

South East Asia

*A tale of
drugs and
debauchery!*

Bryce W James

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Special thanks

To all those who allowed me to include them in this puzzled recollection from my mind.

And also those who I've never met, yet after reading, In Brazil you would say, 'Universo Paralello', sent me a thank you and encouraged me to continue with my dream.

Jack Brookes

Berend Booms

Oren Robinson

Nikita Gonchar

Kate Lee – The Whimsical Wanderer

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One night in Bangkok – What’s love got to do with it?

Now I want you to go on YouTube, or some other site and play, ‘One night in Bangkok’. You know the song, ‘One night in Bangkok and the world’s your oyster’, from the Chess stage show. Now do that and come back to the story.

Good, done? The reason for this is I want to try and capture the excitement and set the mood for what it’s like to have a ticket to the Wild City, the City of Excess, the City of Wonder. The one that’s been the first stop in a hundred thousand dreams. So here we go....

It was February of two thousand and seven and back in London it was cold, dark and snowing. I had been wrapped in my jacket, gloves, woolly scarf and woolly hat, thermal socks, thermal underwear, the lot. In my backpack I had one pair of shorts and two t-shirts. Nothing else apart from the big stash of medical supplies it takes to keep my body from coming out in a rash, my stomach not to bleed and the Asthma inhalers so I can breathe.

When the plane landed in that First Stop City, I stepped out into the stifling, thick ooze of atmosphere that envelopes you the moment you disembark in Bangkok. Check out was easy too, although yes a little crowded. I’d been here before and knew the routine, so I exited on the right level, lit a smoke, went to the taxi rank and bartered over the cost of my cab. I knew the price, four hundred baht to Khao San Road. (Just as a note, the Baht was seventy two to the Pound, exchange rates were good.) I’d even managed to have my driver avoid the toll roads, before he dropped me off outside the Burger King at the opposite end of Khao San Road from the Gullivers’ bar. I checked into a place about half way down, just opposite the Sawadee hotel. It was down an alley, behind a great little cafe and above a bar with a pool table. It had a wide staircase of about ten steps leading up to the reception, and at the time, cost one hundred and fifty baht a night for your own room with no windows, no air con, no TV but did come with a double bed and all the Cockroaches you might want. It was sweet. It was me all over.

The day was a clenching thirty odd degrees maybe even forty knowing Bangkok, and I knew I would no longer have need or indeed have space in my backpack for my winter clothes. So I threw them all under my bed, a gift for the cleaners, and made my way down stairs into the market soup that is Khao San Road. I was gonna’ buy a couple of sleeveless singlets and sun glasses, no more winter supplies for me, not for a while anyway.

Many people have different opinions of Khao San Road but I love it. Yes if you’re a seasoned traveller and are used to being in foreign countries it can seem a tourist trap, but for the many who are just starting out, this little space port scene from Star Wars is the perfect introduction to the Third World. Firstly, as a lot of writers say when describing a rundown trap of a city that can be hard to leave, there’s the smell. Next there’s the bartering over nearly fuckin’ everything, then there’s the locals, ‘Hey you wanna’ go to Ping Pong Show? Boom, Boom? What you want to see? The Emerald Buddha?’ All of it, it’s great. You’re there, it’s hot, there’s manic shopping, street stalls selling food, and people everywhere. The place is crowded, from the get go you’re in a different world. The greatest thing is you’re on holiday in a foreign land and everyone else back home is at work.

I bought a black singlet with the monkey god Hanuman holding a sword and another one with Beer Laos on it. I found the phattest sunglasses I could find, and a pair of long shorts with loads of pockets that could be zipped and buttoned shut so I could keep my shit on me safe. The reason I was in Bangkok was because I’d heard,

at the time, it was the easiest way to get to Cambodia. My brother and other friends had told me all about it. This travel magazine in London had covered a story about these temples called Angkor Wat, I wanted to get high and go there. In the pictures I had seen there were giant trees that looked like they're melting down the side of the ruins, it's hard to explain. Check it out on Google. I'd also heard you could shoot guns in Cambodia and smoke pot on the streets. Not like Bangkok where if you're caught with a spliff life as you know it is going to be completely different, unless of course you've got a few grand handy in the bank. There were also the infamous Killing Fields to see. This was going to be off the trail, a real adventure, somewhere that all the tourists to Thailand don't usually go.

I found a travel agent just across the street from where I was staying, and for one thousand baht bought a one way bus ticket to the town Siem Reap in the north of Cambodia where the temples are, for the next morning at eight am; Visas obtainable on the border.

Everything was done, all I had to do was stash my ticket away and 'Hit the piss,' as they say. That's when I found the satchel of liquid Viagra. Where had that come from? Oh well I'd get a beer from the busy bar in the middle of Khao San with the Pool table, call my brother Scott to let him know I'd landed safely and what my plans were. And from there, anything was possible.

One of the common, things with Thailand is the casual exploitation of women in the work place; by mid afternoon there are always loads of girls in Heineken and Tiger Beer outfits, outside each bar. But what a job to score in a country where the people in general, are over worked and under paid. Thailand's one of the world's biggest producers of rice, now that's a hard day's graft, out in the baking Asian sun up to your knees in dirty water whilst on the watch out for all sorts of bugs and snakes for a meagre wage. All these girls have gotta' do is just stand there, look good, slutty but not cheap and try and convince people to drink their boss's beer. It's gotta' be better than pickin' the rice, workin' in the factory or bein' on ya' back.

The pub was all open air, if you can call that gluey atmosphere, air, and it was full of people. So I ordered a beer and some food and called my bro.

'Yeah I made it sweet as man, I'm sittin' on Khao San with a big cold beer in my hand, a toasted sandwich on the way, and hey I found some liquid Viagra in my bag, did you put it there?'

'Ha, ha, yeah bro, it's ya' welcome to Bangkok, now go and have a good fuckin' time present. So all's sorted yeah? You're headin' to Angkor Wat tomorrow? Cool as, send me an email when ya' get there so we know where you're stayin' and have a fuckin' good time mate. Fuck I wish I was there with ya!'

'How's the weather in London?' I asked, knowing full well. He, he, he, he.

'Dark and snowing! Waddaya' think?'

He, he, he.

'Now don't hesitate, take that Viagra right now while I'm on the phone to ya' and then ya' dedicated man. Ya' gotta go and have a dirty night bro.'

Rip, tear, squeeze, gulp. 'Done bro, See ya' on the other side.'

'Yeah cool. Send us a text in the morning so we know you've survived and have a good one. Fuck I wish I was there with you.'

So that was it, I'd done it. The Viagra was pineapple flavoured and I'd washed that down with my ever increasing in temperature beer and ate my bacon sandwich.

I know, ya' must be thinking how could you do it? How? But hey I've given up eating fiery Asian food. I'd tried to prepare myself for it last time I was there, but the

first meal I ordered was a spicy squid salad, and it was so hot my ass never forgave me, so I haven't bothered with Asian food since.

I sunk another beer, talked shit to some fulla' while his girlfriend had dreadlocks sown into her hair and made my decision. Sex tourism it was.

One of the secrets of Bangkok is that the Tuk Tuks are nearly double the price of the air conditioned cabs. All the tourists see cabs and think 'Hey that must be fuckin' expensive,' but it's not, costs way less as long as you make sure they put the meter on. It is a Third World country don't forget and these Tuk Tuk's are just for us tourists or 'Farangs' as the Thai's affectionately or sometimes not so affectionately call us. It's the same as the Brazilians' with 'Gringo'.

So I walked up towards the Burger King, ignored the Tuk Tuk drivers and the guy selling deep fried grasshoppers, jumped in a cab and said, 'Boom Boom boss.'

'You wan' go Boom Boom?' he yelled back, sticking a finger through the circle he'd made with the thumb and fore finger of the other hand.

'Yes, Boom Boom.' Now don't get me wrong here, it's not like I'd done this a thousand times, or even a couple of times but hey, I was in Bangkok on my own with a hard on, thanks to my blessed brother's Viagra, and besides a million other men had done it before me. Fuck it, I wanted adventure and new experiences, things I'd never done before. That's why I was here, that's the *real* reason why I was going to Cambodia, the secret one. No, not the sex trade. For excitement, for something different, for the *drugs*, or more specific; for opium. I'd never done Opium, I'd done a lot of other stuff in my time, but never Opium so I was on a holiday to somewhere exotic where I could try something new and see what all the fuss was about. To live the legend that Opium is in our society. Opium was done by everybody in the old days, I'm pretty sure Queen Victoria started a war in China over it at some point and hey, I wanted to give it a go. So that too was my mission, go to Cambodia see the temples, smoke some Opium, smoke some Pot, go to Vietnam, then come back and meet my friend Huey on Koh Tao.

The traffic isn't as bad as you'd expect in Bangkok and after a short journey my man brought me to some dwelling that towered off into the sky and said, 'Here my friend, you wan' Boom Boom, come wi' me.'

So he with greasy cap on and buckled smile, led me up some steps in the twilight of that humid afternoon sun, and ushered me up to what looked like the front doors of a posh hotel.

'Here you go, Boom Boom.'

I paid the few hundred baht the meter said, and threw in a bit extra to him for bringing me here. He left me with a well suited brawny lookin' local standing outside a dark door made of glass.

'Welcome sir, won't you come in?' in almost perfect English.

The tinted gleaming heavy door swung open and I was led into a dim room with thick red carpet and mirrors on the ceiling. To my right was a little reception desk and directly before me was a window framed with all the golden carved excesses you would expect on a famous work of art hanging in the Tate. This picture though, was made up of about eighteen Thai women dressed in all sorts of garb. One for every occasion, there was the secretary, the slut, the beefy one and the burlesque one, the rabbit ears and the stylish. They all had different features, different looks, this one with a round face, that with one a flat nose. I was a bit out of my depth here, and had been placed on one of four bar stools. There were no arm chairs or anything like that, just the line of bar stools in front of a giant window. So I dunno', what do you do in this situation? You've come this far, can't bottle it and leave. So, I looked at the girls,

tried to see one who looked confident, beautiful and strong, and with a dry mouth pointed and said, 'That one there please in the red evening gown.' There she was, not dressed down, or slutty, dressed nicely with a beautiful smile and deep dark eyes. They scooped her out of that exotic fish tank and led her over to me. She took my hand and gave me a soft kiss on the cheek.

'That'll be three and half thousand baht for the next hour and five hundred for me,' the guy behind the reception desk said.

Four grand? I thought this shit was like twenty pounds a night? Oh well, I'd come this far.

'Sweet as, and I'll have a bottle of Sang som, a Coke, and some ice too please.'

'Come, I'll take you.' It was her first words and they were as soft and silky as her kiss had been. Like the guy on the door my hostess spoke almost perfect English, but with that smooth lilt of the Orient woven into it.

Still with one hand in mine and the other around the elbow on the same arm she led me outside and around the corner to a Seven-Eleven store.

'Would you like anything?' I offered.

'No I'm fine sank you.' looking up at me with those deep dark eyes, before another tender kiss, this time just on the bottom lip.

She took me upstairs to a room with a circular bath built big enough for a party, and a circular bed, that too I guess built for a party. There was also a large air mattress on the floor beside the bath.

She took the Rum, and pulled a bucket of ice from the fridge, 'Please, take off your clothes while I make you a drink.'

I undressed feeling a bit nervous about the whole scenario, but thanked God that the Viagra had at least given me a raging erection.

A smile crossed her face, 'Well doesn't look like you've had too much alcohol already tonight.'

She ran the bath, checking the temperature of the water as it filled. 'Come here,' she said, 'I want you to undress me now.' She turned around and lifted her long black hair across her shoulders, 'Please help me with my zip.'

I took a mouthful of my drink and with hands shivering I pulled the zip down to her waist. She looked over her shoulder, smiled again and turned to face me, never letting go of my gaze. She had no bra on and her breasts were shaped like tear drops with dark brown nipples.

'Now take off my dress,' she said with a stroke of my cock and once more that enticing smile. As I slid her dress down to her ankles, her smooth, sweet, shavin' pussy was right in front of my face, and she brushed herself against my cheek.

'Lie down on the air mattress.'

I followed this gentle order too. Again she tested the temperature of the water. 'First I give you massage, next I give you bath and then I give you me, Ok?'

Anything you say. 'Ok.'

'Start on your stomach.'

I tried to lie that way down but my hard on was sticking out like the mast on a ship. I shuffled about for a second trying to tuck it in somewhere.

Throwing me a reprieve she giggled, 'Ok, we start with you on your back,' then pulled out a bottle of menthol smelling oil and covered me with it, spreading it all over, adding a couple of smooth strokes to my penis at the same time. She rubbed my chest and my shoulders, always looking at me in the eyes, dressed only in that soft seductive smile, occasionally passing me my drink, which she would refill when required.

‘So why you pick me?’ she asked.

‘You were the most beautiful one there, and you looked the most natural, comfortable. It was an easy choice, the others seemed more; fake or forced in either the way they dressed or their makeup. You just seemed to have a touch more class.’ I could feel the warmth from inside her on my thigh and swallowed as for the first time during the massage she reached down and took me in her hands. It was only for a few seconds, still she never took her eyes from mine, still, she had that smile.

‘You can call me Mai Lee. You are my first customer of the night. I’m glad it’s a young, strong, hard man like you. Later it will be all old men. Indians are the worst, verly demanding. Commanding do this, do that. You let me do it my way, I like you.’ Another soft stoke, a rub of her hips on my thigh. ‘It is ok if we kiss, I am clean they test us, this is an expensive place, and you are my first customer of tonight, my mouth is fresh, try.’ Placing both arms around my neck, leaning forward, her B cup breasts, firm, touched my chest, her eyes still looking deep into me. She finally closed them and gently sucked on my bottom lip. A stroke of her tongue, to part my mouth, then a light touch of my top lip before our tongues met and caressed.

We separated and she drew back, another light touch of me. She started to slide around over my body, using her whole self to massage me before; ‘I think it is time for your bath.’ testing the temperature of the water once more, then adding a little cold.

The bath was foamy and the temperature perfect. I lowered myself in, careful not to slip because of the Tiger balm scented oil covering me. Mai Lee spent a few moments scrubbing down the mattress with some of the water from the bath and pushed it up against the wall to drain. She passed my drink and sat behind me on the wide ledge, then took a large clean dry sponge from the little cupboard beside us and with a kiss on my forehead started to clean the oil from my skin. She stayed behind for most of the time, her breasts bumping against the side of my head every now and then. After a short while she climbed in the bath with me, tying her hair up into a loose but firmly fixed bun. Mai Lee took each of my legs and rubbed them down from the top to the bottom. Taking each toe individually she clicked it between her fingers. The whole time she kept passing my drink and refilling it, topping up the ice from the silver bucket with little tongs.

She took my drink out of my hands, put both of hers beneath the water and with one, reached beneath me and began to massage my balls, the other slid up and down my iron like shaft. I became lost in those deep dark eyes and nearly drowned in that full lipped smile.

‘I think we should get out of the bath,’ she said, ‘and onto the bed before you become too happy. Ok?’

Anything you say, ‘Ok’

She stood in the bath in front of me, legs either side of mine, the water running off her glistened in the dim light. Her body was perfectly formed, her nipples hard like my cock and her eyes entrancing mine. Mai Lee reached out a hand and helped me step out of the tub, then took a towel and began to dry me off.

‘Just one second,’ she said almost apologetically as she towelled herself before letting her hair down again to sit over one shoulder and cover her left breast. My drink was filled again and I was led to the round bed with its purple velvet covers. She sat down and produced some condoms from under a pillow, opening one and placing it on the end of my tip before rolling it down to the base in one smooth motion with her mouth. She took my hips in her hands and pulled me towards her as she eased further back on to the bed. I put a knee under each of her thighs to support her as I neared. I

was just outside her; she was smiling that smile and guided me the rest of the way in. Inside she was like satin, and warm. I moved closer to her and we kissed on the lips once more before I kissed each of those wondrous eyes, then moved down to her neck, biting and sucking on the way. Together we moved as one, slowly getting a feel for each other. With my lips I circled round her breasts, teased her for a minute, me this time giving that gentle smile before kissing her right nipple and giving it a few flicks of my tongue then taking it between my teeth, causing her to let out a warm gasp and to take the back of my head in her hands and pull me deeper into her, rolling her hips at the same time.

We stayed in that position for a while before she rolled me onto my back and mounted me, riding me with her hands clenched in her hair as I teased and rubbed her breasts and belly. All the booze had filled my bladder and with Mai Lee on top, the need for the loo became an obsession.

'I need to go to the toilet,' I let out, and was replied with a shocked look, 'Oh, now? I am enjoying myself so much.'

'I'm sorry,' I whispered, 'but I really have too.' I received a mild slap across the face and a giggle.

'Ok, but come back soon, the toilet is the last door down the hall on your left.'

The condom was a struggle to remove because I was still like a rock but together we managed it, and I made my way down the corridor. Just outside the toilet door a young guy was being led up the staircase by the Secretary and I high fived him as they passed.

I had to stand about five feet back from the bowl I was still so stiff from the Viagra, I emptied myself and made my way back to the room, Mai Lee removing a pillow from on top of her as I shut the door.

'Come,' she said as she moved onto her hands and knees, 'Come and take me.' arching her back down, and pulling her hair over her shoulder to expose the supple flesh of her neck. I crawled onto the bed behind her. Entering my mistress once more, the tenderness of her gripped me all around, her heat covered me entirely, and once again we moved together, finding a natural pace, and momentum. I reached around, cupping one of her breasts, taking the nipple between my thumb and finger, twisting and squeezing, adapting to which ever she seemed to enjoy more. I took her hips in both hands again and picked up the pace, the impact between us ever increasing. Reaching around again, this time I searched for the top of Mai Lee's pussy and with kindness began to rub the small bump between the edges of her lips. A moan escaped her, and she responded in-kind, supporting herself on one hand the other stretching below her to take my balls and to start to rub there. Never losing our rhythm she worked her hand towards the back reaching the point between them and my ass. Here she firmed the touch and I felt myself tipping over the edge. Electric volts shocked through my body, setting every receptor off in a wave of euphoria so strong I let a cry of my own. My sperm jetted out to fill the condom and I collapsed onto her, our sweat mingling while I breathed in the scent of her hair, enjoying those few moments after. Then rolling off, I reached for my drink and for my cigarettes, Mai Lee pulled a lighter out from somewhere and lit it for me.

'Oh my God, that was amazing, you were amazing.' I gasped in between long drawn out breaths, my heart racing like I'd run the Marathon. 'Thank you so much.'

'No, you were amazing,' Mai Lee replied, 'Men never think to please me too, they are always all so selfish. I enjoy myself too. Ka poon kap,' she purred putting her hands together almost like we would in prayer, in the Thai way of showing politeness.

You must dress now, your time finish half an hour ago but I was enjoying you so much I let you stay. It is not very often.'

She pulled open her bag and pulled out a scrap of paper and a pen, writing out her name and a number. 'This is my personal phone number, I like you, maybe you could take me out sometime. I can take a night off if you give me notice. I not charge you, I like you.'

I pulled out my wallet and as I opened it Mai Lee reached forward and drew a note out. It was an American fifty dollars I kept in there for bribery purposes if needed. 'I can keep this?'

Still a hooker eh? 'Well I dunno' fifty dollars, I could stay for another hour for that.' I must have had pretty gutted look on my face, I felt it, the spell cast over me had been broken by this one act. To her credit though Mai Lee, my temporary lover, my sensuous and skilled teacher, my whore, placed the note back in my still open wallet and took a Thousand baht one instead.

I washed again quickly, put on my shorts, singlet and shoes then made my way down stairs, near empty bottle of Sang som in my hand, and a smoke in my mouth.

'You have fun?' the guy from reception beamed. 'You want taxi, they are parked outside. The gentleman on the door will call one for you'

'Oh yeah, yes I did, and a taxi would be great.'

He let out an unintelligible expletive, to my 'Farang' ears anyway and as I approached the door, our guardian opened it and led me down the steps to a waiting cab.

'You enjoy Boom Boom.' The driver asked in a high pitched tone, before saying, 'Where to?'

'Khao San Road please boss. I need a beer!'

He dropped me off at the Burger King end again, right by the guy selling grass hoppers, scorpions and other deep fried delicacies. I pulled out my phone, plugged in my head phones, put on my favourite tune, 'Low' by a band called Cracker, followed by the Doors and did a couple of laps of Khao San before a night at Gullivers ensued. Much later I stumbled back to my room and had the pleasure of having to listen to some Aussie cunt in the space next door abusing some poor local girl because she'd agreed on the street to let him, and to quote his exact words, 'Do anal for three thousand baht.' Not surprisingly now he'd already handed over the cash, she now wouldn't let him. He was pissed off because she wanted more. They started yelling at each other and she refused to leave without more doe. 'More money? I'm not giving you more bloody money!'

I yelled at them both to, 'Shut the fuck up.' and, 'It was your fuckin' fault mate! People are trying to sleep!' He went down stairs and got the guy from reception, they eventually talked her out of the place. She was cursing and threatening to have all of us beaten up. I pulled out my knife and slept with it in my hand; my head spinning in the dark from being so drunk, with sweat streaming off me from the oppressive heat and tried not be sick on myself.

All the while my fan clattered away, attached to the wall above.

I was glad my experience had been a little different than my neighbour's. Bangkok eh? She's one hell of a city.

Bryce W James

One night in Bangkok and the world's your oyster
The bars are temples but the pearls ain't free
You'll find a God in every golden cloister
A little flesh, a little history
I can feel an angel sliding up to me

One night in Bangkok makes a hard man humble
Not much between despair and ecstasy
One night in Bangkok and the tough guys tumble
Can't be too careful with your company
I can feel the devil walking next to me

The scam bus

The cold shower peeled the crust of congealed sweat away from my aching body and throbbing head. Still drunk from the last night's adventures there was no time to lose. I checked my pockets and backpack for passports, wallet, phone, etc, and made my way down to the corner of Khao San next to Gullivers where just over the road the bus was waiting. My holiday in Cambodia was about to begin!

A group of only about fourteen of us were loaded into an air conditioned coach built for eighty, so we all got to have a pair of seats to ourselves. It was around six or so hours to the Cambodian border and from there, just over a hundred kilometres to Siem Reap where the temples are, this was going to be easy. Within minutes I was asleep again.

Later I was woken by a smiling Thai guy, who informed me that he could get our visas sorted at a restaurant/bus stop just before the border for two thousand baht. He collected my New Zealand passport and money as the bus pulled over, then disappeared into an office space at the back of the three walled building that made up the stop. The toilets were decidedly pungent and I was welcomed by a hole in the concrete floor with foot grips on either side. There was no flusher, not even a bum gun to spray your arse with, only a big blue plastic drum with a green plastic sauce pan half floating on the top like a turd that refuses to be flushed away. These squatting toilets are a shock introduction to Asian culture, but I've found after a while you sort of come to understand them. The position feels quite natural and the straightness of your core with your thighs pushing against the lower abdomen seems to help push all the shit out of your system.

Back at the food counter I looked at the various assortment of off looking gloop that must have been stewing all day in the heat, and made the decision against lunch, grabbing a Beer Chang and a packet of prawn flavoured crisps instead. After half an hour, we were herded back onto the bus, and not long after pulled up at the Thai/Cambodian border.

'Those of you,' our guide said, 'that do not have Cambodian money, which is call 'Real' please see me after you have cross' over and we will exchange it at a safe place for you. Please do not attempt to have your money change' by yourself. Without us to escort you, you may not get a fair deal. With me you are safe. Please know that there are no money machine' in Cambodia, you must withdraw all the money you wish to spend on your holiday now, and have it change' on the other side.'

Damn, that was good advice; I queued up with the others at one of the cash machines and took out the maximum of ten thousand baht, about one hundred and fifty pounds from both of my cards.

Our group was put at the back of a queue around a hundred people long and our ever smiling guide informed us that he would, for safety, hold our passports and hand them to us at the counter to be stamped. But for five hundred baht we could skip the line and go directly to the front. Only me and a Chilean doctor who was about my age took him up on the offer. The doctor, 'Andreas', from Santiago, was on a gap year through South East Asia and Indonesia. He was going to go overland pretty much all the way to Bali, and from there he would fly back home. The two of us joined only by envious looks, were ushered to the very front, and as promised were given our passports to get stamped. We were then led to the other side, the whole process having only taken a few minutes.

Here, officially in Cambodia, everything felt and looked different. There was a group of about twenty shoeless children dressed in filthy rags who came rushing over

behind a wall of ‘Mister, mister, mister.’ with their hands out. Our guide shooed them away as you would a flock of scabby pigeons.

‘You wan’ change your money?’ he asked. ‘There no money machines in Cambodia, you need to get local currency.’

‘Ok,’ me and Andreas both agreed. He then ran across the road, his flip flops scuffing the ground. Moments later with him on the back of one, three mopeds pulled up beside us.

‘Jump on, we take you to our friend, he give you the best deal.’

Andreas and I got onto the back of a moped each and were whisked off through the crowd to a series of huts not more than two hundred metres away from where we originally were. In the shack that he took us to, a big fat guy was sitting behind a glass counter with piles of money visible under it. I counted out the twenty thousand baht to him and in return he pulled out a huge wedge of notes and started to count them out to me. Five thousand, ten thousand, fifteen thousand and so on, until he reached one hundred thousand, then started again. Eventually with six of these stacks in front of me he said we were done, and with a look over both my shoulders, I started trying to fit the six hundred thousand real into my various pockets, being careful to zip and button them up. Andreas went through the same routine before we were loaded onto the bikes and transported back to border control to wait for the others. I was nearly a millionaire for the first time. It felt good to feel rich!

The two areas on either side of the border, as I have said, couldn’t have been more different. On the Thai side you had infrastructure and order in the means of, tarmac roads and painted lines in the car park, a selection of glass fronted air conditioned shops that included a Seven-Eleven with cool refrigerated drinks, a Duty Free, and banks with cash machines. Here in Cambodia, the shops that made up the market where we had had our money exchanged, were constructed with parched, non uniform pieces of wood, a light corrugated steel roof and canvas sides. The road was made up of pot holes surrounded by dry dusty earth and sharp stones.

We were sat on the corner of the ramshackle courtyard that made up the parking area. On the opposite side from where we had been dropped off were a few of the French colonial buildings these parts of South East Asia are known for. Next to us a Casino three storeys tall stood out like a wart on a witches face, the only building with actual glass windows.

An ancient lady pushing an old rusty steel cart, on old rusty wheels, with old rusty bearings that squeaked, trawled towards us over the mountainous surface.

‘You like Coke?’

Andreas pricked his ears up at this, ‘How much?’

‘One dollar for two.’

‘A dollar? I’ve got Real, how much in Real?’

‘Four thousand real. Dollar is better though.’

‘What do you mean dollar is better though? What dollar? We only have local currency.’

‘Ok then, four thousand real,’ she said, ‘but I wan’ bottle back. Don’ you give to children, ok?’

‘Ok,’ he answered, handing over a five thousand and receiving one in change.

‘She opened the top of the cart, reached into some murky ice filled water with bugs floating on the top and grabbed the drinks, removing the lids with an old rusty bottle opener tied to the cart’s old rusty handle.’

Two kids who looked poorer than Oliver Twist started eyeing us up, the closer we got to the bottom of the bottles, the closer they got to us. After we had finished, they came running up and hauled to a stop with their hands out.

‘Hey mister, can we have your bottle?’

‘No.’ And without realising I put on a slight Asian accent, ‘The lady make me plomise to give to her.’

The boy could have been no older than three or four, and who I took to be his big sister could not have been more than a few years more. She stood behind him with a shy, but intelligent look in her eyes. The Old Lady with her leathery skin, black rags, and woven flax hat, must have had senses like a cat. ‘Cause with a screech and violent wave of her hands, she came trundling back over, pushing the laden cart through the pot holes with the speed and agility of a track and field star. The kids bolted.

‘You not give them my bottles,’ she accused. ‘I tell you to give to me.’

‘Whoa, easy tiger, we got them right here.’ Collecting Andreas’s one, I passed them both back to her.

Andreas and I were left to our own devices under a plastic shade, while we spent the next two hours waiting for the others. I bought a couple of beers from The Old Lady on her next round.

First we were joined by a round Swedish girl with a dark witch’s wart just by the left side of her nose who commented, ‘Why did you give the bus guide your money? You just had to wait on the other side for us anyway.’

‘I couldn’t be bothered standing in the queue and wanted to get into Cambodia,’ I replied.

‘But it was no faster. You are waiting here for us.’

‘Well I just wanted to be in on paying a bribe to cross a border, to tell the truth. And while you’ve been stood over there in that incredible heat, fuckin’ about, me and Andreas have been chillin’ in the shade with a Coke and a beer. Besides it was only five hundred baht who gives a shit?’

‘Oh well it’s your choice I suppose,’ she answered.

The whole group eventually made it through; we only had to wait a few minutes more while some of us were ferried off to the money exchange. We were then loaded back onto our bus, ready to be driven the short distance to Siem Reap. It was great to get under way again without any more delays. We even made it all the way round the first corner from the Customs’ area before the coach pulled up and our guide said, ‘Ok, this is as far as I take you, your other bus is coming now.’

There was a big weary collective sigh; we knew this had been too easy. ‘What? Are you kidding,’ an American sounding lady piped up.

‘You must get off coach now,’ a little more firmness in his tone and the smile gone from his face.

Disgruntled but passive we got off the bus, mooing our disappointment on deaf ears. In the short time it had taken to do that, our backpacks had already been dumped in the dirt and the rubbish that was strewn about the place. The moment the last of us exited the bus, the doors were shut and with a whiiiiish of the air brakes our luxury mode of transport with its curtains, spacious seating and air conditioning, pulled off and drove the hundred or so metres back to the border.

‘What the fuck was the point of that?’ I tried to not complain but it was difficult. We were left with some poor Cambodian fulla’ who just stood there in silence while a tirade of demanding questions was thrown at him from all angles. Me, Andreas, an English guy who turned out to be a Postman, and a calm but determined looking elderly lady close to seventy, were the only ones who sat back amongst the piles of

trash and the civilisations of flies who battled each other for control of those waste product wonderlands. The odd over sized cockroach scampered around between our feet causing whoever it had chosen to befriend, to dance about like a fool in a circus. The hardship was bonding in a way.

Our new guide eventually said, 'Bus coming now, look.' extending a finger towards an approaching old and beaten up beige coloured van, that was using it's wipers to clear the dust off the windscreen. Another collective sigh of moos were released as we were led into the slaughter house. The van had room for no more than ten at the back.

I was on the second seat from the rear. Behind me was a tall French man, bald as an egg with his wife, crammed in with a young Mediterranean couple, the fulla' of which had a bongo on his lap. On the single seat to the right of me The Elderly Lady was comfortably sat with the window wide open, what little breeze there was to be had blowing on her face. Andreas, me and The Postman were crammed on a seat built for two, just in front of the French couple. The seat gave way in the middle as we sat causing the three of us to be a little closer than sweaty strangers would normally prefer. In front of us The Swedish Girl, The American Lady and the others fought for space like those on the titanic would have, once they realised there were not enough life boats. Our luggage was stacked at the front, bag on top of bag; the driver slowly disappeared behind the wall that was created.

'What about the rest of the people?' The American Lady more demanded than asked.

'We have special seat for them.' from our new guide. He pulled out some small plastic chairs that seemed more suitable for a child's play area rather than public transport.

'No way, no fuckin' way,' she squawked. 'I've had enough of this. I'm getting off. Let me out. Where's my bag? Fuck this shit. This is fuckin' joke. I want my bag!' The others shuffled over as much as they could for her, and with a huff and a strop she grabbed her things. 'You guys should get out too. This isn't what I paid two thousand baht for.' With that she turned and disappeared around the corner, heading back in the direction of the border.

We looked about at each other for a second. 'Well, I'm staying in the van,' I added. 'If we get off, I can't see any way to Siem Reap. I don't think we've got a choice.'

'I'm with you.' Andreas agreed. 'Besides it's not far now, only a hundred kilometres or so.'

'Yeah,' said The Postman, 'welcome to Cambodia I guess.'

The Elderly Lady joined us, 'Me too, I've travelled harder than this.'

'We have as well.' from The Mediterranean Girl. 'We've just come from India. At least here no one's shitting in the street. If the American lady thought this was bad, she should see Varanasi during the Ganges festival.'

Her comment worked like white magic, breaking the dark spell that had been trying to encircle us. A moment's more silence as we looked at each other. 'To Ziem Reap it is,' said The Bald Guy.

'To Siem Reap, I added'

The Guide beamed at this. 'So we go? Thank you. Look it' not my fault the Thai's do this. Cambodian people are not like them, we do not strive for these injustices.' He climbed in beside the backpacks and took up position on one of the little red plastic pre-school chairs the last ones on had been offered, and with a yell to the driver, we were off.

The road was hardly a road, more a series of troughs and gullies for the driver to negotiate. The heat inside was overwhelming and soon all the men were stripped to the waist, the younger women in short sleeves, and only The Elderly lady, like the Cambodians in a long sleeved button up shirt.

'It keeps the sun off your skin,' she informed us as we started to gossip amongst ourselves. 'So although it may look warmer, if you have light enough material, you are in fact kept cooler.'

The Swedish Girl questioned, 'You know the lady that got off, she said that her ticket had cost two thousand baht, I paid more than that, did any of you?'

'I paid fifteen hundred,' The Postman said.

'We paid three and a half thousand between us,' from the French couple.

'It only cost me a thousand,' I said, feeling proud that as a relatively new traveller, I'd gotten the best deal so far.

'Us only nine hundred each,' said The Mediterranean Guy with his Bongo drum. He had to hold onto the thing for dear life to stop it flying around the van, as it bounced two and fro through the ditches.

'How are people supposed to come and marvel at those lost temples if the only option of getting there,' I thought to myself, 'was to come through this hell?'

Time passed, until Andreas broke an unrealised silence, 'Hey how fast do you think we're going?' as once again we were thrown a few inches into the air. The Postman made a last minute grab to the seat to stop him from ending up on the floor.

'I dunno, about twenty or thirty 'K's an hour,' I replied.

'I think so too, that means this journey is going to take four or five hours, minimum.'

As juttering time passed, the dark cloud started to loom over us again, tried to grip our emotions and drive us towards an isolated and empty despair. We were strangers in a strange land, trapped at the mercy of what we had paid for. But united in solidarity we would persevere, we would see this challenge through.

BOOM, we went down a ditch, deep enough that you could feel the drop in your stomach, then CRASH, we hit the bottom and lurched upwards and forwards as the van continued its momentum. The wheels and suspension fought for every inch of ground.

We'd been going for about two hours; the reddish dust coated the inner surface of our mode of transport, and the outer surface of us. We shared water to rinse our mouths, trying to remove the grit from teeth that chattered together due to the conditions of the road. The van slowed and pulled up to stop outside a house with a sheltered seating area. 'Ok,' our guide said, 'stop now for refreshment.'

We crept out of the vehicle, stretched and loosened our joints, lit smokes and dusted each other off.

'Ok,' he said once more, 'we here for food, everybody sit down please and look at menu. The toilet is down there.' pointing to a standalone shed behind the house, inhabited I imagined, by a hole in the ground with a bucket of water that had a dirty pot floating in it. How are you s'pose to wash your arse with a sauce pan full of water? Gravity wise it's not plausible, you'd have to arch your back and try and pour it down the indentation of your spine. It just doesn't make any sense. (I've never figured that one out. To this day, in the Third World I always travel with toilet paper.)

There was a mixture of selections made, a few bowls of soupy looking stuff with what looked like spinach, and what promised to be pork floating on a bed of noodles. Some rice dish with a slightly odd shade of pink, and mine, eggs on toast.

‘There’s no fuckin’ way I’m eating the meat here,’ I said. There was no tomato sauce either; instead they had a rather tasty chilli sauce which we guessed, or rather hoped was the pinkness in the rice. To their credit, the food was good and the beer was cold, so a few fags later, and eager to get back on the road so we could put all this behind us; we mentally prepared ourselves, then continued the journey.

Although it seemed an impossibility the path got more treacherous, you could feel it as the tyres slid over the deep layer of shingle that had appeared not long after we got back on the road. We passed some earth moving machines, and one of the ones that level the ground with a large steel blade set in the middle.

‘See,’ The Guide said, ‘they are building a new road but it cannot happen overnight. We are a very poor nation. Hun Sen only opened our border a few years ago. Only now, through support from other nations are we receiving infrastructure.’

Ka’blam, we all left our seats; the van could be seen to physically bounce into the air. This was followed by a sickening thud then, ‘Aaaargh, ma tete.’

Oh my God, zlow down pleeze!’ said The French Woman.

We all turned around, there he was, a centimetre long gash in his head, blood was already seeping down to The Bald Guy’s brow.

‘Here, let me have a look at it,’ The Elderly Lady said. Producing some wet wipes and sticky plasters.

‘We have some sterilising hand alcohol,’ The Mediterranean guy with the bongo said. His partner then pulled a small bottle from her pocket. ‘We can clean it with this.’

And so, something that should have driven us further to the edge, brought us closer together once more, the bonds strengthening, the darkness once more receding.

The Elderly Lady supported by The Postman, cleaned and covered his wound as we were thrown in every direction. For a while the blood continued to flow, and had to be held back by The Bald Guy’s shirt.

With the worsening road conditions, it was evident the journey would take that little bit longer, those inches that millisecond more to travel. As we continued forward, the dust and heat continued to plague us, another hurdle to overcome, and another challenge we all had to face. The fine powder of the earth got in everywhere and coated our sweat slicked skin. A sort of vote was held, agreeing that the smokers could smoke, the ones who did not puff happy to sacrifice a little more of their own comfort, by allowing the others a small reprieve in the placation of an old habit. It’s amazing how something as simple as sharing a well needed fag, can give a moment’s reprieve from your torturous surroundings. Although yes, I was not on a luxury bus, its air-con muddled with the ever present Thai style music playing it’s almost Bagpipe sounding flutes and mesmerising vocals in the background. There was a pleasure to be found inside all of this. As a group we had not said a word to each other while sitting in that *luxury bus* and not paid attention to the passing country side. From the little that I saw everyone had either read books or listened to music. Now we had been drawn together by the shared destitute feeling of our surroundings. From this very hardship, friendships had developed, character had been strengthened, and challenges had been faced.

A few more long hours passed. ‘Ok, we stop again.’ The van pulled over once more, this time across a small bridge spanning a ditch filled with black, stagnant water that played host to a family of ducks, a pig, and a mangy looking dog who was drinking from the foul liquid under the shade of the solitary palm tree.

As the sun began to set, we clambered out once more, bones creaking and muscles complaining. Our guide approached whilst we were comparing bruises, and like a broken record ‘Ok, you look at menu, sit down please.’

I puffed on a cheap, strong Thai snout, ‘I’d rather just keep going, how ‘bout you guys?’

‘Yeah I wanna’ get this over with too,’ said The Postman.

Andreas nodded in agreement, along with the French couple. The Bald Guy now had a prominent bump on his head where it had connected with the roof of the van.

‘I think we should keep moving forward too,’ said The Elderly Lady.

‘Hey look, get us some cold cans of beer and let’s hit the road,’ I told The Guide, as he disappeared off towards the house with the driver.

He came back on his own a minute or two later, ‘No, sorry driver must eat. We must wait for him. Please sit, look at menu, I will get you beer.’

‘Oh well, hey, look don’t worry about the beer.’ Sorry now that I had asked. ‘Let’s just keep going man.’

‘No, driver must eat, please sit in shade, it is better for you.’

Surrendering to the helplessness of the situation and understanding that, fair enough this might be his only meal of the day, we parked up on the seats.

The Guide came back with the beers, Cokes, water and Fanta that had been ordered. He passed menus around again.

‘Please eat.’

‘I’m not hungry dude, are any of you guys?’

‘Well if we’re going to have to wait,’ The Swedish Girl said, ‘I’ll have a bowl of duck and noodle soup.’

‘You’re probably going to be eating one of the fulla’s swimming in the water beside the house,’ I said. Andreas laughed, and the mood lightened with the resolution of another delay.

About thirty minutes later, as we pulled out in the van, the luminescent orange mirage of the sunset blended with the reddish soil. Around us only a scattering of palm trees peppered the barren wasteland that seemed to make up the landscape. Hexagonal patterns of cracked dirt had formed. Random pools of fetid water reflected pink and purple as we passed. There was no livestock, no birds, no rice, no nothing. It seemed as if Cambodia herself was stained from the bloodshed left by the pointless genocide of millions. It felt as if the suffering had not yet left this land, this land that has been cursed by one of the greatest abominations in recent history. The surrounding emptiness, haunted still by the souls of those slaughtered by their own people, their own friends, their own family.

We continued at a snail’s pace, the road unrelenting in its poor state. There was almost no traffic passing the other way; understandable given the conditions. Why would anyone want to drive down here and suffer all this?

Once again, we stopped. The whole group unanimous that all we wanted to do was carry on. The time was nearly ten pm; we’d been on the road now for fourteen hours, six of those spent on this route. Around the table with the menus in front of us, we sat in a misery of silence, sipping our drinks and puffing our cigarettes. Finally we hit the road once more, and after another hour, our silent prayers were answered. We hit the tarmac. The smoothness felt how it does when you first step off a boat after you’ve gained your sea legs.

‘We are nearly there now,’ The Guide stated. Only to be received with contempt by us. The last stop had been completely unnecessary and we’d all agreed that we

were being deliberately stalled for reasons unknown. A feeling emerged that they got a cut from any of the money spent.

As we hit the edges of society the change in our surroundings could not have been more drastic. Huge resorts skirted the edges of the road. Five star neon luxury, with men in suits waiting by great glass doors. Extremes of wealth to match the extremes of poverty we had seen near the border. Lush green lawns were accompanied by fountains that spewed water into the air, whereas before the land was desolated.

‘There’s my hotel,’ The Elderly Lady said, pointing towards one of these modern facilities, ‘Stop here please.’

‘No, everybody must come to our guesthouse.’

‘No,’ she let out, ‘I will not have this, I am staying right there. You will stop now and let me off this hell ride. I’ve suffered in silence all day with *your* deliberate delays and *this* journey. You will not now take me to look at *your* hotel, in the hope that after all the shit that I’ve been through, that I will give *you* more money to stay in *your* accommodation.’

‘I am sorry but we have very specific order, we must take everyone to the guesthouse.’

Seeing her like this seemed to be the straw that broke the donkey’s back. The dark spell seemingly had won. The Elderly Lady had been so strong throughout the day, a silent uncomplaining force that had kept us younger people stable and ashamed to complain. After all, if she could do this, then so could we.

‘What iz zis shit? Stop ze fuckin’ bus and let ‘er out,’ our scarred companion demanded. ‘Yeah, pull over and let her off.’ all of us joining the chorus. Solidarity through misery banded us once more. But The Guide only responded with an apology and the van kept on going. Andreas, me and The Postman made a pact; there was no fuckin’ way we were staying at these guys’ place. This now seemed the obvious reason for the unwanted stops. A trick; it was nearing midnight now and we had been at it for sixteen hours. They must have expected people to be so exhausted, that they would take a bed at their place just to have it all done with.

Even if I had had to go it alone, a steely resolve developed in me to not have anything more to do with these cunts.

We pulled off the main road and not long after went up a driveway, the vehicle at last coming to a stop.

‘You fucking bastardz,’ The Bald Guy said, as he and his partner helped the inconsolable Elderly Lady out of the van. ‘Friendz, I would like to say that it has been a pleasure, but I cannot. We are going to take zis lady to her ‘otel and find a place for uz to stay. Au revoir.’

‘Wait we’re coming with you,’ I said.

‘Please, everybody must look at our rooms, we have very good place, very cheap.’

The calmness of The Postman evaporated. ‘Don’t you fuckin’ tell me to do anything.’

‘Can I come with you guys?’ The Swedish Girl asked.

‘Of course,’ said Andreas.

‘Us too; strength in numbers,’ the Mediterranean Couple said.

The others, with a beaten look said they had enough of today, and followed our guide to view the accommodation on offer.

We walked down the long drive, and parked up there in the black of the night were four Tuk Tuks.

‘Hey you need guesthouse?’

‘A little too convenient don’t you guyz zink?’ The Bald Guy stated. ‘But we shall take it. Come on,’ he said, helping the Elderly Lady into a seat. His companion slid in beside her. ‘Au revoir once more my friendz.’

‘No way we’re getting in with one of these guys,’ the Mediterranean Couple said. And with backpacks strapped on, and a large bongo drum in hand they walked off into the darkness back the way we had come.

‘Fuck it, I haven’t got that much fight left in me. I’m getting one of these, are you coming?’

Andreas joined me, along with the other two.

‘Ok,’ said our new driver. ‘I know a great place, five dollar a night, is ok for you?’

‘What do you mean five dollars, I’ve only got real.’

‘No problem man, twenty thousand real, five dollar.’

‘What do you mean dollar? I thought your money is called Real?’

‘No we only use Real for change, in Cambodia we use American dollar. It comes from banks.’

‘Banks? What banks? In Thailand they said there were no banks in Cambodia.’

‘Ha, ha, no, there many banks, look I show you.’ And with that he started the motor.

With the warm wind in our hair, we began a new journey. As we drove past the couple on foot marching through the darkness, I marvelled at their strength and determination. After a few more minutes, sure enough we passed an ANZ with two cash machines attached to the front, a guard sleeping beside them.

‘See I told you,’ yelled our man over his shoulder. The Tuk Tuk motor screaming away as he rushed through the streets.

Not long after we pulled down another long driveway, going right to the very end.

‘Here you go, Lucky Guesthouse. Five dollar each, I show you rooms.’

There were only two left. Us boys went in one with four beds, and the Swedish girl got the other to herself for eight dollars.

With that simple comment our trek was over.

For today anyway.

Buddhists and beggars

We slung our mobile homes onto the floor and went downstairs to sign in at the Lucky Guesthouse.

'Is ok,' the Tuk Tuk driver said, 'sign register tomorrow. You have long day, yes? Look you wan' beer? Come, we have sea' outside.' He led us out the front door to a little porch area at the side of the house. It wasn't until he turned on the light that we saw there was another guy asleep on a slab of foam under a mosquito net, one end of which was tied to the door of a fridge. They spoke to each other quickly and our sheepish looks were calmed when the fulla' on the mattress gave us a toothy smile and a wave before rolling over and carrying on with his rest. 'He is chef, his name Joe. My name Jimmy,' the Tuk Tuk driver said, as he passed around the beers. 'You wan' smoke?' pulling out a blue packet of cigarettes. 'These are call' Ara, they only one thousand real. These the best.'

We passed them around and lit up. Jimmy grabbed a tattered old notebook from the top of the fridge. 'This is how it work in Cambodia, if you wan' drink you just help yourself and write it down. If you wan' food, you just tell chef and he cook for you. Any time, it does not matter. If chef asleep, you jus' wake him up, and tell him what you wan'.' In Cambodia people are honest and trusting. We respect you for honesty, believe you to write in the book. I am your Taxi, you wan' go anywhere, wan' anything you just ask Jimmy. Even if I sleeping.' He grinned. 'You wan' some ganja?'

'Hell yeah,' I said. 'How much?'

'Five dollar. Oh sorry, for you, twenty thousand real. If you like there is machine for dollar at the gas station next to the en' of the driveway. If have dollar, is much easier for you. Cambodian people prefer dollar. In shops, everything in dollar, in restaurant and Guesthouse everything in dollar. I go get you Ganja now.' With that he was up and off, the engine of his Tuk Tuk making a sound loud enough to get half the dogs in the neighbourhood howling.

This money situation was starting to worry me. There could only have been one reason the Thai guide had gone to so much effort to have us exchange our money the way he did; profit! Andreas and The Postman were starting to come to the same conclusion. We tried working it out. One English pound was pretty much, two American dollars. So that meant I had, in general changed three hundred American dollars into real. Three hundred multiplied by four thousand is one million two hundred thousand. One point two million! The bastards they'd ripped me off over seventy quid. Fuckin' cunts! The only bright side was that it had happened to everyone and not just me! We grabbed three more beers and copied what others had done in the book under the day's date. I basically wrote my name along with 3 x beer, easy. The simple honesty here was such a contrast to what we had experienced earlier. A few minutes later I could hear Jimmy's Tuk Tuk crashing down the driveway.

'Here you go,' he said. Tossing me over about an ounce of leaf mixed with small bits of bud and a thousand seeds. He smiled, 'You need paper? Oh, no good for you, lots of Ganja but no paper.' Jimmy waited a few moments, before breaking into a youthful laugh and a clap of his hands. 'Is ok, I get for you from petrol station.' and produced a pack from his pocket. Is ok, don' give me money now, jus' write in the book. Look you nee' guide for the temples tomorrow? I take you, not much only six dollar each. That's for one and a half day. Tomorrow afternoon, I take you to Sunset Temple, Then day after I take you to Angkor Wat for sunrise, is beautiful. Then I take you to Faces temple and Tree temple. Is ok yeah? Only six dollar each.'

A silent conversation later, 'Yeah we're cool with that.' I rolled my first joint in Cambodia, of the whole holiday in fact as fat as possible, the edges only just reached each other. We smoked it and hit the hay.

Some days ya' just gotta' chalk down to experience.

The heat the next day was fuckin' hot and dry like in Greece, rather than the muggy shit in Thailand. Around lunchtime Jimmy dropped me, Andreas, The Postman and The Swedish Girl down in the town centre, which was a few minutes away for a dollar, or more like, for four thousand real. I was determined to spend the Real so I could put that one behind me. My feet were cooking. I still only had my pair of Nike Airs for footwear, so it was time for a little relaxed shopping therapy, only after a fat joint of course. Jimmy knew his stuff, he had dropped us next to the butchery side of the market, saying, 'Jus' go through there and clothing on the other side.' before with a wave and a smile he took off, with his two stroke engine screaming.

The first stall we passed, consisted of four smiling pig's heads and a battalion of overprotective flies. The thick smell of decaying flesh clung to us like the beads of sweat that ran down our bodies. The odour took on new forms and graces as we got nearer the centre of the building. Here it had the delight to take on extra textures, a more deeper aroma blended in as we skipped over foul puddles of ooze, protected by their legions of flies. The new depth of smell turned out to be from a fish market, that not only sold fresh but dried offerings too. A wave of nausea threatened to engulf me and with a swat of my hand and a final deep breath, I picked up the pace and passed on into the clothing section. I was determined to at least give myself the simple pleasure of feet that weren't pruning up in sweat soaked socks, and for twelve thousand real I scored some flip flops with flowers on them.

Back out on the street we were menu browsing, everything looked fab' and cheap, 'Hey guys, over here.' The Mediterranean Couple were sat in a traditional Southeast Asian place, with plates heaped in noodles and two beers in front of them.

The lot of us bitched about the day before like old friends and sunk cold beer while we waited for our food. It was then a guy appeared from around the corner on a hand powered tricycle type wheel chair, with a trailer attached to the back. On his trailer was written, 'I was a farmer, but one day I stepped on a landmine and now I am a cripple. I am not a beggar. These books have been donated to me in the hope that I can sell them for money to feed my family. The books have no price I just ask you to make a donation.' He parked up right in front of us and just stared. When he caught your eye his deep frown leapt into a smile and he waved over his shoulder at the literature behind. My heart was broken, what we had recently suffered in the van was nothing compared to what this guy must have once, and still must be going through. This was my first experience of true extreme poverty in the third world, anywhere in fact. It was the first time I got to really appreciate how lucky I; we all in the west, are.

'Just ignore him,' The Mediterranean Guy said. 'In India you get used to it. There are so many poor people and beggars that you learn to just blank them out. There are too many to help.'

This cut even deeper, 'But surely if every tourist who ever went to a foreign land helped just one person, there would be millions less starving and living like this?'

'But if we help them they will never learn to help themselves,' he said.

I couldn't get that. How can they learn to help themselves if no one will take the time to teach them? I didn't know what to do. The Postman bought a book about Pol Pot called, Big Brother Number One. I remembered I had an item that was no longer of use to me, and worth a lot of money. I know giving shoes to a man with no feet

doesn't sound right, but they were worth over a hundred pounds and I had no plans of wearing them in the near future. I felt kind of silly as I walked up to him with them in my hands. 'Here, take these and sell them. They cost two hundred dollar.' This guy must have been starving; you could see his extruding rib cage when you got close up. A few minutes later another wheelchair bound, trailer pulling man with no legs rolled up, and then another. Our food seemed to show up timed in the same way the starving children in Africa commercials do on the TV back home when you're trying to eat dinner.

'See,' The Mediterranean Girl said, as she passed around her hand sanitising gel. Often beggars are a set up by the mafia for money, in India they cut the hands off children and blind them for profit. Disabled people make lots of money begging, disabled children even more.' This was all putting a sour taste on my meal. 'You see,' she continued, this is why although it may hurt. You must ignore them; you could be making their real life situation worse.'

I couldn't deal with that thought. How the fuck can ignoring someone's suffering be a better solution than coming up with a way to help. As I have just said, if every tourist who had ever come to a place like this had helped; it doesn't always have to be with money. Helped one person or one family, surely the situation around the world would be better. I finished my beer, paid my meal, and after spending ten dollars on a bottle of sun cream walked back to the Lucky Guesthouse, wondering how much it would cost to feed that man's family for a day.

Back at my temporary home there was a big man with a deep tan and thick Eastern European accent, which I couldn't quite pin down its origins to. The guesthouse manager, Mr Paun came over. 'What the fuck do you want from me now,' the big fulla' said. 'These people all want money from you. Money, money, money, that's all they think about.' He slapped a meaty arm around my shoulders, 'Now you listen here my friend. Don't you trust a single one of them. They would kill their own mother for money in this country. I can't wait to leave.' I couldn't wait for him to leave either.

Mr Paun lowered his gaze as he walked towards me, 'Here is signing in book, please put your passport details here. It is not just for us, if something happen to you we can contact your embassy. I filled it all out and he disappeared. I would have liked to of talked to him, asked him about his life. But this no good lump of nothing sat beside me had taken that away. The others showed up after a time and with the arrival of Jimmy we prepared for our first foray in to the Angkor Wat complex of temples.

A fat joint later and we piled onto the back of Jimmy's Tuk Tuk, soaking up the late afternoon breeze as we drove the miles down to the main entrance. For twenty dollars you got a twenty four hour pass, which meant you could see the sunset and then come back the next day with the same ticket. We drove for another ten minutes down a wide, long, straight road that was lined with monstrous prehistoric looking trees. We turned left at the end of the road, on our right was a river about one hundred metres across. There we were met by an army of buses that were swarmed by a plague of buzzing Tuk Tuks. The group of us jumped off and joined a mass procession of Japanese people up a path that wound around the side of a small mountain. The track itself we found cut through four large ancient staircases of solid stone reaching up on each side to the temple crowning the top. At the bottom of the path was a small orchestra playing traditional music, which to my uncultured self seemed out of tune. The sign in front of them said they were all landmine victims. Between the ten of them there were only about four feet. A little further on an orchestra of the blind played as they stared blankly into the endless distance. On the mountainside surrounding the path, there was an uncountable amount of inch wide holes doored by

thick spider webs. The sombre scene was accompanied by the mating call of a million cicadas and the crunch of footwear on gravel. The throng of people was silent as the weight of Cambodia's sorrows pressed down on us all. Or was it just tiredness from the steep walk?

At the top we were greeted by a thousand happy snappers, the atmosphere seemingly lighter up here. The first obstacle was what once must have been a staircase, but was now a smooth faced death trap that took both hands and feet to climb up. One fat lady slipped and took out a score of people on her way down. She was alright, they had cushioned her fall. We made it to the top and the breathtaking beauty of what is a nearly millennium old place of worship, totally fuckin' blew us away. Whoever built it had levelled the whole hilltop and taken all the dirt away. Kinda' like a pyramid, they'd layered a series of square platforms on top of each other but then crowned them with squat towers. The orange bricked outside walls looked every one of their thousand years of age, and once you had climbed the stairs to the top, you could see in the middle of the platform, a small grey building made of stone. It had flowers and what I guessed was a Goddess, symmetrically carved into its walls. There were a few young Buddhist monks about the place, and I imagined it must feel for them, like a visit to Mecca would for Muslim people. But here they were almost a tourist attraction; people were lining up to have photos taken with them. I wondered if they just wanted a moment alone to pray in the setting sun. The golden light faded to orange and pink, then purple and blue as it disappeared over the forested horizon. In the dark, we stumbled from the ruins, blind to the night and fearful of what creatures lurked down those inch wide tunnels.

From there we went home, for a much needed cold shower, cold beer and a big doobie before heading out to a restaurant that had traditional dancing. At the end a young girl walked around with a silver dish for donations to help the local school. After that we made our way across the road to what is still one of my favourite bars. The fabulously named, 'Angkor What?'

The walls of Angkor What? are covered in the names of everyone who's ever drunk there. On arrival we were given a marker pen so the four of us could add ours. We shot some pool, The Postman cleaning up every time, and drank till they closed. At some God forsaken hour we crawled back to the guesthouse and passed out, knowing we had to be up again soon.

When the alarm woke me it felt like I had only blinked. The Postman was the worst off, he looked like he would never drink again. We waited around for The Swedish Girl then lumbered downstairs to find Jimmy asleep in the back of his Tuk Tuk.

We roared through the darkness blind to the wonders we had seen the day before. Jimmy parked up in a mass of Tuk Tuks and buses. 'You remember where I am. If you no' find me, ask Tuk Tuk driver for Jimmy.'

Due to the fact that there was no moon, we couldn't even really see the path that we were on. We just followed a procession of Japanese sounding people across a flat bridge. The right hand side had been smoothed out, and the left was still in its ancient buckled form. We passed through a gateway and on the other side the water was gone. We were guided to a position that the four of us were told would be the best to see the sun rise. It was just us, the thousand other tourists and the million mosquitoes. Trying to feel the spirit of the place, I put on some good psychedelic trance, smoked a joint and waited.

As the sky lightened there appeared a series of towers which the sun rose from directly behind. Our surroundings became more visible and soon you could start to get

a feel for the immense size of the place we were in. A virtual palace constructed of solid stone, every inch detailed and engraved. Angkor Wat is something else. The fact that you can walk all over Angkor Wat and its surrounding temples is what makes it something else, something marvellous. There were no guards or Police telling you where you could and could not go. I haven't been to the Pyramids or Machu Pichu but as far as I know you can't crawl all over every inch of them, you can't become completely lost in those famous wonders.

Later as we drove through to the faces temple which is named Bayon I was reminded of the pictures I have seen of the Mayan temples. There were hundreds of giant images of people made from carved stone, each four sided, each in near mint condition after nearly a millennia. Ta Phrom, the temple in the Tomb raider movies is once again unique to the others. Massive trees sit atop the ruins, their roots pour down to the earth in a way that looks planned and deliberate. The weight of the trees has caused many of the buildings to collapse, but that just adds to the mystic and the aura. The only downside apart from the tremendous heat was the children everywhere trying to sell you trinkets. It was a continual bombardment of, 'Mister, mister, mister'. Everywhere you went outside the main temples, like hungry gulls they flocked to you waving bracelets and shit. I started feeling like the only way to not let it get to me was to follow the advice of The Mediterranean Couple and ignore them. It was a harsh reality check and the only let down on an otherwise mind blowing experience.

Our group finished up around mid afternoon and we went back the guesthouse for a rest before heading out for dinner to some Korean barbeque place The Swedish Girl wanted to go to. It was there the only rift in the group developed. It may have been my fault but really it was over nothing. Korean barbeques are basically an upside down wok with all the meat cooking on the dome of it. As the meat cooks, the juices flow down into a trough filled with water and vegetables. I personally did not want to use the same chopsticks that I handled the raw meat with to eat the cooked stuff. Even in a place with modern hygiene standards it makes sense, let alone the fuckin' horror show we had seen the day before at the market. But The Swedish Girl would not leave it alone though, and continually she made comments at me about this. I tried telling her that I'd studied food hygiene as part of my bar management training, but she wouldn't fuckin' listen. She just wasn't prepared to let it go, and had to have the last word. So fuck her, I can be a stubborn cunt too, and there was no fuckin' way I was going to cross contaminate my meal. Use the same chopsticks you'd been playing about with raw pork with and then stick the fuckers in ya' mouth? Bollocks to that!

I couldn't understand what the fuckin' problem was. Why would someone make such a fuckin' fuss about what utensils I used to eat my meal? Maybe she was just pissed off that after spending three days with three single guys no one had shagged her? She was proper wound up though, and after dinner stropped off home. Me and the boys stayed out drinking at Angkor What? and played rounds of pool. We joked that the loser had to go back to the guesthouse and sort our mate out. At the end of it all Andreas lost but straight-out refused, I was still pissed off with her so I wasn't gonna' fuck her. And The Postman? Hey he had won all the games so there was no fuckin' way he was gonna' *do the deed*. The boys laughed that I'd have the best chance 'cause it was me that had gotten her all emotional. Anyway, fuck knows. Women eh; go figure?

I had made up my mind, the in your face poverty in Cambodia, matched against the vastness of wealth in Siem Reap had really gotten to me. I was going to ditch the place and head to Vietnam.

Mr Paun informed me the next day that I would need to get to Phnom Penh first and spend a night there before making my way to Vietnam. He had a friend who ran a guesthouse that would even send someone to pick me up from the bus depot. So that was it. My time in Cambodia was almost up.

Or so I thought.

The Green Lake

It only took six hours down a smooth wide highway to get to Phnom Penh. As the van pulled up in the busy bus depot, I spied out the window a young looking man holding up a 'Mister Bryce' sign. He fought off the dozen or so touts that tried to take my bags and lead me onto their bikes and to their guesthouses. He then introduced himself as Bouna before loading me onto the back of his moped. We drove off through crowded streets towards my new guesthouse for the night. The roads in Phnom Penh weren't much better than the one from the border to Siem Reap. More than one bike passed with hundred litre gas cylinders. Bikes with two adults and four children were common place, and we even passed one where the guy on the back struggled to not be blown off as he struggled to hold a huge pane of glass that was between him and the driver. It was hot too, hotter than Bangkok, but drier and dustier. Didn't smell though.

'You like skunk?' Bouna yelled over his shoulder. We have good ganja, the best in Phnom Penh.'

'Hell yes I do.'

'Is good for you, when we get to guesthouse I show you. If you like, you can buy.'

We pulled off the main road down a street opposite a petrol station. There was a Mosque on my right and squalor in front. During the short distance we drove, all we passed was bars and tourist offices.

Once in the guesthouse I was offered a range of accommodation, and as I planned to stay for only one night, took the cheapest room for the princely sum of four dollars. The toilet was next door to me.

As soon as my backpack was on the floor Bouna came in with a small bag of outdoor seedless buds, which if I wanted was gonna' cost me fifteen dollars. I wasn't overly happy with that, 'cause it's a similar price to what you would pay in London, but hey, beggars can't be choosers. I went out to the main sitting area which had a bar, a big TV, hundreds of DVDs, a shoddy looking pool table and loads of comfortable looking couches designed for lounging around all day in. The whole guesthouse was built on top of the lake, which itself was apparently five kilometres wide.

I joined an English fulla' called Mike and a mid fiftyish dreadlocked Irishman named Pete. We sat out on the balcony over the lake and smoked fat joints and played cards, sheltered from the wild sun under some random beer sponsored umbrella. We were joined later by two English girls, Nimi and Angela and whiled away the day by playing hands of five hundred. Time passed unnoticed at The Guesthouse and to change the day up a little, rounds of one handed pool were played married with cold pints of beer and the constant passing around of spliffs.

One handed pool is just that. You play a normal game of pool, but you can only hold the cue with one hand. After a while though you got to understand the table, and as long as you hit a ball into the right areas on the table, the various ways it leaned would lead the ball right into a pocket. Some pockets were definitely easier to go for than others.

My rush to exit the country was forgotten as I joined this new group of relaxed merry makers. Turned out it took three days for your Visa to Vietnam to be sorted anyway. Not that I bothered for the next two weeks.

That night we watched the film "The Killing fields" and with a tear in my eye, that introduction to Cambodia's past rounded off my first day in Phnom Penh.

Part of the tourist experience in Cambodia is the Killing field in Phnom Penh, which is one of the two hundred odd that have been found. Bouna offered to take me on the

tour. There are two parts, first, S21 or Tuol Sleng the Genocide Museum where eighteen thousand men, women and children were systematically tortured. Followed by the Killing field itself where all of the eighteen thousand, bar four, were murdered and their bodies dumped into pits. The Genocide museum stopped me cold. Previously it had been a school but the Khmer Rouge used it as place of interrogation against those they believed were of no use to the New State. Every one of the eighteen thousand were photographed like in a portrait and those pictures were all on display, those pictures filled three or four rooms; there was information all around the site. Two simple looking Coconut trees had at one time been used to string people up by their arms which were tied behind their backs at the elbows. Class rooms had been filled with small brick cells with bolts on the floor with which to chain people to.

As you first walk in the gates; to the left there were smaller rooms which had steel bed frames in them. There the sinister task of electrocuting those who may have had information about other 'traitors to the regime' took place. When the Khmer Rouge fell to the Vietnamese, who saw themselves as liberators, they ran so quickly that they left the people still chained to the beds. There were large pictures of those people tied to the beds above pools of blood on the wall. It was monstrous. It blows me away to think of these genocides, and the fact that those who commit these atrocities can go home and sleep at night. The power to brainwash human beings is too much to comprehend. One more thing, and this may sound familiar, the 'Liberators' were seen as 'Occupiers' by the very people they were trying to help.

The depths of how it had affected the people, the future generations, was brought to me when on the way to the Killing field Bouna decided to make a stop off at a shooting range. It didn't seem right; it didn't seem natural after going to a place like Tuol Sleng to fire weapons of death. Bouna though, was determined that I have a go. So giving in to my sorrow and not really wanting too, I chose the AK-47. For thirty dollars I got a full clip. Growing up in New Zealand I had never seen a real gun before and the weight of the machine gun was the first thing that surprised me. The next was the nonchalant way some soldier led me into a thin but long solid brick room and simply said, 'Poin' it that way and pull the trigger.' Those were my only instructions. There was the classic target from the movies of a black silhouette on a white background. So hefting the AK and looking down the barrel I tapped the trigger, KA'BLAM the fuckin' thing nearly flew out of my hands. I took aim again and squeezed once more. KA'BLAM, the barrel pushed up and to the left. The noise was deafening but the excitement rushed through me, like fat line of cocaine. Instantly addicted, I thought fuck it, and got all Samuel L Jackson on that shit, 'AK-47 for when you absolutely, positively gotta' kill every mother fucker in the room', then pulled the trigger and held it down. The AK let loose! As the bullets emptied and the shells flew I was pushed back about two feet, sparks could be seen as the bullets bounced off the walls and ceiling. I would have thrown it from my hands if I hadn't been so frozen with fear. Once the roll of thunder stopped and remembered to breathe again, all I could think was, 'How the fuck, is anybody s'pose to hit anyone with that fuckin' thing?' The power it released, as the ammunition exploded made it completely uncontrollable.

Bouna later informed me that during the wars they hung it like you would a guitar on a strap, and waved it side to side cutting down anyone in the way. Next it was the Phnom Penh Killing field. From the outside, apart from the one footed man and sat in the dirt with a hat on the ground and a help me sign, there was nothing that placed the area as out of the ordinary. I certainly didn't feel the spirit of eighteen thousand murdered people. Inside, in the centre of the grounds, stood a Buddhist style

monument that was about twenty feet wide by about one hundred feet high. Surrounding it were a series of pits with the odd scattering of bones and a few signs that told you what had gone on. A sign next to one tree stated that, that tree had been used to kill the babies with. Their heads were smashed against it, before their carcasses too were dumped in the ground. It said that music was played so the women and men who also were about to die couldn't hear it. The Khmer Rouge thought that hearing babies being murdered might lead to an uprising and cause those who had already accepted death to try and fight back. I entered the temple like building and was met by the stark reality of the genocide. The skulls of the eighteen thousand found here had been placed on a series of platforms that rose one upon the other all the way to the ceiling so far above. Fractures could be seen cob webbing through the – sometimes still blindfolded – skulls, where the six foot long batons had been used for the death blow shortly before these poor souls' throats had been cut. In the genocide carried out by the Germans gas chambers had been used. Here; Pol Pot had talked them into killing *their own people* by hand. The mostly adolescent teenage Khmer Rouge executioners would then go home to their families, and be able to eat and sleep. Like many of the successful murderous cunts that have plagued our recent history, Pol Pot realised that children and teenagers make the best soldiers. *Get them while they're young and brainwash their minds.*

I was a broken man, these atrocities hadn't been carried out that long ago, the whole thing was devastating.

Back at The Guesthouse Bouna charged me ten dollars for the day trip, and once again I was not happy with the price, I paid it nonetheless. I was wound up later though when Mike told me it should really only have cost three or four.

Over the next few days, with the leaving of Peter, our group was joined by two Geordie fulla's, (As the people from Newcastle in the north of England are known) named Andy and Matt. They were a great laugh and although Andy didn't smoke, Matt sunk right into our eccentricities. On one occasion Matt came out in the morning with a photograph of the dossier in their room the night before. She was a gigantic Tarantula type spider the size of a dinner plate. I'm not kidding, the span of this fuckin' thing covered nearly half the width of their door. Being Geordies and not used to this type of monstrous fuckin' creature, Andy threw a shoe at it. And 'cause he threw like a girl, missed, which caused it to run for the first dark space it could find; Matt's backpack. The boys truly fucked now had to go wake up one of the kids who ran The Guesthouse at night, and he, not sure what these big girly foreigners were afraid of casually reached in and plucked it out. Then he opened the front door and let her go. The guys reckoned they couldn't sleep for the rest of the night.

It was around that time that I really got sick, it started with a chronic case of the shits, which to combat with I was fed Imodium. This blocked me up and caused me to have the most agonising stomach cramps which would not relent for the next three days. At one point it got so bad Bouna made me go to pharmacy on the back of his motorbike. The ride was dreadful, the vibration from the engine made me feel like I would shit myself at any moment. The pharmacist, used to sick tourists, gave me antibiotics and said I would just have to wait it out. Bouna suggested smoking opium to help relieve the pain, and after handing over ten dollars I was presented with a black tar like substance a few millimetres wide and two centimetres square.

Sure enough it worked in the means of knocking me out when added to a big joint, but, the pain was ever present. I went to bed and stayed there for the next day and a half until finally, in the middle of the night, I was woken by the call of the angels and

managed to take a dump. The first one since I took the Imodium. The stomach cramps lifted, the sensitivity to my skin lessened and the shivering ceased. I started to feel normal again. But I didn't finish the full prescription, which apparently led to the continual shits, which happened to stay with me for the next two months and would end up causing me to lose over fifteen kilos. When I eventually got back to London my doctor looked panicked, 'cause when I left I weighed eighty six kilos and on my return, I was only seventy. Who needs diets and the gym eh?

I was warmed by the compassion of everyone at The Guesthouse. Throughout my bedridden time, they took turns to check on me every hour. It's these simple moments that make life feel alive.

All this shitting brown water; 'cause let's face it I never saw another solid turd for the rest of the vacation, led me to the most fierce case of haemorrhoids, which during my time in Laos would reach a whole new horrendous crescendo of agony.

As far as I was concerned there was fuck all to see in Phnom Penh. I'm not interested at looking at palaces and shit, it's just more walking around in the thirty five degrees heat. More children selling me stuff when they should be in school? More crowds? Fuck that!

One afternoon however, Bouna came up and asked if we would like to go watch Cock fighting. The suffering of animals pitted against one another for the entertainment of humans didn't seem too appealing though. But there was fuck all else to do, besides, the one handed pool on the wonky table had started to run its course. So a few of us agreed and next thing ya' know we're driven out near the shooting range and found ourselves standing in an enclosure of sorts. There was a main arena for the fights, surrounded by various gambling tables under old army canopies. The main arena was sheltered with corrugated iron and had a raised seating area so everyone could see. Beer bottles and fag ends were strewn about the floor as a hundred or so Cambodian men yelled and waved money in the air.

I've never really been much of a gambler but on this occasion, I thought fuck it, when in Rome act like a Roman. I joined a table to the side where they spun a six sided top with numbers on it. You could pick either the number that would be face up when it fell, or odds and evens – kinda' like a mixture of craps and roulette. I put a dollar on number three and won six. Next I put all six on evens and once again pulled it off, this time doubling my money. I let all twelve stand on evens and this time the guy in charge let me spin the top. Once more I came up trumps. Now twenty four dollars better off than when I started, I thought I'd better quit while ahead. Anyway I didn't particularly feel comfortable with the look from the guy whose table it was. The other gamblers though loved it, and as I swept my money up off the table and walked away I received slaps on the back and cheers from the others.

We joined the main arena. Over sized chickens with what looked like razors attached to their legs, had water blown up their arses by cigarette smoking men, before they were set on each other. It was kinda' slow going 'cause in general they only circled one another, only clashing every now and then. The rules seemed to be,

1. If no one was killed after fifteen minutes, the fight would be stopped and two new contenders were brought in.
2. If one of the Cocks bottled it and flew out the ring he was the loser.
3. If one of them connected properly with his razor the other would be pretty much disembowelled and would fall dead where he was stood, blood flowing from the mortal wound.

Although I did win a dollar off Matt, it didn't take much of this for us to want to leave. We were all then treated to dinner at Bouna's parents' restaurant next door, which involved the whole family, and that we all paid for. The food was good though.

During the day The Guesthouse was run by the adults who were supervised by a character named Boom Boom. Boom Boom had a blessing tattooed on his chest and loved his food. 'Being fat is a sign of wealth in Cambodia,' he would say. We woke up one day to find him looking like someone with little round feet had given him a good kicking. Turned out he had been for some type of Chinese medicine type thing where they put cups to ya' skin, and then warm them up. As the air changes temperature it sucks the skin into the cup, and like fumbling teenagers necking after the prom, he was left covered with love bites.

In the evening the kids took over. They cooked, served drinks and took money; they had every responsibility the adults had. They would fall asleep one at a time, until the last traveller went to sleep. I asked Boom Boom about this.

'They get education, books, sports, clothing, anything they like. In exchange they work in The Guesthouse at night. These children will have a better start in life than nearly all the rest of the children in Cambodia.'

I asked myself, 'Can you consider that child slave labour then? The children were all happy, well fed, and gaining a proper education. If you took that away from them where would they live? What would they eat? Would they be able to go to school?' They weren't over worked. They had a nice lifestyle. The couches we used during the day, and that they slept on at night were comfortable, and the food I saw them eat was plentiful, there was always more than they could finish. Since then I've seen a TV show about child slave labour in India. Some celebrities went there, exposed some place and had it shut down. Yes, the kids there were doing fourteen hour days and sleeping rough, they were also being fed minimal food. But after, when the children were interviewed they said. 'Before, I worked hard, but at least I had some money, food and a roof over my head. Now I am homeless and hungry. I must go to find another job.' It's a situation I can only believe I have an understanding of. In New Zealand, as far as I know, situations like this simply do not exist. How can I offer an opinion against this, when the only real experience I have had of Child labour, did not involve slavery, and the kids, I feel, were truly better off than their peers.

When I first moved in to The Guesthouse I'd asked Bouna about the safety of my Passport and other possessions. 'Don't worry. The Guesthouse is owned by an army General. No matter how poor they are, nobody would dare steal anything from here. The army would come and they would disappear. This is the safest building in Phnom Penh.'

We would leave our wallets and drugs lying all over the place, the next morning after the kids had cleaned up before school, it'd all be in individual piles lined up on one of the tables. Only once was my weed stolen and I think that was by two young Aussie kids who had left first thing that morning. Otherwise, there was no need to even lock the door to ya' room. Unless ya' havin' a wank of course.

Me and Matt were smokin' a joint one day out on the balcony watchin' the sun set of the lake. I looked over my shoulder and walking towards us, was a smart looking Army officer. We both nearly jumped over board and swam for it as he came over, but he smiled, lit up a doobie of his own and shared it with us.

'Today is a sad day,' he said, 'They have sold the lake to developers. They are going to fill it in and build hotels.'

'What? But it's huge! They can't do that!'

‘It’s true; I come here now to look at her. Soon they start to drain the lake. All the people who live in the middle will be gone. All of this,’ he waved his hand with the spliff in it. ‘Will be gone. Who will come to my guesthouse when there is no lake to look at?’

The sadness in his face said it all. But with this Government, no one can stand in the way. Not even one of the Generals of their army.

The centre of the lake was populated by a group of dwellings that had been there as long as the water had. Each day the kids from there would paddle up on canoes that looked as if they only just stayed afloat. They would offer rides through the labyrinth of weeds that grew on its surface. It was a blissful calm out there in their half sunken canoes between the (What turned out to be a kind of lettuce) plants that gave the Green Lake its name. As the sun set The Green Lake turned pink, peach and purple. Out there, the only sound was of the kid and the splash of his paddle. His friends would see he had bagged a tourist and would yell over, only for him to respond proudly. You’d give him his dollar and usually a Coke, and pleased as a pig in shit he’d paddle off to the next balcony.

We gossiped about how much money you would have to drop in to the water before you would go and fetch it. All the toilets from the guesthouses lining the lake emptied straight into the Green Lake. After a while the paper from those who flushed it, would build up in a little penned off area and on one occasion Boom Boom paid a kid named Tiger ten dollars to jump in an inner tube and scrap it out with a net. We all tried to talk Tiger out of it, but he assured us in his perfect English that he does it all the time. It goes to show the strength of the immune systems of people in places like Cambodia. In the Modern world even the water we drink is bottled and our Governments are trying to give us this shot and that jab. Really all we need to stay healthy is a bit of dirt in our lives.

After about two weeks at The Guesthouse, everything had become a little too familiar. I’d lost that traveller feeling. I was one of the people that looked like I’d lived there forever. You know how it is. You first get to a place and some guys are just settling in, some guys have been there for a few days, and yet other guys seem to know everyone and everything. They walk behind the bar and help themselves, that sort of shit.

My feet were itchy for new adventures so I made the decision and went down to the Vietnamese embassy on the other side of town to get my Visa.

The gates were closed and a uniformed guard with an AK-47 said to give my Passport to him and he’d sort it out. ‘Give me thirty five dollar and come back tomorrow.’ Back at The Guesthouse Mike couldn’t believe what I’d done.

‘Are you fuckin’ joking?! It was closed and some guy out the front said,’ ‘Give me your Passport and thirty five dollars,’ ‘and you fuckin’ did it! Go back there now and get it back before he fucks off!’

Now that it had been said out loud I felt fuckin’ stupid. I rushed upstairs to wake Boom Boom. He laughed and questioned me about the man. ‘What was he wearing? Did he have a gun?’ That sort of shit. After my answers he was like. ‘No problem, go back tomorrow at same time and get Visa from him.’

Mike however was having none of it. ‘Look man, it takes three days to get a Visa and costs thirty dollars not one day and thirty five. Go back dude.’ Mike had won in the way that if I didn’t go get my Passport I would have spent the whole time until the next day worried about it. I jumped on the back of a fulla’s bike outside and he rushed me back to the embassy. The man and his machine gun were still there. I asked for my shit back and from a draw he pulled out about twenty Passports and sifted through

them until he came across mine, then returned that along with my money. According to a sign out the front the embassy re-opened in fifteen minutes so I waited it out and went inside to leave it there instead.

Back at The Guesthouse, Matt, Andy and Mike were having a good ol' laugh about what I'd done, but after I'd told them I had got it back and the dude had loads of other peoples Passports they admitted it may have been legit, but leaving your Passport with some guy out the front of a building while it's closed is just bad practice. and I couldn't argue with that.

On my final night in Phnom Penh we all went out to a legendry Nightclub called the Heart of darkness. It's a small place with a big reputation. Almost everyone who's been to Phnom Penh has had a session in the Heart of darkness. It plays cheesy music, is full of hookers and as far as I know, is still there now.

I had become a little too casual with my lifestyle in Cambodia and as I was being searched on the way in the guard found my bag of weed and some opium. 'You must leave at desk,' he said, 'and pick up on way out.' Joined by a new Swedish girl with fiery hair, me, Mike and Matt danced the night away, to hits from Kylie and shit. There was definitely a dominant Cambodian gangster feel to the place, 'cause it was full of leering, buff locals but they left you alone and you were allowed the freedom to enjoy yourself.

Outside The Guesthouse up on the street, all kinds of drugs were offered, from China White heroin to Ice (Crystal Meth). I was feeling a bit pissed and felt like a pick me up, (The Ice not the Smack) so decided to make a move, with a promise from the others to join me when they'd finished their drinks. Although you were forever being offered samples, I hadn't done any of the strong drugs for sale around the lake. But it was my last night and I thought fuck it let's have a party.

As I was leaving the club, a uniformed officer of some sort walked up to me and put out his hand, so I shook it. He was in fine military kit. He didn't let go. The guy from behind the desk where my drugs were, held up the tobacco pouch they where stashed in and said, 'Here you go, this is yours.' The guy was still holding my hand. Over on the road next to us, a moto-taxi yelled at me, 'They're setting you up. Quick get on my bike.' I looked over at the desk, then at the frowning face in front of me, 'No, that's not mine, dunno' what you're talking about.' As I shook my head, the grip of the officer loosened and I took the opportunity to free myself and ran over to the bike and jumped on. 'Go, go, go.'

'You were fuckin' lucky,' the taxi guy said. 'They were going to fuck you big time. I was outside and heard them talk about it. They called the army and were all going to share the money.'

'Fuckin' Jesus.'

That's how close it came on my final night. One nod away. He took me to the Green Lake and I tipped him double than what he asked. Two dollars was certainly less than what the army would have taken. He waited while I tried and then bought the Ice, feeling protective of me. For twenty five dollars I bought quarter of a gram, about two hundred and fifty dollars worth in New Zealand.

The others came back and we shared the Ice between us by drinking it, not smoking it which is the popular way these days. Our group gossiped and laughed, played around with the old broken machine gun that hung up on the wall next to the bar then moved it to my room so the kids could sleep. I had been looking for a unique experience and my time on the Green Lake had certainly been that.

Saigon

My final morning in Cambodia rolled around quick enough, and soon I found myself sat in the minivan that would take me and a few other people heading that way, to Vietnam. Just as we took off there was a mad tooting from a bike and looking out the window I saw Bouna laughing and waving something in his hand. Once the van stopped I found out it was my ticket for the bus once I had reached the other side of the border. And with a hug and a smile we said our last goodbyes. To say I felt rough doesn't even come close to describing a meth comedown. I felt bruised; I didn't want to talk to anyone new, the hairs on my skin hurt when the breeze blew against them. I was jumpy as a mother fucker and my mind was so all over the place I couldn't concentrate on my book. The only reprieve was to hide in some rave tunes and while away the hours to the border.

Just before we got there the van stopped for a break and I ruined their hole in the ground, then tried to wash my arse with a saucepan full of water. At the border itself, we were all given our backpacks and the group was led into a huge building, where at the first checkpoint the guard checked our Passports to make sure we at least had the appropriate Visa. When he was satisfied with that he passed them back, calling out each person's name. 'Lady Wilson,' he said. I looked around, nope, no other Wilsons came forward. 'I think that's mine,' I said.

'No is lady,' and carried on yelling, 'Lady Wilson.'

He eventually had handed out all the Passports except mine. 'Lady Bryce Wilson.'

'Look that is my Passport, I am Bryce Wilson.'

'No is lady in photo.'

No dude, that's me. I was much younger.' I should explain now that eight years earlier when I had bought my Passport I was clean shaven with straight, shoulder length blonde hair. At the time of the border crossing, my head was shaved, I had a goatee beard, and was quite heavily tattooed. The guard laughed his head off, called his mates over and pointed. They too joined in making fun of me. I didn't mind, I had been mistaken a few times for a girl in my teenage years.

'You will have big trouble with border crossing,' he said. 'I think it best if I walk you through.'

There were a few places my Passport needed to be shown, and each time I was received with laughter and other guards being called over to join in the merriment. The X-ray machine was just being switched on as we passed and soon enough I found myself at the final place where I got my stamp and was led outside into Vietnam proper to wait for the others. I had The Rolling Stone's song, Paint it black, running through my head. That's my Vietnam song for sure, when we were growing up there was a TV series called Tour of duty and that was the opening title tune. Every time I think of Vietnam, that song automatically starts to play in my mind.

It took a while but they all made it through, then eight hours later we were dumped on the side of the road in Saigon. There were a few hotels strewn about the place so I went down a small side street to get away from the more expensive looking ones and found myself in a maze of small alleys. I came across a place with the national flag over the door and a retarded teenager splayed on the floor. It was obvious he was unable to use his limbs at all and this poor soul's life was based around, being, fed, being changed and staring at the ceiling. The elderly couple who ran the hotel were still able to smile though. They led me up the staircase to a decent room, with, for one, a quiet fan. All for only seven dollars a night. After a quick shower and a long wank, for the first time in ages I went to put on some fresh clothes. Jammed into the top of my pack was a pillow I'd stolen from the plane. As soon as I pulled it out a full

bag of opium fell from inside the pillow case onto the floor. This scared the living shit out of me. I'd gone through all of my belongings with the attention of someone wired on speed does. I'd searched fuckin' everything man, except the pillow, which I'd shoved in at the last minute on my way out the door. I must have hidden it there at some point and since first starting on it when I was sick, I'd always had quite a bit. I never realised any was missing.

A wave of nausea rose, I thought back to the border crossing and the X-ray machine. All it would have taken, was for them to open my bag and I would have been calling my family from a Vietnamese prison, banged up abroad for opium trafficking. I'd probably still be there now! Paranoia crept in fast, what if this shit was found on me? This is a communist country where as far as I knew, 'The Man' might search my belongings at any time! What the fuck was I going to do? Really there was only one option. I knew what I had to do. I certainly wasn't going to throw it away. I was going to have to smoke it, and smoke it quick! I had no rolling papers though, so I hid the opium under my mattress and made my way downstairs to find some skins.

I got lost in the close streets and eventually found myself back on a main road. 'You want to by some ganja?' a guy on a moped offered.

'No, I don't, I would like to by some papers though.'

'No problem, get on my bike and I will take you to get some.'

Fair enough I thought. I didn't have many dollars on me, so if I was robbed, he could take it. I jumped on his bike and we took off into Saigon. 'I have good ganja,' he said, 'One hundred thousand dong.'

'I only have American dollars on me,' I said trying to talk my way out of it.

No problem, ten dollar, ok.'

Ah, fuck it I thought. I'm going to be here for a month so if they sell weed this openly it must be fine, I relaxed a little about the opium. Still, in the back of my mind I knew that this country was different to Cambodia, and if I got caught here, I'd be truly fucked. The two close calls I'd had with drugs in the last twenty four hours were running though my head. The night before outside the Heart of darkness, where if in that moment I had said, 'Yes' I would have been marched to a cash machine. And a few hours earlier, where if I happened to not be ridiculed for looking like a girl in my passport picture, I could have been well and truly fucked as an international opium trafficker across the Cambodian/Vietnamese border.

The guy dropped me off on some random street corner, where I waited fifteen or so minutes before he returned. Once we were on the road again he passed me the bag and I stuffed it in my pocket, then handed over the cash. A thought hit me, I was now in possession of opium and marijuana but still didn't have any way to smoke it! This was spiralling out of control. The guy dropped me off at the same place he'd picked me up. 'I still need those papers man!'

'The shop behind you sell them,' he said, and with a wave and a smile he drove off.

Fuckin' incredible, I thought it was best to drop the weed off at home, before buying rolling papers, it seemed safer that way. The weed was at least marijuana, but the packet had been padded out with paper and the buds were full of seeds. So what, I was in Vietnam and was fully sorted for drugs, again!

An email from Thailand

The papers sold to me were thick, looked recycled and had no sticky bit. I laced a joint with opium and stood in the bathroom blowing the smoke out through the extract fan, then floated downstairs to find somewhere to get online and update my family on my location. I hadn't heard of Facebook at the time and was using good ol' fashioned Yahoo. There was a message in my inbox from my friend Huey who was living on Koh Tao Island in the gulf of Thailand. He'd been there for the last few months studying Thai boxing. It basically read 'Brother I'm fighting in the ring at the start of April!! Where are you? You've gotta' try and make it to the island for it!!'

Fuckin' hell, there was just over a week and I was at least four days travel away, probably more. I had to make it to the fight, there was no fuckin' questions about it. I checked my guide book. If I made my way half way up Vietnam to a town called Hue, there was a border crossing into Laos. From there I could go to a town called Vang Vieng which the guide book said was notorious for drug use. From there I could head down to the Thai border, then make my way to Bangkok, and from there on to Koh Tao. So with no time to lose and using the guide book, I got a taxi ride to the train station and bought an overnight train ticket leaving ten pm that evening.

I wasn't happy travelling with the weed and opium where any thorough search would reveal it. So I wiped the opium onto some of the papers then emptied most of the tobacco out of some fags and fed the laced papers inside. Then I filled them back up with tobacco until they pretty much looked normal again. I did the same the same thing with the weed, but broke it up, then fed it in instead. Satisfied that you couldn't tell what was inside the cigarettes, and with a few hours to go, I went downstairs, found a cash machine, from which I withdrew a million dong, (One American dollar equalled sixteen thousand Vietnamese dong) and found a place that sold beer to pass the time.

It wasn't really a pub as such, more a load of kids sized tables and chairs on the side of the road where you could buy a two litre milk bottle full of beer for eighteen thousand dong. Nine o'clock rolled around soon enough, so I bid my farewells to the people I'd met and grabbed my stuff from the room. The ol' boy was still sat there watching TV; I carefully stood over the retarded teen on the floor. What a fuckin' life? Poor fucker, poor fuckin' all of them.

I located my cabin on the train, and to my happy surprise found that had I booked a bed for the eighteen or so hour journey north. My roommates were a couple in their thirties or forties, (It's hard to tell with South East Asian people) and their young daughter. I pretty much fell asleep before the train left the station and was woken the next morning to the call for breakfast. Pot noodles, nice, I wasn't going to have to try and eat anything too risky. There was no air-con and the passageways were full of smokers, so I thought I'd lessen my load of drugs and try a sneaky joint in the toilet. The toilet lid was down so that made a decent enough surface to prepare everything on. I was nearly finished when the train lurched sideways, which led to a splooshing as the contents from the toilet which turned out to be filled to the brim, soaked my legs and flip flopped feet from the knees down. I opened the lid and it was full with, shit, piss and tampons. I was close to puking as I looked around for a basin to wash the shit off. No basin! Oh my God! It was so fuckin' dirty and vile I didn't know what to do. There had to be a water supply on the train somewhere, so with little else for it, I smoked the joint out the window and went searching for something to wash the God awful foulness off me! There was nothing, I looked everywhere. The Pot noodles had come from a solitary water boiler and they wouldn't let me use that. I just had to grin and bear it until I got to Hue.

Later the guy who I shared the cabin with asked if he could chat with me so he could practise his English. Turned out he was the manager of a Vietnamese version of the Spice girls and his mate in Hue owned a five star hotel which, after a quick phone call, he had me booked in for ten dollars along with a taxi to pick me up from the station. It's amazing how life can go from shit to five stars so quickly sometimes!

I walked into the hotel and a disapproving receptionist checked on the phone before showing me my room. While I looked and stunk like shit, the other guests in the lobby were in suits.

And so it was, from the simple matter of talking to the person next to me I found myself in a hot bath for the first time since I'd reached Asia. I smoked a black joint, had a beer, and slept like a baby, bliss.

The next morning rolled around and I still had loads of gear to get through. Apart from Huey fighting, Vietnam just didn't feel right to me. I wanted to sit around in the jungle or on a river and get stoned. This place just felt that's not the kind of thing that Vietnam is about. So yup, without a doubt I wanted to head into the unknown. The plan was to get to that town written up in the book for having a sever drug problem. The town full of terrible things, such as marijuana and magic mushrooms. I was going to try and find a town called Vang Vieng.

I still had a lot of gear to get through so I found a backpackers, got a dorm and waited for my roommates to rise. They turned out to be two guys, so initially I was confident I'd have a posse for the day to get loaded with, but as fuckin' luck would have it, neither of them smoked. So I just put it to them straight. 'Look, in that case, I'm going to try and finish all this opium and ganja by myself today, can you keep an eye on me? And ah yeah, my insurance card is in my wallet if anything goes wrong.'

We had a good laugh and took a taxi to where the locals lived, 'cause one of the guys had a thing for eating where they ate. We sat on those little plastic tables and chairs that the Asians seem to like so much, and ate what they ate, drank what they drank then went to a bar and found a game of pool. The whole time I kept smoking joints laced thick with opium, the tar heavy on my lungs as I ploughed it into my system. I wasn't worried about the weed, but I had no idea about how much opium it took to kill you. At some point though I'd managed it. All the drugs were gone, man I was high as a kite and shit at pool, the music was playing and I was in 'Nam Baby, and I was feeling great. Although I'd only been in 'Nam for two nights I'd had a fuckin' new experience in life. And that's what it's all about isn't it? The first times, and the lost moments. It's nice to settle into a new place until you're a regular, but sometimes, if you're truly a traveller, ya've gotta' keep on moving. Gotta go from the guy who thinks he knows something to the guy that realises he knows nothing and only has their basic skills of life. That's the rush man innit? That's the real high.

The next morning I sorted my ride to Savannakhet in Laos.

Ya'd never fuckin' believe it but once we got to the border, I tried paying in Dong, now I can't remember how much it was, but the cunts charged me double for not havin' U.S. dollars!! That's another one of the other interesting things with travel, there's always someone tryin' to fuck ya'.

Savannakhet

When it's that hot, do you ever really sleep when you're on a holiday like this, or is it just a continual state of passing out and coming round? The ever present constant, is the clack, clacking of the fan above you somewhere. I crawled my way out of bed, checked out of the guesthouse and took a passing Tuk Tuk to the Savannakhet bus station. There I purchased a ticket to Vang Vieng and grabbed a seat in front of a group of Buddhist monks. Traditional music was playing and the bus was like a furnace. It was when I went to put my music on that I realised my usual pocket for storing one of my passports, phone and Ipod was empty! Empty what the fuck?! A vague memory came back of me hiding the contents of the pocket under my mattress before I crashed, fuck! My guesthouse didn't even have a name, just a giant Arabic looking squiggle.

Running I leapt from the bus. Pete! There was Irish Pete from Phnom Penh. He was sat in the dust, hiding in the shade from the heat of the morning sun. 'Pete I can't hang around, I've left my passport at the guesthouse, I'll be back in a minute.' I came out at an intersection and was confused that there was a roundabout. I didn't remember that. Which way? It had to be the road straight opposite. There were a few tense moments as I looked up and down the deserted road for a Tuk Tuk before one came into view. I remembered there was a pharmacy come bar that I'd bought some Valium at the night before with a red rose sign opposite my place, but my driver didn't understand a word I said. He did however understand my panic and we took off in the direction I was pointing. Not that street, we tried the next, not that one either.

He pulled up at a doctor's office and we rushed inside, thankfully the doctor spoke good English. I told him about the red rose sign and thankfully he knew where I meant. With a smile the driver took me there, my panic abated but worry still consumed me. How much was a British passport worth in a place like this? The guesthouse was a few streets over; I found the room still in the shape I had left it in. And still there under the mattress was the passport, Ipod and phone. Thank fuck for that! We raced back to the bus depot to find not only was Pete not there, but neither was the bus! Fuck, I'd left my backpack on the bus! In the backpack was my other passport and other one of my bank cards. I always keep one bank card and one passport separate in case I get robbed or something. My driver stuck with me and once again he took the initiative. This time he went to the ticket office. The bus had only left two minutes before. He grabbed me, we jumped on the Tuk Tuk and away we went charging up the road in pursuit. Five minutes later we caught up and with me frantically waving and him tooting his horn, the bus pulled over. I tipped my man well and settled onto my seat with smiles and handshakes from the monks. It was about four pm when we pulled up at Vientiane and everybody piled off the bus. Vientiane is the capital of Laos and is about half way up the country on the border with Thailand. If you picture Laos as an elephants head, the top of which touches Burma and China, the trunk reaches down between Thailand and Vietnam where it ends on the border of Cambodia. Vientiane is at the top of the trunk, kinda' where its mouth would be.

I said to the driver, 'Vang Vieng' and he replied, 'Yes, stay on bus.' A ride straight to Vang Vieng? Maybe this day wasn't going to be so stressful after all. I bought the driver, me and the luggage guy a beer each and we shared a fat joint that they produced. Once we got 'round to the other side of town they pulled into another bus station.

'Here you take bus to Vang Vieng,' the driver said. Then he helped me buy the ticket and made sure I got on the right bus. It was a locals' one, not a tourists' one and there were no seats left. I thought fuck it, no point complaining, I'd had enough

worries for one day, so I sat on some sacks of rice, took two Valiums and crashed out. I hadn't had the ride all the way that I thought I was getting but hey we can't always be that lucky. And hey, even though only momentarily, I'd still made some friends and shared a beer with the locals, who in turn had made sure I'd get where I needed to go.

Sound asleep across the sacks of rice, I was woken by high pitched yelling, laughter and being slapped. In a doped up haze of confusion I opened my eyes to an elderly lady going berserk and hitting me on the legs. She was sat on one of those little plastic chairs they like and was touching her hair while pointing at my feet. I had no idea what the fuck was going on, but gathered that I must have touched her head with my foot. I found out later this is very insulting to some Laos people. But for fucks sake come on, how was I to know; besides I was fuckin' sleeping man! Some people around me were laughing at the scene but I still didn't really have a clue as to what the fuck was happening. I tried apologising, but I guess our ability to speak one another's language was about equal. Sweet fuck all. I thought I was doing alright in placating her, when she yelled to the front of the bus. Next thing ya' know two guys started pushing their way past people towards me. I started to get worried now and jumped up with my hands out trying to calm the whole situation down. Then it happened.....

People were laughing, she was rubbing her head with one hand, hitting me with the other, the two guys were only feet away now and didn't look like they wanted to talk. And then a fulla' on the seat beside me stood up. He had a square jaw, square glasses, short hair, and an AK-47 with the butt sawn off. The laughing ceased, she froze and so did the two guys. The AK was aimed straight at them. A bus full of people have never shut the fuck up faster. It was this guy's turn to yell, and everybody listened. With a complete lack of English but pretty obvious hand signals he offered me his seat. He made the lady stand and offered her the sacks of rice, and sat down in her place. He then made the two guys sit on the floor at his feet. The adrenaline had kicked in hard and with the appearance of the AK-47? Well, although still numb from the valium, a tight chested feeling from the violent realisation that I wasn't in Kansas anymore, threatened to drown me.

As I sat on my new seat the Asian guy next to me held out his hand, and in very educated English said, 'Hi I'm Thomas.' And we got into a brief conversation about how beautiful Laos was, and how much of a shame the wars in Asia had been. 'Look,' he said, 'I'm going to get right to the point. It seems fate has brought us together. You are obviously looking for new challenges and experiences in life, but maybe also you want to make a difference too? Maybe you are meant to come and work for me? You see I run a landmine clearing business.'

Now hey, I said way back at the start that I was after new experiences and shit, but clearing landmines? He could stick that right up his ass! 'Look I've been through Cambodia man, and I fully respect what ya' doing but there's no fuckin' chance. I'm here as a tourist.'

He bit his bottom lip and seemed lost in thought for a moment, 'Yes I understand, it is difficult getting volunteers.'

Volunteer to clear mines? Mother fucker you got the wrong cat here. I started to wonder about the incident before. To start off with, the guy with the gun had said nothing. The AK-47 had been sat upright between Mr Machine gun and Mr Landmine here, so that no one could see it. In the half second but half hour that it took for him to stand up and point the rifle, I only had time for a sharp choke of air. The man with the gun's voice had rattled like the sound of the automatic weapon as he commanded

silence and order. Had he given me his seat so Mr Landmine here could find or guilt trip a new employee?

Five or so silent minutes went by, then Thomas pulled a business card out of his shirt pocket and passed it to me. 'Hey look, I have an offer for you. Take my card and if you ever get in big trouble in Laos, you show them this. It is a get out of jail free card. It says that you work for me clearing mines. All the people who work for me have a free reign to spend their time off however they want, because; well I think you can understand. The Government and Police all know who I am and you would be released into my custody. So if you take this we must make a deal.' He paused and looked straight into my eyes. 'If you ever have to use this card, you must spend one year working for me. With me, you stand a better chance of living than the mandatory Death sentence the Government hands out for drug trafficking.'

Hey, I ain't no drug trafficker but I knew my lifestyle in Asia was risky, and I thought back to that night outside The heart of darkness and the border crossing in Vietnam. So with a promise and a handshake, I took the card and put it in my passport. After all, it was better to take the card and not need it, than to need the card and not have it.

Although the last five or so minutes had been mind bending enough to keep the most tired of people twisting and turning in their beds I felt I safe again, and with a reassuring smile from him, the valium took hold once more and I dozed back off.

Later I was woken in darkness by Mr machine gun and he said, 'Vang Vieng.' The bus was pulled up on the side of the road and I exited to handshakes from some and grins from others. Outside the bus, the luggage guy was stood there. I questioned, 'Vang Vieng?' 'Yes, Vang Vieng.' He got back on and the bus then pulled off. I found myself standing in pitch black surrounded on all sides by the shadows of trees, thinking to myself, 'Well this is a pretty cruel trick. They've dumped me in the middle of nowhere.'

Dismayed, I looked around, and about fifty feet up on the opposite side of the road, a fire was burning. Walking towards it I saw it was in fact a barbeque with kebabs being cooked by a solitary man. 'Vang Vieng,' I asked. 'Yes, Vang Vieng.' And he extended a hand towards a path leading through the silhouette of the jungle. This was all a little confusing, Vang Vieng was s'pose to be some sort of party town, apart from the chirping creatures of the night, me and the barbeque guy I was out here on my own, close to being engulfed by the nowhereness of my surroundings. Only the guy's face was lit up in the darkness and with that all too familiar grin, he nodded in the direction of the path, 'Vang Vieng'. It was starting to feel more like Dusk Till Dawn but I thought fuck it, unless I'm sleeping on the side of the road with this dude, I've just gotta' push through this fear of the unknown ahead of me. I pulled out a torch from my first aid bag, and with it to light my way, I stepped off the road and into the trees. I was rewarded and punished in quick succession. Rewarded because although from the road the trees seemed like a forest they were only a few feet thick. It then opened out onto a monstrous, vacant car park type area, the glow of streetlamps stretched across from a series of buildings with their backs to me a few hundred metres away. Punished 'cause the batteries on the torch lasted only those few feet of the path before dying. I used my lighter the rest of the way. After I crossed the car park and then found a way through the buildings, I ended up on a gravel road which brought to mind scenes from the Wild West. It was lined with bars and hotels all framed by the green and yellow signs of Beer Laos. I had only just started up the street, and was still trying to comprehend the complete opposite of this to where I had been just seconds before when a beautiful blonde girl came up, and with an English

accent informed me that I was to join her at the Smile Bar when I had found a place to stay. The Smile Bar it was then. I didn't wanna' stay at the first few hotels 'cause they were all above restaurants. It was then that I noticed the strangest thing, there was no music playing in any of these joints. Not music but TV. TV being stared at by zombified farangs. One place would have Friends on, the next, Family guy, the one after, The Simpsons. Then it would start again, Friends, Family guy, The Simpsons. It was uncanny.

I wandered through this for a while until I saw a bar with no TV, a pool table, and JD's written above the door, that'd do nicely. I took the place across the road which for the grand sum of seven dollars a night I got the standard, double bed, fan and toilet.

Vang Vieng

I crossed over to JD's and found a bald headed fulla' going by the name of Raz holding the bar up.

'Hey man,' I said, 'do you know where I can get some weed?'

'Yeah my mate's leaving town tomorrow, he's looking at selling his. He'll be back at some point just get his off of him.'

I thought about it but the call of the girl and her invite to the Smile Bar took over. Raz said to turn right outta' JD's and take a left, I'd find it at the end of the road.

I walked off into the dark, Guns n roses fading away with the lights above the street. I only knew I had to turn left, so I carried on down the road till I reached the end. I was at a T junction, so left it was. There was no one around and the buildings had evaporated with the music. A few more minutes of walking with the moon illuminating the road as my only source of guidance, until, off in the distance there was an ever growing light, followed by the sound of laughter. 'The Smile Bar,' I thought. 'I must be there, see, put myself out there, walked off into God knows where and got rewarded for it.' Under the glow of a single bulb I saw about ten or so local people, sitting around laughing and joking with each other.

'The Smile Bar?'

'No, that way,' some guy yelled, pointing further up the road.

Oh well at least I was on the right track. I moved on from their warm glow and continued, heartened by the fact that they had confirmed I was going the right way. Jeez it had been a long day. What the fuck was up with that bus journey? I like an adventure but sheesh that was a little too much, such is life though eh. Better an AK-47 on the bus than a newspaper on the tube to work right?

I didn't have a watch on me but I must have been wandering out in the darkness for about twenty minutes. Where the fuck was the place? What the fuck was I doing? Fuck this, I was walkin' on a gravel road in total fuckin' silence, there was no music or bar down here. I gave up and decided to head back to that JD's place. I passed the singing group of locals, the derision of their laughter following me like the shadows from the moon.

Back at the bar; 'Ya' find it?' Raz asked.

'Nah, walked to the end of the road and ended up lost out there.'

'You been walkin' the whole time? Ha! Anyway this is my mate Han, he's the one with the weed.'

'Hey how's it?' I said.

'Yeah, cool, look man I'm leavin' tomorrow. Raz says ya lookin' for some smoke.'

'Fuck yeah'.

Han pulled out a bag with about a quarter of an ounce made up of four solid buds. Fuckin' rewarded. 'How much dude?'

'Well it's about two dollars worth so just buy me a couple of beers and we'll call it even.'

'Tyah? Are you sure?'

'Yeah man an ounce is about ten dollars here, really fuckin' nice outdoor, and seedless too! Raz can take ya' there tomorrow if ya' like?'

'Fuck yeah.' So I ordered the beers.

A tall Laos guy in a leather jacket served the drinks, and with an extended hand and a 'Hi I'm JD. You must be new here.' we were three big fuckin' bottles of Beer Laos richer.

'Here do you want to look at the menu?' he said, 'The special' are inside.'

I wasn't really hungry, and was about to put it down on the bar with a polite thank you when Raz said, 'Go on open it.' I checked a look between JD, Raz and Han and played the game. Just as I was prising it open JD spoke. 'Wait, wait, wait, it's your first time in my bar, so you must drink Laos Laos. It is tradition and considered very rude in my culture if you say no.'

What fuckin' choice did I have? Whatever this Laos Laos shit was, I'd give it a go.

JD reached behind him and grabbed the only bottle sat on the back of the bar. We serve two alcoholic drinks here, Beer Laos, and Laos Laos. You have the Beer Laos now drink the Laos Laos. As he poured the liquid in to a glass it seemed as if the music had quietened. I focused on the ever growing measure of spirit in front of me. 'Here drink this then open the menu. Welcome to JD's, friend of the traveller.'

There was no lemon and salt or shit like that. The bottle didn't even have dead scorpions floating in it. So without a thought I took it all in one mouthful, shame it took three swallows to get it down.

With eyes watering and cheeks bulging I slid that swimming pool flavoured shit down my throat, and like a man, or half a man slammed the empty glass down on the bar. Now like fuckin' Charlie as his goddamn Chocolate factory, and hoping I had the golden ticket in my next wrapper, I opened the menu.

Marijuana

In a joint 25,000 kip

On a pizza 100,000 kip

In a milkshake 75,000 kip

Magic mushroom

On own 50,000 kip

On a pizza 100,000 kip

In a milkshake 75,000 kip

Opium

In a joint 50'00 kip

In a pipe 50,000 kip

In a milkshake 50'000 kip

I savoured the moment to myself for a second, then glanced around at the others, the same expression as Charlie, when the penny finally dropped, 'Cause I got the golden ticket!'

'One joint of opium,' I looked around, actually make it three. Boys let's get high.'

'Nah,' said Raz, 'I'd rather some Yaa Baa if ya buying. Costs the same.'

Yaa Baa, what the fuck is that?'

Chocolate bruv, chocolate, You like speed?'

'Yeah.'

'Here come next door with me. One minute JD.'

We went to the hut next door, it was a pizza shack. Han stayed behind with a, 'I gotta make the bus in the morning.'

Like JD's, people were lounging about on raised seating areas covered in pillows on either side of the path that led through it. Three young Laos guys were playing Alex the kid on an old Sega Megadrive.

Over the speakers, Jim Morrison was breaking on through to the other side, while a few separate groups chatted in a low murmur. 'Hey Raz,' one said, getting up with arms open and a wide grin.

'Two please Gecko,' Raz said. And we followed the guy out the back.

The one he'd called Gecko whispered to another guy who went out to the front for a second, and returned with two red tablets that had WY stamped on the top of them.

'Fifty thousand each bruv,' Raz said. 'Or ten dollars for the two, depending on what ya' got.' So I passed over the cash and an elaborate bong was produced with a straw on the end instead of a bowl.

'You have cigarette?' Gecko asked. 'Yeah sure.' and passed over the packet. Gecko pulled all the smokes out and tore the foil bit from the middle. Next, he measured a width with a lighter, folded it over and ripped an inch wide piece off length ways. Turning the lighter down low, Gecko then carefully burnt the paper off the back side of the foil and straightened it out until it was smooth. Following this he shaped the foil around the lighter so it made a trough shape. And there we were, one canoe looking piece of tin foil, one bong, one lighter on low, and two red tablets.

'You first,' Raz said.

Gecko put one of the pills in the foil trough. The steel guard bit had been removed from the lighter. He held it under the gear, just beneath the end of the straw and said, 'When you see the smoke suck on the bottle.' No need to tell me twice. What happened next surprised me. This seemingly solid tablet started to liquefy from the bottom up, thick smoke crept out of each bursting bubble. 'Suck, suck,' Gecko and Raz said together. I sucked. As I inhaled the water in the bong started to boil. The smoke went up through the straw, filtered through the water and filled the inside of the bottle, before filling the inside of my lungs. It had a smooth creamy chocolaty flavoured way about it. Then my heart began to quicken, then my wariness began to dissolve like the lights of JD's earlier as I walked off into the night. I inhaled more and more.

'See,' Raz said, 'I told ya', ya' should of stayed, but no, you had to go chasing pussy. Hey, here let Gecko finish it off.'

'Cool.' is all I got out. 'Cause suddenly I was awake, momentarily furry and high, man, fuck I was high.

'My turn, out the way. Watch how a professional does it.' Gecko was ripping, burning and preparing another trough to smoke off of.

'I'm ready,' he said, and put a new Yaa Baa on the sheet. He then held the lot on a steep angle, the tiny flame quite a distance below. The smoke exploded off the foil and up the straw. 'If you not careful, can catch fire,' he said, looking at me, without having to know where the lighter was. He looked reptilian. 'You know why they call me Gecko?' It was chilling. And looking me straight in the eyes, blood rushing, he puckered his lips and let out a sound. 'EH ohhh, eh ohhh.' Fuckin hell, he sounded just like a Gecko!!!

Raz choked and spluttered a bit but next thing ya know, a little wiser and two more Yaa Baa tablets later we made it back to JD's and smoked that joint of opium.

Lizards, speed and rivers

My phone was dead and it didn't matter, I was happy to lose time and date, 'cause that's when you're truly on holiday innit', when you think it's Tuesday but really it's Sunday, and besides, it doesn't matter. The only time you can meet someone is sunset 'cause that's the only surety of the day. So at some point anyway, I woke, showered, cried while I farted liquid haemorrhoid fire into the toilet, (Which thankfully I could sit on while I suffered) then made my way to the pizzeria. All the guys who'd worked there the night before were passed out on the pillows in front of the TV, the console still switched on. The guy at the counter sat me down. 'Here is menu,' that knowing smile. I opened it up and sure enough, marijuana, magic mushrooms and opium. 'Do you have Yaa Baa?'

'Why yeah, sure. Hey Gecko, Gecko, clean the place up.' That must have been a code word or some shit cause Gecko woke himself up and was right into action. 'You have cigarette?'

It was the same ritual that I had the whole time smoking Yaa Baa in Laos and later Thailand. Key to the whole thing is you've gotta get the foil to smoke it off, and in order to do that, first ya gotta get the paper off the back of the lining of ya' cigarette pack. Now there are two ways to do this, the easiest is to simply fill a pot with warm water and soak the inch wide strips in it until the glue dissolves, then you can just slip it off. Carefully mind you, the whole thing rips pretty easily. The second is the faster but trickier method of burning the paper off, but if you get it wrong even for a millisecond the big flame from the paper burning, melts the foil and you can't straighten it out after, it just crumbles up. Then you've gotta shape the trough by wrapping it round the lighter, and finally set that lighter to an almost zero flame, otherwise the Yaa Baa catches on fire and everything burns to shit. Practice makes perfect I guess.

Gecko told me about the no drugs on the street policy. You see, you could buy whatever drugs you wanted in the restaurants but if the local militia, kinda the same as the guy on the bus with the AK-47 catch you, it's a gun in the face and a trip to the one cash machine in town for a five hundred dollar withdrawal. Or the equivalent in Laos Kip, which was basically ten thousand to the dollar. 'Especially by the river,' I was told. 'They do busts at the Smile Bar and the others down on the river at least once a week. The militia come with their guns and search everybody. If they find drug, you have gun and then cash machine.' It was good advice, and once this had been pointed out, I did notice there were armed guys stalking about the place, looking for a retirement plan. But I guess rules keep a place like Vang Vieng under control.

After my morning or whatever time of day it was, let's just say breakfast pick me up, Gecko pointed me in the direction of the cash machine and I withdrew the maximum, 700,000 kip. Fuck it, it was millionaire time so I took another 700 K and went up to my room to roll around on it. By the time I came out Raz was lying down on one of the two little balconies that framed the outside of JD's, with a joint in one hand and beer in the other.

I was curious, the place was deserted, where as last night it was like any party resort, just with more television and less music.

'They're all down by the river,' Raz said. 'It's the whole point of the town. You rent out an inner tube for fifty thousand kip for the day and they drive ya' about five miles up the road. Then ya' float back down. There's loads of bars and they've got swings into the water and all kinds of shit. It's a good laugh, ya' gotta do it at least once while ya' here.'

‘Maybe tomorrow dude.’ And that was it, we settled down to beer, Yaa Baa and opium for the afternoon. It was quiet bliss. Some local moto-taxi guy came in and chatted with us, he eventually managed to talk us in to playing him at pool for a bottle of Coke. He won four times in a row. The guy was a nice character, and in a town like this, where, ‘I’ll be there for you,’ is the most popular song you’ll hear, to spend a day with locals like him, JD and Gecko is a treat.

An older boy showed up, mates of Raz, he’d just bought a pound of weed for a hundred dollars. I could have an ounce for a tenner he said after we smoked a joint of his sticky, seedless outdoor buds, and since there was fuck all else to do in that sweltering heat on that gravel road to nowhere, we paid up the bill and moseyed on down to his place.

It was a nice chance to see some of the town, which must have only been three hundred metres wide and about half a mile long. This guy’s place was on the river, it was the first time I’d seen it. He was in quite a big hotel considering the rest of the buildings around us, and there was a strict no smoking pot out on his balcony rule. Apparently they had just finished a joint the other night when the militia appeared round the corner guns in hand and bullied everyone into emptying their pockets. Fucked eh? We had no scales and shit like that so it was the old world fair trade, he’d make a pile of pot big enough for me to hand over ten dollars for.

We had it about right, I appreciated his generosity and we agreed on pretty much an ounce, he offered more, but, hey, it was five pounds. Who gives a shit over a few joints right? I could always buy more. I asked about the opium ‘cause five bucks a joint is a little steep compared to what I was paying in Cambodia. The Ol’ Boy, reckoned to wait a few minutes and he’d go have a word with the fulla’ on reception. This gave me a chance to look out at the river. To my right was an island about thirty feet from us that had a series of proper shitty ol’ handmade lookin’ bridges runnin’ from the mainland to it. One of which was just to our left and cut right in front of us. That’s where the Smile and other bars were located.

On the opposite side of the river, about fifty metres away was a group of bungalows, which I thought would be awesome to stay in. They were your typical Thai looking beach hut. A plan came to me, I’d drop this weed off, chuff on some chocolate and go for a nosey now that I knew where to go.

The Ol’ boy showed up with a local in tow, and they waved me in to the room.

‘You wan’ opium?’ The receptionist guy asked.

‘Yep.’

He pulled out a folded up piece of actual tin foil and unwrapped it. The opium was laid thick on it, about two centimetres wide, and at least five long. There was a fuckin’ lot there.

‘How much,’

It should be one hundred thousand but because you are friend of him,’ pointing at the Ol’ boy, ‘you can have for eighty thousand.’

Saweeet!!

‘Done.’ and I counted out the cash. We laced a fat joint, smoked that shit, then me and Raz went and hung out with Gecko for a while. I followed everyone’s advice and left my shit in my room, then went for a tour of Vang Vieng. After a magic mushroom milk shake of course.

The shake was vile, Gecko had treated me to a glass of milk with whole mushrooms in it, he hadn’t even blended it up. I tried to swallow it as quick as possible but the stalks kept getting stuck in my throat. An automatic gag reflex to the taste of mushrooms has been honed into me from when we used to collect shopping

bags full of the fuckers back in New Zealand during my teenage years. Anyway red faced and another red tablet down, I started my mission.

At its widest the island was only about fifty metres across and two hundred metres long. I started off at the top end next to the hotel where I'd scored the opium. The bridges to and from it looked as if they'd collapse at any time. They were a mixture of old wood and bamboo strapped together, and bounced with your rhythm as you walked over them. The first place I came to was run by a chatty elderly lady who tried to talk me into buying her bar for five thousand dollars. I'd have to pack it up at the end of the dry season though because the whole lot would be submerged by the river during the rainy part of the year. She offered me Laos Laos, on the house of course to go with my beer, much to my stomach's distaste. From there I made my way on the open side of the island, the side closest to the towering peaks directly on the other side of the river, that loomed a half a mile or so above. There was a series of closed bars and hammock dwelling locals, further down I came across the Smile Bar and its huge fire pit, lined with wooden sleepers and sitting areas. More hammocks were strung up about the place and it was there swinging in one of the hammocks that I drank another Beer Laos and waited for the mushrooms.

It was a mild trip, barely more than a weird skunk stone, but it was pleasant enough. The mushrooms had been thin and gangly looking fuckin' things. Not like the laboratory grown ones you found in Camden Town London when they were legal, or the monstrosities we would bring home from our foraging forays in Auckland, so I hadn't expected anything to fall on. It was nice really; I got to have the odd warm electrical sensations across my skin, and at first a disjointedness, then a harmony with my surroundings. It was only me there and the guy behind the bar. He brought me another beer and then rolled a joint for us to share. Once again I received a warning that tourists weren't allowed to bring drugs down to the island, but I was fine at the time 'cause no one was there and besides he was a local and it was his joint. In case I was acting odd I told him about the mushrooms and he smiled that genuine smile. After a while he thanked me for coming to Laos before disappearing back up to the bar, leaving me with my thoughts and the melodies of Jimi Hendrix playing in the background. What more could you ask for? The odd person on a truck tyre inner tube floated by, a random drunken giggle and splash of a flip flop covered hand acting as a paddle the only unnatural noise to shatter the serenity, if you can call laughter unnatural.

As the sun made his way behind the jagged peaks, the shade he left behind made its casual way towards me. The few wisps of cloud changed from white, to pink, orange and then purple, with Jimi whispering 'Mary' from the recesses behind me. I had the urge to check the internet, yes there was internet; one bank machine and one internet cafe. I thanked my new found friend at the bar and with a plastic smile accepted another shot of the awful chlorine flavoured Laos Laos, then went to catch up with the real world.

I'd received a message from a friend of a friend, who was gonna' be passing through Laos and they wanted to meet up. So I gave my hotel's address with a message that I'd be in Vang Vieng for a few more days, and then updated the family with pretty much the same information. Night was on proper by the time I'd cried my way through another shit. The haemorrhoids on my ass were bleeding profusely and I was afraid to fart anymore 'cause brown and yellow, foamy watery shit would explode from me with such voracity, that one time, although my ass was pointing down it hit the bowl so hard, it sprayed all up my back and onto the wall behind me! I didn't know what to do about it; there was no doctor or hospital in Vang Vieng at that

point. It was literally a one horse town like something in a Clint Eastwood flick, only surrounded on both sides by tall un-climbable mountain peaks, they were exactly how you see them pictured in flash looking paintings hanging up in the Chinese takeaway above the little golden cat with his waving paw. For three dollars I bought a flick knife from a shop. It had a polished wooden handle and with the touch of a button the three long by one inch wide blade exploded out. It was one of the coolest things I'd ever seen and since they are banned in New Zealand, I wanted one. Rebel without a clue I guess.

I went back to JD's and The Ol' Boy was there talkin' to some big ginger fulla'. As I went to pull up a seat the big dumb fuck said to me, 'What the fuck do you want? All you trendy cunts around this place are ruining it. Fuck off!' Well, that took me by surprise. I'd been here two days and had only seen a handful of people, and none of them I would call 'trendy'. He was a bit too big to argue with and you never knew what people were on in a town like Vang Vieng. I swallowed my pride and went over to the pool table where a beefed up fulla' from Liverpool was handing over a bottle of Coke to the guy with the Tuk Tuk, that as usual was parked up outside. People from Liverpool are 'affectionately' called Scousers by the rest of England and the fulla' offered up a joint, which I in-kind laced with opium till it was black and soggy, then we blasted that while I lost game after game of pool. I was never any good. I came close to winning a game of one handed, but that was about the best I managed.

'Hey you want smoke some 'eroin?' he offered.

Heroin just has not been part of my scene, me and my friends take recreational drugs like cocaine and MDMA to make a good time better. Not to become the slaves that smack gives birth to. But fuck it, I was feeling adventurous. Scenes from the movie 'Trainspotting' started running through my head. We went to a bar just up from JD's and there we were taken into the toilet, and for ten dollars each some young guy tipped out a powder on to the foil and burnt it. It tasted like shit and nothing happened. The scouser fulla' kicked off, and the guy apologised saying come back tomorrow night and he'd sell us grams of pure China White for twenty bucks. I was kinda glad really, I have a tendency to dive head first into enjoyments of the flesh and mind and can't even give up smoking fags, let alone the gremlin on ya back that is Heroin. So anyway, the guy from the bar said to come back the next day and he'll give us a free sample. We were accompanied by the 'I'll be there for you.' of the Friends show opening credits.

We went back to JD's and sank more beer, dodged the Laos Laos and accepted a grovelling apology from the Ol' boy who had been mortified by the big ginger cunt's attitude. Raz showed up and we smoked joints of opium, more of Gecko's Yaa Baa and chatted shit about everything. I mentioned to JD about the heroin and he was gutted with me. 'Bryce heroin? Please don't do this.' His face said it all. I think it was the last thing he suspected of me. Although opium is the base for heroin they are totally different substances. Kinda like the difference between speed and crystal meth or crack and cocaine.

After Laos I felt no, withdrawals symptoms at all, no grating need, nothing, just coughed up a load of black shit and struggled with my sore ass. Sitting on a bar stool was out of the question, I had to lie down on the balcony areas and swap sides continuously. We gossiped about what may or may not have been a local urban legend. More than likely it was true though because JD'd told us. Apparently, recently some guy had drunk an opium tea then went to a different place and had a lemon shake. Now that's a no no here, 'cause although I didn't fuckin' know it, when citric

acid mixes with opium it turns into smack. So instead of having a gram of opium in his belly he had a gram of heroin, and that was enough to kill.

In Vang Vieng the militia enforced a late night curfew and forced all the restaurants closed and the people off the streets. Gecko had a word with some guy around his age carrying an AK-47 and he shepherded us up the road to a place that had its curtains drawn and all the big spenders and fiends curled up on pillows, talking shit around tables. It was the same each night; the rest of the town were sent to bed at gun point and those getting high were holed away in one place or another smoking chocolate, green, black or white.

The opium seemed to act as a sleeping agent against the Yaa Baa and sleep was never too hard to find, and if it was, there was always the valium. A few days later I woke and checked the internet and found my friend of a friend was already in town and checked in upstairs. I went and knocked on her door. Sarah who I'd never met, answered with a smile and a questioning, 'Bryce?' 'Yes, I'm your friendly tour guide, what would you like to do today?'

'Tubing,' she said, 'Everybody who comes to Vang Vieng is supposed to do this tubing thing.'

'Ok, let's do it.' It was about time I did something other than get loaded. So I stashed my weed, packed a Yaa Baa and we went up to the depot or office, whatever you wanna' call it and booked our ride on the next taxi/truck outta there. It was five dollars for a tube for the day and a five dollar deposit. It was while I was sorting all that out, I discovered that there were way more people in this town than I originally thought. In general my world consisted of my hotel and JD's across the road, with of course the odd visit to Gecko's next door.

We were bundled up with a group of beautiful looking young people, (obviously the said cunts that are ruining the place) and were driven on a rough road outta' town for about five kilometres. As we neared the drop off point it was like finding a rave in the forest, first the bass, then the crowd. The day, like my ass, was a scorcher and I was thankful for the hole in the middle of the tube so I could hang it into the cooling water. We sank a Beer Laos and the mandatory shot of Laos Laos and started the journey down stream. I presumed it would just be what it seemed, a tranquil ride back to town with the scenery and my beautiful friend as companions. This soon proved to be a false dream though, 'cause as we made our way round the first bend in the river we were confronted by the bass once more, joined with about a hundred or so others all dancing in the sunlight. You see they'd set up a giant rope swing and flying fox over the river, and crowds of people were queuing up to throw themselves into the river from either one. Points out of ten were being given by this group of twenty somethings. I snuck off to the toilet and smoked my carefully wrapped Yaa Baa before sitting there cynically looking upon the others and their crowd pleasing ways, gaining an ungrateful understanding of what that big fat fuck had spewed upon me the night before. What a wanker! It was understandable now though. Still, cunt!

Sarah was dead keen for a go on the swing and I too was up for it, people bouncing around and judging me out of ten or not. There was a proper hand crafted staircase up to the swing and underused flying fox and it was only once you reached the top you realised how fuckin' high it was, almost higher than me! Sarah went first and the arc of the swing dipped then launched her up into the air again. Bravely she let go and plunged into the black depths. There were local guys on the river bank with smaller inner tubes who had the foresight of a fuckin' Jedi knight. As she surfaced the tube literally landed over her head, then they dragged her to the steps cut out of the river bank.

Really I wanted to back out, but you can't do that can you, as despised as I was against the cheerleaders on the river's edge, there was no way I was going to receive a zero. So with hands shaking from either the Yaa Baa or the rush of what was to come, maybe both, I gripped the bamboo handle as tight as I could and stepped off the ledge. Whoosh, the wind suddenly ripped through my ears, then the plunging descent that throws the contents of your stomach into your mouth, followed by the exhilarating rush as you're swept upwards before the moment of climax when it's time to let go. You can't be one of those pussies that take two swings before releasing so probably at the ultimate wrong moment of my trajectory I let go and knowing it was all going wrong and with the only thought of, 'Arch your back dude.' I hit the water like the clap of a giant's hands. Plam! And 'Ooohs' upon rising to the surface. Eight! I'd scored an eight! Purely for the ungainly way I'd hit the water, but people cheered, the tube dragged me back to the bank and some kiwi fulla' helped me to the top of the river bank. It felt and apparently looked like I was sunburnt all down my back. But hey the adrenaline rush was awesome and free highs are good highs.

The guy after me was graceful enough to perform a backwards somersault to which he received a perfect ten. Yeah whatever dude!

Later we were invited to a kiwi run backpacker's down by the entrance into town. With a hoard of new friends we made our way down river to the island, where just past the Smile Bar we pulled up for a drink and to watch the sunset. It's always beautiful innit'. The bar there had a prominent 'No drugs' sign, so it was only a quick stop before we dropped the tubes off, got our deposits and went to join the rest of the town at this backpacker lodge.

Although I'd had a good time, sat, swum and drank with the young crowd down on the river I didn't feel like one of them. They didn't look like they smoked opium and chocolate. They danced with their hands in the air to cheesy music while painting each other in bright colours and mud. Let's face it, we all hate feeling out of place and we all hate being judged by others who don't even fuckin' know us. Without realising, I'd taken on the attitude of that big fat ginger fuck, and that was wrong. They were beautiful twenty somethings, with enough of a sense of adventure, to stray from the usual Thailand route, and to bring them to this far away wonderland. It takes time to get to Vang Vieng and it's so easy to stay and wallow in the beauty that is Thailand. That's what makes books like *The Beach* and the novel *Shantaram*, based in India so important. They give you the drive to get off that track. Maybe my books will inspire that in some people too, I hope so anyway. The Kiwi Guesthouse was the centre point of all of those who'd probably followed the Lonely Planet to get here. I'd met someone on my first journey to Thailand who said the Lonely Planet was only good for wiping your ass at the bus stop restaurants, and I agree to a point. But I'd rather people used that and come to places like this, than stayed on the trail with all the others. You still gotta' have some balls and an insatiable drive for adventure; an adventure to help you forget the reasons why you came. One where days of the week don't exist, and television is a thing you used to do because you couldn't be bothered to do anything else. The problem with the Lonely Planet is you can rely on it too much.

Still though, I felt apart from the group. Sarah was in her element, and where as I was withdrawn she was absorbed into the mix straight away. Looking back it was more than likely the drugs, but hey, that's me sometimes. When I was with Raz, The Scouser, JD and the Ol' boy I was in my element. Here they were afraid to smoke pot let alone the rest, and the Kiwi owner was always looking over his shoulder towards the door. A few nights before the local militia had come through. They had searched

everybody and found weed on one girl. She'd been marched off to the cash machine at gunpoint; the sum of five hundred dollars had been her lawyer.

I felt uncomfortable around these 'normal' people and longed for my dredges of society, so double checking with the young guy who's father was in charge that he would make sure Sarah got home safely I skanked back to Gecko's and knocked back two tablets of toughen the fuck up.

I rose to a banging on my door, my first thought was of the unseen but ever consciously present militia, grouped with the rumbling of my stomach. My only meal since I'd arrived in Vang Vieng had consisted of a milkshake with a magic mushroom float. It had been at least three days now perhaps five, I wasn't quite sure. I opened the door to Sarah glowing with Lonely Planet in hand.

'Hey there's a cave full of Buddhist monuments not far from here, do you wanna rent a motorbike and ride out there?'

Now I'm not a big fan of motorbikes 'cause everyone I know who's owned one has crashed the fuckin' thing. But hey, no man has ever said no to a beauty like this and I wasn't about to be the first. We went up to where the tube office was, next to the solo cash machine and for the same price as a tube got a moped each. I had to give it to her, although she'd never ridden one, Sarah never shied away. We followed her directions and travelled about ten K's outta' town. Somewhere we took a turn off to the left, our tyres sank into the deep gravel like ice skates on a chocolate cake as we made our way to the river once more. It cost about a dollar to see the shrine, I'm not sure, but it was sweet fuck all anyway. Then we crossed another shitty ol' bridge, only to be met by a monkey chained to a tree and a dog who knew to keep out of grabbing distance of the primate. A surprisingly well spelt sign with an arrow pointed us in the right direction. We began our journey into the series of dry rice paddy fields and towards the base of one of those peaks that exploded so dramatically from the peaceful earth's surface. Walking along a track that may have been there since humans first ploughed these lands, we came across a solitary water buffalo wallowing along the river's edge.

A child looking no older than five or six joined us accompanied by the innocence of her smile. 'Hey you wan' Cave of the Buddha? You going the wrong way.' So for the princely sum of, 'Whatever you like.' (One dollar). We would be taken to the right' place. She was bang on the money, accompanied only by the 'Eeh oh' of the actual Geckos and one dead Tarantula we were led up to the towering cliff face itself. This all added to the ancient mystical feel. Inside was pitch black, under the guidance of our young but multi lingual guide and the dull ember cast from my lighter, we came across a ten foot tall statue of the fat Buddha serenely sitting cross legged with that all knowing grin. An eminence of wonder swept over us all. The young girl, no more than five or six, took the role of leader as she walked us towards him. She took three incense sticks and using my lighter, which left us for a moment of total nothingness and contemplation lit each one.

After, we rode back into town blissed out by the experience, you can't fault the Lonely Planet for that one. That is after all the benefit of guidebooks such as the Lonely Planet. When I travelled for the first time without a guide book a few years later through Brazil, I discovered it can come in handy having some inside knowledge. I tried to find a nightclub district in Sao Paulo but not even the locals knew what I was on about. I ended up eating deep fried pork fat and drinking beer while watching football instead, but hey, that's for a story already written.

Anyway as the sun called it quits for the day once more, we rode back into town, legs swingin' to and fro whilst we raced one another. After we went to the Lonely

Planet recommended street stall outside Vang Vieng's Buddhist temple just on the left of where my hotel was. Once I'd carefully positioned myself on the little seat I noticed my wallet was missing. Pause for a moment, I 'd spent pretty much a week at a hotel and not paid yet, I had no other money, and the God blessed cash machine had a no Visas sign so I was, apart from about a quarter of an ounce weed and even less than that of opium, completely stink ass broke. I couldn't even pay the fifty cents for my meal of cold noodles, fresh mint, coriander and whatever else was in them, Spring rolls. I was embarrassed I felt like one of those scum bag tourists you wanna' punch in the face 'cause they're begging for money instead of going home and getting a job! I looked fuckin' everywhere but it was gone. Some Laos person would soon have a driver's licence with my name on it and a few hundred grand to blow. As I've just said I was embarrassed, I looked like shit, probably smelt like shit and didn't have two brass razooks to rub together. I might as well have been sitting on a street corner with a, 'Spare some change?' sign. Sarah being Sarah, offered me one hundred dollars without a second's thought. She put faith in me as a traveller that she'd only just met the day before, with only a promise from me to pay her back, which of course I did.

She gave me the cash and I was eternally grateful. We went to JD's, she beat me at pool, pretended to lose and still won, and I lied to her so I could go next door and smoke Yaa Baa with Raz whilst she talked to the OI' boy.

That was it. That was my tube ride. The next day on the 'net' I discovered the closest HSBC was in Bangkok, another fuckin' country altogether. I booked my bus back to the tourist motherland, the city of destitution herself and birthplace of a million dreams, back to Khao San Road!

One bank, one bus and one sore ass

I was in Laos, with no wallet, and only enough money from a passing stranger, all be it a beautiful one, to get me back to civilisation. I was on a bus with two Yaa Baa's and four valiums inside me, trying not to cry 'cause it felt like someone had skin grafted a pebble onto my ass. I was on my way back to some form of normality. Well, normal for me anyway.

In the morning Sarah had helped my crooked self to a Simpsons' restaurant, where we were offered Heroin as well as eggs. While eating breakfast I'd given the last of my weed to the guy and his mushroom milkshake next to us, along with the last scraping of the opium. He took it with a smile and a thank you. Sarah didn't smoke the stuff. Tourists eh, but what can you do?

After that was the bus to the border in Vientiane. When I went to get on some girl had been sat on her backpack crying her eyes out. Turned out she was so sick, she couldn't even stand properly, and with our support 'cause there was no other fuckin' choice, we bundled her onto the bus. She puked, shit and sobbed the whole way, but, at least she was on the road towards civilisation. There was no other option, it was Bangkok or bust.

That lump on my ass felt like a blunt, rusty dagger, as the pain edged its way from my pelvis to my stomach. The echoes of anguish rang through the valium.

I arrived in Bangkok just before the sun came up and checked into the same shitty room that the guy from the Beach checked into before plugging in my phone, that way I'd know what part of the day it was for the first time in nearly a week. I needed to be at the HSBC before four pm. I set my alarm for noon. Once again my room had no windows, it was eternal bliss. Before, Eeh, eeh, eeh, eeh, fuckin' thing! I killed the alarm, Stupid fuckin' alarms; you might as well be back at work! And then crawled my surprisingly fresh feeling ass outta bed.

I went outside, argued over the Tuk Tuk price and was driven to the centre of town. Here I was dropped off by the front doors of a skyscraper so tall that it vanished into the hazy grey smog above. I was ready to get back on the game. I had both passports and was mentally psyched to do this thing. But, after a long hour surrounded by people who looked like they never had to worry about money, a hot young Thai thing in a business suit told me that I would have to wait until the English banks opened at two pm Thai time. The building next door was one of Bangkok's biggest shopping centres, MBK I think it's called. I dunno, anyway all the staff crowded around outside for a fag wore yellow shirts.

The agony in my ass was furious and all consuming, so my first tearful stop was the pharmacy. The pebble that screamed between my butt cheeks was now a dull constant ache that reached my finger tips. Why after all these years of evolution, would man, who can fly to the moon, have to suffer this? I was in a horrifying state, the pain absorbed all of my thoughts and just as I was close to crying out for help, for the second time on my holiday the Angels sung for me.

That little green and blue cross is the same in every language and hallelujah to the motherfucker who invented it. There she was, amnesty, pharmacy whatever you wanna' call it. At that point, soothing ass relieving cream that's what I called it. I went in there, all confidence chewed up like cows cud, and with a held back tear said, 'Haemorrhoid cream please.' She knew the word, I wasn't the only man to ever ask for haemorrhoid cream. But fuck it's embarrassing man, like asking for condoms and some KY jelly.

Like a crab with the winning lottery ticket, I edged outta' that place before making my way up two flights of stairs to the public toilets. Some people I know don't like to

sit on public loos in case they catch something. I always wonder if I'm the guy they're worried about. I smeared that creamy cooling goo in and around my tender throbbing ring hole, the soothing effect working its magic almost straight away. The heavens had opened and for the first time in two weeks the most prominent thought in my mind was not this grizzly shard of hell buried between my ass cheeks. I swallowed a couple of pain killers, courtesy of the pharmacy and went to check out MBK.

MBK is massive, too big to take in all at once it's filled with stuff the same price as London, and really, after a few minutes I packed it in and went out onto the street for a fag. I didn't wanna' do too much walking in case all the rubbing set my ass off again. There was still an hour to go and I was contemplating lunch, when straight across the road from where I was smoking, I saw a fancy Thai massage place was open for business. Oh, what better way is there to kill an hour than have some little Thai lady walk all over you? I was on it like the flash.

Inside, the place was plush with ornate carved wood lining the walls, and a small pond with Carp nestled in one corner. The sound of trickling water added to the effect of calming you. A thin middle aged gentleman was manning the reception. The smell of tiger balm and incense wafted all around.

'We do many type massage,' he said, as he handed me a leather bound menu, 'Thai, Swedish, oil, three hundred baht thirty minute, five hundred for 'our.'

'An hour please.' Lush as!

'Sit here please,' he said, pointing towards a leather arm chair. With the tinkle of a bell a woman who seemed not much older than me came down the staircase off to my right. First she removed my shoes and put my feet in an empty brass dish. She disappeared for a second and came back with a copper kettle then poured the warm soapy water, first on her hand to check the temperature and then down into the bowl. With a sponge she gently rubbed my feet, and between my toes. After the chaos of the last week in Laos and the shit splashed on those feet in Vietnam, and the adventure that was Cambodia, I could feel every tension and knot ease. The water was perfumed and smelt like bubble gum, the forgiving softness of the lounge chair I was in, meant I could breathe freely without that soreness from the diamond stuck up my ass. Oh man, the seat on the bus from Laos to Bangkok had felt like I was sitting on a plank of wood, only somehow I was perched on top of an invisible nail half through the plank.

I was woken with a light tap on the knee and Geisha's giggle. The bowl was gone now and my feet were being dried with a thick downy towel. 'Come upstairs with me please,' she said. She guided me up through a door and into a room with a series of curtained partitions. My Geisha girl handed me a pair of pyjamas and asked me to change. It was good to peel my shorts off, and put on something crisp and clean. I'd been wearing the fuckers for the whole week in Laos pretty much. Ever mindful that all my life possessions were in the pockets, I folded them up and put them beside my pillow. A few minutes later my petite masseuse shuffled back in and asked me to lie down on my front. Through the material of my shirt she kneaded the knots imbedded in my shoulders that were wrought there through lugging my backpack around. Slowly and painfully she made her way down to my legs. Thai massages are seldom relaxing when it comes time for the calf muscles, the masseurs dig their thumbs right between the muscles and it can feel like they're separating the meat from the bones. My Geisha girl was an exception though, and through the firm probing of her nubile digits and the soft repetitiveness of her breath I was soon dozing once more. Only semiconscious of my surroundings she snapped her fingers off each one of my toes, then gently started to work her magic down each of my arms. She caressed the palms

of my hands and rubbed the little webbing bit between each finger before making that quick snapping sound again as she clicked each one of my knuckles.

‘Ok, turn over,’ she said. Still not altogether with it I rolled over, only to be left humiliated from a raging, just woken up from sleep hard on that made my pyjamas stand up like the mainsail of a yacht. ‘Oh you naughty boy,’ she purred and with an innocent giggle gave my knob a tap on the end. She glanced back out through the curtain, and satisfied we were alone, ‘You like I massage here too?’ She reached down through the top of my pants and took my cock in her hand. Well, like a hopeless fat kid to an upsizing at McDonalds I certainly wasn’t about to say no. With foresight though, I did say, ‘How much?’

‘One thousand baht.’

‘Done’ and with one of her hands wrapped around my member and another rubbing the inside of my thigh, I reached for my wallet as quick as possible and counted over the cash. My Geisha positioned herself closer to me so I could caress her body through the silken night gown she wore, and swirled my hand over the smoothness of her in the same practised way her hands swept over me. It felt like a life time since my last embrace with a woman and I thought it would end quickly. So did she I think, but the more turned on I became the more I wanted to be inside her, not just getting a hand job, but actually getting laid. I offered another thousand baht but she said no. Two thousand, but still the answer was no. No blow job, no love making, just a warm rub in the corner of an empty room sheltered behind thin cotton sheets. I was going mad with endorphins, so close to the edge, but not able to just relax for that final moment to let myself tip over. I started to rub her breasts, she didn’t seem to mind, in fact her body responded with heat. She glanced out through the curtains once more then whispered with a gulp, ‘Five hundred baht and you can kiss my breasts.’ Like the flash the wallet was out and the cash counted. She tucked it in the waistband of her pants with the rest, and with one more final look through the curtain, began to undo the buttons on her top. Her breasts were amazing, she wore no bra and they still held firm shape, she had the womanly nipples of a mother, large, protruding and firm. I cupped her left breast in one hand, supporting it while I kissed then licked the other. Her breath stayed at the same slow pace, but the inhales and exhales deepened. The whole time she kept the same rhythmical motion of her hand around my cock, and with a final sigh and a quick warning on my part I blew my load onto the hand towel offered.

With the look of a guilty school girl she tucked me away and buttoned her blouse. Then she commanded me to lean forward so she could shuffle behind me and massage my scalp, before using her elbows to force the last of the tired knots from my upper back and shoulders. ‘You wan’ take me with you on holiday,’ she said, ‘I clean and cook for you. Give you massage and we make love.’

I was tempted as a motherfucker, but the words of my brother rang through to me. ‘What if ya’ walkin’ hand in hand with some hooker and a group of girls you know from back home stumble across ya’. How the fuck are ya’ gonna’ explain that one?’ Stupid brother!

‘No sorry, I have to meet friends. But thank you.’ I’ll always remember my happy ending massage. My hour was up and I tipped her another five hundred baht and received a deep kiss as a reward before she left the room so I could change back into my normal rancid clothes again. Like nothing had happened, I thanked the Ol’ boy down at reception and nodded to a Thai looking businessman with his shoes off and feet in the bowl on my way out the door. He was about to have the massage of his life too.

HSBC fucked me good and proper. They would only give me the equivalent of two hundred and fifty pounds as an emergency fund and said it would take six weeks to receive my new bankcard. Six weeks! What fuckin use was two hundred and fifty pounds for the next six weeks? I called Huey and he gave me his bank details so I could transfer two thousand pounds over to him. It was another week before I remembered about my Barclays account and the other card I had.

So here I was, sorted. I'd gone from zero to hero in the space of a day. Twenty four hours before I was so fucked I couldn't even sit on a seat, even standing was excruciating in the middle of that God dam nowhere place. To now, back on Khao San Road, load empty and wallet full. Back at the bar with no windows and the pool table halfway down the street, I sunk a couple of beer towers with a mix of guys from every corner of the globe. We were served by hot young Thai things in short little sponsored dresses. All of us laughin' at the experiences the others had had. When I'd first gotten back to Khao San, I'd bought an overnight bus ticket to Koh Tao. However by the time half six rolled around I was quite happy to stay where I was.

But no, adventure called, and four valiums and a rock hard seat later, I woke up on the ocean's edge ready and waiting for the ferry to those infamous islands in the gulf of Thailand.

Dive shops, drinks and an unknown legend

I'd arranged to meet Huey at lunchtime at a place called Secrets diving. It's a beautiful resort down on the main beach of Koh Tao and is made up of traditional looking bungalows that lead up away from the beach, and is crowned by a pool used for the beginners' diving lessons. When I got dropped off by the ferry I'd rented a little automatic scooter straight away, the shittiest one I could find. There were rumours of the people who owned the hire places seeing the bikes they'd rented to you parked up and scratching them, so you would have to hand over extra cash for the repairs. Besides everybody crashes motorbikes and I couldn't afford to buy a new one for these people.

At Secrets I was greeted by a charming Irish fulla' going by the name of Duff who pulled me the coldest beer he could find in the fridge, and snuggled it inside a Secret diving branded beer cooler. 'So, yeh' 'ere to dive den?' he said in a thick Northern Irish accent.

'Nah I'm here to meet a mate of mine called Huey, he said to let the people at the bar know when I got here.'

'Oh Huey, a friend of 'is, from London den are ya?' He had a quizzical look on his face, maybe even a little apprehensive. 'You don't happen to know a girl from there called Kayla do ya?'

'Nah never heard of her.'

'Oh,' he said with a smile, 'you should be alright 'den.'

He didn't look like he was gonna' tell me what he was on about and he had a laugh to himself before, 'I'll givim' a call for ya' 'den shall I? Hey why don't ya' try one of my Cuba Libres? I make the best Cuba Libre on the island. Famous for them I am.'

'Well it is what, nine in the morning? Fuckin' eh, make it a double.'

'They're always doubles,' he said, the always part, rolled off his tongue in that melodic voice the Irish have been blessed with. He put some rum and fresh squeezed lime juice into a cocktail shaker and mixed them together before pouring the cocktail base over a glass of cola. Duff made the call, 'Huey there's some fulla' from London 'ere to see ya, says his name is, 'ang on, what's ya' name son?'

'Bryce.'

'Oh, Bryce. Says is name is Bryce. What? Yeah. No problems mate.' then hung up. 'He's at training at the moment. Reckons I'm to look after yeh'. That must mean I'm to roll yeh' a joint I s'pose. Yeh do smoke weed don' yeh'.

'Fuckin' eh dude. Where do we have to go?'

'I'll roll it righ' fuckin' 'ere, 'den the young fulla' can watch the bar while we go and smoke it down on da' beach.'

He called some Thai guy over who had been serving orders to the weary looking travellers and we hit the sand for the first time on Koh Tao.

The island and the people were going to swallow me up and welcome me into their family. All the drugs can leave me a bit anal and shy when it comes to chatting with people for the first time, it can be a bit of a curse. Sometimes you crave the peace and quiet of your own thoughts, sometimes you feel lonely in a room full of people all having a good time. That's part of the pros and cons of drug abuse for me I guess. Back at the bar two blonde English lass's were perched on the stools, one drinking coffee the other drinking beer. 'This is Bryce,' Duff introduced me, 'a friend of Huey's from London.'

'Oh a friend of Huey from London eh?' the one with coffee said. 'Hi I'm Anita'

'Not a-fuckin-nother one', the girl sinking the beer belched out, much to the cold looks of disdain from Duff and Anita. Something was going on here, or at least head

gone on, but no one was willing to elaborate and I wasn't about to ask. So I saved that question mark for Huey and ordered Cuba Libres for me, Duff and the beer drinker, whose name was Shell, short for Michelle.

'Jager bombs.' Duff stated rather than asked. 'I make da' best fuckin' Jager bombs on the island, ask anybody I dare ya'. Do it, say to anyone, 'Who makes da' best fuckin' Jager bombs on da' island and 'dey'll all say, 'Dat fuckin' Duff does.' With a raucous laughter from our group he set up three charges, three short glasses each with a single bottle of M-51 (Pure Red Bull syrup. Three cans of Red Bull in each 50ml bottle) then balanced the shots of Jagermeister across the rims of the glasses. 'Go on 'den Bryce, knock the shots in, 'den let's slam 'dese fuckers back before the breakfast rush starts. The girls 'ave got to get set up before a hard day working on their tans. Hey look I forgot to show ya', 'dere's a picture of Huey's fight in a couple of days. He's the headlining one, famous round 'ere your friend is. Nearly won the Mr Koh Tao contest, if wasn't for da, fuckin' Smurf.'

'A what? A Smurf?'

'Yeah, long fuckin' story, lucky I'm Irish and you're on holiday. Are ya' comfortable 'dere?'

Later he finished the story with, 'So it were down to 'im and one 'udder guy, and 'da fulla' trounced 'im by winning 'da crowd over dressed up as a Smurf. Bit of a sore spot for ol' Huey' if ya' like to take the micky 'dat way.'

Time rolled past I guess, it always has to I s'pose, but when ya' on holiday in places like Koh Tao, you don't really seem to notice and you don't really care. Huey would get there when he got there. Duff, Anita and Shells were great company anyway. There was obviously some relationship thing between Duff and Shells, but that's just one of those things you notice. He called all the girls babe but there was a slight difference in the way he said it to her. A lowering of his head, the way here peered up at her through sheltered eyes. The way he passed her a drink and the way their fingers would touch, then linger just for a moment. It was sweet, a hidden, pure, respectful lust.

At some point there was a 'Hey Bryce my man,' from behind and the sleek form of Huey appeared out of the glaring Thai sun and joined us at the bar. The lunchtime rush had just begun. 'Hey are my friends looking after you? I warned them Bryce was coming.' So fuckin' glad you could make it bru', cheers eh!'

'Beer dude?'

'Nah I got training again in a few hours. Gotta' prepare for the fight, you know how it is. Look you finished your drink? Where's your bags and stuff? Let's take it up to mine and we'll get you sorted.'

'Sweet as dude , gimme' two seconds.' I downed the drink, paid my tab, left another drink on the bar for Duff and stumbled my way out to the front. I struggled to find my flip flops amongst the masses of others, and eventually came across two that looked the same. I noticed Huey had on a pair about three sizes too small. There was no point saying anything I was fuckin' tired now and was just looking forward to some hard sleep. Besides he's done stranger things than wear small footwear.

Koh Tao is your typical postcard perfect tropical island with rugged cliffs framing pure white sandy beaches, themselves fringed with drunken Coconut trees. All of it led up to a towering jungle covered mountain that looked as if it should be home to a volcano with a skull faced cave. Where was my man Friday? Huey's place was three quarters of the way up that mountain and although the road started off tarmac, it soon turned into thick dusty sand with potholes deep enough to drown in. A couple of hundred metres of it was all mud and big rocks that your scooter would ricochet off

like a bullet in a barrel. That was before the fuckin' steep incline up to his pad, which was one of three bungalows raised ten feet in the air and framed by wooden balconies.

'Here bru. Shame, I've only got one room, but the couch is yours and there's blankets beside the TV. Look, how's this for a plan. How 'bout I head off back to gym now and you chill out or do whatever you want, and I'll meet you back here in a couple of hours?'

'Cool man, all I wanna do is sleep. The Cuba Libres and valium have got me feeling all funny.'

'Best Cuba Libres on the island eh?!'

'Ha, ha.' We both shared the humour. And before he was gone I was curled up under the fan and sound asleep.

'Hey bru.'

'Baaaaahhhhh' Lesson learnt; wake Bryce up from a distance.

'With a gasp and a shock I was back in reality. I was hot, sweating and yet again my ass was throbbing. That scare having ruined my ringhole once more. Cheers dude!

What do ya wanna' do my brother,' he said. 'The world is your oyster and my man from London wasn't full of shit and came to join me.

The original promise of this holiday was made on Christmas day two thousand and six and sure as shit I'd kept my word. Huey was coming to Koh Tao to fight in the rings and I was coming a few months later to get high.

'I wanna' get some drugs dude. What have you got?'

'We'll check out the Jamm Bar, they sell weed anyway.'

'Cool, that's the second stop, first I need a wash,' casually hiding my haemorrhoid cream in my shower bag as I grabbed my towel and things.

It reduced to only an itch, but that's always a prelude to days of endless, throbbing dull pain. To me, I think it always takes a little of your manliness away whenever you have to screw that little funnel thing for the haemorrhoid cream onto the end of the tube then feel about for the right place before you squeeze that cooling freshness inside.

'I've got a Paintball business,' Huey said, 'that we need to stop off at to check if there are any bookings, then we'll head over to the Jamm Bar.'

It was here I met the Canadian couple Dom and Janine, they'd come to Thailand for a year's holiday seven months before, and their first stop had been Koh Tao. They'd met Huey on their first night. He was their diving instructor and he'd sold them the idea of working for him at the Paintball shop. I personally didn't think too many people would come to Koh Tao and want to run around in its thirty something degree heat, but, they all assured me money was rolling in so who the fuck was I to second guess?

The four of us rode down to the Jamm Bar, Huey on a low riding motocross bike, Dom with Janine were on another trail bike, and me, I was on my automatic scooter. We rode for about five minutes, back past the docks and towards a place called Shark bay until we took a sharp driveway up to the left and pulled up outside the place.

'Just talk to the guy behind the bar,' Huey said. So I ordered four beers, and he offered me weed while opening them. 'A thousand bahts worth please.' It was well under sized to what I was used to but even though I complained I wasn't handed over anymore. 'We have opium if you like?' he said.

'Fuckin' eh. How much?'

The guy pulled out a small ball wrapped in a Rizla paper and told me five hundred baht. 'No fuckin' way,' I said to him. That's not enough to get wasted. Especially for five hundred baht.' It was only about seven pounds fifty. But hey it wasn't enough,

and if ya' tried to roll a joint of it the Rizla would just tear and shit, and next thing ya' know the whole scene is a fuckin' mess. 'Have you got any Yaa Baa?' I said with a look over my shoulder.

He looked over my shoulder too. 'Yes, but you no tell anybody it come from here, ok?'

'Cool as dude. How much?'

'Eight hundred baht each.'

'What? Hey man I just came outta' Laos that shit is only five dollars.'

'You're in Thailand now, if the Police catch us we'll be shot and dumped offshore.'

Whoa, 'Fair enough then dude, I'm not gonna' do them here so they had better not be shit. Tell me now and swap them if they are, 'cause fulla', if they're good, I'm gonna buy loads off ya'.

'Everything we sell here is good, enjoy my friend.' And with that he leaned over, turned up Bob Marley, and we got high with the Buffalo soldier.

We were halfway through smoking the doobie, when Huey threw in, 'Hey bru' I got your money, so that worked out close to eighty thousand baht. You wanna get some coke? It's four thousand baht a gram. But look, please don't tell anyone about it. If the guys who have it get caught, at best they'll be locked up forever.'

'Mum's the word dude, can we get some cash out now?'

'For shit we can, let's finish our drinks put in a thousand each and party on!'

The drinks didn't take long to finish. Soon enough me, Dom and Janine found ourselves back at Huey's while he was off to meet these risk taking people.

'So you know Huey from London eh?' Dom said.

'Yeah,' I said, 'we made a pact on Christmas day and here I am. His brother was s'pose to come, but he had some excuse or other not to make it. But fuck that shit man, once I had the cash I was outta' there.'

'Yeah... We met one of his other friends from London two weeks ago, a girl called Kayla. Did he tell you about it?'

'No, but the legend is starting to grow, what the fuck went on? Duff and Shells, do ya' know them? They mentioned her too.'

'Yeah we're good friends, Duff, makes the best Cuba Libres on the island.'

'Yeah that's him fulla'.'

'Well hey, I'll leave Huey to tell you the story.'

Not long after, Huey announced himself with an, 'Oi what the fuck are you up to?' then joined us in the lounge. He unwrapped a packet of coke, which we inhaled in about three minutes. The whole time I'd been soaking my strips of cigarette packet foil in a sauce pan full of nearly boiled water, and they was about ready. It was my first time trying it and the paper came away from the lighter wide strip of foil easily enough. After carefully shaping it around the edge of the lighter I dropped a whole tablet on the foil, set my lighter to low as possible and burned that shit. The thick chocolate smoke bubbled then rolled up into the note I'd made for a funnel. I took it till I could handle almost no more, saving the last bit of breath for the after trail. Then slowing turning the red colour of the WY, I exploded that dense sweet smelling ooze onto the others who all refused the next turn. So I ploughed into the rest like a fire engine to a burning blaze.

The night rounded off and the others went out while I went to bed. I was woken sometime later to yelling Geckos and a blonde girl disappearing in the direction of Huey's room.

What turned out to be the next day. 'Hey bru, are you awake?'

‘Baaahhh.’ This time to be woken at the end of a pointy stick. ‘This is my trainer Korat. Korat, this is the friend from London I told you about, Bryce.’

‘Sawadee, Bryce, I Korat,’ he slapped a hand on his chest as he said his name.

‘Korat is preparing me for the fight tomorrow.’

My ass was hurting. ‘Cool fulla’, hey let me have a shower and we’ll take things from there.’

‘Hey you fulla’s want a joint?’

‘Nah bru, but you help yourself, papers and everything are out on the balcony. You can use the coconut shell to mix it all up with, everyone else does.’

Korat must have seen the saucepan with the tin foil in it. ‘Yaa Baa?’ pointing at the fag packet lining still floating in it.

I was halfway through the joint, ‘It might be, is that ok?’

He grinned a massive grin. ‘Ok.’ He and Huey both laughed, and the joint I was smoking was discarded in such a way that it was lucky to hit the ashtray. ‘Fuck yeah, I’ve still got three left, let’s smoke some.’ Korat was on the game straight away. What a fuckin’ legend!

‘Hey Bryce,’ Huey said, ‘I gotta check on the Paintball shop, you and Korat look fine. Can you drop him off at the stadium later? I’ll be at Secrets, see you there, ciao amigo.’

‘Cool as, I think we got this covered.’ Korat was already peeling the strips of paper from the back of the sheets, so I sat next to him and started to shape them. Without verbal communication we worked as a team. Korat started working the flame lower and lower, until it was only a small blue bauble and I rolled up a note and broke the tablets into halves. Team Koh Tao had broken all records and we were set and ready to go before the spliff dumped in the ashtray had even gone out.

I passed the note to him and half a tablet, it was split right down the centre of the little W Y stamp. After he’d dried the trough out, he placed it at the top end so when the pill started to bubble and the sweet orangey brown liquid began to billow out smoke, he could run it down the surface and not over heat it in one place. That’d cause the whole thing to go up in flames and we didn’t want that. So, Korat knew what he was doing, and as the flow continued, the miasma of smoke poured from it, only to be caught in the suction from the funnel as Korat’s chest expanded. Just before his lungs filled he let the flame of the lighter go out so he wouldn’t waste any last wisps. Then after taking in a few more sips of air he exhaled a massive plume of smoke dense enough for him to disappear behind. Sweat started trickling down his forehead straight away, and then he finished the rest of the half off in one more puff.

It was my turn next and I took the same trough he’d used, just reversing the ends that he held onto, so I would have a fresh un-burnt piece. I steadied the movement of the lighter by resting one finger against the hand holding the foil. I didn’t wanna’ set the thing on fire my first time smoking in front of Korat. Pride amongst users man! Then just as the aluminium started to warp from the heat, I angled it down on one side so the tablet would slide as it liquefied and not melt through. It worked perfect, little white crystals built up on the edge of the pill, which yellowed then melted into the sweetest vanilla chocolate flavour. Those flavours were harmonised with a quickening of the pulse and a rise of the body’s temperature. I’m a good and proper sweater when I’m high; I used to cook so much on E’s that there would be a wet print of me left on the bed when I got up. We carried on and smoked all three Yaa Baas in one sitting, then I finished the joint.

I asked Korat if he wanted a beer and he nodded away so I grabbed two out the fridge and passed one over. ‘Oh,’ he said. ‘Beer? No beer sank you.’

‘Fair enough you wanna watch a movie?’

He just nodded again, then struggled out through an onslaught of perspiration, ‘My English no good. I speak little. Talk slowly.’

‘Oh, fair enough then fulla’, I’ll try my best.’ said at the pace of a madman on speed.

He laughed, then put on a serious look, ‘Slower.’

I just dropped some syllables out of my conversation and added a slight Thai twist to my accent, ‘I try, but I talk fast. Is me.’ We both laughed and he helped himself to a glass of bottled water from the fridge.

The lack of a common language is never an excuse to not communicate, and if you’ve travelled yourself and met foreign people you soon find a way to get across your thoughts, I find acting out charades is the easiest. I went outside for a smoke and over on the horizon everything was tuning into a blur, this was joined by a blue streak of lighting. ‘One one thousand, two one thousand, three one thou’. Boooooommm the thunder exploded all around us. Korat laughed and slapped my shoulder, ‘two half mile.’

‘Yeah man, that’s what I was about to say, One second one mile.’ I remembered and slowed it down for him. With wave of my hands like a wizard casting a spell, I said, ‘Flash, lightning. One one thousand, one mile, two one thousand, two mile, three, boom! See two and half mile.’ He laughed and I could tell he understood.

‘Flash,’ waving both his hands, ‘lightning?’

‘Yeah, that’s it,’ forgetting to keep it simple, ‘lightning.’

Just as I lit another smoke it happened again, and Korat yelled out. ‘Lightning, one, two,’ Boooooommmmm’ The thunder echoed off the mountain and like a bursting dam the torrent of sound rolled down the hill beside us. The blurred vision in the distance swept ever closer and with the next strike we barely even reached one before the sound wave hit. Korat pointed at it. ‘In English name, Lightning?’ and at the drum roll, he pointed upwards, ‘Thunder?’

‘Yeah man. Oh, Yes. I try and talk slow.’

‘Is ok,’ then he raised one hand in the air, palm out and up with fingers spread, and tapped each one, ‘One, two, three, four, five, is good?’

‘Of course man, that was fuckin’ excellent, Oh, I mean, yes, is good,’ and gave him a solemn nod.

The rain hit the island and marched right up the hill towards us, distorting the world behind it. I understood where the muddy puddles down on the road had come from now, and how they existed in a place that’s thirty degrees Celsius in the shade.

He held his hand up once more and pointed at me, ‘You,’ then glanced at his hand and motioned with his eyes and head towards it. ‘You, Thailand say, Neung,’ and tapped his thumb then lowered it, ‘Sawng,’ then dropped his pointer finger, ‘Saam, See, Haa. In English one, two, three, four, five.’

That a deserved a high five, we bantered along like that for a while. Later Korat helped himself to whatever food was in the fridge. I dunno’ how the fuck he managed to eat, but the guy put it away, I tell ya’ that.

The storm had passed and the humidity was like noodle soup. At least up the mountain there was a slight breeze. ‘I go stadium,’ Korat said after some film we’d watched had finished.

‘Ok cool dude, I’ll drive ya’ down. Oh, ah, I drive you on motorbike.’

‘No is ok, I run, is not far.’

‘No it’s ok I go drink beer with Huey.’

'Oh, drink wi' Huey,' emphasizing the 'Oh'. 'Ok you drive, I ride. And with that we skidded on the wet all the way down the driveway, then negotiated through the puddles and rocks on the sand road, before after a few long minutes we came out on the tarmac again.

I bid my friend farewell and went to meet the others.

Papaya trees and punch ups

It was the day of the big fight, Huey was amped but trying to keep chilled. Me and Korat were smoking weed on a homemade bong he'd made, using an old plastic bottle for the main chamber and the hollow branches of a papaya tree out the front, to smoke the weed through. Papaya branches are in sections sort of like bamboo, we would poke a small hole at the beginning of the section and you'd get four or five bongs off of one branch before it burnt through and we had to make another.

The Yaa Baa had been going down as ever and my ass had let up a bit, the action from the cream doing its job. The rain storm came over at the same time every day and was a nice treat, both visually and also as a reprieve from the constant heat. The only issue was that it added to the humidity later in the afternoon.

Korat took off back to the stadium to help set up, he wasn't fighting that night but still, as one of the trainers he also had a duty to keep the place clean. Huey surfaced and we went down to a small cafe near the beach where we got his favourite breakfast, pineapple and banana pancakes. 'You and Korat act like you've been friends forever,' he said. 'Same tastes and sins eh? By the way don't worry if you see him helping himself to my food and shit in the fridge, he hasn't got much cash and friends help each other out, know what I mean.'

I had to laugh at this, Korat had been eating Huey out of house and home and I although it wasn't really my place to say anything I had wondered at the casualness Korat took at munching his way through everything in the fridge.

'Yeah,' Huey said, 'did he mention where he lives?'

'Nah, didn't ask.'

'Well don't say anything to him, but when you go to the stadium tonight, check it out, there's a wooden box leaning against the wall of the stadium. He shares that with another guy who fights there. It's only about a metre wide by two metres long, that's their house. He's the number two fighter in Thailand for his weight division, a proper fuckin' killing machine. You get guys coming from all over the world to fight him and what they don't realise is that although they might be European champion or something, they're about to get in the ring with a guy who lives in a wooden box and bets every penny he's got on himself. So if he loses he's broke and only has money through personal training, but the stadium keep most of that anyway. He's gotta' sweep the floors and clean the gym for meals. Crazy eh? And get this, how much of that Yaa Baa shit does he smoke? Some Farang comes all this way, and not only has Korat got every penny in the world riding on the fight, he smokes two Yaa Baas just before he gets in the ring and wipes the floor with them.'

'Yeah, fuck, I hadn't thought of that. How the fuck do ya beat a methed up Thai boxing local with those odds, and all their money riding on the outcome? Jesus! He seems such a lovely guy, I forget that he's a fighter. So that's it eh? What a life? Fighting for money as a living, that's hard core dude.'

'Hey,' Huey said, 'Do you want some Coke for tonight? Don't let Korat know though, even though he's a friend, we can never let the Thais know, it's death sentence for anyone caught.'

'Fuck yeah! I'll have a whole one to myself please.'

'Hey did I tell you what happened to my neighbour two days before you got here?'

'Nah dude.'

'He was riding home pissed and fell off his bike on some side road, and the first point of contact on the road was his chin. His jaw split straight in half and was pushed up each side of his face, and he shattered his left shoulder. Reckons he came to in the dark and no one was around, so he had to crawl back up to and along the main road

until someone found him. There's no doctors on Koh Tao and the ferry to Koh Samui wasn't until the next day. So they took him down to the pharmacy lady, and she wrapped his head and arm up and fed him a load of Tramadol to keep him numb till the morning. I had a call from his missus today, they're flying out a plastic surgeon from Sweden to begin the reconstruction of his face and get him ready for the flight home. Shame man, he was a good guy. But that goes to show, always have travel insurance.'

'Fuckin' holy shit dude, that's fuckin' rough as fuck. Imagine that, waking up in the dark, in a ditch and your seven shades of fucked up. That's awful, I fuckin' hate motorbikes, and that's the problem with here innit', you're always riding drunk, with no helmet, no shirt and flip flops for foot wear. Fuckin' ruthless, I'm not sure I wanted you to tell me that.'

We got our shit together and Huey dropped me off down at Secrets with Duff while he went and got the Charlie. Duff told me a good story on the history of Secrets. Secrets was the one of the first proper diving schools on the island, and as with all enterprises in Thailand, farangs are only allowed to own forty nine percent of it. He went in with the head Policeman of the day and they split the business. Mr Secrets did all the work and the Chief of Police made sure all the bureaucracy went along smoothly. Huey himself had to donate ten percent of his takings from the Paintball shop to the Police and ten percent to a local school. Kinda' tax in a way. Anyway, Secrets took off and became one of the most popular diving schools in the country and soon started to expand, more money and more money started to roll in. One night though Mr Secrets was walking home from the school and he was executed gangland style, a single bullet to the head. After that the control of his share of the company went to his wife. No one knows what exactly happened but rumours were rife. The Chief had wanted a bigger share of the cash and Mr Secrets refused. His wife on the other hand, considering the situation, was happy to accept the new bargain. It was an urban legend to the extreme. But shit like that is easy to believe in South East Asia, they are such lovely Buddhist faithed people, but they can be so cruel to each other. And that brings up the phrase all tourists to any country should live by, 'Never fuck with the locals. Never!'

'I sank Duff's Cuba Libres and chuffed a few Yaa Baas while we waited. The sun set and the temperature was dropped to a more comfortable level. Even still, the sweat poured from me. Not long after sunset Huey showed up with a whole crew in tow and together we rode up to the stadium.

As we pulled into the car park there was already a crowd of bikes parked up and a hundred or so people were making their way in. I checked down the side where Huey said I would find Korat's shack, and sure enough built on stilts, two feet in the air was a box about one metre wide by one metre high. If that's where my brother lived, he could eat all the food he wanted from Huey's as far as I was concerned. I was determined now to make sure my friend got to enjoy himself as much as I did while I was here on the island. I went to the toilet and hoofed down a fat, my-friend's-fighting-the-rings-of-Thailand-sized-line, and wished I had my Papaya tree bong with me for a smoke, but, hey, you can't have it all, right?

The guy doing the announcing was an Englishman who had married a striking Thai woman, who was also a fighter. They were a complete Yin and Yang, although he was a skin 'ead, he was placid and loved his life here. He was so proud of her, their kids and her family; he was forever showing us different pictures of the kids and nights out with his kin. I envied his happiness and lifestyle in a place like this. 'Everyone wants to live in a paradise like Koh Tao, it's just the livelihood and means

for support which are difficult to come by. So many people go over there and try to survive but they never really make it. This guy didn't seem to come off as financially rich but he was rich in so many other ways, his inner calm and positivity was contagious.

The ring itself, as you would expect was in the centre of the stadium. Surrounding that was a metre wide area that was fenced off. The English fulla's wife collected the money laid down on bets. It's not your booking agent type betting with odds and shit, one fighter was red and the other was blue, you would tell her how much you wanted to put down and she would find someone who supported the other corner to bet the same, it was winner take all. Same as the Cock fighting in Phnom Penh. Old fashioned; awesome! Everybody would give her the cash, and she doled it out to the winner at the end. In the case of a draw both parties got their money back. That hardly ever happened in Thai boxing though, 'cause it's so fuckin' brutal it always ends with some cunt on the floor. The build up throughout each fight is heightened by a whining fuckin' flute thing that sounds like a strangled set of Bagpipes. As a round goes on, the pace of the music quickens, heightening the adrenaline of the spectators and also signalling to the fighters how much longer is left in the round.

Four fights were scheduled for the night and one poor gangly fuck, who was in the blue of Huey's stadium, got beat up good and proper from some kid on the neighbouring island Koh Phangan. He was knocked out halfway through the second round and had to be helped from the ring once he came to. Thai boxing is cold like that. I've been to fights where kids no older than ten were beaten bloody before being knocked unconscious, while adults waving beers and fags chanted in the background. Every time your fighter scored a blow to the other guy your lot would cheer, 'Oi!' and when the other guy scored a hit their lot would yell the same.

It was time for Huey to fight, it was only his third in Thailand and the other guy was s'pose to be the same, but when the announcements came out, this guy had had thirty five, winning most of them by knockout. Me and Duff looked at each other. Huey yeah, although he was six feet tall with defined muscles cut to fuck, and towered at least six inches above his opponent, the conversation we'd had earlier during the day rang through my mind. Was this guy a meth addict too? Had he just bet every penny he had against himself? The whining flutes started to play and I bet two thousand baht on my friend to win. I was as nervous as an expectant father, at least I had cigarettes and beer to keep me in check.

The fighters warmed up with prayers in the centre of the ring, going down on one knee and swinging their arms. The jungle surroundings, the music, the gambling, being in the motherland of this martial art, the closeness of it, and the gratuitous blood. It all separates the fighting in Thailand from the other combat sports. They're worlds apart. It was raw here. We were amped by being at the roots of a millennia old sport. Apart from the modern use of gloves, A sport that has stayed the same throughout the ages.

With a ding of the bell and the start of the slow hypnotic rhythm from the pipe, the fighters approached each other like the blade wheeling roosters back in Cambodia. Huey had a massive reach advantage and used it to the max. In South Africa he'd trained in Tai kwon do and in Brazil, Capoiara. Now he was in Thailand where he trained in the art of Thai boxing. He kept his distance and landed solid blow after solid blow, they guy in red sneaked through a punch combination and they grappled together. Huey's strength advantage came to play and after a few knees to the other fulla's midriff he landed a flying elbow to the Thai's guy's head, which dropped him to the ground. Most normal people would have stayed down, but this fulla' did a hand

spring and was back on his feet before the ref even had a chance to get to one in his count. They came together again and Huey roundhouse kicked the guy in the face. The guy stumbled back only to receive another thundering elbow to the head. He kept his footing this time and continued to move forward so he wasn't at the end of Huey's powerful reach. He forced the fight into close contact where it was more even matched, until he made the mistake of stepping too far to the right and was met by a flurry of elbows and knees that left him on the mat once more.

Our side were screaming for our boy, and this time it took till six before the guy was back on his feet. The music was a tornado sweeping over us and with every landed blow each team let off a tremendous 'Oi!'. It built and built.....

Ding,

The round finished, the other guy wobbled to his corner and a sweat covered Huey came over to ours. I left to the team talk to Duff and went for a, my-friend-is-fighting-a-proper-fight-in-Thailand, sized line.

Ding,

Round two started and the other guy came out looking fresh as a daisy. Huey threw a punch combination that the guy side stepped forcing Huey into close range fighting again. As they grappled Huey threw another elbow. The guy through his experience of over thirty professional fights, ducked underneath and swept Huey's feet from underneath him. As Huey's momentum went forward, the guy, who was only a twig, muscle wise, used that momentum against my man and lifted him in the air, before slamming him onto the ground with a collective, 'Ooohhh' from all of us, and a rapturous 'Oi!' from all of them. My man was up on his feet again in moments and they drew together once more. Again as Huey swung a kick, the kick was ducked, the leg was swept, and he threw my friend to the floor floor. The chant of 'Oi!' exploded from the opposite corner.

'Kill 'em Huey, kill 'em,' we yelled, and once more the cocks circled one another, respect showing from both sides. Huey faked a punch and the guy took the usual duck to his left, only to receive a telling knee blow, flush to his face, which put him flat on the mat. He rose once more and moved forwards, Huey landed a punch combination and when the guy tried to duck the next time he was met by crunching elbow to the back of the head. It was thrown so hard both of Huey's feet left the ground. The guy staggered and my brother went in for the kill, only for the man in red to dodge once more and sweep my Huey's feet off the ground yet again. Again using his momentum to lift his body three feet in the air, then slam him flat on to the mat. The music quickened and the fight was even, both men knew the other wasn't gonna' just lie down and take the count out. The frenzy built and the off key music swirled. Ding,

I didn't know if I could handle another line just yet. Duff and I were as passionate about this as Huey was, and my heart might have given in if I pushed it anymore.

Ding,

Third and final round. The Thai guy looked a right state and although he hadn't actually landed any proper hits on our friend, he had the smarts enough to know that points count too.

Huey threw a low right kick and then a solid right hook. The guy caught the sweep on his knee and stepped under the hook, he knew how our man fought now. It was his brains and experience versus our man's natural ability and strength. He ducked the hook and it was a simple matter of sweep, lift, bam! Once again our man was straight on him. Frustration was starting to show on Huey, he was stronger, but this guy's years of experience and his technical ability were keeping him in the fight. In fact giving him the edge even though he hadn't landed a single brawling blow.

'Kill 'em, kill 'em Huey, use your knees, fuckin' kill 'em.' You could see Huey take a moment to think, he wasn't letting this cunt get close enough for the sweep any more. He kept his distance and rained blows on the other guy hard enough that after a few clashes his blocks couldn't keep Huey's lightning punches and thunderous leg kicks out. The music carouseled once more, fatigue took the man in red and Huey smashed him with a ten punch elbow and fist combination. Still on his feet the valiant opposition stumbled back Huey leapt high into the air and crashed a mighty elbow straight on top of the guy's head. He dropped like a sack of shit, and it wasn't until the eight count that somehow he found his feet once more. Huey moved in.

Ding,

The fight was over.

Both parties hugged and held each other up. When the call for a draw was made both men lifted one another's hands in the air. The ancient sport of Thai boxing had yet again shown what it was all about. Everyone could be proud of that matchup between the young strong farang, and the old wise Thai.

Koh Phangan – The Full moon party

Korat was gutted with me, he was fighting that night and I was going to the Full moon party over on Koh Phangan. I was gutted too, I wanted to be there for him, to watch him, fight, to stand in his corner. But I had to go to the full moon party man, it was legendary, it was one the reasons I chose to come to Thailand. So fuck it, I had to go.

I'd been warned by everybody that the Police presence is more than a little heavy there, and if you even get caught standing next to someone smoking a joint it a was four thousand euro fine. And what choice do ya' have, either pay up or call your family back home and tell them you're in a Thai prison for drugs. More urban legends circulated, and apparently they even had local people offering to sell you drugs, just so the Police could bust you. The locals would get one thousand euros and the Police three. Think about it, one thousand euros to these people was probably the equivalent of a year's salary. Then they would just sell the same drugs to the next farang. They probably weren't even real drugs to start off with, but would you wanna' wait around in a cell for the results? Everybody paid! So with that in mind I got four Yaa Baas to smoke and four more to take with me. We smoked three and I gave Korat one to have just before his fight. I left the weed at home in case of sniffer dogs, and put three of the Yaa Baas in a coke can, then crushed it and shoved it in my bag. The other I saved for the journey over.

Turned out there was a party boat to Koh Phangan so I booked a ticket on that, bought a beer and went and joined the craziness. It was an hour to the island, so as soon as the boat was moving I smashed the whole WY in one hit, holding up a queue to the toilet. And with a sweat on, I went down to the back of the ferry for some fresh air and a fag.

'You alright there mate,' some scruffy English fulla' next to me said.

Apart from the guilt of missing Korat's fight I couldn't have been better. I was living my dream of going to the Full moon party.

'Yeah, I'm sound, couldn't better fuckin' better actually, and you?'

'Pretty fuckin' excited mate, I've travelled from England for this party.'

'Fuck, true, same here. I'm from New Zealand but live in London.' And that was it, a new friendship was made and I had a partner in crime for the night. Wouldn't have to get high on my own.

'Hey mate,' he said, 'I think I got us two birds lined up for tonight as well like. See those two over there.' He pointed to a blonde and a brunette, both about five outta' ten. Even then though, they could have been ten out of ten and I wouldn't have been interested. Some people like to talk about how great sex is on drugs, but me; I couldn't be less interested, I can't shag the hottest chick when I'm high, my mind is just too all over the place. Fuck I can't even piss when I'm on E, let alone shag. I played along, 'Cool as man, introduce me.' It was still an opportunity to expand our group, and you don't just make friends with women so you can fuck them. The blonde girl was Liz and the brunette Jen, they were both Police cadets from Lincolnshire and were on a three month sabbatical. A DJ played, and soon enough as the sun was waving us goodbye, the party cruise pulled up at some shitty port and we were offloaded, ready to be queued up and thoroughly searched by the Police.

Welcome to Koh Phangan, birthplace of the famous Full moon party. The copper went through my bag and questioned the crushed can he found, but with a shrug and a, 'I didn't want to litter,' he shrugged too and handed it back.

As we walked off the ramp there was a stall set up selling bottles of Sang som, with a can of coke and a bottle of M-51 in a bucket filled with ice for two hundred baht. We coupled up. Mike his name was, shared one with Liz and I shared another

with Jen. Since he'd done the ground work, he got to pick first. He took the blonde, there's no love amongst friends sometimes. Apparently the party was a few hundred metres away on the other side of the island. The town was in the midst of celebration, bars were full, music was pumping. IT WAS FUCKIN' ANARCHY. Guys were selling glow everything and Henna tattoos were being drawn. It was happy chaos, you couldn't help but get into the vibe. Pretty much every person there had put their lives on hold, and travelled all that way for the same reason. To rave and have a good time; the Full moon is a legend to this day.

We made it to the beach and topped up with new buckets. Facing out to the water, psy trance was dooger, doogering away to the right, drum n bass was bop bopping away to the left. The last fragments of light were still clinging on so we got to see the beach properly. It was probably just under a kilometre long and about four or five sound systems with thousands of ravers were lined up along the edge, each individual lost in the soundscapes. Mike looked at me with a glint in his eye and said, 'My mates came here not too long ago and apparently if we go left all the way to end we'll find a bar on the hillside called the Magic mountain bar, and they sell, magic mushroom milkshakes there.' I looked at our trainee copper companions, they both silently agreed with each other, then announced they were dead keen.

Mike's advice was bang on the money, 'cause sure as shit at the end of the sand was a trail of messed up looking gigglers and an arrow that said, 'Happy shakes this way.' We ordered four and they were vile. Even worse than Gecko's, the guys serving them hadn't even tried to disguise the flavour in any way, not even with milk. It was just a green and blue slushy of crushed ice and god damn magic mushroom. There was no option but to toughen the fuck up. Besides the girls weren't having any problems, so I slid that horrible frozen, raw mushroom flavoured slush puppy shit down, and within twenty minutes we all started to buckle over with strange sensations and laughter. As soon as my stomach and thighs started to go I knew these weren't going to be mellow like Laos. I had suspicions of the high strength purely by how dark the colouring of the 'shakes' was. Vileness or not, it was only about half an hour after consuming them that we all decided the whole bar thing was too much, so we made our way back down to the beach.

Mike was making out with Liz, and me and Jen were chatting away. When the girls decided on a toilet break Mike came over, 'Look man you've gotta' get stuck into Jen, Liz won't do anything unless her mate pulls too.'

'Oh man,' I said, 'I'm way too high for that sort of shit.'

'Come on dude, You're my wing man, I pulled two girls for us! Hey look, take one of these.' and he pulled out a big blue diamond shaped tablet. 'Viagra.'

'Oh for fucks sake, alright then I'll take one for the team, give it here. And begrudgingly I took it and swallowed that mischief down with a mouthful from my bucket. The girls came back and we paired up straight away again. Liz and Mike were straight back on it and I caught Jen looking over at them. It was time to be a man, and help a brother out. I moved towards Jen and she looked at me with a, 'It's about fuckin' time.' and we started making out on the beach surrounded by revellers and ravers. I saw Jen glance over at Liz again, who was now fully engulfed in Mike and she looked at me said, 'Let's go somewhere else.' Cool, the Viagra had kicked in strong and the mushrooms had all but been forgotten about.

We were only about a hundred or so metres from where the path led up to the magic bar. Behind us up on the edge of the sand, were well constructed, expensive looking bungalows, and there was a party in every one. Jen took the closest of them and pushed me up against the side.

‘Get ya pants off love, ya’ve pulled.’ What choice did I have? I just went along with her commands and crawled under the edge of the hut while she straddled across me and twenty or so people partied above. It was action time.

Then the mushrooms decided to surface again, and the feeling of lying in dirt where spiders and shit could be took over. So although still hard I was completely freaked out by the grubbiness of it all. ‘I can’t do this man I’m sorry, but I’m lying in dirt and shit.’ The look she gave me? Well if they could kill, I’d’ve been fucked. We threw our clothes back on and went to find the others. It didn’t take long, they hadn’t moved and were still fully lost in one another. I copped Jen checking her blonde mate again. She pushed me back onto the sand, and a tit was put in my mouth. She reached down inside my pants and my Viagra fuelled prick played along with the game. She stared kissing my neck then pulled my shirt up to lick and suck me there. Next, after I caught her glancing one more time at Liz, she pulled my pants down and started to suck on my cock.

What can I say, it was awesome. The initial peak and euphoria of the mushrooms had subsided and all my senses were focused on the amazing feeling of Jen’s lips around my knob. And not just that, I had wanted to do the Full moon party for years, I was high on good drugs, hadn’t been busted by the cops, and was getting a blow job on the beach. I heard laughter and looked up, and checked a group of people taking photos of us, so without her noticing any of this I struck a pose with my thumbs up. An icon in holiday photo albums.

There was no way I was gonna cum, and hey I gotta’ give her dues she stuck at it for a good half hour or so. Eventually it was Liz who was like, ‘Jen, the fuck are you doing, people are watching.’ That put a stop to it. Fuck, what can ya say, I’d had a good time. Put myself out there and been rewarded. The girls disappeared off to ‘toilet’ again and Mike high fived me. ‘Cheers mate, he said. Take one for the team eh?’ We laughed and hugged about it, then gossiped about how good the mushrooms were. I wanted to smoke some more Yaa Baa, and friends or not I wasn’t about to share.

Just next to the bungalows I found a bar with an outside loo, so I made myself at home in that party scene toilet and smoked myself up a storm, doing two tablets in one session. Because of what I had been told, I wasn’t particularly keen to have a drug like Yaa Baa on me in this place. I had nowhere really secure to hide it, if I happened to randomly get stopped and searched again. So I bought another coke can from bucket stall tipped out the coke in the shadows and hid the last one in the same style. Plus of course two more buckets of Sang som and M-51. There was only one thing that could make this amazing life experience better and that was rubbing it in the face of someone back home. So I called Cousin Paul back in London and laughed the whole way through my story. ‘High on mushrooms, on Viagra and a blow job on the beach!!! Can you fuckin’ believe it? People were taking pictures and everything!’

Maybe it was the mushrooms but when the girls showed up back on the beach, Jen looked as guilty as a smiling priest lurking in the shadows of a school boys’ gym. We chatted, but I thought I could tell she wasn’t proud of herself. Her and Liz kept chatting and Liz laid off Mike as well. We were only a few hours into our trip and in my mind I could see this all going wrong. Without a word I just walked off while no one was looking.

I went over to the other end of the beach, happy to not have my poor head confused by the goings on of women. It may have all been in my mind, but the seed of doubt had been planted, and the only way it wouldn’t blossom and for all my thoughts to not be consumed by it, was to fuck off and do my own thing. You can always

survive a bad trip by finding a fresh grounding of consciousness where you feel comfortable. Dealing with over worked thoughts and experiences when ya' tripping can set ya' mind astray for ages. You'll never really be able to let go of those collections of anarchic thought until you face up to them.

As I cruised up the shoreline, fire dancers were showing their skills surrounded by entranced party goers. At some point a 'Welcome to the Full moon party' sign was set ablaze, the scene was truly magical, and hey, I'd just gotten a blow job. 'Think you're having a good time? I'm having a good time,' I projected at those around me. Just after the flaming skipping rope, some bar was playing full on psychedelic and the guys mixing were dropping samples everywhere. I danced and partied with my hands in the air.

Mr Sun came up to greet us once more and feeling bad about ditching them, I went looking for the others. I found them shuffling away outside some Drum and Bass bar with what I had to admit, (As a trance fan) was perfect music for the moment. It was melodic and better suited to that time of day. We met each other and carried on as if I'd only been gone for a moment. As if nothing out of place had happened, like the attempt at sex under the bungalow, and the blow job on the beach. Although Liz and Mike were arm in arm me and Jen generally continued on as if nothing awkward had come between us. It was fine, totally comfortable and not long later, with a reminder from Mike we caught the party boat back to Koh Tao.

The boat was a lot quieter on the way back and I followed the others downstairs so they could find a seat to crash out on. It was like a morgue in there and I checked loads of zombies trying to get some shut eye that had been well up for it twelve or so hours before. Me? The Yaa Baa had hit its second wind and every fidgety second in the snoring silence felt like an hour of fidgety speeding time, which reminded me I still had that last WY in the crushed can. The call for that as well as nicotine finally dragged me away, so I slid the sleeping Jen off my shoulder and went outside for chocolate and cigarettes. There was one group of likeminded looking people, obviously governed over by the whiskey drinking, budgie smuggling, gay guy with a joint in his mouth. I clocked them as the group I was going to join, then locked myself in the cramped toilet and puffed my way to gooey happiness.

I joined the group, which was made up of some Aussie fulla' with his missus, two girls with oversized sunglasses, and Mr Budgie smuggler himself. We all sort of recognised each other from the boat ride over and I was welcomed as I sat. My gay friend offered me his bottle of cheap Thai whiskey, and fuck hey, if he could drink it, so could I. I knocked back a swig, and accepted the joint, the others forgotten about. As we pulled up to Koh Tao I was invited to join them at some place not far from the Jamm Bar. When I stepped off the ramp I caught hold of Mike and the girls and they invited me back to the girls' place, but I had it set in mind to join the new crew. With a thank you and a story that I was going home to sleep, I ditched them again, and walked the half kilometre back to the rental shop.

The night had been amazing. Meeting Mike, Jen and Liz, had made it unforgettable. It wasn't just the experiences, it was the fact that I had actually lived a dream. I hadn't just talked about it. I'd fuckin' done it man and I'd gotten' fucked in more ways than one! Well kinda'. Anyway, I'd set a goal, saved the cash and fuckin' put myself right fuckin' out there in the wild. And it was fuckin' good. The people I had met had created memories for me so great that I'm writing about them all these years later.

The guilt piled up again about the way I had just walked off the night before. But the way my head had been going at the time, I felt confident that I had made the right

decision. I don't think my head would have coped if I'd hung around. Lying to them at the dock was out of order though, and I toiled with that process until I reached the restaurant come hire place that Huey had suggested.

A lady stormed over waving a finger at me, 'Sorry I not see yesterday, but you crash bike, look.' And pointed at a series of scratches on the paint work and a half lose brake lever.

'No I fuckin' did not.' All the cons you hear about bike rentals and the reason I always try and get the shitty one flooded my mind. I was on the offensive straight away, 'I made you check yesterday when I dropped it off, and you said it was fine. If something has happened to it since then, it's not my fault.'

'No, yesterday I make mistake, but you bring bike back damaged, you pay!'

'What the fuck!?! Hey look man, I gave *you* the bike, *you* looked over it and *you* didn't see any problems. Don't you dare try and fuckin' put this shit on to me.' Eventually she conceded that she had agreed the day before it was ok, and that fine, I could have another one without paying the repair cost for the other. We both went over the new bike and went over the fucker like they say – with a fine toothed comb – and agreed on all its little marks. Anyway it was all sorted and I had another ride. I thought it was about time I caught up with the guys I'd met while the others were sleeping, but as soon as I got on the bike to go look for them I realised I'd properly crossed the line with the lady at the hire shop – who Huey had introduced me to – and thought it best the incident came out of my mouth rather than when they saw him next.

It was on the way back, just as you turned left after the stadium and the asphalt road changed to sand that I saw the lamppost. A throbbing pain in my foot reminded me that a few days earlier I had tried to do a burn out on the gravel. My first one, and as soon as I hit the accelerator the back wheel instead of skidding had gripped the road, and I had been catapulted, bike and all into the lamppost, two feet up in the air. I had broken the bike, I was a complete cunt and had disgraced myself while outta' my head and on my high horse. Anyway I went back and told Huey about kicking off, was apologetic and blamed it on the drugs and kept my incident with the lamppost to myself. After my conscience was clear I drove over towards the Jamm Bar looking for my 'Cool' friends but after a few moments of feeling like I'd been ditched, I decided to savour the night I'd had, and call it quits for real.

Mushrooms, Korat's roommate and the rogue scouser

It wasn't gonna' be just another day down on the beach in front of Secrets, it was Songkran the Thai New Year's celebration of water. I'd heard a lot about it; people had been talking the festival up for the last week or so.

Armed with my water pistol and a stash of well wrapped up Yaa Baa's Korat had scored for me, I jumped on my scooter and made my way into town. The festering hole the moped had left in my foot had started to heal, and the sun was beating down. As soon as I got near the main road I could hear the typical sounds of celebration. Kinda' like the sound of wild panic, but without that fearful edge. The traffic was piled up on the corner, and with a sploosh, a torrent of water landed right on top of the guy sat on his bike in front of me. Looking up I saw a couple of local girls in hysterics as they pulled the now empty bucket back over the balcony. Fuck I was glad that wasn't me! In front of the guy in front of me was a pickup truck with it's back area piled with kids. They joined the madness by throwing what looked like flour bombs on the now drenched poor fulla'. He took it with good taste and produced a water canon type thing and proceeded to annihilate the kids, who now found themselves trapped in his line of fire.

Down on the beach in front of Secrets, Duff had set up a long plastic sheet that ran down the sand and had a ramp at the end which threw you up and into the water. I quickly chowed a WY and with a beer in hand, joined the back of the queue. No one mentioned that the unseen particles of grit that covered the surface of the slide acted like sandpaper and left ya' back looking like you'd caught a nasty dose of Scabies.

The whole crew had the day off, and a few of their friends along with Dom and Liz joined us. Korat came and we snuck into the toilet and smashed another tablet down each. Later as the vibe was pumping, Huey and Duff got it in their heads that we should head to Bom shanka's where the strongest mushroom shakes on the island were served. So like a pack of modern yuppie bikers, we headed out on the highway and took the ten or so minute drive right to the other side of the island, and ordered twelve magic mushroom milkshakes. We downed those suckers there and got another two litre bottle full to take with us, and hit the road before it all kicked in, after a joint of course. Although the ride was ten minutes, as the shrooms took hold the time seemed to expand. When we got to Secrets everyone was glad to be off their bikes and back at home base. We laughed at all our scars from the slide and compared others from motorbike crashes. Duff came out trumps with his classic Koh Tao tattoo. It consisted of scars all up one leg and an exhaust pipe sized hole burnt into his calf muscle.

The sun set in a kaleidoscope of wonder and left us feeling humble as we gossiped about everything. In awe we sat and watched the local fire dancers who came out and put on a show, those guys were amazing. Apart from a dry area about twenty centimetres wide the rest of their staff was completely ablaze. They twisted and turned at such a speed that a million infinity signs were traced in front of us, it was amazing.

They twirled and threw the staffs high in the air, only stopping now and then to refuel. Duff took over the bar and we drank yet more Cuba Libres, the best on the island, and he began to rack up twelve shots of Jager bombs, one after the other. He sat the shots of spirit on top of the glasses that were half filled with M-51. Whose ever turn it was would tap the first shot on the edge, and like a stack of dominoes they'd all fall into place inside the glass. Then we'd knock those suckers back and Duff would start again. The mushrooms gave us hollow legs and the alcohol went down like freshly squeezed mango shakes.

Later that night up at Huey's house the party was in full swing, Korat showed up with his roommate/shack mate, whatever you wanna' call it. The guy was happy to go by the name Thong, or something like that, Thong is what I called him anyway. Thong had a heartbreaking story, and once the party had wound down to just the three of us, he shared it with me.

Thong had been born and bred in Bangkok and was dealing Yaa Baa whilst living with his wife and parents. Without any warning one night the door was kicked down by the Police, they didn't yell, 'Police, Police, this is a raid, get down on the ground.' Instead they opened fire and shot his father; the next volley of shots hit his son. Thong jumped through the closest window and kept on running. He now lived on an island in a wooden box beside Korat, fighting in the ring for money. He wasn't experienced enough to be a trainer and like Korat part of the deal was, win or lose he fought every couple of weeks.

Through fear and shame he'd never tried to contact his wife or mother again. He didn't know whether his father or son had survived, he couldn't take the risk of trying to contact them. Thong's problems didn't end there either. He was the kid I saw knocked out on the night Huey fought. Unlike Korat, Thong wasn't a very good fighter. The burdens on that guy's life were more than any I've experienced. But his English was good and the third member to our team was a welcome one. It was nice for me and Korat to have an interpreter, after all that time we could finally have a conversation without it taking half the night, not that it mattered.

One day I came across the scouser from Vang Vieng with a hooker on each arm. 'You should never have taken ya' money back from that guy,' he said. 'The next day he came up with the most pure China White I've ever had. I dunno' what the shit they sell in England is but this stuff looked like Cocaine, and mun did it make ya' make ya' puke ya guts out or what. 'Mun, my days were running out on my visa so I said to the guy, look I've a hundred bucks left, what can ya' do for me with that? The guy laughed and said,' 'Bring your bags, we will look after you. When you run out of money we' put you on bus back to Thailand.' 'So get this right, next thing ya' know I find myself in the back of like a warehouse type place, just outside of Vang Vieng, and they're proper packaging up kilos of the stuff. These guys gave me a comfy seat in the corner and a pile of smack with a bucket to spew in and fed me that shit for three days. They loved me, I was like a mascot or something. One of them would just come over every now and then, give me a rub on the head and top me up. It was fuckin' brill' mun. None of the boys back home will believe me, fuckin' cunts. They're all still stuck back there blastin' whatever it is those assholes selling us that crap call it. I'm trying to beat that high now with a threesome but I don't think anything will top that; ever!'

The man lived his dreams and found his pot at the end of *his* rainbow. He took a risk that even I wouldn't have taken and got rewarded big time.

Border runs and Black Jack

You only get a one month visa for Thailand, and mine and Huey's ran out around the same time. There were two options, go to Koh Samui and fly to Indonesia, or do the van mission to Burma. Fuck flying, Burma it was. The Thais celebrate Songkran for about a week, and we had been warned to expect a drunk driver earning more money so he could buy booze. We met him on the mainland, and he seemed no worse than the rest of us. So we piled on board, fifteen to a ten seater and hit the road. It was an uneventful eight hours to the border and stories had been rife about the drugs that were sold when you got to the other side. Bottles of Ketamine, packets of cheap Valium and Viagra, that sort of stuff, were supposed to be sold on the street. Anyway we rocked up at an armed border control and all that turned out to be shit. It was a hot day and I thought we were just passing through, so I left my flip flops in the van and went to get my new visa.

It all seemed simple enough, until some fulla' said it would take an hour for the update to happen, and as law would have it we needed to go into Burma itself. This required a barefoot journey up some dock to a ferry, which we were told was gonna' take us to a five star casino island resort. We would spend about half an hour there before being 'Escorted' backed to Thailand and for the journey home. Not too much of an inconvenience.

The resort was completely out of place from my images of the military run Burma. It was ridiculous luxury for a country famed for the suppression of its people, and the imprisonment of the infamous female politician Aung San Suu Kyi. Around nineteen ninety she won an election in to parliament which would have meant the end of the Regime. But as you can imagine, like all greedy Jackals fighting over a carcass, they refused to hand Burma to her. Instead Aung San Suu Kyi was imprisoned by the Regime for most of the next twenty odd years. During that time she never gave up the struggle for the freedom of her people, and for that was awarded The Nobel Peace Prize. She was recently released and ran for the next election, and did great. So after all this time the dogs seem to have devoured their meal and have handed the country back to her, leaving behind the dried and chipped bones of a broken nation.

We had time to kill, so I separated from the others and took a look around inside the joint. I went through some fancy doors to my left, and sure as fuck, there was a huge casino, its tables and slot machines packed! The place was full of the tax avoiding wealthy from East Asia. For their own protection, there's no casinos in Thailand. That's why they're crowded around the borders.

Although this story wouldn't portray it, for a couple of reasons I've never really been much of a gambler. Firstly, once they opened casinos in New Zealand we had the experience of having to drag a certain friend out of the Sky city on numerous occasions. He always just needing one more bet to make his money back. And secondly, I was too busy spending my money on drugs. And to quote the movie Casino, 'All the lights, music and alcohol are here so we can get your money, it's funded by those who lose. If everybody won, how the fuck could we be here?' So fuck that, besides the gambler's high comes from when they are losing, not from when they're winning

But hey, I had Black Jack on my phone and reckoned I'd picked up a few pointers, besides we had time to kill, what else was there to do? So I found a table, pulled up a seat and joined the next hand. All the men were in suits and the ladies their Sunday best, so I played high. They took Baht, Euros, Pounds and U.S. so having four thousand baht on me and about twenty minutes before we had to get the boat back, I

threw all the four thousand baht I on the table then checked my cards. A queen and a seven, seventeen. When you're trying to get twenty one or as close to as possible, seventeen is a shit deal, 'cause the majority of the cards left in the pack are worth more than five. More than five and I was bust, these cunts had my cash, and I was back outside with the other border runnin' farangs.

As luck would have it, someone else further down the line got a king and a jack so the dealer was forced to play and try and better it. Sure as shit he bust. To explain, when he flipped an extra card to try and reach twenty one, he ended up with a score of twenty five or some shit. Anyway 'cause he'd fucked up we all got paid out, and my money was doubled. I left the eight thousand where it was and the next round was dealt. 'Black Jack, Fuck yeah!' I'd received a jack and an ace, twenty one on the first deal. He paid me double and a half, another twelve thousand. The lady next to me was proud as punch and, although I was dressed liked shit, I obviously had cash, 'cause I rolled it high. The round finished off, and the dealer collected most of the money. Since I had nothing to lose I let all twenty thousand baht roll on the next set of cards. A king and a ten, I'd scored twenty, I just needed to sit there poker faced, turn down the offer of another card and wait to see what happened.

With the others watching, cool as, I turned the cards over, first the king then the ten. The dealer had sixteen, sweet fuck all, worse than seventeen, he was forced to play and try and beat my twenty. As he reached for the deck, we all sat around holding our breath. The others around me had scored low cards but had stuck with what they had in the knowledge that the dealer would have to either equal my twenty or better it by only one point, or else he was fucked and would have to pay out to the whole table. He flipped the top card of the deck over, six of hearts, twenty two, he was bust, we'd all won. In the space of ten minutes, I personally had just taken forty thousand baht, a month's wages for the upper middle class in Thailand. There was cheering and shouting from our table, there was approving looks and applause from others, and then there was a tap on my shoulder. A tuxedo wearing gentleman with white gloves on and a stern look said, 'Excuse me, I am sorry but you have no foot wear. I'm afraid you are not dressed correctly, you must leave.' It was better than the cattle prod they used in the movie Casino I guessed, so with supportive outrage from my new found companions and two handed handshakes. I swiped up my cash like a winner and with pride stalked out the door. They didn't really have much to worry about 'cause the cash went straight back to them. I wanted to show those cunts that although I may have looked and smelt like shit, I was big money. So with an easy come easy go attitude, I hit a duty free store they had and bought two bottles of wine worth a total of thirty odd thousand baht; four hundred and fifty pounds or so.

We were all loaded first back onto the boat, then into the van to make our way back to Koh Tao, a little richer, no poorer but one hell of an experience later.

When we got back to the island I still had a few thousand burning a hole in my pocket, so we went and told Korat it was party time. After a few minutes he showed up on a moped crowded with Thong and some new kid who had just started training at the stadium, along with a six Yaa Baas. We carried out the traditional ceremony in preparation for the WY, then got stuck in. There was no fucking around, I stuck a whole tablet onto the foil and tried to do it all in one puff. At first it started to melt, then the white crust built up around the edges, and when my lungs screamed they could hold no more of the chocolaty goodness, I sucked in the last of my breath and held it. A quickening of the heart followed by the outbreak of a full body sweat, then a crazy head rush, that through experience was only leading one way. Pride was out the window, and with green dignity I plunged out onto the balcony, and leaned over

the edge, 'Blah, huuuooorrrrh, I power chucked over the place. As I gasped for breath my stomach churned again and, 'Oooouuuggrrrrhh,' the sweat filled torrent continued. I could hear Korat in the back ground laughing and Huey asking if I was ok. A glass of cool water was handed over and with a wipe of the brow, and a, 'Whatever,' from me we carried on. I only smoked halves for the rest of the night.

Shiva moon

At the Full moon I'd seen a poster up somewhere that had Shiva moon party written on it. Shiva moon was the three quarter moon after the Full. So I made the decision to go. What else was I here for right?

Before I left Koh Tao I'd made a tour to the Jamm Bar for some more smoke and Yaa Baa. When I got there some little lady was behind the counter, and as she passed over the gear she said, 'We have Ecstasy, one thousand baht.'

'What? A thousand? No way.'

'They are very good, we have go to farang for them. You buy two, if you no like the first one bring back the other, I give you money back. These the best we ever have.'

'Fuck it, ok sold. Two please.'

So like last time I stashed it all in an empty drink can, except one of the Yaa Baas of course. Then crushed the can and stuck it at the bottom of my bag.

To my surprise the ferry dropped me off on a completely different part of the island than last time. I ignored the hostel for rent salesman, got a scooter and hit the road with the plan to find a guesthouse away from the main drag. I had far too much drugs on me to risk it.

I'd been riding for about fifteen minutes and saw a big boxing stadium come up on my left, with a guesthouse opposite. So I pulled in there and rented a bungalow with a nice balcony that had neon cotton wound around its edges and a hammock. Previously home to some other tripper, I guessed. There'd been a couple of guys lying around on pillows up by the bar. So I went and cemented myself amongst them and caught up on the local gossip. Some chick had fallen asleep on one of those blow up swimming pool beds and had floated right out to sea. It'd taken her eighteen hours to make her way back to land again. Thing was, she ended up on Koh Samui not Koh Phangan where she'd originally been. Some people someone knew had been busted by the cops for sitting next to a guy smoking pot, and got the infamous four thousand euro fine. Also the boxing across the road had been last week so I wouldn't see any while I was there.

I thought I recognised the ol' boy sitting with us, and it was when he mentioned the Pendragon parties in London I put my finger on it. Like Eddie the Angel he was an icon in our dance scene. I used to see him all the time at either the Fridge or Brixton Academy. The parties were huge, and full on. Pendragon was a legend!

'You're that fulla' from the parties with the orange bag, aren't ya?'

'Yeah that's me.'

We were both chuffed to bits to have a kindred spirit and as we talked, smoked and drank, he said that one of the guys from the massive Lab 4 rented a room in his house. Lab 4 used to play the coolest, most full hard techno trance live, and their show was always awesome to watch and bounce around to. He gave me the directions on how to find the party, which it turned out, was a couple of miles back the way I'd come. 'Just

take the right just after the Seven-Eleven.' The night wore on and around twelve I decided to get my shit together and head on out to find this rave.

Even at the best of times I don't like riding motorbikes, especially at night, but at least on Koh Tao it was generally flat. Koh Phangan's roads are broken up by a series of treacherous hills, with really sharp blind corners. As per usual I was riding my bike stoned and pissed, and as per usual was only going about fifteen kilometres an hour.

I noticed after a while there was a car right up my ass and although I pulled over more to the left, it wouldn't pass. My sixth sense kicked in and told me it was the filth. Panic sunk in, I'd become a little too relaxed drinking beer back with the others, and had slipped back into Koh Tao mode. When I left, I'd thought about the drugs and thought fuck it. I'd smoked the last Yaa Baa, put the weed in my pocket and the E's in my wallet. Now the memory of that four thousand euro fine came back like an unwanted cold sore, and my only thought was, if you get a fine like that for sitting next to a guy smoking weed, what'll you get for carrying real ecstasy? Pictures of calling family back home to tell them I was in a Thai prison for class A drug possession flooded my mind. Fuck it, I kept my cool as well as could be expected, hoping I was just being paranoid and praying they'd over take, but it never happened.

Five or so minutes later I spied the Seven-Eleven lit up in the distance and I made the decision to deal with this matter. I pulled up opposite it, hoping the car or whatever would keep on going, but no it slowed right on down too and stopped behind me. First glance told me it was the Police, so I tried not to falter and walked in to the cool air conditioning of the shop.

In my most charming Thai, I threw out my best 'Sawadee Kap' hello, and with a sober smile asked for two packets of smokes. The door opened beside me and an officer in that stiff perfectly pressed Police garb they wear looked me dead in the eyes. 'Sawadee Kap,' I said once more, and with my heart in my mouth I extended my hand. 'I love your country, it is so, beautiful. I only get here today and already it is too much. In my country now is snowing,' putting that slight lilt of an Asian accent to it.

'Ka poon kap,' thank you, he said. The guy at the counter handed me over the smokes and I paid. 'Ka poon kap.' he said to.

I carried on my charade, 'Ka poon kap? It means thank you?'

The Policeman smiled, the guy behind the counter smiled, I smiled. 'Yes,' the Policeman said. 'Mean thank you.' And with a warm 'Sawadee kap' from him, I 'Ka poon kap'd him one more time and walked out the door.

I wasn't free yet though, the even worse vision had come that not only were the E's in my wallet, they were behind my driver's licence. The first thing they'd fuckin' look at. So although the headlights of the Police car were shining right on me, I took the risk, pulled them out my wallet and held them in my fist, with the plan that I'd simply drop them on the road if the cops flashed me. A sign in front of where I was parked pointed out that the party was, as the ol' boy had said, down the road next to the shop. There was no fuckin' way I was gonna' head straight towards it, so I carried on forward, hoping the sweat on my hands wouldn't dissolve the E's. I'd gone about a hundred metres or so when the cop car pulled up behind me, then with a moment of held breath, he over took with a toot on his horn.

I pulled over and kinda' shaking I thought, fuck this, took one of the E's and stashed the other in a torn bit of lining in my pants. There was fuck all I could do to hide the fat joints I'd rolled, so I turned around, got my head back together and drove on to find the party.

Shiva moon was different from the Full moon, it was a real psy trance rave, not a party on the beach, filled with twenty thousand drunks. At the beginning magic mushroom shakes were being served at the bar, and me and a German guy drank one of them each, then shared one of the joints while we waited for it all to kick in. He was a nice fulla', and had been on the island for a couple of weeks. He'd had the same thoughts about the Full moon too, after all that travel chasing a legend, the Full moon, although great fun, wasn't really a rave. The fear of being busted by the Police, and all the drunk people, made it exactly what a rave is not. For me and him too, a rave is like a vacation, it's a ten or twelve hour break from the real world, the world that's full of going to work and paying bills. It's about a group of people making a choice, to live outside the law high on illegal drugs. But by their actions proving the illegality of these drugs is lunacy. There's never any violence at a rave, never any trouble, unless you call, making life bonds with strangers and genuinely caring about each other trouble. There's certainly not any Police, and never any drunks. There was no buckets of booze here. After my shake I only drank water, the same as most other people. As the party got underway, a few dealers came around. I was glad I was sorted for the time being because I got to watch who sold stuff and left straight away, and who hung around. The guys who showed up, sold some stuff then disappeared were more than likely selling shit. However over on one side they were fuckin' lovin' it. I watched what was happening and caught a few people high fiving a local fulla' who was dancing with them.

'Hey, what's this fulla' selling?' I asked.

'Ecstasy. Fuckin' good ones too.' some guy said, with a rolling of his eyes and a chew of his lip.

Cool, I thought I'd better grab some before he ran out.

'How much?'

'Five hundred.'

'Fuckin' sweet as, I'll take two now, and when ya' get low come and see me and I'll take the rest, how's that?' He grinned then laughed, and taking me in both his arms he gave me a hug and a promise to sell his last five to me.

The music was awesome, full on. The crowd was a mix of Japanese hippies, European hippies and other casual looking people. Everybody was high and the mushroom shakes had sold out. We danced under the neon lights threaded amongst the coconut trees. We danced under the Shiva moon, it was perfect. I lit the other joint and choofed away on it while thick clouds of smoke engulfed me. Looking around I spied the European looking hippy group and went to share. This cunt's eyes went wide as a car's headlights and he raised his hands and backed away.

'No man,' he said. 'No fuckin' way.'

Whatever, ya' know I just presumed 'cause you look like you haven't showered in a while and have great big thick dirty dreads, typically ya' smoked fuckin' pot. Fuck ya then. So I went over to the group on the riotous side and smoked the joint with them. Later the guy with the dreads came up and apologised, then started to lecture me about how, 'You can't smoke pot here.' And how him and his friends, hide their weed outside their bungalows, and only roll one joint at a time and smoke it locked in their rooms. I was like, 'Dude, what the fuck are you here for then? This shit's about freedom man. If you're that afraid, how can you enjoy yourself? Why not go to Laos or Cambodia, where you can smoke that shit on the streets, in fuckin' restaurants, where ever the fuck you like? Hey fuck, apparently in southern Cambodia, it's the Police who sell it. You guys need to chill the fuck out man.' I dunno' if I'd been rude or been the one to give him good advice, but I've never had time for that shit. If you

can't smoke a joint at a rave in a jungle on an island in the middle of nowhere, what was the fuckin' point of the whole thing? What's the point of coming here? Fuck them, Police or no Police; I knew what I was here for!

The combination of the shake, Yaa Baa and four pills had made for a great night and as the darkness started to give way, and our surroundings started brighten in the grey morning light, the Thai guy came up and said, 'I go now before sun come up. I have six left you wan' them, I give them to you for two and half thousand baht.'

'Fuckin' yeah dude,'

We hugged again and he said, 'You going to Half moon party?'

Half moon? There had to be didn't there; any excuse eh. 'Yeah, see you there then. Hey when is it?'

'When the moon is half.' And with a slap on the shoulder and rough hug we parted ways, new friends abound. The Euro hippies had gone but the Japanese were going strong and the ol' boy showed up from the guesthouse.

'Hey how's it,' I said, 'you want an E? They're pretty good.' waving one round in his face.

'No I brought some MDMA with me from London. I just empty it into some of my medication capsules and stick it in my luggage. Who's going to suspect and ol' fulla' like me?' I told him about the copper the night before and the Euro hippies, we both laughed and shared the moment. I spied my Swedish mate from Cambodia, the girl that had partied with, me, Matt and Mike on my last night; it was nice to catch up and we shared an E. The music was simply outstanding and the sun was directly above us when the Police finally decided to show up in force.

'Hey,' the ol' boy said. 'If you've still got any of those E's on you I'd either take them or go.'

Ah fuck it, I called it quits and with a promise to meet up later, slipped through the crowd, got back on my bike and rode home. Really slowly this time.

I crashed out in the hammock and woke just as the sun was going down. There was no one around, so I thought I'd find somewhere with a movie on and chill out. Closer to town I saw some fulla' I recognised from the night before walking down some stretch of road. 'Hey you wanna' lift?'

'Yeah mate that'd be great. I'm heading into town to meet some friends for dinner. Couldn't eat a fuckin' thing though. I reckon I'd rather go to the after party down at Ban Sabaii.'

'After party eh, where's Ban Sabaii?'

'Ah fuck dinner, here, turn the bike around I'll show ya.'

That was easily done. We both threw our plans out the window and went to carry on the party. Ban Sabaii was on Ban Tai beach. Basically just down a road to the left of the Seven-Eleven. We pulled up next to about twenty other bikes and went to check it out. Ban Sabaii's interior is quite small, room for about a hundred, and it was decorated with the typical glow in the dark material stretched out into funny shapes. The music was uplifting full on trance and the bar staff were as friendly as the fifty or so people in the crowd. Out through some side doors it opened up right on to the beach with its palm trees, seating areas, and powdery white sand. You couldn't ask for a more perfect chill out area.

'Arigato!' some crazy Japanese hippy yelled at me. He grabbed my hand with both of his and said once more. Arigato!', then covered in sweat he hugged me.

What choice did I have but to hug him back?

'Arigato,' I beamed, 'Arigato amigo.' It was my turn to pull him into a hug, raves eh, there's fuckin' nothing else like them. As the fresh dose of E's kicked in, amazing

sensations of euphoria swept through my body. They were at their most ticklingly strongest as they rushed up and down my spine.

I got chatting to some crazy Thai bird who loved to party and dressed like a hippy. She spoke faster than I did and we were instant friends. We took one of my E's each, and rocked on to the music. I got talking about my travels so far, and when I mentioned Vang Vieng, she laughed and said she had a mate called Raz staying there.

'Raz! I know a Raz, Bal' 'ead English fulla', bout my age.'

'She yelped like an angry puppy and we gossiped about our different adventures with him, those six degrees of separation eh? They can show up anywhere.'

It was while I was telling Lolita about the first night I met him at JD's when there was a familiar voice behind us.'

'Thought I could hear my fuckin' ears burning, you two wouldn't be talking about me would ya?'

'Raz!', we both yelled and then both hugged him. I had three E's left, so we took one each and went outside to catch up on his journeys.

'Well you wouldn't believe it would ya,' Raz said. 'Of all the millions in Thailand, you two trouble makers end up together. Ha, fuckin' life eh? So here's a story for ya', I'd moved down to the river, right next to the Smile Bar. You know try and get a different view on life rather than lookin' out from the inside of JD's, and it was lovely. The sound of the water at night, fuckin' perfect. I was planning on coming back next week and asked one of the other guys, not Gecko, to get me a hundred Yaa Baas. He reckoned, 'No problems'. I was suspect though, 'cause he didn't want to meet at the restaurant, but some random fuckin' place outside of town. And get this, when I pulled up he had two other fulla's with him. I was still on my scooter and was like,' 'Who the fuck are they?' 'One of them leaned behind his bike and I followed him with my eyes. As soon as I saw the gun I pegged it. That fuckin' cunt! I'd been buying off of him since you left, I couldn't fuckin' believe it. And that wasn't it either. The fuckin' chase was on man. The guy from the bar disappeared but the other two were right after me. The one on the back had a fuckin' Ak in his hands. I was fuckin' scared man. Luckily I can ride a moped like motherfucker. And you know Vang Vieng man it's not very fuckin' big, but with a few quick turns I managed to lose them. I rode straight over the shitty little bridge to my bungalow, grabbed my shit and took off to my mate's hotel. She had to go book my bus ticket and sort the bike out, so I could get my passport back.

I took the first fuckin' bus outta' there. I waited right till the last minute, then she ran me to the coach. I jumped on, hid up the back praying they weren't searching the buses, and with my ass in my mouth, the bus pulled off and took me to Bangkok. Even at the border I was fuckin' lookin' over my shoulder for the cunts. Fuckin' horrible man. Why the fuck would he do that? I'd scored loads of gear off of him!'

'That's some fucked up shit dude!'

Lolita just sat there with a hand over her mouth and eyes like a rabbit in the headlights. Goes to show, never trust the locals. Anyway I bought us all beer, and some Euro hippy chick and her boyfriend came in selling liquid acid pre mixed in M-51 bottles, or so they said. Sure as shit, they hung around for thirty minutes made their money and fucked off, twisted smiling thieves, amongst a crowd of wonderful people.

Goes to show, you can't judge a cunt by its frilly underwear. They seemed genuinely lovely people, and can't have made more than a hundred or so pounds, but now they would have to leave the island. A lot of the people at Ban Sabaii were long haulers, they weren't going anywhere and after robbing them, you couldn't come

back, could ya'? Not many people knew of that secret little gem and it's awesome uplifting music.

One DJ had this amazing remix version of the Gorillaz' song Windmill, windmill or whatever the fuckin' thing is called. The tune blew my mind, although I haven't heard it since it's still one of the coolest dance tracks I've ever heard.

'Anyway,' Raz said, 'I got some Yaa Baa at home, let's go smoke it.' And that was us outta' there. I hadn't realised how big Koh Phangan was, we drove for about half an hour up towards the northern tip. Of course we stopped off for more fags and booze on the way. Raz was staying on a cliff side place and his bungalow faced right out onto the water. I still had loads of weed, so we got stuck into that then started the ritual of removing the silver lining from our cigarette packs. Lolita said she wanted some.

'No Lolita,' he said, 'You're not allowed any, it makes you act crazy.'

'Let her do what she wants man, she's a grown woman.'

'Oh well then Bryce, let it be on your head. But she'll lose it, always does when she eats chocolate.'

'I wan', you give,' she demanded.

Raz looked defeated, 'Whatever, but when you start crying don't expect any sympathy from me. And Bryce, it's your fault, you just remember that.'

She seemed like a lovely chick, she smoked a quarter, one quarter! Lolita started right away. 'You not really my friends, you like all farangs. You meet Lolita and pretend to be her friend, so she get you drug. Then you leave like all the others, back to your rich lives, with your big houses and Lolita stay on this shitty island, and meet new not true farang friends.' The tears were flowing like broken guttering on a stormy night. 'You bastards, I'm gonna' tell Police.'

'Hey!' Raz scalded her. 'You say what you like, but you never threaten me with the Police, you got that!'

'See you not my friend, why you talk to me like that?'

I had to apologise to Raz, 'Sorry dude, but who the fuck could expect that? And so quick too. Dude. Sorry.'

'No, don't go apologising and giving me that 'Dude' shit, it's your fault. Lolita, we're going to sit outside for a while until you get your head together, then we'll come back in and talk to you.' I felt really bad, but what can ya' do right?

The sun was coming up and I thought it was about time I made my way back to the calmer waters of Koh Tao and left that mad, head fuck of an island behind. I thanked Raz for a good night, and was truly stoked about the way I had happened across Lolita. And with the wondrous thought of how, at the exact moment that the two of us realised we knew the same person, that that person had walked through the door! You can't make that shit up. It was truly part of the magical spell cast over me.

The ol' boy from Pendragon, the Policeman in the shop, the Euro hippies, the girl from Cambodia and the randomness of how I ended up at Ban Sabaii. How just stopping off and offering a familiar stranger a lift led me to Lolita and Raz. Oh the webs that are woven. Can life really be that random, or does someone really have a master plan after all.

Life eh? If you're willing to live it, it can be a wonderful thing.

A story so sad it has to be told

Me and Huey were having pancakes one morning down at his favourite cafe, when my Geordie mate Matt from Phnom Penh waltzed past in that way only someone who's on holiday, and is no particular rush does. 'Hey Matt, how's it brother?'

'Yeah, good mun good, and you, you ok?'

'Couldn't be better brother, you hungry, these guys make the best pancakes on the island. Hey where's Andy?'

'Oh, fuck, now there's a long story, let me grab a seat.'

When there's no TV, long stories are always good.

'Right get this,' he began. 'Me and Andy had gone to Sihanoukville down the bottom of Cambodia. Fuck there's a lot of drugs down there mun. Anyway I've always been the one that's been on the drugs, and Andy has always just been on the booze. So when he started to go off the rails a bit like, I thought I was just being paranoid and the drugs were making me turn my mind on my friend. Now we grew up together, best buds since I can remember right. You know we were at the beginning of our year's travels together. Anyway Andy started going on about buying a bar down in Sihanoukville, and I just shrugged it off like, thinking he was just being a bit keen or what haves ya'. So I didn't really pay too much attention. One night this guy comes up to me and says, 'Hey that mate of yours, just bailed me up about lending him money so he could buy a bar.' 'And I was like, 'Don't worry about it mate, he's been on about that bar for a few days now.' 'I didn't really say anything to Andy, 'cause the next day we were outta' there on a bus back to Thailand. To an island off the coast near Cambodia called Koh Chang. When we got there Andy was still going on about this bar and I was like, 'Forget about it mun, we've got a whole year ahead of us. We're going to Australia soon, remember.' 'Anyway we met a really nice couple and after a few days, they came up to me really panicked and were like, 'Your fuckin' mate's bang outta' order, he just properly had us up against a wall and demanded cash from us.' 'I was really fuckin' worried now, 'cause although Andy's a big lad, he's always been a really placid guy. A fuckin' saint, know what I'm sayin'. So I hit him up about it,' 'Andy what the fuck are ya' doin' lad, ya' can't go around speakin' to people like that. What the fuck's goin' on in ya' head?' 'And he was like, just carrying on about buyin' the bar, the fuckin' bar. I was like, 'Fuck it Andy, we're not even in Cambodia now, we're in fuckin' Thailand,' and he kicked off at me. I was really scared now. In a way though, I was kinda' glad he'd said something to someone else, 'cause now I knew it wasn't just the drugs making me para'.'

Matt's Banana pancake arrived and he pushed it around the plate.

'As I was sayin' he's my best friend, my fuckin' brother and if anyone was going to go crazy, the safe money would have been bet on me.

So I did something I never thought I'd have to do, I called his folks. I was so fuckin' frightened, I called his Ma' n' Pa'.'

Matt's bottom lip trembled and he reached for the honey, to pour onto the pancake. 'Anyway, I call and I say to his Ma', 'Look, I think something's wrong with Andy. I'm sorry, I dunno' how to describe it, he's completely out of character, he's getting aggressive and asking people for money so he can buy some bar back in Cambodia,' 'I still had the gnawing doubt though, that it might have just been me going crazy.'

If you know Andy like I know him, to tell someone he's acting aggressive would make you doubt yourself. Especially after all the fuckin' drugs I took in Cambodia, and he hadn't touched a thing, just been on the beer like, ya' know. So's anyway, his Ma' starts crying down the phone. In all the years I've known her it was the first time I'd heard her cry, and then she was like, 'Thank God you've called, Andy's been

emailing us asking for money for that bar you're on about, and yeah, they've been getting more demanding over the last few days. Look, get him to Bangkok and his Pa' and his brother are going to fly out to meet ya'. 'I could hear the whole family in the background talking about it. She said, they were gonna' fly out on the first flight they could, just get him to Bangkok. When I hung up the phone, it all came crashing down, something was wrong with my best mate, my brother. Our families are like blood you know what I mean? I had to do it though, I had to get Andy to Bangkok, I'd have to come up with a plan, I'd have to lie to him. I've never lied to Andy in my fuckin' like, ya' know what I'm saying. So anyway the next morning, I said to him that I'd lost my bankcard and needed to go to Bangkok to pick up a new one. He agreed and we took a boat straight back to the mainland. By the time we got to Bangkok he had a fever and was sweating like mad. Although everyone sweats like mad in Thailand don't they? Anyway, I say's to him that we were passing a hospital on the way to the bank and asked him to keep an eye on our stuff while I sorted a doctor out for him. Sayin' it looked like he had the flu like or something. Anyway, when I told the lass at reception what was going on, she was like, 'You need to go to the hospital on the other side of town. We don't deal with psychiatric patients here.' 'I was fuckin' begging her like.' 'Please help us out, I'm fuckin' afraid here mun, something's wrong with my friend.' 'And she was like,' 'No.' 'then I heard Andy go, 'What the fuck?' He was right behind me, had heard the whole fuckin' thing and next thing ya' know he just took off, fuckin' gone like. My heart leapt into my mouth, I ran outta' the doors after him. But by the time I got out there, all I saw was him jumping into a Tuk Tuk and disappearing up the road. I'd fuckin' lost him like. What was I gonna' tell his Ma'?'

The untouched pancake was going cold, or as cold as things can get in Thailand. Matt paused to stare at it for a moment, maybe to gather himself together before carrying on.

'Anyway while Andy's Ma' called the Police in Newcastle and told them what was going on, I went to meet his Pa' and brother at the airport. I felt like I'd let everyone down, I'd fuckin' lost Andy, and he might be big lad like, but anything could've fuckin' happen to him to in that state. You know how the Thai Police can be; we were dead scared they'd fuckin' shoot him.

Anyway he was gone two days before they found him on the outskirts of Bangkok, ranting and raving in the street with no fuckin' footwear; they'd had to sedate him. He was kept sedated all the way to fuckin' Newcastle like.....

He's in an institution at the moment, everyone's still trying to figure out what went wrong? Fuckin' psychiatrists and everything mun, no one's got a fuckin' clue like. I can't shake from my mind though mun, that for those first few days I thought it was me, me and the fuckin' drugs. He's s'pose to be my best friend, I shoulda' fuckin' seen something. He was always the sane one out of the two of us. He's supposed to be *my* fuckin' rock, help *me* through life, but it didn't end up that way. I'm fuckin' heartbroken mun.'

'So that's it like. That's where Andy's at.'

I was sat there with my pancake loaded fork hanging halfway to my mouth. I think it had been there since the story began. The amount of suffering that Matt had been through was hard to comprehend. I reckoned I too would have blamed the drugs and the vile paranoia they can cause. I still think about that moment when he finally

cracked, you know that moment when it's all gone so wrong you make the decision to call home for help. How do you deal with that?

Matt looked at his pancake, 'I'm not really hungry; do you want this?'

A few weeks after I got back to London I received an email from Matt. 'After about a month in the Psychiatric hospital, Andy's right arm started to change colour and turn purple then began to swell up. The doctors investigating found right up in his arm pit, buried just under the skin, was the head of a Tick. It must have gotten' on him at some point and when he brushed it off, the body came away but the head stayed in. This led to something called Lyme disease, and one of the side effects can be dementia and paranoid schizophrenia. Once the doctors realised what was wrong they knew what to give him, and how to begin his rehabilitation.

It's such a randomly fucked thing to happen to someone, but I'm glad to say that with time Andy came right and is married now.

As for Matt..... Well can you ever fully heal from something like that?

The Half moon

There was one more party left that I wanted to do, the Half moon. I had come to Thailand to rave and I was determined to do so. I wanted to relive the old days with Huey and tear up the trance floor together. We hit the Jamm Bar and stocked up with four Yaa Baas, four E's but left the weed at home. The stupid Euro hippies at Shiva moon had ruined that part for me. The ferry pulled up at Koh Phangan and instead of the typical scooters I ride, Huey talked me into renting a great big fuckin' motocross bike that went about a million miles an hour. The party was just up the road from where Shiva moon was. So to keep things simple and to spend as little time on that roaring monstrosity as possible, we got a bungalow down on the beach at the guesthouse next door to Ban Sabaii. Just before we got there we stopped at the Seven-Eleven to stock up on booze and fags. The guy who'd I'd scored the awesome E's off pulled up.

'Hey you wan' some MDMA?'

'Fuck yeah, hey Huey, this is the fulla' I was telling you about, I hugged him and thanked him for the good time I'd had the week before. His shit wasn't cheap, but I was confident of the person so we paid up five thousand baht for a capsule of MDs, and three pills that were wrapped up in paper. He hugged us good bye and left. I opened the wrap and found some incorrect looking blue tablets and thoughts of doubt flooded my mind. 'Oh dude, maybe that wasn't him, his ones are white and look like E's, I dunno, what the fuck this shit is.' We opened the capsule of MD and straight away saw it was full of some powder looking substance rather than the crystals that MD comes in. A quick dab and we knew we'd been fucked, but hey, my bad and such is life eh, so we moved on and hired our bungalow for the weekend.

Huey had painted Koh Phangan red before so after we'd stashed all our stuff away I grudgingly crawled back on the machine, and we drove into town looking for a bar he knew that sold fruit flavoured magic mushroom milkshakes. We got two litres to go, and after smoking some Yaa Baa hit the Half moon in style. 'We can't take the shake into the party,' Huey said, 'let's drink half now and finish the rest off later.' I was cool with that, so I followed suit and we waltzed in.

It was the start of the night and the music was like house or something, the layout of the place was fab, they had a main stage opposite a tiered and raised bar. In between both was a palm rimmed dance floor, big enough for five or six hundred people. The mushrooms kicked in as the night moved on. The high from that crazy fungus married with the E, made the music vibrate right through my body and out through my feet. At some point I rolled my eyes around to the front of my head, and saw that the party was heaving, and the tunes, man, they were amazing, proper journey stuff.

The first round of E's had run their course, but the mushrooms were still going strong. 'Hey let's go back to our place,' Huey said, 'and smoke some Yaa Baa, then come back and finish off the shake.' When I looked at him, his head changed shape like a melting jelly bean, and his big sparkling bright kaleidoscope eyes stood out from the rest of his face.

'Cool man, party on Wayne.'

Out in the car park we argued over who was gonna' reach into the bushes where the snakes and spiders live to check the shake was still where we'd left it. There was only one mature way to settle it. I drew rock and Huey drew scissors. Good ol' rock, never fails. We jumped on the bike, and with a turn of the key the beast leapt to life. The first seeds of doubt about the ride ahead surfaced at the forefront of my mind. Huey, my fighting in the ring friend and gracious welcoming host, took off with a

skid of the tyre and roar in the dark. We hit the road at what felt like a hundred and on the first corner he leaned the bike over so far that my un-helmeted face was only a foot or so off the ground. The whole road seemed to twist as my eyes continued to play tricks on me; I was terrified. He accelerated out of the bend so fuckin' fast, and I could picture him yelling, 'Vraaaaam,' with both hands gripping onto the handle bars as he leaned out over them and we launched forward again. He jammed on the brakes to take the next snake like bend in the road. I held onto him for dear life. This time the bike was swung all the way over to the right, my head once more within touching distance of the ground.

For what felt like five long hours but was in reality more like five very long minutes the journey continued like that, my life on the line, every lasting second felt like it might be the last. I was so fuckin' frightened that at one point I nearly jumped off in mid turn. But a buried sense of 'Don't be fuckin' stupid, hang on you fool,' showed up in the niche of time and saved me from the same fate as Huey's forlorn neighbour. The one who'd woken up to a shattered face, shoulder and lost in the middle of nowhere. Back at the bungalow I let my brother know the hell I'd just been through. But after a WY and a promise from him to never do that to me again, I was talked back onto the bike, so we could make our way back to the party. Sure as shit as soon as we hit the road he was off like Speed racer. Back in the car park outside the now rammed Half moon party, my discontent was received with laughter and apologies. 'C'mon bru,' Huey said. You know you loved it.'

'No I didn't in fact dude, not at all.' Friends eh, what else are they for?

After finishing off the shake and a thorough search at the gate, which included looking through wallets and fag packets, we hit the trance floor. We'd been boogying for an hour or so when out of nowhere a cap wearing local fulla' threw his arms up, yelled, and came running over. The man with the E's, I recognised him straight away, for definite this time. 'That's the fulla' I was telling you about Huey, this fulla' right here has the best E's on the island.' He was happy as fuck to see me too.

'You must be careful here,' he said. 'I sell you one Ecstasy, you take it and when you wan' more I sell you another. Do not keep anything in your pockets here in case the Police search you. They catch you with my Ecstasy you fucked! Much money!'

'Sweet as, I'll take two for now. Where are you hanging out?'

'Over here with these party people.'

'Cool, hey and in case I don't see ya' before, save me ya' last six.'

'Hey no worries, you my brudda', I jus' here. If you wan' more, you jus' let me know.'

We necked those two and partied till the sun came up. Once the second round of mushrooms kicked in we didn't need fuck all else for the rest of the night anyway.

We chilled out for a while up on one of the balconies and solved the world's problems. Some bird came and stood right in front of me just as I had the third world hunger crisis sorted. She started rambling on about God knows what to Huey and acted like I wasn't there. Next thing ya' know she ran her fingers down Huey's chest, and just as I was thinkin', 'Oh well, I'll hang out by myself,' my brother shot her down.

'Excuse me, that's so rude. I'm here with my friend and just 'cause you think you're good looking and dressed in fuck all, you think you can come and just stand between us? Look, go talk to someone else please.'

My man! She certainly wasn't expecting that!

As the grim darkness receded into warm, colourful light, we got to see the surrounding circus for the first time. Next to me there were a couple of platform

things about three feet in the air, the coconut palms growing out of the centre shimmered like when you look off into the distance on a hot day, and reminded me the shrooms were still on the go.

About ten people were dancing on one with their shirts off and hands in the air. Some guy fell off and grabbed the shorts of the guy next to him on the way. It looked like he was trying to use this fulla's shorts to drag himself back up to where the others were. What happened next was very quick, if you weren't watching what was going on, you would have carried on blissfully unaware that such a brisk violent assault could happen in that paradise, on that perfect morning.

Out of nowhere some butch Thai fulla' leapt half up onto the platform, then launched himself at the guy who was still trying to find his feet. In mid air he smashed him square in the centre of the face with a flying elbow. To his credit the dude took it and stood upright. The Thai fulla' waved his hands in his face and yelled at him for a moment, then disappeared back off into non existence. Had that really happened? 'Hey Huey did you see that?'

'See what bru?'

'Nothing man, it's cool.'

It stated one thing to my tripped out brain. Behave, and for God's sake don't let that motherfucker catch you with drugs. No one around seemed to have seen it and the party carried on; its rhythm unbroken.

Like us the sun was high in the sky and my man came trancing over. 'Ok, I have six left, here you go.' and with a look over each shoulder passed them to me. I pulled out my wallet and low and behold it was empty, fuck. 'Oh fuck man, I've got no money on me.' and went to pass them back.'

'Hey, are you going to after party? Take these and I see you there later, you give me money then, ok?'

'Oh fuck are you sure? Hey look I'll definitely pay you. I promise.'

'Ok no problem, you go to after party at Ban Sabaii and I see you later. I like you, I put trust in you.'

I took the E's, swallowed one down with a two hour old warm beer, and passed another to Huey. I took my flip flops off and danced with my feet in the dirt. Cautious of his words earlier, and the battering the other fulla' had taken, I stashed the other pills in the dirt beneath the flip flops. As the Half moon drew to an end we joined the convoy down the road to Ban Sabaii. Thankfully Huey this time drove at a speed which I approved of.

Back at Ban Sabaii the place was going great, as per last time the music was really uplifting and the crowd were good and cooked. At some point some girl came up saying she'd just got back from a visa run to Burma and had some liquid Ketamine.

'How do I turn it into powder?' she asked, 'If you can help me out I'll share it with you.'

'Simple,' I said, and tore my empty beer can in half, 'pour it in here and hold a lighter underneath it. When the liquid evaporates, line it up and sniff it.'

'Really,' she said. 'It's that simple?'

'Yeah man, cook it down and Bob's ya' uncle.'

'Oh, well in that case, see you guys later.' and she disappeared; the bitch.

The guy who'd ripped us off for five grand the day before showed up and although he never came over to us, he mingled amongst the crowd off loading his fake wares for half an hour then fucked off. Me and Huey discussed with each other about warning the other people, but that age old saying came to mind and settled the

argument. Never fuck with the locals, never! There was no way we were about to shit on this guy while he was still kicking about.

I hadn't smoked a spliff all night and was gagging for one, had been since that first Yaa Baa had soaked my clothes with sweat. A few people around us were smoking weed but I hate asking. The Ban Sabaii staff were straight up in the fact that although they knew what was going on they didn't supply drugs. I saw the guy who'd been smashed in the nose and went over to try and find out what the fuck the whole thing had been about. And maybe also to double check that it had actually happened. He was German, 'Yah, we were dancing on the platform and I saw some guy walking off with the strap of my bag around his ankle. He was trying to steal it. When I saw, I tried to say, what the fuck are you doing but fell off the side. My natural reaction was to make a grab for him so he couldn't fuck off into the crowd, but only caught his shorts. I was pulling myself up when that security guard came from nowhere and hit me.'

'Dude, he didn't just hit you, he was like fuckin' street fighter and did a flying elbow to your face. Hey, don't be ashamed man, he proper king hit you and you took it like a man. Christ I would have been crying from a blow like that. Man he hit you square on the nose whilst in mid air and you didn't drop. If anything, you should be proud dude!'

He didn't look too proud about it, but it least it had actually happened and my brain hadn't made up an entire scene of paranoid madness. At least his bag wasn't stolen too, I s'pose. He also pointed me in the direction of a shop a hundred metres back up down the road that sold ganja, rewarded.

The cunt who'd try to rip him off was a farang like us. As with the guys who sold everyone the fake liquid acid that time, you just expect better from your fellow travellers. Why the fuck are you here if you can't afford it? Go home and get a fuckin' job man!

We scored some smoke and sat on the beach to skin up. Like the sun, the last of my man's E's faded off into the distance. Where the fuck was he anyway? I was dead tired and although bed was calling, I was determined to stay around a bit longer so I could pay back the respect and trust he'd shown me. Just after dark he materialised with the usual 'Hey,' and a hug. I had ten or so grand stashed under my mattress back at the bungalow. 'Brother,' I said, 'I've been waiting around all day. Hey you like Yaa Baa, I'm staying next door, come to mine and lets smoke up a storm.'

Of course he smoked Yaa Baa, he was Thai. So we went up to mine, and chuffed some chocolaty goodness.

'Why are you in Thailand?' he asked. 'Are you here for the woman?'

'Nah, not really, it's a bit too much like slavery for me. I'd heard about the parties on Koh Phangan and worked my arse off, saved my money and lived my dream. Hey I gotta' thank you man, the E's you sold us were awesome. Really made you feel amazing you know, and each one lasted for hours, you could always feel it. Fuckin' magic man, thanks a lot, you've really helped make my dream happen.' As we walked back to Ban Sabaii I told him about how I'd thought I'd seen him the day before and gotten ripped off. He laughed and threw an arm around my shoulder. 'You' a good guy,' he said. 'Many men come to Thailand and ruin our women, but you are different.' I felt kinda' guilty, my little white lie was karmacally blowing up in my face with a sonic wave of guilt.

'Hey look,' he said. 'You know the man you say sell bad drugs? He in gang and this is their place, if they see me here I have very big problem. Look I have seven E's on me, if you wan' them you can have for two thousand five hundred baht. You say

he was here just before, so may come back, I must go. You cool though, share your Yaa Baa with me.'

'Sweet dude,' and handed over the cash I owed him from earlier, plus the extra few thousand for the new lot of pills.

A few moments later when we reached the light of Ban Sabaii we embraced again, and he thanked me for coming to his country before heading off on his way.

I found Huey dancing with a group of new found friends and with pride announced, 'I just scored seven E's for just over three hundred baht each! Party on Wayne!'

The people he was chatting with had all lived on the island for a while and were sure, as the rookie, I'd been ripped off. So I handed one over to them to share and try out. Fuck giving away all of them, and me and Huey necked one each.

True to what I'd experienced so far, the music at Ban Sabaii was rocking, and life on the beach under the light of the moon was everything people dream of when they picture themselves going to that unassuming island in the middle of the Gulf of Thailand. The one they slated as ruining tourism in that most famous of books/movie, 'The Beach'.

We scored a quarter of a gram of actual crystal MDMA off some farang who was risking his life by selling that shit on Koh Phangan, for a thousand baht. It wasn't needed, but while the music playing was that good and we had a pocket full of E's, why stop for sleep right? I couldn't help but think, what a fuckin' idiot, if the cops in this country caught you here selling actual class A drugs, you'd only ever see the light of day again through the bars of your cell. Four thousand Euros for weed? That mother fucker and his crystal MDs, was playing dice with the devil. At least his gear was good, but really, get a fuckin' job man. How the fuck could you take the risk of dealing drugs in Thailand? As far as I'm concerned that's a risk on life not worth taking. God forbid it ever went wrong for him, but if it did, there'd be no parole, your sentence would be so long it would be in the papers back home. Banged up in the Bangkok Hilton you'd never have a chance to walk out in the open again. Never have your shoes off and feel the blades of grass between your toes, never listen to music again. Never hold a woman in your arms, never drink another beer. Those risks are far too great. That's far too much to lose. Fuck that, get a fuckin' job and pay your way, when ya' money runs out, go home, work, save, and come back.

The party continued into its second day and the sun came up once more. At some point we gathered our shit from our still made beds, and trailed by a stream of expletives, Huey rode us back to the ferry.

I had managed to spend eighteen thousand baht in around thirty six hours, and it had been worth every penny. If ya' haven't been to Thailand before, ask a friend who has, and I'm sure they'll tell ya', - spendin' eighteen grand in that place is HARD FUCKIN' WORK.

One last Yahoo

My time was running short and I wanted one more opium bender before returning to London. Huey reckoned a trek up in Chang Mai would be the best port of call. So it was settled, my time on the wondrous island of Koh Tao was up. I made the decision to get back on the road the following day, so that meant one thing, party time.

‘Huey, my brother, since I got to this island, I’ve smoked, I’ve drunk, I’ve danced and I’ve fucked, but man, I haven’t done *one* tourist thing. Apart from paint balling, what’s there to do?’

‘Bru, you’re on Koh Tao, and I’m a qualified diving instructor. I can pull some strings at Secrets, and if I’m quick enough, we might be able to get on a trip by lunchtime. He got on the phone and two minutes later it was sorted. Huey’d give me a training session in the pool for the morning and we’d sneak on board the twelve-thirty tour to some big coral thing off the coast. All the other people on the boat would be doing their final dive after a week’s training. I had been diving a couple of times before, but only off the beach. Not anything like actual open water, but fuck it eh. You only live once, and you can’t turn down opportunities like that. Besides Huey was good at what he did, so after the pool session I was really relaxed and looking forward to it.

Just as we were getting ready for the boat, Duff walked passed. ‘Alright dere’ lads. You goin’ divin’? Hey I got da’ day off, I ‘tink I’ll come along.’

Huey told him it was my first serious dive, and Duff goes, ‘Well in ‘dat case I ‘tink we better go for a joint first. Hey you’re goin’ to the Coral rocks, ya’ gonna’ love it ‘dere.’

With a grin on his face he rolled a fat, ‘My friend’s going diving for the first time’ sized joint and we blasted it back two minutes before the boat left.

Everybody knew everybody there, so Duff didn’t have to ask, he just jumped on onboard and started helping people with their kit.

When the boat pulled up Huey, talked me through all the signals once more, and then it was show time. Duff came up, ‘Don’ worry Huey’s the best, everything is goin’ to be fine, just don’ go stickin’ ya’ hands in any holes and you’ll at least come back wid’ all ya’ fingers.’

‘Thanks man.’

He slapped an arm round my shoulder and laughed.

The first step was almost the coolest bit. It was just like I’d seen on TV. I had to hold my mask and breather thing, and step off the side of the boat, where it was about a six foot drop to the water. Sploooooosh, the world was different, gravity was no longer a force in my life. Unlike us above the water who can only move horizontally, the creatures of the ocean could go up or down as well. It also seemed to come with the Jaws theme tune. Sploooooosh, Huey appeared beside me. He gave me an ok symbol – kinda’ the same as when the taxi driver in Bangkok did – but without sticking his finger through the hole, and I gave him one back. It was hard to tell, but what looked to be about thirty or forty feet below us was a giant rock with all kinds of life growing on it and swimming about. I followed Huey down, remembering to squeeze my nose and blow whenever the pressure on my ears built up too much. We swum away from the groups of students, and I followed Huey amongst some rocks covered with giant yellow and pink sponges. Once we were amongst the corals it was easy to see why people got into diving. It’s a whole other universe down there, full of the most wondrous and complicated eco-systems. I did expect a few more fish but I did find a sea cucumber, and although Duff had warned me, I couldn’t help touch it. It was soft so I picked it up and tapped Huey on the leg to get his attention, when he

turned around I copied what I'd seen Steve-O from Jackass do, and jerked it off, hoping it would blow it's insides out, like when he did it. I could tell Huey was laughing 'cause of the way his bubbles were coming out; and just as I thought I might be getting somewhere, a class of students swam over the rocks directly above us. Busted big time by the whole group, I put the sea cucumber back as Huey buckled up in hysterics.

The dive lasted for about fifteen minutes and once we were back up on the boat, the natural high was as good as any other bought one. I told Huey about the Jaws song, and a crafty look came about his face. 'Bru, shall we sort that out? Sharks are cool man, look I'll prove it.'

'Eh?'

'Don't worry bru, trust me.' and he smiled a wicked smile.

Back on the island, Duff disappeared off somewhere, and I was followed Huey on my bike to the Jamm bar. When we got there he ordered two opium teas, then shushed me when I tried to complain about the price. 'Bru, I've got everything under control.' Opium has a really bitter taste, so the tea was shit, but hey you've gotta' let your friends treat you every now and then don't ya'. We sat around for an hour or so, smoking joints and giving it time to set in.

'How're feeling now bru?' Huey said.

I was lying on one of those triangle cushion things with the mat attached that are everywhere over there, and I felt pretty immobile and a little queasy. 'Lazy, and really stoned.'

'Perfect,' he said. 'Let's get on the bikes. Don't worry we'll go slow, and besides it's not far.'

We pulled out of Jamm and turned left along the road. As always it was a beautiful sunny day, my shirt was off, the wind felt amazing as it gusted through my hair, and I felt alive, truly alive. We took another left down some gravel track and I saw a sign with 'Shark Bay' written on it. Alarm bells started to go off. What the fuck was this cunt up to? Fuckin' Shark Bay, what'd it mean by that?

The track ended in a small alcove a hundred metres wide, with pure white sand and coconut trees lining its edge. A couple of boats were anchored out in the bay, less than a hundred metres from the shore. 'Come on bru,' said Huey as he pulled two pairs of goggles and snorkels out of his bag.

'You're fuckin' joking me aren't you? I'm not fuckin' swimming with sharks dude. What, and they're right just fuckin' there.' pointing out at the boats.

'Don't be a pussy bru, look; check there, there's loads of people swimming with them. Come on they're only little, as long as you don't go poking them in the eye, I swear they'll leave you alone.'

I looked out and sure enough there were two groups out there snorkelling about and some of them were chicks, so I had to do it. Besides, chickening out of that would have been precisely the type of thing Duff would have ridden me with till the time left. Walk in the bar and the Jaws theme tune comes on while ten friends laugh in the corner, that sort of shit. So I chose pride over sense and followed Huey into the water. That fuckin' song from that movie – Daah, dum, daah dum, dum, dum, dum, dum – fuckin' hell, once I was waist deep all I could do was scan the surface for fins. Dum, dum, dum, dum.

We started swimming and about twenty feet off shore we crossed over a giant skeletal grey coral. It ran the whole length of the bay and was dead. After seeing the life at the other coral earlier I could picture how beautiful it would have looked when the entire thing was alive and thriving. As we passed over the far side of it, the ocean

floor dropped away and the water became colder. The opium flowing through my blood stream had a relaxing effect and I soon forgot about our mission as we paddled about. Huey, tapped me on the arm and pointed. Daah, dum, I remembered real fuckin' quick 'cause my first shark ever swam in front of us. It was about thirty centimetres long and was sleek and black colour. He didn't seem to scary, the tune quietened, – Dum dum, dum dum, – and we carried on, another tap on the arm, I looked to my right, DAAH DUM, DAAH DUM, DUM, DUM, DUM, DUM. A six foot animal swam towards us along the sea floor, and then passed right underneath, without paying us the slightest bit of attention. Huey swum down behind it and the music in my head faded. Now all of a sudden, the creature swimming beneath me wasn't a fearsome man eater, and its movements were soft and graceful. I swam down too, and together we followed it as far as we could until I had to go back up for breath. We stayed out there for about an hour, coming across a big six footer every now and then and swimming along beside. It was life changing.

Back on the beach, Huey looked at me and grinned. 'You like that bru?'

'Fuckin' eh man. That was cool, thanks bro.'

'No worries, hey look I gotta' set something up at the bowling alley for tonight, they've got like a party and want me to do a shooting range for the paint ball guns.'

'A fuckin' bowling alley, what the fuck?' I couldn't help but laugh.

'Yeah bru, and instead of having machines to reset the pins they've got a couple of Burmese guys doing it. It's fuckin' classic. Anyway bru, I'll meet you at Secrets later.'

Amped, from my day so far, I went down to Secrets to see who was about and keen to party.

To my surprise, I found Liz sitting at the bar by herself with a bucket of Sang som in front of her.

'Can I join ya', I said and pulled up a stool.

'Yeah 'course ya' can love.' and she patted the seat gave me a wink. I got a couple of extra straws and we got stuck in. We moved down to a spare table on the sand as the sun set and ordered another bucket and some Jager bombs; things were looking positive. We finished the second bucket and ordered one more. Liz was really easy to talk to and we chatted about life as a Police cadet, and the year ahead that she and Jen had planned. Like Andreas they were heading to Indonesia, but they were gonna' keep on going until they reached Australia, then backpack around there. Mike had fucked off a few days before and besides, although they'd shagged, she thought he was a bit of weirdo. We sat a little closer together.

Jen appeared, and her face said it all, I'd had that look before. Liz knew she was in trouble too, so I left the girls for a talk it out and went to the toilet. The argument didn't look solved when I got back, so I thought fuck it. 'Who wants a joint?'

'Yep,' Jen said. And Liz backed off. 'Nah, I'm fine.'

We walked down the beach a bit so we weren't right in the front of Secrets and I went to spark the joint. Jen said, 'Why don't we smoke it at my place? It's right there.' and pointed at some bungalows just off the beach.

I wasn't letting her down this time, so I put the joint away, took her hand, and together we went up to her place.

Jen had a diving lesson in the morning, so around ten o'clock I kissed her good bye and went back to Secrets to see if Huey had arrived.

Later with the whole crew up at Huey's house, Duff brought up the fact that I was much cooler than Huey's previous friend from London, and they all had a good laugh. I'd forgotten all about that.

‘So what the fuck’s this all about then?’ I said. ‘Come on, spill the beans.’

‘Alright, alright,’ Huey said, and all the kids gathered round. ‘So here we go right. Now I don’t think you knew Kayla back home, anyway her visa was up in London and she stopped off to visit on her way back to Australia. She was a good cooker and a mate, ya’ know, she likes to party like we party. Hey, the guys made her feel right at home eh, the way they have for you. You know it’s a respect thing, the same way I would for their friends.’

‘She’d been here for a week, and one night we all decided it was mushroom time, and Kayla was keen as the rest of us. I’ve taken acid with her plenty of times in London so I didn’t have any worries. It was the same as with you when we did the Bom Shanka mission. Anyway bru, everyone was having a good time and we partied right through to the next day. Duff was smoking a spliff and Kayla had a puff too. She doesn’t usually smoke weed but after all the other drugs she reckoned fuck it, ‘What’s a joint gonna’ do?’ Well; she saw her ass big time bru. Like, we were all sitting around laughing and shit and she just pipes up,’ ‘What the fuck was in that joint man? That’s not normal weed.’ ‘And we were like,’ ‘Yeah it is, look.’ ‘Duff showed it to her, just the usual compressed brick of seeds and leaf you usually get. But she wasn’t havin’ it man.’ ‘No way what the fuck have you guys given me, I’m really fucked man, what the fuck’s goin’ on?!’ ‘We weren’t really paying too much attention ‘cause she’d been smoking Yaa Baa, sniffin’ coke and getting fucked with us all week and she had been fine. One of the gang, like you are. Then she started to get real serious and was like,’ ‘No, listen to me, what did you guys put in that joint, tell me!’ ‘Now we started to notice bru, and to get a little worried. You know how I told you about my neighbour who crashed his bike? Well he said to her that everyone was cool and we’d all smoked from the same joint, and that all the drugs and no sleep was just getting to her. So him and his missus offered her their place to go sleep it off in. She went along with that and my mate’s wife took her next door. Fair enough, it happens to the best of us. Every now and then we all take too much and just need to get some rest.’

‘So we thought that was that, and partied till the sun went down again. Eventually everybody fucked off home so they could sleep it off too. You know what it’s like here bru, we’d done it properly! The neighbours only had one room at their place, so they crashed at mine and everything was good. Until bru; at some point there was a banging on my door. I thought it might have been Kayla so I was shocked to fuck when I opened it and Sammy, one of the local cops, was standing there with what looked like Duff’s bag of weed in his hand. He goes,’ ‘Huey you are lucky it is me working tonight and not the others. What is this doing lying around? You should always hide it in case the Police ever come. Huey there is much trouble, who is this Kayla? She cause big trouble, she say you give her drugs and steal her passport.’

‘I was like. ‘What? What passport? Kayla’s my friend from London. She got a bit fucked up so the guys next door let her sleep at their place. Here look they’re sleeping in lounge come and ask them yourself.’

‘Lucky I know you and I know you are a good person, you donate to the school but this girl, she cause big trouble. She phone’ her parents in Australia and tell them you give her drugs and steal her passport. They call Police in Australia. Police in Australia call Police in Bangkok, Police in Bangkok call Police on Koh Tao. They say we have farang name’ Huey on our island drugging young girl and stealing passport. If I not answer the phone Huey, you be in big trouble. Big Chief in Bangkok very angry, he wan’ answers Huey, and you have ganja lying around outside your house.’ Huey please, show me your friends.’

‘So I took him out front and woke the others, he seemed a little more relaxed when my mate’s wife gave him the same story. I think it helped having a woman around. The passport thing was still there though so we looked outside on the balcony, and sure enough that and her wallet were sitting right there. None of us had noticed, everybody dumps their shit all over the place when they get relaxed don’t they. No one’s a thief here bru, when people leave, they take their shit and go. No one would on purpose ever take someone else’s stuff, and if they accidentally did, they’d ring, apologise and bring it back. You know how it is here; do you think anyone’s a thief?’

‘No.’

Sammy knew us all, and was happy that apart from getting fucked up and leaving Duff’s weed on the table outside, nothing really bad had happened. I was gutted with Kayla though, how could she think such shit thoughts about me bru? We’d all been great to her, the guys were exactly the same to her as they have been to you. So what? After partying for three days and taking loads of gear you find ya’self a little wrecked? You don’t call your parents and tell them I’ve fuckin’ drugged you, for fucks sake man. If Sammy wasn’t on duty that night, I would be in prison right now!’

‘So anyway,’ ‘You owe me beer Huey,’ Sammy said, ‘First we smoke joint, then I think is best if me and neighbour’s wife go and get this girl. She very upset, it good for lady to be with me.’ ‘And that wasn’t the end of it bru, I got a call from my brother a few days later and she’d emailed him about how much she had trusted me and that I’d drugged her and tried to steal her passport. So she still believes it. That’s what’s fucked up bru, her paranoia never left with her high.’

It was fucked up for sure, I’d only arrived a week later, another one of Huey’s friends from London, no wonder it was an in-house gag. But the guys’d never treated me shyly. Sure they’d had a laugh, and maybe looked at me with a bit of caution when we first met, but they’d never made out like anything that serious had happened. Sammy’s big concern was that the Police from Bangkok thought their peaceful island might be an out of control drug haven, and they might send investigators out to come and look around. Koh Tao has a deserved reputation for tranquillity. The last thing everybody wanted was for a new Police force to be brought down, only to have the place fill up with the same entrenched fear that steals part of the soul from your experiences on Koh Phangan.

So that was it, one crazy fucked up bitch had nearly fucked it for everybody. The story was a good one, and we all smoked a joint to celebrate it. I of course didn’t puff too deeply though did I. Who knows what those cunts had put in it.

As the sun came up for my last time on Koh Tao, somebody produced a bottle of Amyl nitrate and we welcomed the day through various perspectives of plastic bubble vision, it was bliss. I was all chilled out and relaxed, blissed in the knowledge that there was a ferry in a couple of hours. Ah, the sweet scent of Amyl Nitrate. It smells like being at the dentist. You inhale the fumes for a couple of seconds and zang; your oxygen starved brain sends the most awesome waves of tingling euphoria through your tunnel visioned spirit.

Out of nowhere Korat came running up the stairs. ‘Bryce, Bryce, the ferry not leave at twelve, it leave now, quick, we go!’

‘What, eh?’

He laughed, but in a serious kind of way, ‘Ferry leave in five minute, where your bag, quick we must go.’

There was no fuckin’ about for it. I stumbled onto my feet slung my pack over my shoulders, and with a group hug and final deep huff of nitrate wobbled down the

stairs. I had to hang half off the back of a moped that already held Korat and his mate who couldn't fight but had to every two weeks, win or lose.

The three of us piled down to the docks; only to find out the ferry had left a few minutes before. Korat was straight on the case though and talked some local fisherman into driving me out to try and catch it. They spoke to the guy at the ticket office who made a call and said the ferry had one other stop and we were to meet it there. I hugged my brother from a different mother and with a tear in our eyes we parted ways. I'll always love Korat, we'd spent a whole month together, smoking weed through that bong – we must have stripped half the Papaya tree – and speeding off our heads on the little red, and neither of us could communicate properly in a verbal way. For me, it had been the true spirit of travelling.

I jumped on this fisherman's shitty, long, wooden boat and we chugged out into the gulf of Thailand looking for that ferry. Sure enough after we passed the rest of the island we saw it waiting out there for me. The waves got much bigger once we got out in the open sea, and as we drew near I started to wonder how the fuck I was gonna' get aboard. But the Captain answered that by throwing a rope ladder down and yelling through a megaphone,

'Jump.'

What? The ocean's movin' all over the place.

'You must jump now,' he said, 'we must go.'

The entire crew and most of the passengers had come to watch, and really I had no choice. So I waited for one peak to roll by and backpack and all, leapt into the air and tried my damndest to grab hold of the swinging rope ladder. I missed the first rung and grabbed the second. I was absolutely over the moon that although I was sunken up to my waist, I hadn't fucked up completely, and the weight of my backpack wasn't pulling me to the bottom of the ocean. So I went up, watched Apocalypto on their big screen, and wallowed in the vivid movies in my mind of the journey so far.

To Chang Mai or bust

I had one week left, and an opium bender up in the mountains was just the final adventure I needed. Sure I could have stepped over the border into Laos but I'd been there before, and travelling's about new experiences and new adventures right?

Bangkok train station was surprisingly calm and easy to work out compared to the rest of the city. I was so tired from all the mischief on Koh Tao and the ensuing fourteen hour bus ride, I thought my best option would be to neck four valiums and try to sleep the whole twenty four hour mission to Chang Mai. It later proved to be a costly error.

Sitting outside on the platform was a group that consisted of three English lads and four Swedish girls. So I stocked up on beer and made myself at home. Turned out they'd only met a few minutes before anyway. They were moaning that there would be nothing to do on the train for the whole journey and I soon put them straight on what Duff had said about the party carriage. We drank and shot shit about our travels until it was time to board.

We all had second class sleeper tickets, so we took over part of a carriage and dumped our stuff. I led the others up through the wagons until we came to the famed bar. The train seemed to pass through the expanse of Bangkok for a good hour or so. The trackside slums and rundown buildings were replaced by palm trees, duck ponds and rice paddy fields. I had a pocket full of weed so we rolled a few joints on the sly, and two at a time snuck off to the toilets for a puff. We ordered a round of beer s and a bottle of Sang som, and after a polite request to the barman, we plugged my iPod into the speakers. Next thing ya' knew, as the sun was setting we had full on Hoe down built just for eight, it was beautiful.

The girls were heading north so they could enter Laos up near the capital Luang Prabang. Being typical Englishmen the guys were going Carp fishing up near Pai, right on the border with Burma. There was a river there famed for the size of its fish. They were keen as and were travelling with rods and all. The tunes were playing loud, the main lights were off and we were dancing under the flashing LEDs set up around the place. No other farangs had joined us, just a solo Thai man who sat quietly at a table and who turned down our invitations to join in.

He was a polite fulla' and once the valium started to take hold I joined him at the table and we shared a Leo beer. It's what the locals seemed to prefer to drink. I've got no idea how it happened but we were soon showing each other the different porn we had on our phones. He just had some boring Japanese stuff with some chick who, 'Ooh'd' and 'Ahh'd, while some older looking Japanese guy gave it to her slowly and methodically, like they were doing math or walking around a museum or something. I on the other hand had absolute filth with college girls getting honed out to the tunes of the chemical brothers, and chicks with cum being blown on their face, that sort of stuff. The guy couldn't believe it and soon enough I'd filled the memory of his phone with a range of classy five minute films of his choice. As the South Africans would say, 'He was a good oak.' and we had a good laugh together. After a few more beers he even joined us for a little boogie and a shot of Sang som.

The hours passed and everyone coupled up. I as usual was blind to the flirtations of the girl who'd chosen me and she eventually had to pull me aside and say, 'Let's go to the toilet.' Still clueless we got to the bog and I rolled a joint, swaying not just from the movement of the train but also the forty milligrams of valium and ten or so beers. We lit the joint, she puffed, I choked and then fell over. My mouth filled up with that insipid water that means a lung full of vomit is soon coming to play at the party. The cubicle was small and she was in the way of the shit covered steel toilet with its hole

straight down on to the tracks. Sweat poured as the white out loomed, but with her support we managed to open the door and step back out into the carriage. She was beautiful, her eyes a deep blue and her short blonde hair sculpted a youthful angular face. 'Let's go to bed,' she said.

And with all the exhaustion, lack of sleep, marijuana, valium, alcohol and sweat, in all graciousness, I replied, 'I think I'm gonna' be sick.' And dry heaved a swallow that made her jump back.

With her bottom lip poking out and her eyes rolled up towards me, she offered to help me back to my bunk. I was lucky, double vision had turned the world sideways, and I had no idea where the fuck my bed was. She took me back, wiped my forehead, and with a kiss on the cheek wished me good night. There's never a red tablet around when ya' need one.

The heat and humidity in the bunk was irrepressible, the churning in my stomach, a constant waking nightmare. The only sanctuary that I was blessed with was a sporadic thirty seconds or so of breeze from the revolving fan set in the aisle of the carriage. I had to work hard for it too. It only blew on my face if I hung my head off the side of my bed, looking like a drunk dog on a hot day. At some point later, through blurred eyes, I saw my blonde beauty swish by in the arms of someone who wasn't me.

I came round the next day in the same position I'd passed out in, half hanging out of the bunk. Only through good fortune, somehow I hadn't ended up on the floor six feet below. Man I crawled down the ladder and hit the toilet with a vengeance. Also a joint was needed to clear my head before making my way back to the bar in search of a mango shake or something. I rolled particularly fat one, and although the small window was pushed open as far as possible the space was soon clouded with the sweet smell of outdoor Thai weed. I gathered myself together long enough to wonder how I'd yet again managed to fuck up getting laid, and to curse the amount of valium I'd taken. But how the fuck was I s'pose to know I'd meet a load of people and have a good time? Let alone have some outstanding Swedish girl offer herself to me? Oh well such is life.

I slid open the door and through the cloud of smoke a Thai Police officer appeared. Not a normal one I might add, but one of the fucking really scary ones in their shiny boots, knee high boots, and starched pressed uniform with the gold band running around their left shoulder. In my pocket I had just over half an ounce of pot and this disapproving looking mother fucker was waving weed smoke from out of his face. He offered two simple words that meant I was fucked! Well and truly fucked! 'Follow me.' Then he turned with a snap of his well dressed heels.

With the blood draining from my face we reached the others who were all now, sat up on their beds. The deafening silence of their halted conversation followed me into the next carriage. As we passed between the carriages I noticed the train wasn't moving that fast, and the idea of making a jump for it crowded my thoughts. Another one kept repeating over and over, 'You're fucked bro', time to pay up.' Stoned images of being run over by the train and the fact that I still had a few grand in the bank, stopped me from actually jumping. As we passed through carriage after carriage I came really fuckin' close a couple of times, but the roaring of the steel wheels cutting over the steel track was a pretty convincing deterrent. Hey, I'd played the game and the dice this time didn't go my way, such is life. The risk was still better than being at work.

We reached a closed door which he banged on. It was opened by another officer, fancy in his exquisite clothing, and we entered what must have been the final carriage. Inside a combination of Police, combat fatigued military and other uniformed Thai

men were either sat around the single table with a deck of cards or lying around on their bunk beds. Like my friends earlier, they all stopped what they were doing and stared. The door was still open and as the train rocked to and fro, her speed, you could tell was not that great, maybe even survivable if I went head first off the side.

I was ushered forward, the bag of weed rustled in my pocket and the door, my one means of escape was closed and the bolt was slid across. I thought my stomach had been churning last night, it was nothing compared that moment. My man had not looked back at me once throughout the long lasting minutes we had walked back to that place where the men in uniform slept, and at last, still without a glance at me he said, 'Is this him?'

At the table, a man with a handful of cards, eyed me, then smiled, 'Yes! Yes, this is him! This is the farang with all the sexy video!' My close to crying eyes were met with the sweetness of thirty smiles and then my ears were happy to hear, 'Show me, show me!'

It took me a moment to get my head around what was happening. No, I wasn't fucked, what I was, was surrounded by thirty or so military officers, who between them all only had one boring video of some Japanese girl getting done by some ol' guy who wasn't even spanking her!

Then it dawned on me, the guy with the cards who'd pointed, and had smiled that amazing smile; was the guy I'd bought beers for and danced with the night before. They all jumped down from their small beds and gathered around, phones out and blue tooth on. My man with the cards was the only one in civilian clothing, all the others were in fatigues and spotless uniforms. As I blue toothed them film after film I couldn't help but think.....

'Fuck yeah! Has porn actually just saved my life?'

A stroll in the jungle

When I got back to where the others were, I'm not sure who had the more surprised look. With apprehension and glances over my shoulder for the Police they gathered round. Everybody knew about the fifty or so valiums, they'd all taken one each themselves. They knew about the great big bag of weed, they had smoked from it. They knew about who I was, and like me, they'd all thought I was fucked. I'd seen it in their eyes as I'd passed by thirty or so minutes earlier.

'Fuck, we were about to call the embassy for ya', one of the lads said. 'That cop guy had been standing around all morning, ya' nearly knocked him over when you fell out of your bunk to take a shit just before. Fuck man, you could smell the weed from down here, and he was stood just outside the door. We were on the case about what to do straight away. And then when ya finally opened the door and all that fuckin' smoke came piling out, we were sure it was over for you. Bangkok Hilton, ya' know. So how the fuck, did ya' talk ya'self out of that man?!'

'You'd never fuckin' believe bro', and I went into the story of the guy sat with us during the evening, and sure as fuck they were blown away. That one moment of tiredness and talking to the guy next to me, had saved me from empty bank accounts and possibly phone calls home.

As the sun set once more the train pulled up in Chang Mai, the girls wished us farewell and I got a ribbing from the guy who'd ended up fucking her the night before. 'Man I had to put a hand over her mouth she was yelling so loud, best lay ever.'

Well fuck you very much fulla'.

The lads still had a couple of days before their fishing trip and I sold them on coming to the jungle with me to smoke some opium. A gaggle of Tuk Tuk drivers had surrounded us and there was only one who when I said, 'We wanna' trek and smoke opium,' that took us up on the deal. Our man took us through the city, then across a canal and through the grand walls of the old city, before pulling up next to a sign that said, 'Sue's Place'.

Sue was an open, welcoming woman, and the mural painted on her wall had a series of trek options that included pictures of women with extended necks, stretched by gold necklaces, and another with a field poppies. 'We want the one with the poppies please,' I said. 'Look this is my last week in Thailand and I've got loads of money, all I wanna' do is get lost in the jungle and smoke black gold.'

'No problem,' she said, 'you can leave tomorrow.'

It was a deal done, we paid up, got a good night's rest and I dreamed sweet dreams of freedom, that were interrupted now and then by a pair of shiny boots and a gold arm band.

The next morning Sue woke us up and we were bailed onto the back of a pickup truck along with an American Hawaiian girl in her late twenties and a promise from Sue to look after our stuff. On the way out the city and with my weed stashed back at Sue's we were waved down by yet another formal looking guy. 'Quick, pull your phone out man,' one of the lads said. 'We don't wanna' get arrested.' The story was explained to Felicia, the yank; and with laughter our passport details were handed over to the official who recorded exactly who was going in to the jungle and when they were due back. 'In the past,' he said, 'people go missing. Now if taxi take you to jungle, taxi must bring you back. He wrote down the licence plate number and took the driver's ID, it made sense.

We drove for three hours, the mountains got higher and the road got more treacherous as we made our way directly towards Burma. Felicia's father had died in Vietnam, at the battle of Kah San and she'd been to the battle grounds. Then she'd taken the hard road across the north of Laos. Now she found herself on the way to nowhere with three English fishermen and a guy who felt like he'd just picked the winning numbers in the lottery of life.

The truck pulled up and once we'd off-loaded, we were introduced to a local fulla' who obviously had a love for food. Like Boom Boom back in Cambodia he had a prayer tattooed across his chest. The guy also had a weird spade looking thing thrown over one shoulder. He introduced himself as, 'Mike'. I couldn't help but think, 'Jesus another one.'

'Mike,' I said, 'we are here to smoke opium, I was told you have the best'.

'No problem,' he said, 'we have much opium, but first we must walk. It is not far.'

We walked, and I don't just mean to the shop around the corner. I mean we fuckin' walked good and proper, for fuckin' miles. 'Cause of the height of the mountains it wasn't so hot here, so at least our aches and pains weren't joined by the clinging humidity of the Low lands. We questioned Mike about his shovel thingy and he said it was for digging up Dung beetles with. We all thought, 'Whatever dude,' until he spied a random hole in the ground and dug one out, shit ball and all!

'The larvae in the ball is delicacy in China, very expensive.' He got a few throughout the day's march. Eventually we reached a village on the slopes of a steep mountainside. 'Here we stay for the night.' he said.

Mike cooked a meal fit for kings. There was the vegetarian (Or semi vegetarian) option of green Thai curry with quail eggs and an equally amazing red Thai curry with chicken. Now I've eaten Thai food, but there was a reason this guys belly was the size of a keg of beer' this guy could cook. Even though we were in the middle of god damn nowhere with only wood as a source of fuel, he'd cooked the most delicious example of Thai cuisine, I still to this day have ever eaten. Yes while he cooked the local school kids put on a show of traditional dancing and stuff, which we had to pay a donation for, but that is travelling in the third world innit. It's not like the money was going into corporate pockets.

Another thing that caught my eye was a group of girls playing Elastics, the same Elastics, girls when I was their age played on the basket ball courts in New Zealand. An elastic band stretched between two kids while another skipped over it. The two holding it up sung a song and clapped their hands to keep the rhythm for the girl skipping. The band would get higher with each successful attempt. I couldn't help but wonder how children's games can spread from the urban schools of Auckland New Zealand, to the mountainous border regions of Thailand and Burma.

After dinner we were taken to a hut on the edge of the village. On one side there were mats and in the centre was a great big pipe looking thing. The elder of the village who we'd been introduced to when we showed up appeared, along with a teen looking lad with a cricket ball sized lump of tar in his hands. They sat us down and we watched as the young guy crushed a tablet in a bowl, and then mixed a good finger full of the black gold into it.

'Three hundred baht for one opium.' The ol' boy said.

'Nah fuck that,' I said, 'I got thousands on me, I'll give ya' two for a big ball of it.'

'No you must pay for each one.'

Fuck him, what was the fuckin' problem? Since the whole thing was my idea, the team let me go first. The young fulla' had finished whatever he was up to, and pulled a fair piece from the mixture in the bowl. Then he spiked it on a long needle adorned

at the top with red and gold silk thread. He then passed me the pipe, which consisted of a fifty mil' glass bottle with a hole drilled into the side, and a three foot long piece of bamboo taped to the top to suck through. As far as I can remember, he burnt the glass and the tar started to boil. Anyway, the thick smoke gathered inside the bottle and I started to suck. As the goo, started to crust, he would push the needle through the hole which removed the outer edges, and continued to let it burn. I inhaled deeply, the flavour was wrong, the difference between a sweet bourbon and a matured Scottish whiskey. The correct high never came either. 'Another please,' I said, then sucked down one more like a glutinous child in a sweet shop. Nothing. Maybe it was just me.

I rolled over to the side and with looks from others for approval, I sort shrugged and without words said, 'Maybe you should have a go.' Felicia went first then the boys, then I had another turn. Nothing. Something was up, we'd been burnt, I was sure of it. I smashed a few more and as the night came to a close we all slept peacefully. Apart from me of course and those bright shiny boots. In the morning as another brilliant meal was cooked and the girls played Elastics', I hit the others up. 'Hey did you guys feel anything from that stuff last night?'

'You mean the opium?' one of the lads said.

'Well I don't think that was opium man, look I've just come outta' Laos a month ago and not only did that shit not taste like opium, it didn't get me high.'

'Nah, us either man.'

'Nor me,' said Felicia.

'Yeah,' I said, 'it doesn't add up, I offered them two thousand baht and they wouldn't take it. Who the fuck have you ever met in Thailand, who turned down two thousand baht? Fuckin' no one.' I went to have it out with them. As I've said, the only reason I was there and not at JD's was because these guys had promised me good gear. I cornered Mike and then the ol' man, 'Hey look guys, I don't know what the fuck that shit you sold me last night was, but it sure as fuck wasn't opium.'

'Yes opium, very good.'

I kept my cool, 'No Mike, no that was not. I've just come out of Laos man and I know exactly what opium is, the taste, the smell, the high, and I fuckin' asked you man before we even started and you promised me dude, fuckin' promised me that if I came with you I would get what I wanted. This is my last week of holiday man, and right now I could be back in Vang Vieng, getting high, getting loaded, but you've shit on me dude. You've brought me right out into the middle of fuckin' nowhere and fed me that, whatever the fuck it was, last night. That's bullshit'

They knew it too, 'cause as soon as I'd mentioned Laos the look on their faces had changed. I'd, we'd all been, well and truly fucked.

'Ok sorry,' Mike said, 'the Burmese sell us this and we need to make our money back. We are sorry.' I could sympathise but fuck all use that was to me, but hey what can you do? 'Look Mike,' I said, and pulled out my wallet, showing him the full contents for the first time. 'I have thousands of baht, are you telling me, in all these miles of jungle and hundreds of villages you cannot get me opium? I got the cash man, just feed me up.' There was nothing, the elder looked embarrassed and I promised them not to tell the others.

Like fuck, as soon as I joined them they surrounded me. 'Yep, we've been fucked guys. These cunts have brought us out in to the middle of nowhere on the promise of a lie.' But really, they weren't too gutted, we were still out in the jungle crossing streams on logs a million years old. The mountain scenery was like no other, totally different from the rain forest below. The scarce villages we travelled through were

full of welcoming people, who apart from the odd radar dish lived lives untouched by our societies of debt and marketing. At some point during a beer break Mike pulled out a Dung beetle. As he crawled all over us, his shell shone metallic blue in the sun. Piglets would run past and rice paddies were watered by bamboo irrigation systems, opium or not, it was magical.

That night we pulled up in a village and were kept totally separate from the other farangs we saw on the opposite side. When opium was offered each of us turned it down, and later a forlorn looking Mike presented me with two blocks of weed which I shortly pointed out were not made of opium. I felt bad about it, 'cause although these guys had brought us out here on *my* false dream of opium they were obviously upset, not embarrassed but more, broke looking.

'Look guys, here's four grand,' and counted it out to Mike. 'Get me some opium man.' Mike handed the money back.

'No,' he said, 'we have no opium here, I'm sorry.'

Maybe if the opium was real they'd all go to prison. Maybe if they didn't advertise that attraction other hill tribe people would get the money. They weren't rich, and I'm pretty sure if you peeled back the layers of what we may perceive as money grubbing, these people were only trying to feed themselves. Then again, something good might have been coming up on pay per view TV.

What could be said about this? Really, the other guys only gave a fuck 'cause I'd drilled it into them. I couldn't ruin their experience through my own selfish needs. Our hosts were truly gutted that they'd been caught out, and unless I perked my shit up we were all gonna' be stuck out here in the middle of nowhere, missing out on what may have been one of the best moments of our lives. So I took the ganja, I hugged Mike and the elder and I joined the others with a smile, a beer, and a pipe full of weed. It diffused the tension I had caused, then we all joined Mike and the villagers for a drink, and they offered deep fried tarantula for dessert. There was no fuckin' way though that I was eating those hairy mother fuckers.

The next day was our final day, the plan was some elephant trekking and some rafting.

The first stop was the elephant trek, I'd spent the whole way on the ride in telling the others how sick elephant trekking was, and how bad the elephants were treated. By the end, the lads who'd all been keen had changed their minds. When we got to the Elephant sanctuary they followed my lead and we all made a pact not to do it. It's really fuckin' uncomfortable when this shit happens. The locals are standing around with whatever it is they're trying to get you to do, and a group of defiant farangs are sticking to their guns. It's drawn out silence. Anyway, I was offered a gorgeous elephant though. She was about two metres tall and shy as a horse. I was still umming and aahing when she reached over with her trunk and with that extra digit sensed my face with an inhale and ever so light touch. I was in love, she was beautiful beyond all comprehension. She was intelligent too, and she knew who I was. Only one of the other lads agreed to come with me. As I climbed on top of her I was met with a snuffling, swinging trunk, which I passed a banana to from the bunch I had been given. Sat up on my seat I felt she was so special. I took my rancid shoes off so I could feel the inch long bristles from her head scratch against the soles of my feet, her skin was dry and warm. My lady was free from the scars people associate with the torture of these wondrous companions to the human race. She knew the path and all I had to do was dodge the spiders that were sat on the leaves basking in the sun. In complete opposite, the other guy was mounted on a stubborn, one tusked male. He stood a few feet taller than my baby girl and all he thought about was his next meal.

He was scarred from the eyeballs down, the scars proving to come from a pointed hammer that would be driven into him by the barefoot handler as he tried to keep the beast subdued. I asked my guide, who was easy going and would pass me branches of my loves favourite meal, 'So what's with the treatment of the elephants man? I hear they are treated like shit. People care about them. Farangs aren't stupid man, they don't wanna' support shit like that.'

'Farang are wrong.' he said.' Elephant are left over from the logging industry, if we no care about them who will? We love elephant, their skin very strong, we hit elephant and hurt elephant you think elephant not say something? If elephant angry everybody know, elephant not weak, elephant is symbol of Thailand. If we not look after elephant then who? If not for us, elephant must be killed, elephant is from the past. We have fifty elephant, all rescued from bad men who exploit. Without tourist, the elephant would be dead. The government will kill. I feel bad when farang think we only use elephant for money, is not true. Elephant and Thailand are one.'

I was kinda' lucky, my girl was something else. Once I looked behind me and the lad's elephant was stretching right out over a high cliff trying to reach some tasty snack. After a few hours we were dropped off on the edge of a rushing river where we met up with the others and lunched out on sticky rice wrapped in banana leaves and more curry flavoured food. I left my dream girl on the other side. However, smelling the food the stubborn boy steamed across the river. He snacked down on our empty rubbish bags and then choked them down in one. Can you Heimlich manoeuvre an elephant?

Next was the river rafting, and it was no inflatable river raft boat thing, it was a bunch of bamboo strapped together. We spent most of the time semi submerged, pulling radioactive sized bugs off of us. At one point my right foot slipped between the poles, and when I fell off the side my leg was trapped and I thought for sure it was going to break. The water slowed and over on one bank of the river we saw our guide waving us over. Our trip in the jungle was complete. So apart from a few bruises on my leg, and of course the fake opium it had been better than alright, it had been good clean fun and I had had yet more life changing experiences with new found friends.

One last Yaa Baa

The day after we got back to Sue's place, the other guys left for their journey north and the waiting fish. I'm shit at pool but at the guesthouse there was a table so I joined the rounds. I argued with a Frenchman in a communist shirt, about how he could support such a theory after the genocides it's caused. He said Vietnam was different and well what could I say. Although I'd been there, I hadn't stopped to find out. It reached around nine in the evening or some shit like that, and a Swedish fulla' called Johannes talked me into going to some street about five minutes walk away with a load of reggae bars on it. I only had a few days left now and was still smouldering about how I should have just gone to Laos. I was determined to get high one last time and made the decision to find some Yaa Baa. Susan the guesthouse owner was getting more and more pissed, as she tried to keep her nerves in check. She was going back to her village for the first time since she'd had her sex change operation, and was afraid her family would be embarrassed and what the kids from school would say.

Out on the street me and Johannes waved down a Tuk Tuk and straight away I asked him for Yaa Baa.

'Yeah no problem,' he said, 'get in.'

I explained to Johannes that we were going on a little detour, he didn't seem to mind so the mission was on. We sorted out costs and fare charges and settled on six Yaa Baas for two and half thousand baht. Plus I said he could have another five hundred baht for as the taxi fare. It's always good practise to pay well in these situations. We ended at some bar on the other side of Chang Mai. I hadn't seen any farangs for ages. The place was surrounded by Tuk Tuks, their owners for once were drinking inside rather than outside sleeping on the back seat waiting for a fare. A moment later the driver came running out with another guy, who waved and jumped in a Tuk Tuk just down the road. The fulla' came racing up beside us, and with a yell we followed him. The streets were thin, most, only wide enough to take one Tuk Tuk at a time. They didn't slow down at the end of the rubbish strewn blocks with their packs of wild dogs. The guys didn't stop for traffic; they just tooted their horns and ploughed on through. The badness of the whole situation was exhilarating. We were off on a mission in Thailand to by some kickass amphetamines that if we got caught with, would mean serious trouble. Or these guys could rob us, or even worse yet, sell us the drugs, turn us into the Police, and then rob our bank accounts too. I wasn't too worried if they robbed us, if that happened they could just take the cash, it wasn't worth fighting for, and there was always my switchblade if I needed it. I had decided to always keep it in my right pocket, just above the knee.

After half an hour we ended up on the outskirts of the city, parked in a gas station car park, waiting for the guy we'd followed from the pub earlier. After an hour or so, Johannes was fuckin sick of it and started to get paranoid. Both of his feelings were fair enough, to tell the truth I felt the same. He was more determined to fuck hookers than to get high, each to his own. Giving up on *my* fantasy he went over to the road side to wave down a ride to *his*. I had to wait about another hour. The guy eventually showed up with all the gear, and like a legend, a bag full of beer. A fulla' with a bag full of beers can't be a bad guy can he?! 'Follow me,' he yelled again, and we were on the road once more. Down the motorway and off to the left, further and further away from Chang Mai, deeper and deeper into the countryside, until we pulled up at a block of flats, and with a round of high fives and a top up of beer, we went inside and started the ceremony.

I was a stranger in a strange land once more and ever present of my knife. But my hosts spoke good English and they were as pleased as punch when I offered them a whole WY each. We cracked more beers and I went first. The tablet started to melt and bubble, the smoke billowed as the white crust formed around the ever decreasing pill. I managed to take the whole thing in six or seven large lung fills, and with sweat pouring the boys chased the fast flying dragon too. They asked, but I wouldn't tell them my exact address out of fear that they still might turn me in, and the beautiful Susan would end up in more trouble than me, for harbouring Class A drug takers. But they understood my paranoia and accepted it without offense. We chatted about life and shit in general then I ploughed one more down before we hit the long road back into town.

I got dropped off in the ol' city a few corners back from Sue's, and with a hug and a 'Ka poon kap', I bid my driver friend farewell. Back at the guesthouse I joined a table full of shit faced backpackers, all of them had been taking in the excesses of Lady Chang Mai. The French fulla' was there with his partner and our earlier disagreement only solidified our late night, drunken friendship. As I sat, a conversation about this legendary drug the farangs had heard of called Yaa Baa was on the table. 'Oh it costs a thousand baht one said.' 'No more like seven hundred' but it iz very addictive and once you try it you are addicted for life,' the Frenchman added.

'More like four hundred and tastes like chocolate,' I said with eyes as wide as street lamps and so drenched with sweat it looked like I'd just stepped in from a storm. He seemed to realise or more, recognised the symptoms of a speed freak and simply nodded. There was no need for him to point it out to the others. I rolled a fat joint and passed it around. Some young fulla' next to me with dreadlocks sprouting from his head turned it down, so I ridiculed him for having dreadlocks as a fashion statement rather than a way of life. His girlfriend agreed, there's no love sometimes.

The next afternoon Susan came back waltzing in a swan song, her obvious delight meant that all must have gone well back home. Yes her father was a little pissed off daddy's little Thai boxer had become daddy's little dancer, but transgender people are not uncommon in Thailand, in fact they are something of the norm. And to add to Susan's time back home an old school friend had even asked her out for dinner, and she was hoping it was real love. They'd loved each other as friends growing up, why couldn't they love each as man and woman now? She took my complaints about the opium free jungle trek on board and offered me a night in bed together instead, I graciously turned her down. Even if I had said yes, there was the risk she was still pre op' and with all the speed in me there was no way I would have been able to get it hard, and that would have meant it was me getting fucked, not the other way round. And hey, even if you're one the one doing the fucking there can't be anything more unsexy than the girl your shagging up the arse getting a hard on!

It was Sunday night, my last night in Thailand. I'd fly down to Bangkok in the morning, and from there take another flight back to London and the coming summer. The Frenchman and his girl were flying out in a few hours and just as they were grabbing their bags he came over, 'I have gift for you my friend,' he said. 'We meet a guy who had travelled over from Nepal and he gave uz some Nepalese hash,' and he pulled out a penny sized ball of squidgy black doe with a slightly menthol smell. I will not take this on the plane and you seem like the one here who would appreciate it the most. But promise me, one day you'll go to Vietnam and see how communism has come out for them. I think they are the wealthiest people in Asia. Apart from all the

bombs left over from the war of liberation, that were dropped by the American occupiers.

That night I rolled the whole lot into one big two skin spliff and shared it with Susan and some new arrivals. We went out and checked the Sunday night market that encompassed the whole of the old city. My Tuk Tuk man somehow found us amongst the masses but as I still had one Yaa Baa left and was flying the next day, I turned him down on another offer to ride the road to awakeness. We went out and probably against our better judgment ate spicy street side Chang Mai sausage and seemingly fresh sushi. We had to follow the swollen flow of crowd, if you stepped too far across to the other side to check out some painting or handmade artefact, you took the risk over being washed away in the tidal surf of the masses. The night was full of the sounds of the orient; sounds created by blind buskers lit by dim yellow lanterns.

We went home. I smoked my last bubbly WY, and then spent the rest of the night losing at pool. Even one handed, like I did – in what felt like years before – way back on the Green lake in Phnom Penh.

Back at Bangkok airport it was cold, fuckin freezing in fact. I couldn't go outside to sit in the thick soup of Thailand's capital, so I found my gate and sat next to an elderly lady and her fur coat. We were joined by a guy in his sixties or so from Australia. He had tried to have one last yahoo by being part of the crew of a sailing ship that was s'pose to go from Greece to Thailand under sail, but which in fact had spent most of the time under the power of the motor. He was pissed as a mother fucker about it and I would have been too. I sailed a three mast boat when I was on the Ark Trust course at school, and I'll tell you what; there's nothing like the feeling of taking a hundred foot vessel in your hands, and trying to keep her from rolling over as the force of the waves lifts you, and the strength of the wind guides you.....

Except of course that feeling of having taken a risk; a risk that most others are too afraid to take, and getting away with it.....

Live life, love life, make this life yours!!!!

Peace, Love and all that jazz

Bryce..... The Author and Life