of sight of the gunmen, *Sang Yun*'s village headman had watched the two lads being gunned down. He was shocked to be so close to the taking of innocent lives, but it hadn't really surprised him. He knew that these extra-judicial killings were becoming more and more common throughout *Issan*, as the north eastern part of Thailand was known.

Hundreds, possibly thousands of men, many of them innocent, had been rounded up and summarily killed by execution squads, under the orders of no less a personage than their beloved prime minister. It was all part of a populist political drive to rid the country of drugs and drug dealers; but like so many of the government policies, not only was this ruthless policy a crime against democracy and basic human rights, it was also doomed to failure.

He walked slowly over to where the two bodies lay and stared sadly down at them.

He knew that there probably hadn't been much of a future for those two half-starved and penniless young men. But whatever humble aspirations they may have nurtured, were ruthlessly cut short on that hot, torpid day in May, as their bodies lay intertwined in the last throes of an ugly death, and their meagre blood seeped slowly into the hard, unforgiving earth

PART ONE

Chapter One

Perry had almost finished applying the first coat of paint to his bedroom wall on a hot, late September afternoon, when he was disturbed by a loud rap at the front door. ‘Who the hell can this be in the middle of the afternoon?’ he muttered to himself irritably, as he climbed down the stepladder that straddled the back wall. ‘I’ll never get this damn decorating finished!’ He very nearly walked straight into a large pot of yellow paint that had been carelessly placed in the middle of the floor, when he heard yet another knock on the door. This time, he yelled back at the top of his voice,

‘Who’s there? What is it?’

‘It’s me, Bert!’ was the booming, baritone reply.

‘Oh, Bert. Well come on in then, the front doors open.’

‘Where are you?’

‘I’m in here, painting my bedroom.’

The towering, bulky figure of Bert put his head around the bedroom door. ‘More like you’re painting yourself. Look at you; you’re covered in yellow paint – from head to foot!’

‘Yes, I know. I’m hopeless at this painting lark.’

‘You can say that again, what a mess! It doesn’t look like you’ll ever get it finished?’

‘If you didn’t keep disturbing me, I might have got the bedroom done days ago,’ Perry complained with a smile, as he led Bert back through his cottage to his tiny kitchen.

He was actually pleased to see Bert. The painting seemed to go on forever, and he hated doing it; but he had no choice, as there was simply no spare cash to pay for expensive decorators. But the longer he left it, the worse it would get and he needed to protect his investment. The plain fact was that most of his life savings were sunk into the property and he really needed to get on with his work, but couldn't resist the temptation to take and break. Good old Bert would bring some light relief on a hot and very trying afternoon.

Bert's home was a quarter of a mile "upstream" on the other side of the brook that dissected the village. At six foot four, he was a good two inches taller than Perry, and considerably heavier, with an upright stature that belied his seventy-two years of age. Perry had become friendly with Bert almost from the first day he had moved to Fawnhope, after they had met at the Royal Oak, a charming, three hundred-year-old public house which served the village and the surrounding locality.

Bert had lived in a pretty bungalow near the top end of the village with his wife since his retirement, some seven years ago and Perry had soon realised that the elderly man's friendship was worth fostering. Not only did he seem to know everyone and their business in Fawnhope, but he was also head of the local "neighbourhood watch". He claimed to have a direct line to one of the senior officers at the local police station, which was located in the nearby market town of Ousby; and you never knew when an aspiring author, like Perry, might find that kind of contact useful.

Bert's wife, Mabel, was also a useful source of local gossip as she was a prominent member of Fawnhope's branch of the Women's Institute. Through her, Perry had started to become acquainted with the scandals and affairs that infiltrated even this serene corner of England's "green and pleasant land". Perry particularly looked forward to the occasions when Mabel would join the two of them in the Royal Oak, after her weekly "WI" meetings at the village hall. The two sprightly pensioners had made Perry feel so welcome in his new surroundings that he had taken an instant liking to the warm hearted and generous Mabel, and to Bert, her bombastic but amiable husband.

'Why don't you get Ron Jackson down the road to do the decoration for you? If you pay him cash, there'll be no VAT and I'm sure he'll do you a

good job. You'll never finish this yourself at the rate you're going.' Bert suggested.

'No way, Bert. I just can't afford it – I've got precious little savings left as it is. It'll all get done one of these days. Now, how about a cold beer? I think I might have a couple of Buds left in the fridge.'

'That's what I like to hear. And if you're especially nice, I'll give you a bit of good news.'

Perry grabbed the last two beers from his fridge and the pair moved out onto the small patio in Perry's back garden, where they slumped into a couple of dusty garden chairs.

'Good news? What's happened? A new recruit for your neighbourhood watch?' Perry asked.

'No, nothing like that. It's an invitation.'

Perry had dined at Bert and Mabel's house on a number of occasions, and he was truly appreciative. Mabel was an excellent cook of English fare, and as the culinary arts weren't high on Perry's rather pathetic list of talents, he always enjoyed the evenings immensely. So it was with an air of genuine regret that Perry told his friend, 'I'm awfully sorry Bert, but unfortunately I'm not free tonight. I have a prior commitment. I've promised to attend a meeting of the local "author's society" in Kettering.'

'We're not inviting you to our house!' Bert retorted. 'You've already had enough freebies from us. It's from the young lady next door. Your sweetheart.'

Perry blushed. 'Don't be silly, Sunny's not my... sweetheart... I hardly know her. But – but... what's this invitation all about? When is it? Tonight? Well...I suppose ...I might be able to cancel my other arrangements...'

'Hang on there – not so fast. So, you're happy to cancel out your "authors meeting" for Sunny, but not for Mabel and me. Our food's not good enough eh?'

'No Bert, I didn't mean that.'

‘I know what you meant,’ he replied with a knowing smile. ‘Don’t worry, it’s not tonight, it’s next Saturday. Sunny’s having a house warming, and thanks to your good mate Bert here, I’ve managed to wangle you an invitation.’

‘A house warming? I don’t understand, I thought she already had that last month?’

‘For a lad with a public school education, you don’t learn much do you? Last month was the house *blessing*; now she’s having the house *warming*.’

‘I’m sorry, I’m lost,’ Perry mumbled.

‘The shindig that she laid on last month was a ceremony: to bless the house and ward off evil spirits. It was a religious ceremony; and all the people there, except for us, were Thai. They were Sunny’s Thai friends from around England. This time it’s going to be a proper, western style house warming – for us barbarians. Most of the neighbours in Fawnhope have been invited, and even some of Sunny’s English friends from London, where she used to live. And if it wasn’t for me, you’d be missing out. I had to remind her about you – several times - otherwise you’d be pining at home alone; while we were all up the road, making merry, and tucking into all that delicious Thai food.’

Perry looked so downcast that Bert took pity on him. He slapped him on the shoulders, and said, ‘Come on, I’m just winding you up. Sunny popped round this morning to invite me and the wife, and when I told her I would be dropping by your place this afternoon, she asked me to pass on her invitation for you to come as well.’

Perry looked immediately relieved. ‘Well... er... it’s not as though I don’t know her...’ he stammered with obvious embarrassment.

‘Take it easy Perry, you don’t have to pretend to me. I know you fancy her,’ Bert said as he drained his can of beer.

‘Well – I...er... mean she is...er...rather pretty...but really...what chance do I stand with a girl like that? Yes, I admit I am attracted, but it’s all just a fanciful dream...isn’t it? Don’t you think so Bert?’

‘I wouldn’t know Perry, me lad. All I know, is if you fancy her, there’s only one way to find out if she likes you.’

‘Oh? What’s that then?’

‘Ask her, of course, you dolt.’

‘Oh no! I could never do anything like that – it would be far too embarrassing.’

Bert shook his head in despair. ‘Well, as you seem to have run out of beer, I’d better be going. If I don’t see you before, I’ll see you on Saturday evening, at the party.’

‘OK Bert, and thanks for passing on the invitation.’

‘Think nothing of it – you know me –always willing to help my poor lovesick neighbour. Now don’t give me that hangdog look again. You know I don’t really mean it; but I just can’t resist winding you up,’ he said with a broad grin. ‘Get that painting finished – your house looks like a bloody building site!’

Bert departed by the front door, leaving Perry once again to his own devices. ‘Well, I *should* climb back up that ladder and finish that damn bedroom wall,’ he told himself, without much conviction. ‘But it’s so pleasant, just sitting here in the hot sun.’

He remained seated on his small patio and sipped on the remains of his beer. It was all too easy to slip into one of his customary afternoon naps. ‘That Bert is a wind up merchant, and no mistake,’ he thought dreamily. ‘But it’s good news about the party at Sunny’s. I wonder what she really thinks of me.’

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Peregrine Woodthorne had lived in the village of Fawnhope for three years, but he still felt that he was very much a “new boy”. Despite this, he had found the locals surprisingly friendly, in this sleepy Northamptonshire village, with a population of precisely three hundred and nine,.

His move to Fawnhope was his second attempt to locate a peaceful setting which may be conducive to embarking on a new career as a writer.

He had come into a modest inheritance, arising out of a personal tragedy some four years previously, and had decided to seek solace in the countryside. But the purchase of a tiny thatched cottage in East Sussex, into which he had thrown his entire assets, had not exactly turned out to be the beginning of the new dream life to which he had aspired. He had been obliged to continue commuting to his tedious bank job in the city, as even with his unexpected inheritance, he still had a sizeable mortgage to service. He had been hoping to become financially independent and cease the daily grind to his dead-end job but his first literary efforts were yet to find a publisher.

And then there were his new East Sussex neighbours. It had soon become apparent that even village residents of over ten years standing were still regarded as outsiders, and Perry would consider himself lucky if he received so much as a single nod of greeting during his daily walk to and from the local rail station. The situation became even more depressing when he realised that social standings in his village were determined by the type of car parked in the driveway and even on the size of the swimming pool in the back garden.

Poor Perry, with his rusting, twenty year old Ford Capri and without so much as a bird bath on his “postage stamp” lawn, seemed to be a virtual pariah in an area where the local populace was composed largely of arrogant, contemptuous stockbrokers, merchant bankers and insurance millionaires.

After a spending a miserable and isolated twelve months in his new home, Perry came to terms with the reality of his new situation. He had exchanged his anonymous and lonely bedsit in the east end of London, for an equally lonely, but overpriced cottage that was situated in the middle of a neighbourhood that was largely made up of supercilious and hypocritical snobs.

This realisation led to the difficult and brave decision to cut his losses, to sell up and move out of the traffic-infested southeast for good. Rising house prices had enabled him to realise a small profit on the sale of his East Sussex home, and he bought a run down, but habitable mid-terraced cottage in the charming Northamptonshire village of Fawnhope. There was no mortgage, which was just as well, as he was now much too far away from London to continue his daily commute.

It was all so refreshingly different up here in the East Midlands. He had been made welcome from the first day he had moved in, and no one seemed to care what car he owned. Indeed if anything, the rule of thumb in Fawnhope seemed to be that the richer you were, the more humble was your means of transport. It was almost inverse snobbery, but for Perry, with his beloved Ford Capri, it suited him just fine

This time, he was sure he had made the right move. A national magazine had recently agreed to publish one of his articles, and as he no longer had a mortgage to service, he was hopeful he could build on this modest achievement, and somehow scratch out a new living as a writer.

He thought that Fawnhope was every bit as picturesque as the village he had left behind in East Sussex. A narrow winding brook meandered down the length the village, dividing the main thoroughfare, and creating havoc with the postal authorities, as the road bore no name. Vast weeping willows, towering elms, sycamores and horse chestnuts bordered either side of the brook, and a series of freshly painted white bridges criss-crossed the water, enabling the people of Fawnhope go about their daily lives.

Half way along Fawnhope's nameless road was a ford, which was navigable for most of the year, but occasionally, a heavy rain storm would force all but the most foolhardy of drivers to take an alternative crossing, via one of the two serviceable road bridges. A colony of ducks, usually to be found paddling around in the ford's environs, completed the idyllic village setting.

Perry had just turned thirty-five, and at six feet two, he was a tall, slightly imposing figure. He knew that he could benefit from the loss a few pounds in weight, especially from his midriff, which was starting to show the signs of an over indulgence of "real ale" at the local hostelry. He had a full head of brown - almost blond - thick wavy hair, and while some might say he had rugged good looks, the reality was that his nose was a mite too large, and his lips were a little too thin to justify such a flattering description.

Although possessing a reasonably confident demeanour - the result of a minor public school education - he always felt slightly uncomfortable amongst women, particularly those of his own generation. This was undoubtedly due to the prolonged effects of enforced separation from girls during his boarding school years - something from which he had never

quite recovered. Perry's shyness would also explain why, even though he was well past the age when most of his contemporaries had settled down with families, he was still searching for the one lasting relationship which would transform his life.

He reflected ruefully that up to now, he had experienced little in the way of excitement or indeed, good fortune in his life. His career as a banker in the city had never really taken off, and now, after more than a year of trying, he had made little headway as a writer. Hardest of all, was his dismal record with the opposite sex. He was sufficiently honest with himself to accept that he wasn't blessed with natural good looks, and given his excruciating shyness, he was fast reaching the conclusion that he would be condemned to a life of eternal bachelor-hood.

Since his move to Fawnhope, he sensed that he was approaching an important crossroads in his life. Bert's new next door neighbour, Suneenart - Sunny - had bought her bungalow a year ago, but for the nine months following her purchase, the property had remained unoccupied; except that is, for an occasional overnight stay by the new owner, who was supervising the refurbishment and the construction of a new extension.

Perry had first noticed the slim, dark haired oriental beauty from a distance, and had been immediately captivated. He had learned from Bert that his new neighbour was indeed a very beautiful Thai woman in her early thirties and as far as he could tell, she had no romantic entanglements. Perry was greatly encouraged by this piece of intelligence, but he still fretted that somewhere along the line there must be a boyfriend who would one day appear – probably when Sunny eventually moved in - and then all his hopes would be dashed once again. Besides, what chance would he stand with such a beauty? Given his miserable record with women, he would be lucky if she so much as deigned to acknowledge his existence.

He became obsessed with getting a rare glimpse of Sunny during her sporadic visits before she took up permanent residence, and he dreaded the day when she would arrive in the village with some handsome young man in tow. He had yet to be properly introduced to her, so whenever he spotted her taking one of her occasional wanders through the village, he had made a point of rushing out of his cottage and walking nonchalantly past, offering a friendly nod of greeting.

On such occasions, he found that everything that she had appeared to be from afar was more than confirmed when he saw her at close quarters. She certainly was an exquisite creature: she had a perfectly formed, slightly oval face, with an unusually pale and unblemished complexion, and he thought that her petite Asian figure was incredibly alluring. She was always immaculately dressed - whether it was in one of her close fitting pastel tops, with a matching, short skirt, that showed her perfectly shaped, slender legs off to perfection - or in one of her eastern style sarongs, which seemed to fit her oriental figure like a glove. But most rewarding of all was the return smile that seemed to light up her whole being, whenever Perry successfully attracted her attention.

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He had truly thought that his destiny was on an upward spiral when soon after Sunny had finally made Fawnhope her home, he received a formal written invitation to her “house blessing”. He hadn’t a clue what a “house blessing” may entail, but he assumed that it must be some kind of house welcoming party, although the unusual time of nine in the morning did have him scratching his head.