

RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS

The background of the cover is a grayscale abstract illustration of an open book. The pages are represented by a series of curved, overlapping lines that create a sense of depth and movement. The lines are more densely packed in the center of the book and become more sparse towards the edges. The overall effect is a modern, minimalist representation of a book.

Bangkok Tattoo

John Burdett

About the Book

'Killing customers just isn't good for business.'

In District 8, the underbelly of Bangkok's crime world, a dramatically mutilated body is found in a hotel bedroom. It looks bad.

It gets worse for Detective Sonchai Jitpleecheep when the self-confessed murderer is Chanya, the most successful 'working girl' at The Old Man's Club, a brothel owned jointly by Sonchai's mother and his boss, Police Colonel Vikorn.

And it gets deadly when Sonchai, in an effort to get at the bizarre truth, is forced to run the gamut of Bangkok's drug-dealers, prostitutes, bad cops, even worse military generals, and the pitfalls of his own melting heart.

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About the Author

Also by John Burdett

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Bangkok Tattoo

John Burdett



For Sofía

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Bangkok is one of the world's great cities, all of which own red-light districts that find their ways into the pages of novels from time to time. The sex industry in Thailand is smaller per capita than in many other countries. That it is more famous is probably because the Thais are less coy about it than many other people. Most visitors to the kingdom enjoy wonderful vacations without coming across any evidence of sleaze at all. Indeed, the vast majority of Thais follow a somewhat strict Buddhist code of conduct.

On a related topic, I am bound to say that I have not myself come across police corruption in Thailand in any form, although the local media reports malpractice on almost a daily basis.

Israelites, Christians and Muslims profess immortality, but the veneration they render this world proves they believe only in it, since they destine all other worlds, in infinite number, to be its reward or punishment. The wheel of certain Hindustani religions seems more reasonable to me .

. .

Jorge Luis Borges, *The Immortal*

What? Could perhaps, in spite of all 'modern ideas' and prejudices of democratic taste, the victory of *optimism*, the achieved predominance of *reason*, practical and theoretical *utilitarianism*, like democracy itself, its contemporary – be a symptom of failing strength, of approaching old age, of physiological exhaustion? . . . what is the meaning of – morality? . . . all things move in a double cycle: everything which we now call culture, education, civilization will at some stage have to appear before the infallible judge, Dionysus.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*

1

THE OLD MAN'S CLUB



1

‘Killing customers just isn’t good for business.’

My mother Nong’s tone reflects the disappointment we all feel when a star employee starts to go wrong. Is there nothing to be done? Will we have to let dear Chanya go? The question can only be decided by Police Colonel Vikorn, who owns most of the shares in The Old Man’s Club and who is on his way in his Bentley.

‘No,’ I agree. Like my mother’s, my eyes cannot stop flicking across the empty bar to the stool where Chanya’s flimsy silver dress (just enough silk to cover nipples and butt) drapes and drips. Well, the dripping was slight and is more or less finished (a rusty stain on the floor turning black as it dries), but in more than a decade as a detective in the Royal Thai Police I have never seen a garment so blood-soaked. Chanya’s bra, also hideously splattered, lies halfway up the stairs, and her panties – her only other garment – lie abandoned on the floor outside the upstairs room where, eccentrically even for a Thai whore, she has taken refuge with an opium pipe.

‘She didn’t say anything at all? Like *why?*’

‘No, I told you. She dashed through the door in a bit of a state holding an opium pipe, glared at me and said, *I’ve done him in*, ripped off her dress and disappeared upstairs. Fortunately, there were only a couple of *farang* in the bar at the time, and the girls were fantastic. They merely said, “Oh, Chanya, she goes like that sometimes,” and gently ushered them out. I had to play the whole thing down, of course, and by the time I got to her room she was already stoned.’

‘What did she say again?’

‘She was tripping on the opium, totally delirious. When she started talking to the Buddha I left to call you and the Colonel. At that stage I didn’t know if she’d really done him in or was freaking out on *yaa baa* or something.’

But she’d snuffed him all right. I walked to the *farang’s* hotel, which is just a couple of streets away from *Soi Cowboy*, flashed my police ID to get the key to his room and there he was, a big muscular naked American *farang* in his early thirties, minus a penis and a lot of blood from a huge knife wound that began in his lower gut and finished just short of his rib cage. Chanya, a basically decent and very tidy Thai, had placed his penis on the bedside table. At the other end of the table a single rose stood in a plastic mug of water.

There was nothing for it but to secure the room for the purposes of forensic investigation, leave a hefty bribe for the hotel receptionist, who is now more or less obliged to say whatever I tell him to say (standard procedure under my Colonel Vikorn in District 8), and await further orders. Vikorn, of course, was in one of his clubs carousing, probably surrounded by naked young women who adored him, or knew how to look as if they did, and was in no mood to be dragged to the scene of a crime until I penetrated his drunken skull enough to explain that the business at hand was not an investigation per se, but the infinitely more challenging forensic task so lightly spoken of as a ‘cover-up’. Even then he showed no inclination to shift himself until he realized it was Chanya (the perp, not the victim).

‘Where the hell did she get the opium?’ my mother wants to know. ‘There hasn’t been opium in Krung Thep since I was a teenager.’

I know from her eyes she is thinking fondly of the Vietnam War, when she was herself a working girl in Bangkok and a lot of the GIs brought small balls of opium from the war zone (one of them being my almost anonymous father, of whom

more later). An opiated man is more or less impotent – which reduces much of the wear and tear on a professional's assets – and not inclined to argue about fee structure. Nong and her colleagues had always shown special interest in any American serviceman who whispered that he had a little opium back in his hotel. Being devout Buddhists, of course, the girls never used the stuff themselves, but they encouraged the john to get stoned out of his tree, whereupon they would extract exactly the agreed fee from his wallet, plus a tip somewhat on the generous side to reflect the risk inherent in associating with drug-abusers, plus taxi fare, and return to work. Integrity has always been a master word for Nong, which is why she is so upset about Chanya.

We both know the Colonel is arriving in his limo, because his damned signature tune 'The Ride of the Valkyries' is booming from the stereo as his car approaches. I go to the entrance and watch while his driver opens the rear door and more or less pulls him out (a beautiful cashmere Zegna sports jacket, fawn coloured and somewhat crumpled, pants by Eddy Monetti of the Via Condotti in Rome, his usual Wayfarer wraparound sunglasses).

The driver staggers towards me with Vikorn's arm over his shoulder. 'It's fucking Saturday fucking night,' he complains with a glare, as if it's all my fault. (We prefer not to investigate even capital crimes on Saturday nights in District 8.) The Buddhist path can be much like the Christian in that the karma of others often seems to get dumped on your shoulders from out of nowhere.

'I know,' I tell him as I make way to let him pass and Vikorn, sunglasses now thrust fashionably on to his hairline though slightly askew, also glares at me blearily.

There are padded benches in intimate little booths along the back wall of the Club and the driver dumps Vikorn down in one while I get some mineral water from the fridge and hand it to my Colonel, who empties the bottle in a few

swigs. It is with relief that I observe the rodent cunning return to those frank unblinking eyes. I tell him the story again, with a few commercially focused interjections from my mother (*She makes more for us in a month than all the other girls put together*), and I see that he already has a plan to maximize wriggle-room should things get difficult.

Within ten minutes he is close to sober, tells his driver to disappear with the limo (he doesn't want to broadcast that he is here) and stares at me. 'So let's go up and take her statement. Get an ink pad and some A4 paper.'

I find the ink pad that we use for our business stamp (The Old Man's Club – Rods of Iron) and some sheets of paper from the fax machine, which Nong installed for those few of our overseas clients who don't have e-mail (we tried for hooker.com and similar domain names but they had all been taken, including oldman.com – whore.org had of course been taken since the dawn of cyberspace, so we had to make do with omcroi.com), and follow him across the bar. He stares at Chanya's dress on the stool and cocks an eye at me.

'Versace,' I tell him.

'Fake or real?'

Gingerly I hold it up, hefting the weight of the blood it has absorbed. 'Unclear.'

He grunts much as Maigret used to do, as if absorbing a clue too subtle for my understanding, and we continue up the stairs, passing the bra without comment. I pick up the panties on the floor outside the room (almost weightless and apparently innocent of bloodstains – they are more a *cache-sexe* than a proper undergarment, with the rear panel no more than a bootlace to divide the buttocks) and hang them over a stray electrical cable for now. Chanya has been too stoned to lock the door and when we enter she blesses us with a rapturous smile from that awesomely beautiful mouth, before returning to whichever of the Buddha heavens she had escaped to.

She is quite naked, stretched out on the bed with her legs akimbo, her full firm breasts pointing at the ceiling (an exquisite blue dolphin is jumping over her left nipple), her long hair shining like a fresh black brushstroke on the white pillow. She has shaved her pubic hair save for the subtlest filigree black line which seems to point to her clitoris, perhaps as a road sign for drunk and fumbling *farang*. The opium pipe, a classic of about three feet of bamboo with the bowl two-thirds of the way down, lies beside her. The Colonel sniffs and smiles – as with my mother, the sweet aroma of burnt poppy sap holds fond memories for him, though of a radically different order (he used to trade it up in Laos in the golden years of the B52s). The room is tiny and hardly big enough for the three of us when I bring two chairs and set them on opposite sides of the bed. The sex goddess between us begins to snore while Vikorn dictates her statement:

““The *farang* had been drinking even before he came into my Club. He called me over to join him at his table and offered to buy me a drink. I accepted a Coca-Cola while he drank –” ah, let’s see, “– nearly a full bottle of Mekong whisky. He did not seem to be able to take alcohol very well and seemed confused and disoriented. When he offered to pay my bar fine and take me back to his hotel I told him he was too drunk, but he insisted and my papasan, one Sonchai Jitpleecheep, asked me as a special favour to go with the *farang*, who was very big and muscular and seemed likely to cause trouble if I didn’t.””

‘Thanks,’ I say.

““He struck me as a man with many problems and talked rather abusively about women, especially American women, whom he called *cunts*. I think perhaps he had had a relationship which had gone badly wrong and left him with very strong feelings of bitterness towards all women, even though he claimed to like Asian women, whom he said were much kinder and gentler than *farang* women and more

womanly. When we reached his room I suggested to him that he was perhaps too drunk to make love and that it would be better if I went back to my Club. I even offered to give him back my bar fine, but he grew angry and said he could fuck all night and pushed me into the room. He ordered me to undress and I did so. I was now quite frightened because I had seen a large knife—" Do we have the murder weapon?'

'A large knife, as a matter of fact - looks like a military thing, solid steel with about a twelve-inch blade - I left it in the hotel room for now.'

"An enormous military-type weapon lying on a bedside table. He started to tell me what he would do to my body if I didn't gratify his desires. He stripped naked and threw me on the bed, but he seemed unable to get an erection. He started to masturbate to make himself big, then made me turn over on to my front. It was then I realized that he intended to sodomize me. I begged him not to because I never do that sort of thing, and his member now was so big I was sure he would injure me. Still he insisted, without using a condom or a lubricant, and the pain was so great I started to scream. He became very angry and grabbed a pillow to try to stifle my screams, whereupon I completely lost control of my mind because I was sure he would kill me. Luckily I was able to reach the knife, which I swung around behind me while he was still inside me. By chance I seem to have severed his penis. He went into shock at first and stood up, hardly able to believe what had happened. He kept staring at his penis which was lying on the floor near the bed (it popped out of me and must have fallen off him when he stood up), then he let out a terrible bestial yell and jumped on top of me. I had turned over on to my back and unfortunately I was still holding the knife in both hands in a vertical position and it penetrated his lower abdomen when he landed. His struggles only made the wound bigger. I did what I could to save his life, but it took some time to push

him off me because he was very heavy. I was too much in shock to call the police until I realized he was dead and then it was too late. All I could do to show respect was to pick up his penis and put it on the bedside table. My dress and bra had been on the bed and were soaked in blood. I had to put them on before I could leave the room. When I got back to the bar I stripped off my clothes and ran up to the comfort rooms, where I took a powerful tranquillizer and lost consciousness.

“This statement was taken by Police Colonel Vikorn and Detective Jitpleecheep of Royal Thai Police District 8 while I was in full possession of my faculties. It is true to the best of my knowledge and belief, in testimony of which I hereby set my right thumb print.”

I open the ink pad, roll her thumb over the ink then on to the bottom of the paper. Vikorn, a consummate professional, has neatly ended her report without the need for a second page.

‘Anything I’ve left out?’

‘No,’ I say in awe. The statement is a masterly mosaic of several standard stories from the Game, artfully interwoven with great economy of language. Still more remarkable in a cop who carries his legal scholarship so lightly, he has laid the foundations for an impregnable defence to a charge of murder or even manslaughter: she used only such force as was necessary to save her life; did not deliver the fatal blow; when she saw how badly he was wounded she attempted without success to save his life; expressed sorrow and respect by her sensitive placing of his severed member in a position of honour. The dead *farang*’s standard-issue hatred of the opposite sex arising from bitter personal experience of his own countrywomen provides a motive for his aggression and his sexual preferences. ‘I think you’ve covered everything.’

‘Good. Give her a copy when she wakes up and make sure she memorizes it. If there’s anything she wants to change,

tell her she can't.'

'D'you want to visit the scene of the crime?'

'Not really. Anyway, it wasn't a crime so don't prejudice justice by calling it that. Self-defence is not illegal, especially when by a woman on a Saturday night in Krung Thep.'

'Still, I think you'd better come,' I say. He grunts irritably but stands up anyway and jerks his chin in the general direction of the street.

2

The receptionist, already oozing servility thanks to the five thousand baht I gave him an hour ago, starts to stutter when he sees Vikorn, who is by way of being emperor of these *sois*. The Colonel switches on his five-thousand-kilowatt charm and hints at what a lucrative future awaits those who know how to keep their mouths shut at a time like this. (Positive-type stutters from the receptionist.) I take the key again and we mount the stairs.

Inside the room the stench that invariably accompanies a competent disembowelling has grown stronger since my first visit. I switch on the air-con, which only serves to cool the stench without diminishing its potency. I can see Vikorn working himself into a rage with me for dragging him over here. 'Look,' I say. I take out the dead *farang's* passport from the drawer where I found it earlier. I am not an expert on our occult immigration practices, but the form of his visa disturbs me. The passport is the property of one Mitch Turner.

It disturbs the Colonel too, for he grows pale as he stares at it. 'Why didn't you mention this before?'

'Because I didn't know if it was important or not. I didn't know what it is. I still don't.'

'It's a visa.'

'I can see that.'

'Good for two years with multiple re-entry thrown in.'

'Yes?'

'They never give two-year visas. Never. Especially not with multiple re-entry. Except in certain cases.'

'That's what I thought.'

The visa has deepened our sense of tragedy, the violent loss of a relatively young life so far away from home. 'CIA or FBI?'

'CIA. We let in about two hundred after 9/11. They wanted to keep an eye on the Muslims in the south on the border with Malaysia. They're a pain in the neck because they don't speak Thai so they have to have interpreters.' He looked at the corpse. 'Imagine an over-muscled six-foot white *farang* with an interpreter trying to be incognito down in Hat Yai on a Friday night amongst our little brown people? Damn. I suppose it couldn't have been Al Qaeda?'

'But we already have a statement from the perpetrator.'

'She could be persuaded to retract. You didn't see any long black beards tonight?'

Is he serious? Sometimes my Colonel's super brain is beyond my poor faculties of comprehension. 'I really don't see how that would help.'

'You don't? Look, he's CIA, they'll lean on us from the top down. There are going to be footprints all over my shoulders, not to mention yours. They'll want their own doctors to examine Chanya - no signs of abuse and we're in the shit. We could lose our most productive worker - maybe even have to close the Club for a while.'

'How would it help if it was Al Qaeda?'

'Because that's exactly what they'll want to believe. They're practically blaming the weather on Al Qaeda over there. Just say it's Al Qaeda and they'll be eating out of our hands.'

We exchange a glance. No, it's hopeless. It just doesn't look like a terrorist castration/murder. So what to do about Chanya? I did not examine her private parts, but somehow one doubts that any man would dare to abuse her. Speaking off the record if I may, she's as resilient as a wolverine and when cornered just as ferocious. I can tell by his expression that Vikorn shares my doubts. Whatever the truth of what happened in this room earlier tonight, it is unlikely to be on

all fours with her statement which she has not yet read. Now we are both staring at the *farang*'s face.

'Kind of ugly, don't you think, even for a *farang*?'

I had thought the same thing myself but lack my Colonel's fearless self-expression: an abnormally short neck almost as wide as his head, no chin, a mean little mouth – perhaps she killed him for aesthetic reasons? Vikorn's eyes rest for a moment on the rose in the plastic cup. I know what he's thinking.

'Doesn't quite fit her statement, does it?'

Vikorn turns his head to one side. 'No, but leave it. The key to cover-ups is to leave the evidence alone, make the story do the work. The trick is all in the interpretation.' A sigh.

'Bodies deteriorate rapidly in the tropics,' I suggest.

'They need to be incinerated as soon as possible for public-health reasons.'

'Having taken a statement from the perpetrator and thereby solved the case, with no identifying documents on his person – we'll have to lose the passport . . .'

'Good,' Vikorn says. 'I'll leave it to you.'

We both give the victim the honour of one more scan. 'Look, the telephone cable has been stretched – the phone is on the corner of the bed. A last-minute emergency call?'

'Check with the hotel operator.'

'What shall I do about that?' I point.

Sophisticated practitioners, we have not troubled ourselves unduly with the murder weapon which is lying in the middle of the bed, exactly where one would expect to find it if Chanya had killed him in the manner Vikorn says she did. I see this as a lucky sign and clear proof that the Buddha is looking favourably on our endeavours, but Vikorn scratches his head.

'Well, keep it. She did it, didn't she? So her prints are going to be all over it. What could they find on the knife except his blood and her prints? It all points to her

statement being true. We'll give it to them as corroboration.' A sigh. 'She'll have to disappear for a while. Since it was self-defence we don't have the power to hold her. Tell her to change her hair.'

'A nose job?'

'Let's not exaggerate, we all look the same to them.' A pause. 'OK, let's go back to the Club. You better tell me what really happened tonight, just so I can take precautions.'

3

Students of my earlier chronicle (a transsexual Thai – M2F – murders a black American marine with drug-crazed cobras – standard stuff in District 8) will recall that my mother's commercial talent invented the concept of The Old Man's Club as a way of exploiting the hidden business opportunities of Viagra. The idea, which still fills me with filial admiration, involved blitzing every red-blooded Western male over the age of fifty (ideally, those most pissed off by the options left them by their post-industrial utopia) with electronic invitations to screw his brains out in a congenial atmosphere especially tailored to the tastes of his generation. Photographs of Elvis, Sinatra, Munro, the Mamas and the Papas, the Grateful Dead, even the early Beatles, Rolling Stones and Cream still adorn our walls, and our music pretends to emerge from our faux juke box (chrome and midnight blue with a billion glittering stars). The sounds come out of a Sony audio hard disk hooked up to one of the best systems money can buy.

My mother saw Viagra as the solution to the management problem that has beset the trade since time began: how to accurately predict the male erection? Under her business plan, an old man would come ogle the girls, choose one he liked, then book her by telephone from his hotel room when he had swallowed the Viagra. The drug takes almost exactly an hour to reach full steam, so the logistical problem originally posed by nature was thereby solved. It ought to have been possible to use a simple computer programme to work out which of the girls would be occupied almost from minute to minute. (At the height of our enthusiasm project-

management software was discussed, though in the event not installed.) And guess what? It worked a treat, save for one small flaw that really could not have been foreseen by any of us, not even Nong.

What we had left out of account was that these sexa-, septua-, octo- and even nonagenarians were not old men of the serene, humble and decrepit genre we were used to in the developing world. No sir, these were former rockers and rollers, swingers and druggies, ex-hippy veterans of Freak Street in Kathmandu, San Francisco (when there were beautiful people there), Marrakech, Goa before it went mainstream, Phuket when there were only A-frame huts to sleep in, the world when it was young and LSD grew on trees along with magic mushrooms and a thousand varieties of marijuana. Scrawny contemporaries of Burroughs and Kerouac, Ginsberg, Kesey and Jagger (not to mention Keith Richard), these boys, doddering though they might appear, had once taken a tribal vow never to underdose. You're only supposed to take half a Viagra to enhance performance, but would they listen? The hell they would. Some popped as many as three or four. Only half a dozen suffered heart attacks, despite dire warnings on the bottle, and of those only three actually expired. (Desperate times when Vikorn's Bentley had to be requisitioned as an ambulance, in the teeth of expletive-enriched objections from his irascible chauffeur, who doubted there was much Buddhist merit to be made in saving the lives of geriatric *farang*.) The others uniformly declared they'd gone to heaven without having to die first.

Now what was wrong with that? I'll tell you. Gentlemen, take a whole Viagra (or more) and you kiss your natural flaccidity goodbye for eight hours or longer. (Forget about urinating for a day; questions arise as to how to carry out basic chores with that broomstick between your legs. Many report nostalgia for detumescence. Poetic justice: there's nothing to do but screw, whether you want to or not.)

They wore the girls out, who started to leave in droves. My mother had promised full satisfaction and she hated to disappoint, which left us with no recourse but a relay system. One horny old codger could get through five or six healthy young women before the drug started to fade and he allowed himself to be carried back to his hotel in a condition best described as ecstatic catatonia (or rapturous rigor mortis). Profit margins shrank to paper-thin.

Something had to be done. At an emergency board meeting it was agreed to delete 'satisfaction guaranteed' from the advertising and to appeal to a broader market. Overworked young men suffering from stress-related impotence were favoured. We continued to be the destination of preference for the Western raver on a pension, and at the same time the more traditional customer began to appear (Western ravers with no pension, basically), but we had lost our market niche. We were hardly different from all the other bars and as such suffered the seasonal downturns, not to mention the recession in the West. Suddenly we were running at a loss in a bear market. It was Nong who suffered most, for the Club was her pride and joy, her brainchild and the vehicle by which she was to prove to the world that she was not merely an exceptionally successful whore (ret.) but also a fully fledged twenty-first-century businesswoman of international quality. She grew unusually religious, meditated at the local *wat* every day and promised the Reclining Buddha at Wat Po two thousand boiled eggs and a hog's head if he would save her business. Even Vikorn burnt a little incense and I went further in my meditation than ever before. With such mystic brain power working on our behalf a miracle was inevitable.

Her name was Chanya and I still remember the day she walked into the bar asking for work. She spoke English fluently with a slight Texan drawl (but enough Thai in it to keep her exotic), having spent nearly two years in the US until 9/11 forced her to come home. Post 9/11 was no time

to be travelling on a false passport in America. You had to have grown up in the business to recognize her genius. My mother and I saw it instantly, Vikorn took a little longer to catch on. Within a week we were boiling eggs like crazy and taking them and the roasted hog's head to Wat Po, where the monks ate them or gave them to the poor. Let me explain.

First, *farang*, please dump those childish notions you harbour about our working girls being downtrodden sex-slave victims of a chauvinistic male-dominated culture; take it from me, there's nothing your media won't do to comfort you in your post-industrial despair by making you believe your culture is superior to ours. (Are they kidding? I've been in Slough, England, on a Saturday night - I *know* what atomized basket cases you are.) These are all country girls, tough as water buffalo, wild as swans, who can't believe how much they can make by providing to polite, benevolent, guilt-ridden, rich, condom-conscious *farang* exactly the same service they would otherwise have to provide free without protection to rough drunken whoremongering husbands in their home villages. Good deal? Better believe it (don't look at me like that, *farang*, when you know in your heart that capitalism makes whores of all of us). Most of the girls, being the sole breadwinners and therefore matriarchs, dispense the whole gamut of family business through the medium of the mobile (generally in our staff toilet whilst changing into their working gear), from care of the sick to hire-purchase agreements, from the chastisement of miscreants to the number of water buffalo to invest in this year, from marriages to abortions, religious duties and grave decisions as to who to vote for in local and national elections.

But chemistry is at least as important for commercial sex as it is for the more art-house variety, which is where you start to differentiate between the supporting cast and the superstars. Here's the secret: your superstar *makes* the

chemistry. She is a tantric master in a G-string, a topless sorceress, a dancing dervish with wicked allure. She knows how to turn herself into a mirror that reflects the many and varied fantasies of the men she seduces. Guess how many have come up to me to confide they've finally found *her* at long last, the woman of their dreams, the girl they've been waiting half a lifetime for, the one they are so sure of they will marry her tomorrow if only she'll agree, the saintly Chanya? Answer: roughly 50 per cent of Chanya's customers. We have even employed a bouncer (known as the Monitor, like me he doubles as a cop during the day) to protect us from attack by the broken-hearted. In short, Chanya saved our business and we are not about to desert her in her hour of need. All genius has its dark side. In our pre-atomized society personal loyalty is still important, which is why even the wily Colonel Vikorn did not hesitate to interrupt his Saturday Night in Bangkok (as the song says, it makes a proud man humble – and occasionally dead) when he realized our superstar was at risk. So here's what really happened.

I spotted him the minute he walked in the door. We are between mamasans at the moment, a lamentably common state of affairs, which means that as junior shareholder I have to fill in as papasan pending approval of a replacement by my somewhat demanding mother. (Like all ex-whores she has an inveterate loathing for mamasans and can never find the perfect one. I suspect her of manipulating to keep me as papasan.)

I have already described his face, which was not much improved when inhabited by his spirit. A nasty piece of work with the ridiculous arrogance of an iron-pumper. The girls all took the same view and kept away from him, leaving him isolated at a table on his own in a corner, growing ever more volcanic as he observed the girls favouring men older and less muscled than himself. He was drinking modestly

(Budweiser beer, not Mekong whisky, but one does not defile Vikorn's brilliant narratives with minor quibbles). I was loath to waste Chanya's porcelain talent on this earthenware vessel and really only intended for her to charm him out of our bar and into someone else's. We are fond of each other, Chanya and I, and understand each other. It took no more than a shift of my eyes for her to grasp what I wanted. At least (this moment in the narrative requires needle-point accuracy) I *think* it was the shift in my eyes which sent her over to his table. Within a minute or so his mean little mouth was stretching itself into a smile of sorts, her hand draped lazily over one of his rocky thighs, and when she leaned forward to sip at her 'lady drink' (a margarita with extra tequila) he fixated on her breasts. Yet another proud man was in the process of being humbled.

He was the type whose libido required secretive intensity before it could switch to full alert. Chanya adapted herself in a second and now they were talking conspiratorially (and intensely), almost head to head. To make matters worse, Eric Clapton was singing 'Wonderful Tonight' on the faux juke box. This irresistibly romantic song was the final straw. The iron-pumper's hand found its way to Chanya's nearest thigh. I checked the time by the clock on the fax machine. Less than five minutes had passed and Iron Man was molten – something of a record even for Chanya. I decided to help her out by playing the Clapton song over again – or was I simply curious at the effect of an encore? Tiny tears appeared in the corners of his abnormally blue eyes, he swallowed hard, and the words 'I'm so damn lonely' were recognizable as they emerged from that mean mouth, even at a distance of thirty feet, followed by the unbelievably inept, 'You look wonderful tonight, too.'

'Thank you,' says Chanya, modestly lowering her eyes.

Just then the rose seller came in. One admires this man's quixotic courage, and that of his colleagues: the nut-sellers, and the kids who sell lighters (every bar tolerates them on

the understanding they will be discreet and not stay long). Can there be a greater optimism than a lifelong vocation of trying to sell roses to johns? I'd never before seen him sell a single flower, this rail-thin middle-aged man with a jaw deformed by a tumour he can never afford to have removed. Shyly, the Iron Man beckoned him over, bought a single rose for which he paid far too much and handed it to Chanya.

'I guess I'm gonna pay your bar fine, aren't I?'

Accepting the rose and feigning surprise mixed with gratitude (all the girls can do Oriental Humble on demand): 'Are you? Up to you.'

Exactly seven minutes, according to the clock on the fax machine, and she was about to score. By way of answer, he pulled a five-hundred-baht note out of his wallet and handed it to her. She put her palms together in a cute *wai*, then stood up to bring me the bar fine so I could record what was, now I remember, her second score of the evening. It was Saturday night after all and she was Chanya. The earlier customer had been a young man apparently without stamina for she had taken less than forty minutes to return from his hotel.

The only unusual feature of the transaction with Iron Man was that she did not look me in the eye when she handed over the money and I made out her ticket. Nine times out of ten she winks or grins at me at precisely this moment, when her back is turned to the john. A minute later and they were out the door. It didn't occur to me to fear for her safety, after all she had clearly tamed him already - and she was Chanya.

'That's really the way it went and there's no more I can tell you,' I explain to Vikorn and my mother, back at the Club. It is three thirteen a.m. by the clock on the fax machine and none of us are in the mood for sleep.

'She didn't look you in the eye when she handed you her bar fine? That is unusual. I've seen her, she likes you, she

always looks you in the eye and winks. I think she has a thing for you.' My mother has picked up on this rather female detail. Vikorn is clearly back in Maigret mode, on a plane of lofty strategy beyond our reach. Nong and I wait for the pronouncement. He rubs his jaw.

'There's nothing more we can do tonight. Tomorrow we'll send in a forensic team to take pictures, nothing too thorough though. Sonchai will arrange for removal of the body. He'll get the authorization for immediate incineration from – well, I'll find someone. He'll lose the passport. The *farang* was probably AWOL from some dreary little town in the South where he was supposed to be looking out for men with black beards wearing Bin Laden T-shirts, so the chances are no one knows where he is. She obviously got the opium from him and the pipe too, so it looks as if he's been in Cambodia. Looks like he was not entirely the weight-lifting moron he pretended to be, either. He at least had the imagination to try a little poppy sap. It could be weeks before he's traced to here, though I expect they'll come calling eventually. I don't see any real risk, so long as we lie low and Chanya disappears for a month or so and changes her hair. I don't want them interrogating her. We don't know what she got up to in America.' Turning to Nong: 'You better talk to her, woman to woman, find out where her head is really at.' Then, turning to me: 'Or maybe you should do that, since you two seem to get along so well. Try to get her in a good mood – we don't want you to wind up castrated, too.'

My mother laughs politely at this incredibly tasteless joke – he is the major shareholder, after all. I go out into the street to call him a taxi because he doesn't want his limo to be seen again tonight on *Soi* Cowboy. All the bars are shut, but the street is now crammed with cooked-food stalls, which invariably appear after the two a.m. curfew to fill the street with delicious aromas, serving exclusively Thai dishes to a thousand hungry hookers babbling to each other with