

THE SPONGE

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For my friends—thank you for tolerating my first drafts.

THE SPONGE

Khao San Road

“Where do I find the crazy?”

“Ahh my man—you want the lady boy! These white tourist women—so boring, I know!”

“No, like... where does the crazy happen in this city?”

“Listen,” begins the Tuk-Tuk driver with whom I’ve recently made friends with, “you want the massage, eh? You want the boom-boom!”

This forty-something with a sweet, flat teddy bear-like face reaches into his back pocket to pull out a dirty wrinkled pamphlet with a dozen shiny women in skimpy clothing on the cover.

“No. Thank you. I mean like, say I wanted to get stabbed tonight—where would I go?”

“Farang, you crazy—why wanna get stabbed!”

“I don’t *want* to get stabbed,” I’ve learned that the thirst for adventure is inversely proportional to the amount of rational

thought left in your brain, “I’m just trying to figure out where people are most likely to get stabbed. Somewhere interesting—you know?”

“No stabbing, friend! Not until you let me give you ride like you promise!”

“I said maybe!” So much gets lost in translation. One day I would like to just walk up to one of these guys, look them in the eyes, and say something like: ‘I’m going to fist your asshole, so deep. Would you like that? Friend?’ He would laugh—then I would laugh. No one’s feelings would get hurt.

“You see, in Canada, ‘maybe’ means probably not.”

“No! I give you ride, 200 Baht—come on friend!” Everywhere you go with these guys, be it across the street or to the other side of town—200 Baht.

“Just tell me where the mad parties are.”

“Friend—” he holds out his limp hand to shake mine, “too early for *that kind* of crazy. Come, I show you crazy *now*—the floating market.”

“Oh fuck that floating market already.”

“Come... then after I show you lady boy.”

“Goddamn it.”

I can’t stay mad at these guys.

I’m not going to lie—Khao San Road slowly grew on me over the past few days. Nearly done my first of three weeks here, and I’m already considering extending my reservation. At first glance, all I could see were those ridiculous parachute pants and Chang tank tops in what appeared to be a massive congregation of the world’s filthiest scumbags gathering to fill themselves up with cheap liquor, poke fun at their cultural differences, and exchange various sexually

transmitted diseases. At first, this place made me flaccid in almost every way imaginable.

I felt the urge to grab every entry-level DSLR from every amateur photographer and use them to take detailed 18-megapixel photos of my unshaven scrotum. I wanted to yank back the disgusting hippies' crummy dreadlocks, shove every Buddha Doll I could find into their sweat soaked assholes, before I force them into a lotus position and make them meditate until they found some *real* inner peace. I held back from kicking the heels out from underneath every overdressed European, or tackling window shoppers standing in my way as they contemplated over the cutest piece of elephant memorabilia to place on their windowsill. I loved that I was able to keep myself ignorant to the reality of it all—that people are just here to have fun. I loved that I could be so hateful and cynical about it all. At first, this place made me think a little bit *too* hard about some things.

Soon enough, this place just made me sit down and realize that I was *making* myself feel these things simply because I was so desperate to find any sort of inspiration.

I could sit at a patio and drink the same cheap beer they do, eat the same food they eat, and judge from a distance—trying to convince myself that I'll never be *that* person. I could have held on to whatever cynicism I've accumulated over the past week and work off that, or, I could look around for more interesting things to do that other tourists wouldn't have thought of. This isn't Thailand. This is just a few small blocks in a city of millions that has been specifically designed to cater to tourists with a distinct, but ultimately inaccurate idea as to what Thailand really is about. The word on the street of the word on the street essentially, the sort of shit they've seen in movies or heard from their friends who've never been here.

I'm still not denying that those people are idiots, but I've recently taken the stance to simply be happy with seeing it through the locals' perspective as they rip the tourists' assholes off. For every Tuk-Tuk drive around the block, coconut split open, dollar store-quality sandal, belt or pair of sunglasses, t-shirt, tank top, dress, necklace, bracelet, earring, medallion, carving, overpriced banana or mango, Ping-Pong show or massage, fried scorpion or cockroach, every Baht handed over by a tourist helps me imagine the local on the other end of the transaction thinking: "Location, location, location." I think of it like *that* now, and it makes me smile.

I doubt that makes me a better person, but it does make me feel a little different—and that's what I'm trying to achieve here after all. I think.

My hotel room sits on the second floor of the building and overlooks the last hundred feet of the Khao San Road madness. Below my room is where the massive, double-parked herd of taxi and Tuk-Tuk drivers await to pounce on every enthusiastic passerby, and I can't adjust to the never ending chatter. "Hey buddy where you go?" or "Tuk-Tuk? TUK-TUK!?" Once nighttime rolls around "Lady boy? Ping-Pong? Massage? You want some boom-boom my friend?" is added to the mix.

"Friend!"

"Buddy!"

"200 Baht!"

It doesn't end.

The only window in this hotel room faces east, allowing me to catch a glimpse of the sunset. The level of pollution in the air makes it easy to see the massive ball of orange haze for a short period of time and not be forced into an eye-scrunching struggle.

The sun eventually hides behind an oddly placed coin museum across the street. It's a massive structure resembling a military complex of sorts with its pale yellow coat, armed guards, and ten-foot tall spiked fence that spans its perimeter. My room is a fifteen by fifteen foot square, plastered with filthy white paint except for one odd blue wall with four gold squares painted over in the top right corner. The fridge gives off a strong whiff of its four inches deep collected pool of murky yellow liquid residing in the food tray. Underneath the fridge is where the cockroaches live, and where I assume, reproduce. My phone has no dial tone and the plug for the 25" TV doesn't fit into the universal socket. When it rains, a few litres of muddy water crawls onto my bathroom floor through the rusty drain that empties onto the balcony. The sheets on my box spring have had the same cum stains since I arrived. I'm not sure if this mattress is actually a mattress, and I don't even get a blanket—just another plain white sheet. A thin coat of cigarette ashes, coffee, and dirt left behind from the evaporated water is spread across the blue vinyl floor that is currently decorated with over a dozen empty beer bottles and a few one-litre Johnny Walkers. I can't keep a clean workstation as the ashtray full of Marlboro Reds overflow onto the desk and subsequently, my keyboard. The empty cigarette packs just can't seem to find their way into the trash can, and everything from my phone to my toothbrush is stuffed into whatever vacant gaps remain on the tough PVC surface.

“John Loves a Hooker” is the bloated mess I've travelled to the other side of the world for in order to have some alone time to finally gather my thoughts and finish up. A novel that's way too long for a first, and provokes a torturous cycle of rewrites before even reaching the end upon realizing that one does actually get better at

writing—at which point, I have to start from scratch in order to apply the new skills and techniques to rewrite something that won't be utter bullshit again. One rewrite after another. Slowly deluding myself into believing that perfectionism would inevitably lead to perfection. When my morale over the project would plummet I'd bury my nose in the details, step away from the big picture to avoid admitting defeat to a potential case of sunken cost syndrome. This has been going on for years, and the unfathomable level of insecurity that comes with letting a few people have a read at something that “could be better;” while hoping that the thought “Is this what goes on inside his head?” isn't running through theirs, makes any sort of progress damn near impossible. We all have our excuses, and the more specific, articulated ones are the absolute worst. This started about six years ago as a screenplay that made no sense, and only kept getting longer, to the present day where it's become less of a novel, and more of a romanticized journal of shit that bothers me. Yet another place to vent as I transitioned from being a child thinking of himself as an adult, to an adult saying “fuck it” before turning around and walking in the opposite direction. In a way, finally completing “John Loves a Hooker” will be me making sense of the last six years of my life.

A massive, four-foot tall mirror hangs in front of my work desk. Every now and again I take a break from writing, light up a cigarette, and look at myself for a little bit of self-reflection. It helps me to get into character—like an everyday Joe as he prepares for another workday: self-reflection is the rheum in your eyes when you wake up. The insecurities are that first big morning stretch of the neck, crack of the knuckles, and arch of the back. A heightened amount of self-loathing in the first snotty breath of air as it glides past the mucus in your nasal cavity. Self-awareness is when the

gentle bristle of the toothbrush glides over the sensitive spot on that one bad tooth. Doubt is that random burst of cold water that rains down on you from the shower head—the one that makes you consider jumping out until the water fully heats up, or just deciding to scrap the shower idea altogether. Honesty is the struggle to keep your eyes open when the face wash gets into your cornea and starts to burn. Curiosity is seeing if you can get away with all those wrinkles on your shirt from leaving it on the ground the night before. Letting things go is not polishing those scuffed up leather shoes. Vulnerability is that deep rumble in your stomach from last night's drunken promise to get yourself in order someday. Depression is when the hand hesitantly reaches for the door. Narcissism is the reflection in every mirror and polished surface as you make your way down through the lobby. Sleep deprivation is when you wait in traffic. Cigarettes are that itch on the inner thigh and the alcohol is when you chew on the inside of your cheek. Masturbation is that song on the radio—the one you know all the lyrics to. Commas are the compulsive fixing of the tie; periods for when you lift your ass cheek up to fart. Paragraph structures are coffee breaks, similes for when it's time to come back to work. Analogies are every thought and idea that churns inside your brain that slowly decays with every passing moment of neglect. Metaphors are that milky mess you crumple up in a tissue and flush down the toilet on your lunch break.

But when it's time to go home—it's just time to go home.

The most important part of getting into this character, I think, is being able to snap out of it once in a while. Otherwise, people are going to start looking at you like some tortured puppy that's in need of rescuing. And who wouldn't love to.

"So, what do you write about here?"

She came in from LA for the first time in five years to attend her sister's wedding. Thirty-two years old and her face, although mature, radiated with a youthful vibrancy, her teeth white as pearls, and she sported a well-maintained figure wrapped in skin so soft I'd imagine it would've been a full-time job to upkeep. Her eyes were large and outgoing. She was confident and sly. Her hair—a dark brown hue with occasional light streaks revealing themselves when the light would reflect at just the right angle.

I'm at Ratchathewi Station munching down on a solitary dinner consisting of a few pieces of fried pork thrown over a pile of rice molded into the shape of a teddy bear. I've got a large Chang beer on the go, complemented by a cigarette every now and then. Rice—that's how they get you in the fancier places. The meals might seem cheap, but that's because the rice or noodles, which can sometimes

come close to the price of the dish, are never included. You'd think that in Asia of all places, rice would come cheap and in abundance. Maybe I just don't understand economics.

This plaza is composed of four different restaurants divided by a pedestrian intersection and encapsulated by a massive 500-foot wide roof resembling a rippled tin can. At the center of this intersection is where the staff from all four restaurants congregate. Every venue comes fully equipped with a very stylish young man in an equally stylish vest playing host, accompanied by two girls dressed in their respective restaurant's themed tube dress. They stand around their turf—patiently waiting to lure customers. They're gentle competitors, playing a friendly match of: who can kill the potential hungry customer with kindness first. The Thai, they're so goddamn nice all the time. Always smiling and apologizing no matter what. They're worse than Canadians. But that “fuck you” look is transparent in any language.

Every now and again I catch the girls staring back at me and I can't help but to wonder if these are the “bar girls” I've been warned about, or if they just happen to be really friendly and, consequently, attractive. I'm not even sure if I'm in the right neighborhood for that sort of company as I've been in Bangkok for a total of eight days and I'm as lost as a hipster without his iPhone. It's the culture and geography that gets me, and all that I've learned so far is that ice in your drinks is safe after all, the lady boys aren't as plentiful as one would think, and that the locals might lash out at you if the bottoms of your feet are showing. For them, it's the equivalent to giving the middle finger.

My expectations are quite low in terms of finding anything resembling a meaningful, emotionally fulfilling relationship when I

go by the panty-wetting username of “ScullFucker6000” on my dating profile. The following meaty description of myself approaches a word count on a level of narcissism only a writer who loves to hear himself speak could possess, and it reads something like this:

My self-summary:

I created this account minutes ago because this dating site would not let me change my username on my previous one without having to sign up for a premium account. My desired username was originally “ScullFucker9000” so I went ahead and made a new account under said username, but in my excited haste I made the mistake of creating the new account as a female. Apparently it’s not something that you can change in your general settings—it’s permanent (which I feel is unfair to those who don’t know what they want to be when they grow up). I went ahead and deleted the “ScullFucker9000” account, but it turns out that the usernames stay in the system permanently, and cannot be reused. So, I had to settle for this username here, knowing that for the rest of my online dating life, the superior username is out there, in the cloud, for eternity, within my reach, my own creation, and it can never really belong to me nor anyone else again. Although technically nonexistent, I know that I will forever live in its shadow.

Was it all worth it? Yes.

Update: OK, so it looks like you can change your sex after all—it’s right up there, like, the first box you can click on. How silly of me.

What I’m doing with my life:

Difficult to explain but I like where it’s currently taking me.

I also like to write.

Sometimes I change the sounds for all the notifications on my phone to keep myself on the edge.

I'm really good at:

Sarcasm. Hugs. Fixing this and that. Being modest. Identifying Freudian slips. Being consistent in the format of my lists on dating websites.

Favorite Books, Movies, Shows, Music, and Food:

Books: The Rosy Crucifixion, Catch-22, The Dictionary/Thesaurus

Movies: Terminator 2, In Bruges, The Notebook, (most) animated features

Music: Eminem, Damien Rice, Pink Floyd

Food: Fucking everything

I spend a lot of time thinking about:

Why girls won't talk to me.

There's a dollar store in Chinatown that has had a year round "Closing Down Sale" for many years now. Are they geniuses, idiots, or just pessimists?

How does one become a fluffer?

Is writing fortune cookies a career? Have they just made millions of them years ago and are now simply recycling what they already had? Or is new content being written every day?

On a typical Friday night I am:

Eating carrots or something.

You should message me if:

You are not intimidated by this sentence.

I was a bit disappointed when Anita first messaged me and mentioned nothing of my username or its intricate backstory. No, she started with a simple "Hi," and when an online correspondence

starts off so unimaginatively, I either ignore it or turn into a sarcastic asshole and see how far I can take it. I was drunk, so I indulged, and can imagine a lot of what I said must've gotten misinterpreted in the worst way imaginable because ten minutes of this dull, lifeless, discourse forced me to drink to the point where agreeing to be her date for her sister's wedding seemed perfectly normal. I've never been to a wedding before, and perhaps a wedding hosting 500 people running rampant with politicians and celebrities of whom I've never heard of would be a great first. Reluctant to meet her before the wedding, because I imagined it would've been a lot more fun that way, fell by the wayside when boredom set in over what to do in a city I know so little about.

I agreed to meet her at a bar called The Saxophone when she interrupted my dinner with a text message asking for my whereabouts.

You don't take an extra step during Bangkok summers if you don't have to, and the only thing you have to look forward to when strolling about is a short, euphoric burst of AC blowing past as you pass the open doors of nearby shops. But, I can never slow down to make the wonderful feeling last without disrupting the flow of pedestrian traffic and not judge myself the way I silently judge all the other oblivious morons who stop for it, so, I keep on walking, optimistically looking forward to the next cool breeze. The two-something kilometre stroll to Victory Monument is a busy, noisy, pedestrian-hating road with an ever-decreasing number of refreshing bursts of AC, which subsequently improve my chances of a first impression to be that of a wet, sticky, foul-smelling tourist.

After a couple hundred feet of swimming in my own sweat, I decide to find my way back to the station and attempt to figure out

this train business. It's simpler than I thought, although, I can't understand why the people at the ticket counter only give you change for your cash to buy tickets at the machine instead of actually selling you tickets, especially when the line-ups get obnoxiously long. Why aren't there any change machines at any of the stations to streamline the process? I don't understand why the escalators only go down on this station, forcing the stairs to be the only way up. Shit like this may be why I don't see many fat people in this country.

After what seemed to be a half an hour of walking circles around Victory Monument, checking every corner of every intersection and traversing this damn overpass more times than I wanted to count, it took a Russian with a gold chain and his bald, tattooed buddy—his other obnoxious accessory—to tell me where the hell this bar was.

"You Russian?" he asks after some helpful directions.

"Nah, I'm Canadian mate."

I could never do accents, and I sure as hell don't know what a Canadian accent really sounds like except when saying about (a-boot)—so I went with Australian. Close enough, and I'm sure he didn't notice. I often try to avoid making friends and small talk with other Eastern Europeans since they so often end up being elitist dickheads who think that a mutual language, or some unwarranted sense of national pride, is the base of good companionship or interesting conversation. Given the circumstances—I can see the conversation going to a place I'm not interested in taking it—another drawn-out discussion over the current war in Ukraine, the sort of discussion where people want to convince me to give more of a shit than I currently do. Within the first few months of the ordeal I've grown tired of pulling opinions out of my ass, and I sure

as hell don't want to have to repeatedly answer another: "So, what's your opinion on [latest headline regarding the war]?" as I shoot off a blank stare and give an: "Oh, I think it's really bad," reply while feeling disappointed over the lack of sarcasm detected by the asker. Telling people that I hadn't lived in Ukraine for eighteen years now doesn't seem to be good enough. The fact that I consider the place where I was conceived as nothing more than a piece of dirt, like everywhere else I've lived, is inconceivable to some. People don't want opinions, all they want is another sob story to share with *their* friends for the next time the topic comes up. Like vultures they are. The harder they push, the further I feel the need to simply revert back into my child form and respond to everything with a simple, unenthused, 'Why?' Somebody point me in the appropriate direction for whatever 'like' button on an article, tweet, or Facebook page so that I may click on it and say I've done my part to help, or pretend to care. Maybe then I'd finally be left alone.

I can feel the origin of this bitterness slowly start to come back to me now when I begin to recall a group of Serbians from my high school that would often proclaim, loud and proud "SRBIJA!" everywhere they went. Most of these morons have never even seen the land they call home themselves, but were told, on what I imagine to have been a daily basis since birth, one-sided stories by their parents who had a thing or two to be angry about at the time. I remember the indifference I felt when I heard that one of these kid's stomach met with the wrong end of a broken bottle one night when he decided to call an Albanian he saw at a bar a 'Pigeon'. I don't remember his real name, but many called him 'Thug'. I guess he had to live up to his name. He survived the ordeal, but I can't imagine he'd learned his lesson when he got back in with his herd shortly afterward. I also remember talking to another Serbian after

the event who had the opportunity in life to make up his own mind about the overwhelming national pride thing—he may have disliked these guys even more than I, and was almost relieved to hear about the stabbing. He thought it would maybe change things and help him let go of this shame he carried for his people one day. I don't want any of this shame *or* pride that comes with being whatever country I'm from, or currently live in. Perhaps it's because no place had ever really felt like home to me anyway. And when you don't care, you just don't care—and that's that.

I felt the need to introduce myself with a fake name, 'Mike,' to prove I wasn't Russian. I give them the limpest handshake my pride would allow and take off.

Cigarettes have become my way of telling time. I use them to remind myself when to eat—about every six or seven cigarettes; otherwise I might forget when I'm too busy with work. "I'll be done in about a cigarette," is what I'd tell somebody waiting on me. I know that a drive across town is two cigarettes long, as is my breakfast, lunch, and dinner—one before and one when I'm finished. A film that's over two hours long takes three. I smoke as if I'm that awkward guy who avoids talking to people at parties by going out for some 'fresh air', except I'm that party that never ends, and I'm as awkward as a high-five with an amputee. Every drink is a cigarette. A large beer, maybe three, depending on the size of the glass. Sometimes I'll forget if I've had a cigarette or not—so I'll smoke one just in case. How much I like a certain venue is largely determined by how easy they make it for you to have a smoke without having to leave your seat.

The sandpaper-like texture on my teeth tells me that I need to slow down with the smoking and drinking. Every once in a while

when I'm working I'll take a nap just to get a break from all the cigarettes. One hour without smoking makes it all okay, or so I tell myself. My tongue is sore from compulsively feeling up the texture of my teeth and I'm sensing that this guy in a military uniform, who's been standing uncomfortably close to me outside the bar the entire time, is just waiting for me to slip in one way or another so that he can find a reason to Muay Thai me in the head. I don't know what the hell he's doing here, but I'm being very careful about where I toss my cigarette butts—walking these ten feet to the ashtray and back might save my life.

I don't know how demanding the Thai people are about tardiness, but it takes Anita about four cigarettes to finally show up.

"You look way too good for me," I tell her as she approaches. She laughs and shies away. I wasn't kidding. I'm wearing a pair of beer, whisky, and cigarette-ash-stained jean shorts I bought at the market for about 100 Baht. They fit the waist just fine, but the ass sags so much it's as if they're made specifically so one could fit diapers underneath and not feel the chafing. They almost remind me of those stupid pants Justin Bieber wears. And I hate myself for knowing what sort of pants Justin Bieber wears. My white mesh socks are covered in dirt from the urban hike earlier and my old Nike runners are a bubblegum pink and blue—at least that's the color underneath the tears and dirt they've accumulated. I wasn't expecting to meet her tonight when I wore the same loose, blue and white checkered shirt I've been wearing for the past month—the one I haven't washed since I bought it because it's my 'writing shirt'. Drenched in fresh sweat from walking around the city for the last five hours, the little white squares have acquired a yellow tint. My hair is oily, sticky, and too far-gone to try for a convincing 'messy cool' look. To top it all off, my face is covered in patches of some

facial hair equivalent of a thirteen-year old's pubes and I'm wearing a bracelet that reads: 'I FUCK LADY BOY' in bright neon green letters over a black band. For the last little while I've been embracing the fact that I remind people of James Dean, somehow justifying my lack of general upkeep is all a part of the charm. I still don't know how I feel about being compared to Brendan Fraser, and the constant reminders by friends and strangers of my resemblance to Harry Styles is something I'm still learning to live with.

I give Anita a warm hug and stealthily check to make sure that I haven't yellowed up her tight white dress with my sweaty armpits.

"You wait long?" That accent—I'll have to learn to find it attractive if I plan on staying in this country for a while.

"Long enough for you to take a few years off of my life," I say with a straight face.

"Ha-ha you funny man. Let's go inside."

I still don't know how these people operate—but I'm willing to give them a chance. I'll try to adapt. I'm doing my best to find a balance between being the American tourist who comes to a third-world country and complains about the lack of HBO in his \$20/night hotel room, and somebody who accepts that being randomly punched in the back of the head on the daily is "Just how life goes, man."

We couldn't have picked a worse spot to sit down and have some nice conversation when we park our butts right in front of the stage. The rest of the seats are full and the few times we get a chance to squeeze a few words in is just at the start of every guitar solo, and right before it picks up. Even then I can hardly make out what she's saying due to her thick accent and poor syntax. I can tell she translates her sentences from her native tongue. We're sitting right in front of the banging drums as she sips on a Corona, watching me

through her peripherals while I plow through some Johnny Walkers. Every now and then she gets my attention and tries to say something, but after a few “Whaaaaat?” I give up, smile, nod, and take my chances by replying with either a “Yeah!” “I know!” or “Really?” She does the same and then the both of us just spin our heads back around toward the band.

An older white man with a young Thai girl around his arm sings along to the old rock covers—the ones he recognizes—which appears to be nearly all of them. Every now and again he gets way too excited from singing his heart out, runs out of breath, clinks his glass with mine, and tells me something I just can’t hear nor want to pay attention to.

None of this shit is making me feel sexy except for the occasional sax solo. Thirty minutes in and I don’t feel this going anywhere. The back and forth glances are getting awkward, and even some knee-to-knee friction would be inappropriate and forced at this point.

I’m contemplating as to whether or not I should begin saying my farewells when a wild idea starts to brew inside my head. I turn toward her and catch her singing along to one of the songs she thinks she knows the words to.

“Karaoke?!” I yell into her ear.

“I love Karaoke!”

Bingo.

We’re walking circles around Victory Monument in hopes of spotting one of these karaoke bars that Google suggested for us. Finally, we get a chance to talk. Cooking is her passion, and at first I found it strange that someone who’s a lawyer in her thirties wants to open a restaurant someday. Then I think about all the weird work I’ve done, and peculiar things that will come on my path to trying to

be the writer I dream of becoming. I tell her about my novel stamped with THE END at the bottom of the last page, and my adventure to the other side of the world so to rewrite it. What I don't tell her is how the novel was finished almost a year ago but I was never able to consistently work on it because I had to wait to be in the 'Zone'. I kept telling myself that just like Christmas, birthdays, or crippling seasonal depression, this sudden burst of inspiration would only come to me once a year, specifically in the mid-December to the end of January holiday season. I would embrace the hell out of it—really get into my groove. The chain-smoking would worsen, and I'd drink enough to persuade my blood to not think of me as a traitor to the motherland. I don't know where the sleeping and eating would come in, but it would sometimes take an outside force to get me to do it. Masturbation would take place on a very specific schedule: sometime after I just blew my literary load and right before I needed to take that long walk to clear my head. Perhaps I should've read *The Alchemist* again to remind myself just how full of shit I was about this whole thing. I guess it just never had that effect on me the first time around.

"So, what do you write about *here*?" she pulls the notebook out from the front pocket of my shirt, and waves it in front of my face.

"This. Tonight. Yesterday. Pretty much everything that happens."

"Are you gonna write about *me*?"

"Perhaps."

"This much?" her face fights a smile as she flips through the fifty-some pages of scribbles.

"That depends."

"So, I need to give you something to write about then, huh?"

And there's that smile. I can see the gates of every store that

carries stationary being flooded with a swarm of sex-deprived lunatics with hungry eyes who think that carrying a notebook around will finally get them laid. You're welcome, Staples.

The address for the karaoke bar we're trying to get to leads us to a neighborhood where the number of bars has dwindled to approximately zero; but the dark alleyways where groups of men sit around and watch us suspiciously is on the rise. We continue walking, asking random strangers for directions to make sure that we are in fact walking toward where we're supposed to be.

The address we were given eventually leads us to a hospital, and I can't imagine a hospital having a karaoke bar, but hey—it's Thailand—so we walk the perimeter to check it out. No luck.

A man driving a motorcycle with a cart of dry fish attached at the side pulls up when we flag him down and tells us of a place we can go to where we would find some decent karaoke. We take his advice, catch a cab, and after a fifteen-minute ride we arrive at a neighborhood full of even more dimly lit street corners and kidnappy eyes. There is *one* bar, no singing to be heard, and on the patio we see a group of bald men with sinister-looking eyebrows and way too many tattoos. We decide to skip that one and keep going until the streetlights start becoming scarcer, the roads more unfrequented, and the discomfort growing more prevalent. She asks the cabbie to take us back to "The Saxophone". Although that ride went nowhere—I'm glad we did it since we got a good half an hour to talk and actually get to know each other.

We find our original spot by the stage to be occupied by a group of French people, and every seat in the damn place, downstairs or upstairs, seems to be taken—except for one private little booth in a dark corner by the back of the bar. She's more comfortable around

me now. Her knees not so accidentally brush up against mine while the new band plays covers of last year's top 40's and other classic hits. We're ordering shots of vodka in between each Corona. She's singing along to songs she clearly doesn't know the lyrics to, so I lend my voice to remind her that I wasn't kidding about being tone-deaf, and absolutely serious about knowing all the words to Taylor Swift and Bruno Mars's greatest hits. I'm praying she doesn't realize that I don't actually know half the lyrics to this John Legend tune before we lock eyes and try to go all-out on the song. She smiles, throws her legs over mine, and joins in. Goddamn it, this girl can actually sing. I begin to massage her lower back while she squeezes my arm. My hand runs up her thigh and I move my face closer to hers. Her eyes hesitate. I stop myself and tell her that I'm going to kiss her tonight.

"No you're not," followed by an *'oh please'* face.

"Bullshit."

I pull my face away and wedge my hand tightly between her legs, slowly moving them further up before the rest of the John Legend song finally comes back to me. I forget about everything else and give it my all: "How many times do I have to tell you, even when you're crying you're beautiful too. The world is beeeeeaaattiiinnngg you downwwwnn—"

What a great song.

I get the brilliant idea to take off about thirty seconds into "Fergalicious" when I suddenly realize that I know that one too. *She cannot know this*—and if the song starts playing—I *will* sing it.

"So delicious... ayyy-ayyy-ay-ay..." loops through my head until we arrive at a bar where the prices of drinks are higher than those in Vancouver and the suits in here look like they are worth more than

the cars I've owned. Anita introduces me to a small group of her old friends she hasn't seen in over half a decade. I try my best to show off my cool new bracelet before somebody notices it and decides not to say anything about it—better to just get it over with now. These guys, although wealthy, well dressed, and so fancy with their napkins wrapped around their glasses, give me a very warm, genuine welcome. I didn't expect it after seeing how they carried themselves, or by their resting facial expressions. But I also haven't been stabbed or robbed while in Bangkok, so I'm still learning to make my own mind up about this place and try not to judge so quickly based on assumptions I've learned to make back home.

We stay for a few more drinks before the five of us cram into a cab and take off to the next venue. No one is really giving me any straight answers as to where we're going or what I've been drinking, but I also haven't paid for anything since I met these people so I'm not about to start complaining. I decide to just roll with it and see where the night takes me.

Perhaps the most charming man I've ever met is this Italian Rafael. Mid-thirties, with a perfect five o'clock, and hair glued to one side—just low enough to make it seem effortless, begins to tell me stories of when he spent a few years living in Kiev back in the early 2000's. Specifically, stories of the sorts of girls he met at the one club he used to attend three to four nights almost every week. There was Natasha, whose mother was convinced that he was a Muslim, and her mind wasn't changing. Valeria was the redhead who would ask him for pregnancy test money after every time they had sex. Not the first time I've heard that story about the Motherland. And finally—the girl he gave his heart to—Katya. He loved that her hair was braided, that she never asked for anything, and that no cavity in her body was off-limits to him when things got intimate.

The cab pulls up in front of a hotel built with seemingly way too many purposeless pillars and shiny bits that bother me more than they rightfully should. It's barely past midnight and I'm drunker than I want to be this early on in the evening. I still have no clue as to who these people are or what the plan is. Why the hell am I in front of this flamboyant-looking hotel? Is there going to be some sort of high-class orgy? I don't like this gender ratio. Who the hell *is* Anita? At this point I'm just waiting for this group of people to pull out a bunch of white masks and take me to some "Eyes Wide Shut"-like scenario where I'll have to get naked in front of a half-circle of old judgmental eyes in black cloaks, light a candle or two, and make a sacrifice to a large black phallic statue.

Rafael hands the hotel desk manager some cash and we're led downstairs into the underground lobby where a big black man stops me in my tracks, yanks on my shorts, and disapprovingly shakes his head from side to side. The first black man I've seen in Thailand so far—I didn't know such a thing even existed. I don't know what these guys said or paid to get me in, but after ten minutes of aimlessly walking circles around the lobby while they talked, a bellboy runs down with a pair of black dress pants, puts them into my hands, and politely instructs me to go change behind a corner. Finally, some pants—anything to get me out of these stupid shorts.

After a quick clothing swap, my bubblegum Nikes back on, dress pants a size too big, and the \$12 sweat-stained H&M shirt, I'm led into a club where I imagine the entry requirements are: Russian model or 'buy a drink every ten minutes or we kick you out'.

I don't know what the hell kind of this music this is, but Ibiza, although having never visited, is the only thing that comes to mind while percussive techno shits onto my eardrums. The color changing lasers, random projections of raindrops and Planet Earth

blind me in whichever direction I face. Anita holds my hand as she walks me through a crowd of men who are avoiding the dance floor, before sitting us down at the bar where we take some shots the bartender hands us without saying a word. I've stopped asking questions at this point. The endless sea of models sit quietly in groups at the tables in the VIP section, every now and they make their way down to the bar for a quick offer to a free drink before retreating back. A handful of girls are dancing the same re-run of a gentle hip sway and back-and-forth of their arms, in a circle, occasionally glancing back at the guys sitting at the tables who I assume are exchanging reasons with each other as to why they won't be approaching them. Some things stay the same no matter where you go to on this planet.

Maybe they had to tear a wall down or something, but I can't help but to wonder about how the hell they got this 60" TV into this club when Anita pushes her butt up against me, right into the massive screen. I make myself comfortable up against the toothpaste commercial while she grinds against my crotch with her backside to this abomination they call music. I take a moment to admire the leopard-print panties when her dress rides up too high before helping her pull her skirt down. Anita doesn't notice when Rafael, who has had a few too many by now, walks up to me, lights up cigarettes for the both of us, and begins to blabber on about Katya.

"You know... her eyes my friend. So naaaaiiceeee—" he puts his arm around me. I'm curious to see where this will go. "Ah, you know what it's like. This Kiev my friend—you so lucky to have live there. I would live there, but these winter there—so cold man. I cannot do it. How you do it?"

"Layers?"

“Oh I know. I know the layers. But they not help me my friend. But I see these girls in skirts in Kiev winter, I don’t know how they do it, but I want to make them all warm with my—ahhhhh—you know what I mean!” he pats me on the back, “oh Katya—she was true angel. This girl could sing. I don’t know what she sing about—but so beautiiiiiiiful. These girls my friend... the guys, not so much—they all stay home and get drunk. But not you my friend! You good guy! You go out with such a beautiful girl and show her good time. You the gentleman! I loved Katya—you know.”

“Yes.”

Anita remains clueless about the heart-to-heart happening behind her. And I’m not so much interested in what Rafael has to say as I am about seeing how long we could keep this going on for before she begins to notice.

“Ahh yes buddy, you from Kiev—you know. You’re good man buddy! You listen. You know some people—they never listen. I know you know how I feel buddy! Love! It’s crazy! You the handsome man! You’re so handsome—you know that?!” he rubs his scruff against the side of my face, plants a wet kiss on my cheek, and runs off.

I’m left with a cigarette in my hand while Anita pushes me harder into the screen when one of the bouncers approaches and politely asks us to move somewhere else. She turns around, grabs me by the belt, and drags me to the center of the nearly empty dance floor where she faces me and resumes her mating ritual. She tells me how much she hates it when men smoke as I puff a gentle cloud into her face, pull her in closer, and lock eyes with her. Her upper lip gently grazes my lower before pulling away. She moves in again, kissing my chin, rubbing her nose up my neck, toward my ear, taking in the scent of my day’s work while she tussles my hair. I grab the back of

her neck and press my forehead against hers. Our lips pivot toward one another by the tip of our noses, they lock as I pull her in tighter. Her knee gently pushes up into my crotch.

We continue making out with the occasional dance number in between before going to the bar to grab more liquor. Here I run into Rafael again, standing with a fresh drink and a lit cigarette in hand all ready for me.

“Ukrainians buddy—you good man. I never talk to anyone about these things. You know you get old, you move around, not many close friends to talk to my friend.” Everybody breaks. It’s a good reminder to stay grounded.

“Friend...” The idea that pain might eventually go away may be one of the most difficult things for anyone to accept, which is frustrating for the listener who obviously has the answer to solve everyone’s problems but their own. It’s been scientifically proven that ‘having loved and lost’ is not the better way to go about these things after all. It’s also been scientifically proven that smoking can prevent Alzheimer’s. How easy life is these days when you can just pick the studies to cater to your specific lifestyle. Checking sources is for pessimistic assholes. So is reading anything past the catchy headlines. I take the drink and cigarette. “How well did you know Katya?” as I recall the impression I got from the girls at those sort of clubs the last time I visited the Motherland.

“She was beautiful, man.”

“I got that. But what do you *know* about her?”

“Hah, budddyyy,” giving me the ‘come on man’ hands.

“Listen. I’m sure that at least some of these girls aren’t *just* beautiful. Go and find out who the hell they really are.”

It’s funny how you determine that the best time to give solid, heartfelt advice is when you want the other person to just simply

shut the fuck up. He leaves another wet mess on my cheek and takes off with a massive grin sweeping over his face.

Anita and I share a last drink and take off in order to keep up the momentum. Up in the lobby she watches me change out of the dress pants and back into my grimy shorts, biting her lip, and giving me that telltale look that's a sign of good things to come. We hop into a cab, and I try convincing her that it's best we go to my hotel room. She tells me that she can't because there's a golf game waiting for her in the early morning.

"I don't have any condoms on me," I interrupt our make-out session in the backseat.

"We don't *have* to have sex tonight," as she undoes my belt. "We can just cuddle."

I love to cuddle, but I also get the feeling that she might be translating this wrong.

The tension reaches its peak when her dog catches us sneaking through her parents' house on our way up to her room. The little shit starts yapping and running circles around me until I grab the son of a bitch and take him with us. By the time I shut the door to her room and turn around, Anita's dress is already laying on the floor beside the bed. She's sprawled out across the sheets in her pink flower-print bra and leopard print panties, giving me that look that she's been giving me since we left the club. I put the dog down. He yaps some more while I climb on top of her. I pull down on her bra, exposing her dark nipples and breasts. They're just big enough for my obnoxiously giant hands to cover, but can't completely wrap around. My other hand moves down from her neck, through the center of her chest, stomach, and pelvis before I finally tease her

panties off. I lick the sweat off of her collarbone as I move up to her neck, ending on the chin, pausing a few moments to reciprocate that look before I drive my tongue deep into her mouth and slip my finger further inside. Her hands move where I want them to. I bask in it while I kiss her before I shift myself south where my mouth relieves my fingers of their duty. She flips me over, sits on top of me, and begins to grind her hips back and forth.

I start to damn all that liquor in me as I begin to soften up before I even get inside. Her mouth and tongue feel fantastic—but they aren't helping the cause. I shamelessly admit defeat and start passing out; she tells me she's tired as well and gives me that gentle, reassuring graze of the palm across my cheek as she falls asleep....

Being the early riser that I am, especially after a night of heavy drinking, I wake up at around seven in the morning to find her mouth glued to the inside my forearm. The alcohol is gurgling in my belly, my head is pulsating, and my hard-on is stabbing her in the spine. I gradually come to and realize that my other hand had strategically fallen asleep while hanging over her breast. I give it no second thought and start to play around with it while listening to her slowed breath—she's still asleep.

Being a man who rarely lets his morning glory go to waste when in the company of a woman, I try to wake her up by gently stretching out the arm her face is pressed up against, exaggerating my yawn's volume, and wrap one of my legs around her waist for a better angle.

Her eyes still shut, she reaches a hand out toward me and starts scratching my inner thigh, her back gyrates to mimic the motions of my hips, our bodies begin to move in sync. She flips around, her face moves in closer, and our noses touch. I grab her hand and

move it to where it's needed most—she doesn't hesitate to start stroking. I return the favor. She matches her breathing with mine as we steadily shift closer together. She rolls me onto my back and climbs on top, tenderly digging her nails into my stomach, slowly fitting me in while the fluids spread to all the right places.

The ups and downs are inconstant and sensual; my hands are spread wide open and wrapped around her ass, while hers push down, grabbing at the sides of my stomach. It's getting to that point where I have to figure out where the hell I'm going to come when Anita's mother walks in to wake her up for the golf game.

The maid tries her best to make it look as if she isn't watching when Anita and I have a long goodbye make-out session up against the Mercedes on her parents' driveway. I exit through their gated home only to find myself in the middle of nowhere with a dead phone and only three cigarettes remaining in the pack I thought I just bought last night. Unsure if it's because of how I'm dressed or simply because I'm white, but I'm getting strange, judgmental looks from the neighbors in this community as they leave their homes to go to work. Where the hell am I? There are no mountains, tall buildings, or reference points of any sort to help me out and this goddamn neighborhood of fancy houses seems to be shut-out from the rest of the world by a twelve-foot tall concrete wall.

Two cigarettes in and still walking through this labyrinth, I finally see a car leave one of the driveways. I jog after it inconspicuously until I reach the main gate where an armed guard operates the massive metal arm to allow entry. For the first time on this trip I start to feel like a complete outsider. As I make my way through the last hundred feet toward the exit the guard stares me down mercilessly with every step I take. He makes sure I can see the look

on his face while I stand in front of the arm, waiting for him to open it. I acknowledge what's going on, and he lets me proceed.

I'm now in what appears to be a village, or at least, the outskirts of the city. The buildings are all ground level, food carts are deserted, and the only people I spot in the vicinity are gathered around the 7-Eleven. I stand on the side of the road in hopes of spotting a taxi and pray the driver doesn't try to rip me off, considering I don't know where I am. I do know one thing though—where I'm going. Once they hear the words 'Khao San' they're always going to try and rip you off. With no luck in spotting a taxi, I head to the 7-Eleven to buy a bottle of water and a fresh pack of cigarettes. On this pack, I get the picture of the dead man's feet in the morgue on one side and an oozing black lung on the other. These graphic images take up about 90% of the entire surface of the package, and get so gruesome that it made me consider trying to quit on my first day in Bangkok. I consider that a big leap forward. Maybe if I were to get a pack with the photo of the limp cigarette I would've taken another shot at quitting this morning.

This heat isn't doing my head any favors and this thick shirt is getting heavier with every step I take. While walking further down what seems to be the main street in this region, I spot a group of motorcycle taxis hanging around. The drivers tell me that they can get me to the closest train station for sixty Baht. I have no idea how far that is, but naturally, because I'm a tourist, I assume that they are trying to rip me off. I bring it down to fifty. The driver chuckles when I ask if he's got an extra helmet for me. I remind myself that I'm still learning, and hop on without one.

There's something oddly refreshing about the hot morning air blended with the exhaust of the two-strokers and diesels flying at my face. It fills my lungs while this motorcycle taxi zips past, and in-

between all the other cars on the road. Perhaps it's the hangover that's got me in such a self-destructive mood, but I absolutely love the dusty air as it seeps through the cracks of the oily mess on the top of my head. Every piece of dirt that flies into my mouth makes me grin like an idiot child who thinks he just got away with eating a handful of sand. I let go of the back rail so I can spread my arms out far enough to let my fingertips gently graze the edges of the mirrors on the cars we pass. I want to feel as if I'm about to die when suddenly, our scooter merges into the opposing lane to get past some cars and in the way of other motorists. The driver's body language, cool as a cucumber, along with the lack of honking from oncoming traffic, immediately breaks the illusion and assures me that everything's going to be alright. I'm reminded of what an absolute tourist I am when I see another local on the back of a moped on her way to work, not minding the roads, nor her driver's crazy driving habits, as she casually sits sideways on the seat reading something off of her phone. I suddenly don't feel nearly as cool for not hanging on.

The ride felt like it was at least fifteen minutes long so I don't feel like I got ripped off when I hand the driver the fifty Baht before making my way to the station.

Hugh Jackman, with the all-new 2016 Toyota Corolla in the background, watches me from the 15" TV screen in the train car—without saying a single word. I don't know how many takes they did on that last shot, but I don't think they got it right. His facial expression looks as uncomfortable and out of place as I do right now. It begins to look even worse when I raise my arm up to grab the rail above my head and I get a good whiff of that accumulated sweat under my shirt. The disgruntled look on my face from this mornings blue balls complements it nicely. This lovely combination

is for the best, I tell myself, since I don't see anyone on the train car attempting to come close enough to potentially snatch the wallet from my back pocket. This is something I watch out for since I've heard some stories from people who've heard some stories about the pickpockets here.

I finally arrive at Siam, which at this point, I'm still assuming is the city center thanks to their mall—the 47th largest in the world—and it loves to boast about that on every pillar, stairwell, and in every bathroom. A very helpful Tourist Police Officer catches me wandering aimlessly as I try to figure out where the hell the bus station is. Luckily, he speaks English well enough to get his point across when he tells me I'm not allowed to be smoking on these streets. It's a 2000 Baht fine if you get caught, and it's his job to make sure the tourists know, and possibly collect said money. I look around for a safe and legal place to dispose of it, but he stops me and insists I keep smoking. He doesn't want to be too much of a bother, it seems. I don't know what to do at this point so I just decide to let the cigarette burn out in my hand.

“Don't throw on street!” He wags his finger at me.

I assure him I'll throw the butt into my water bottle when I'm done, and he pats me on the back and starts interrogating me over my business in Thailand, inquires how long I'm planning to stay, and what I do for work. He asks to see my Passport and gets suspicious when I say that I don't have it on me. I tell him I'm staying in Khao San.

“Ah my friend, Khao San!” He sports an unnerving forced smile before giving me very clear directions on how to get there, making sure I understand. “Yes. Go! Go!” He nudges as I walk away. That artificial gaping hole one might call a “grin” on his face throws me

off, and I can't tell whether he genuinely wants to help me or if he just wants me gone from the area where the pretty people like to walk around. After all, it is the 47th largest mall in the world and I hardly look like I could even afford a coffee from Macdonald's at this point. I'd love to see how this man treats smelly hippies.

The #15 bus is the only one I know and trust. So far my exploration around Bangkok has been completely limited to where this bus can go and how far I want to take its route. The only problem is that nobody seems to know when, or how often it comes. After what had felt like an eternity the bus finally arrives, emptying its packed load of businessmen, old people who definitely have no business here, and overzealous early-rising tourists out onto the busy street.

The way these bus doors swing open a hundred feet before it comes to a full stop excites me in so many ways. I imagine the same thing happening back in Vancouver and the fright it would instill in all the passengers and bystanders. If maybe just a little bit of this Bangkok madness could be implemented into everyday Vancouver life every once in a while, I wouldn't find it to be so stale. But then I would have to watch as groups of self-important, gluten-free vegetarians try to take it all away by starting online campaigns and Facebook pages while they gather up in front of the art gallery to protest all this madness back out of existence. Once that herd mentality kicks in, there would be no stopping them. It would snowball to the point where they'd try and rescue every stray animal, ensure all the food carts are up to health code standard with proper licenses, make documentaries about homeless people (but just for the ones that look dramatic enough on camera), and create Kickstarter campaigns for them. Equality for all—because it's unfair to get your own shit together until every less-privileged human, dog,

and tree gets a crack at it first. They would probably even stir shit up about how unsafe it is to have such large open windows on buses—like the one I’m sitting by now, where I can just let my arm hang off the side and rest my face up against the warm, stained, bare aluminum interior. Please don’t take this shitty bus away from me you assholes—it’s the first time in my life I’m actually enjoying a bus ride.

It’s going to be a forty-minute commute in this morning traffic, so I prepare my nostrils for the inevitable mix of rush hour fumes and let my body slide back into the seat to get comfortable. The sharp feeling of aluminum rivets digging into the side of my head feels refreshing and helps to keep my mind off of the incessant ringing in my ears. It helps me forget the heavy pulsing pushing onto the back of my eyeballs. I watch the city of millions, with whom I have no intentions of relating to go by, as they’re about to start their day. This beautiful chaos of thousands of farting mopeds fly, whiz, and squeeze through tight spaces between beat-up cars driving at whatever speed traffic permits them to. Their bumpers are so close together, it would cause white folks back home to lash over the invasion of their personal space. These hundreds and hundreds of nameless shops and garages, each catering to a specific need are packed so tightly beside one another; I can hardly comprehend how the hell they manage to stay in business as they’re almost always empty. To me it’s all just a blur of washed out colors and peculiar shapes. These food carts manage to park themselves in the smallest areas, be it in alleyways, on the sidewalk, or even right on road. They cross eight lane intersections without so much as an ounce of worry in their eyes to sit out in the sun for sixteen hours a day, shoulder-to-shoulder with their competition, with no conflict whatsoever. No arguing, yelling, or honking coming from any

direction. No engines revving to their redlines because although the driving is aggressive, I don't see any indication of anger. There seems to be a system they all abide by. When everyone is crazy, no one is crazy. I'm beginning to think that 'chaos' might be the wrong term to describe Bangkok.

I don't think it's shock, and I sure as hell don't know enough about this place to start feeling any sort of genuine sympathy for these people and their troubles while I'm still trying to objectively figure out of what to make of it. In fact, just a few days ago I watched an older man crawl out of a cab carrying a young legless boy over his shoulder. The boy's body was limp as a noodle; his leathery skin nearly black from the countless hours he spends out in the sun everyday. His puffy burnt lips hung loose, looking almost detached from his mouth, and the look in his eyes was something far beyond the so-called 'thousand-yard stare'. The man set this boy down in the center of the sidewalk on Khao San Road, right where the tourists would give their best sympathetic puppy-eyed stare as they walked past, perhaps tossing a coin or two in the tin pan the man set up in front of the boy before he finally took off in another cab moments later. Now there's a solid fucking business plan they don't teach you in school.

One gruesome, possibly even heart-breaking, example isn't nearly enough to start drawing any sort of conclusions about this country, but this is the sort of trip where people expect you to come back and give them a bunch of bullet points of all the crazy shit you've seen. It's also supposed to open your eyes, make you a more conscious of the world around you and help you see things from a different perspective. I'm trying to keep my mind open, but I have no plans of coming home as the guy that's going to say: "You don't know how horrible they have it in some other places of world,"

when someone complains about their unsatisfactory meals. I'm not here to spread awareness or to save the children. I'm not here to be morally right in anyone's eyes or apologize for being a hypocrite. And I'm sure as hell not here to be politically correct. Now that I'm here I'm finally beginning to understand why it is that so many writers, or privileged white kids who want to follow in their favorite authors' footsteps, would want to go abroad to get their juiciest writing done: you can feel completely misunderstood here, and that makes life oddly interesting if you can learn to embrace it. You can live in your own private little bubble, completely unaffected by whatever pain or misery may surround you, and simply allow the madness of this foreign environment to become a romantic backdrop to help you get into that inspired mindset so many seek. I am here to be an objective-as-I-can be observer. I am here to soak it all in, and I pray, for my own sanity, that too much dirt doesn't get left behind in my mind when it all gets wrung out back onto this page. I am not here to clean up or filter the mess, but rather simply displace it. I am here for the quick in-and-out. I am here to go with the flow. I am just here to be The Sponge.

"Catch those bad guys!"

Dear Constable [Detective],

It was great talking with you this morning. I hope my statement was sufficiently thorough and that it helped with your ongoing investigation. I've attached a copy of my journal entries from last night and this morning. Looking back on our meeting earlier, it looks as though I've missed a few details in my verbal statement, so I hope this will help you fill in some of the gaps. I apologize in advance for the foul language and any other strange things I may have written—it's not something I expected anyone else to read. It's quite embarrassing—but I hope it will help.

In regards to the other incident we spoke about: the time I saw the two suspicious men pull up to the gate in the newer model Audi convertible (hey, it may have been a coupe):

I found some receipts from Lordco from that day when I purchased various undercoating materials for my truck, and so I was able to get an exact date on when this occurred: July 5th, 2014. My first purchase was at 09:07 and I made another one at 14:36, according to my second receipt. If I remember correctly, this would have happened later in the day because after I saw those men I wasn't too crazy about the idea of leaving the shop anytime soon. So to conclude, I would say this happened between 14:40 and 21:00 on July 5th of 2014. Hopefully the cameras at the roads' intersections around here actually work!

[Ex-boss] was away for the weekend so I took the opportunity to make good use of the shop and work on my car outside in the yard. I was on the far end (away from the gate) of the yard when I saw the Audi with two men inside pull up. Their windows were rolled up, their heads turned toward me; mine toward them. I couldn't make out any clear facial features, but it was a sunny day and bright enough for me to see that they were of a darker complexion. For a few moments (perhaps minutes, it was hard to tell while it was happening), the men watched me carefully until they finally drove away.

I've looked through my past journal entries and it appears that I don't have anything written down about this incident. These are all the details I can give you at this time.

I understand that you also wanted to get my take on what happened last Summer when [bad guy] came by with two of his people. Here is what I remember from that day:

I've only been working for [ex-boss] for a few months when this happened and I was just starting to learn of the situation with [bad guy] from bits and pieces I've picked up along the way. Some of which [ex-boss] told me directly; some I learned through eavesdropping. One thing [ex-boss] was really adamant about at the time was for me to check whomever comes to the door before opening it—something I neglected to do when [bad guy] came knocking that day. I opened the door to see [bad guy] (I hadn't seen him in real life before, but from what I heard from [ex-boss], he fit the description). With him were two more men of East-Indian descent—one was about 5'9" with a heavy build, tattoos covering every inch of his arms, and he was sporting a Gucci (man-purse?) over his right breast. I can't recall any specific details as to what the second man looked like, except that he was much less intimidating. My focus remained on the suspicious-looking man-purse for the majority of the first few moments upon seeing them. The incident went down something like this:

"You're [bad guy]?" I asked.

"Is [ex-boss] here?" [bad guy] asked, as he inched his way closer into the doorway.

"I'll get him, hold on."

I began to close the door on him so to run up and get [ex-boss], but [bad guy] grabbed the door handle and forced his way inside. I decided not to confront him about this as I was still quite new to the job and completely unsure of how [ex-boss] would want me to deal with such a situation. One thing I was certain about was that [ex-boss] wouldn't want me to do anything that would get me hurt. I continued up through the shop to get [ex-boss] and explained to him that that [bad guy] was inside. [Ex-boss] came out to greet the

men with a stern and unwelcome: "What are you doing here?"

"I came to talk, [ex-boss]."

"Ok, let's talk. Who the hell are these two?"

"They are my partners."

"Yeah, right," [ex-boss] made his way down the steps to face them, "so, what do you want to talk about then?"

A short time later, [ex-boss] and [bad guy] were arguing about the deal the two made. I was completely lost on most of the details about the entire thing, except for the fact that [bad guy] was trying to launder money through [ex-boss's] company. At one point, [bad guy] started flaunting around a leather bag which he claimed to be filled with \$750,000. [Ex-boss] refused to accept it while calling [bad guy] out on his idiotic behavior. [Ex-boss] then managed to talk the men into taking the confrontation outside the front door, where the security camera they were clearly unaware of could get an image of them.

I took the opportunity to sneak out the back and around the gate in order to get a better look at what was happening. It was essentially the same argument over and over again—tensions were continually rising and falling. The Australian engineer working next door came around at one point and took a stand beside [ex-boss] while clutching a massive pipe wrench in his hands.

I saw a newer generation Audi A6 parked outside the shop, a car I've never seen around this area before, and I believed it belonged to one of the men that came in with [bad guy]. I recall taking a picture of the license plate, but I haven't found it yet (all my things, including hard drives where I store my photos are packed up, I will try to find it and get it to you as soon as possible). I think the license plate read "BZ00KA", or something obnoxious like that.

I went back inside and stood by the door in case anything were to

happen. There were certain moments where these events seemed like they could've escalated into something much more serious, but luckily, they didn't (at least not until recently—right?) Around 17:00 I had to take off as I had a personal matter to attend to. I went out the front door, and as I was walking in between [bad guy] and the larger man with the suspicious-looking purse, I noticed that his body language was less aggressive than when he first strutted in. There was much less hostility this time around and maybe even a slight hint of embarrassment in the henchmen's eyes whenever [bad guy] opened his mouth.

I believe this is as much detail as I can possibly recall at this time. Please let me know if you have any further questions.

Catch those bad guys!

-Dmytro Kolesnyk

Attached Journal Entries:

Wednesday, December 3rd, 2014, 22:14

That fucking Big Mac—you had to go and get that Big Mac the other night. This shit is real. This is all really happening right now. Fuck me. Well, I guess the jokes and speculations were fun while it lasted.

So, I went out the back door for another cigarette. Walking around the backyard in slow circles as I usually do, when I spot a man standing in front of the gate, smoking a cigarette. It's hard to make out the details at night, especially given the fact that he's wearing black boots, black pants, a black jacket on which the collar covers his neck, and a black hat—standing there completely motionless.

I threw up a friendly wave but soon realized that this man was facing away from me. Soon enough, I began to figure out who the hell this could be when his head turned 90 degrees to the left to get a closer look at my truck, which was parked outside the shop.

Slim face, light brown complexion, and stood at around 5'11". I realized who it was when my eyes adjusted to the dark and I was able to make out the details a little better—it was [bad guy].

Carefully, so that he wouldn't hear the crunching of the snow beneath my boots, I started backing away to hide behind a wall, exposing myself just enough so that I could peek at him from around the corner. I don't think he saw or heard me as he continued on with his shady behavior. He started moving closer toward the road so that he could catch a better glimpse of the inside of the shop—by then he already knew about the security camera out front and it looked like he was doing his best to avoid getting in its line of sight.

I'm sure he was trying to figure out why [ex-boss]'s truck wasn't parked outside as usual (it was mine instead), and why the lights inside were still at that time of the night. I'm sure he was disappointed that [ex-boss] probably wasn't there, whether he came by to finish the job or not.

He walked back toward the gate and took a stand right at the spot in the driveway that was splattered with [ex-boss]'s blood just a few months earlier. He kneeled, tipped his head down, and began to slowly, almost religiously, hover his hand over the rain-washed bloodstains. His hand hovered around for what seemed like a solid minute or two before he reached into his jacket pocket, pulled something out, and placed it over the same area. He then stood up, made his way out onto the road, and started walking toward the shop, using my truck to hide from the camera's sights. Soon enough, he disappeared out of my sight too.

The Sponge

I ran back to the shop through the back door in hopes of getting a better look out the front window. Shit, I left the lights on inside the shop—he would’ve totally seen me had I approached any closer. The bullet that went through the window tore up the blinds enough so that anyone could see right into the place through the large hole.

I gave it a few moments before saying ‘fuck it’, and moved in closer anyway.

I pictured the muzzle of a pistol pointing straight into my face the second I slotted my fingers into the blinds to spread them open and try to get a better look.

But at that point he was gone. Fuck. Or maybe he wasn’t...

Another glass of wine—I think now is a good time to start reflecting back on the events that took place in the last few months of me working for [ex-boss].

On the other hand—tonight feels like the perfect fucking night to finally book that flight.

Thursday, December 4th, 2014, 07:50

Oh Jesus fucking Christ. Is this guy for real? I was extremely sure it was [bad guy] after all. Somehow, that helped me fall asleep and not think too hard about it.

When I woke up this morning, I inspected the area around where [bad guy] was hanging out last night. It didn’t take me too long to figure out what he took out of his pocket and placed on the ground—it was a cam follower—from one of his knockoff machines, a poorly made copy of one of the parts we use on ours.

Does this clown think he's the fucking Riddler or something... leaving clues around like this? He really is a psychopath.

Hmm, some of those cigarette butts in the driveway didn't belong to me. Mention it to the detectives when they swing by later.

If you eat it—you're gonna shit it

I can't fall asleep. Whatever this numbness in my throat may be—it's growing to be more persistent. I can't predict when it will hit and I've never been able to pinpoint its cause. But, cancer, of course, is the first thought that comes to mind when the condition starts to become more bothersome. Every now and again, when my mind begins to wander, I do a few quick online searches for signs and symptoms. Do you sometimes feel tired? Yeah, sometimes. Dryness in the throat? Yes? Perhaps. What really constitutes as a *dry* throat? Smoking over a pack a day is helping me justify the seemingly inevitable. Persistent cough, blood in your sputum, a lump? No, but you don't really need to have *all* of the symptoms, right? How about any red or white patches on the inside of your mouth? Your throat? I use the flashlight on my phone to light up the back of my mouth and start to dig around the area with my dirty fingers, pushing my tonsils and other meaty bits off to the side, setting off my gag reflex

every now and then. I don't see any, no. But surely they could be in there somewhere...

Search enough symptoms on the internet and you soon find that everybody, yourself included, is a potential bipolar sociopath with ADD slowly dying of AIDS and cancer. Everyone's searching for their personal tragedy. Sometimes it's best to leave yourself alone.

Anxiety, some search results tell me, could be another explanation for the numbness. When it becomes really uncomfortable, I try going for a walk, grab some food and drink. Meditate. I soon start to forget about the feeling, but when I look back and think about it—I can't remember if it really left me solely because I just stopped thinking about it for a short period of time. I always thought of myself as an extremely calm, collected person—the type of guy who would never get anxiety, and never stress over anything. No, I just roll with it. Make the best of everything. Nothing bothers me. I can count on one hand the amount of people who have ever witnessed me lose my temper or raise my voice. Lately though, I've been second-guessing all of these assumptions I've made about myself. Perhaps I've just become incredibly proficient at hiding it from everyone around me, and most of all, from myself.

I recall the first time I began to feel this numbness, and I'm hoping this isn't confirmation bias kicking in. I think it may have originated shortly after I made the decision to quit my job, move out, pack all my things, and fly to the other side of the world for an undetermined length of time. I told myself that if I wanted to become a writer it would be now or never—without telling anybody that because realistically no amount of downplaying it would make it seem any less dramatic. Feeling any sort of pressure or uncertainty about the whole thing would make total sense, yet I'm

not allowing myself to be content with it. Perhaps it's this need, this duty it seems, as an Eastern-European to always appear indestructible no matter what's going on in my life. Coming across as some stereotype is unavoidable no matter how hard you try to be something you're not. To imagine you live behind a reflective, unbreakable wall in a world without ladders or any sort of aid to help you climb over it, is an easy way out. The most you can hope to achieve is to develop enough strength in your legs so to jump high enough and clear that wall, and give the person on the other side a glimpse of what you actually look like. And you don't ever want that wall to collapse. The indisputable fact that your feet will eventually make contact with the dirt again is what drives that jump in the first place. As much as you want people to see you jump, you also don't want to get a glimpse of them trying to make sense of it. But then what's the point of this perpetual game of peek-a-boo when the amount of work it takes to dig yourself out of that trench you've made after every hard landing is ten-fold what it takes to simply jump up into the air? What happens when you're finally able to jump higher, and remain suspended in the air long enough so to hear the person on the other side shout out: This wall has been nothing but a one-way mirror all along, you idiot!

Let's say it is anxiety after all. Think about it, what else could contribute to it? Drinking about a third of a liter of Johnny Walker, along with a few liters of cheap local beer every single day. One, two if I'm lucky, small-portioned meals accompanied by a piece of fruit. A pack or two of Marlboro Reds, and water. I'm always forgetting to have some goddamn water. Writing for close to ten hours a day with a consistent buzz that begins with a whisky and cigarette in the morning, and ends much the same way. A series of

severely vivid dreams every night while my body rests on a mattress a homeless person would spit on back home. The bedbugs bite and the partying on Khao San Road is never-ending. The fan is loud as hell and leaks small drops of water onto the vinyl floor, one drop a minute. The fridge vibrates and the cockroaches living underneath it come out at night to shuffle through my garbage bin. The Tuk-Tuk drivers ramble. The two-strokers fart. The guys. The gals. All the foreign languages coming at me from every direction. Just shut the fuck up! The lack of planning. The fruitless existential digressions. The internal conflicts. What internal conflicts? Just dig deeper—something will surely come up! This notebook and this pen. The need to write every fucking thing down. This hair and these itchy bug bites. The questioning as to whether or not alcohol addiction is a real thing after all. This bracelet. How the funny slowly morphs into the bitter. The hunger and the thirst. The puzzling texture of my laptop against the palm of my hand. The clicking of this massive mechanical keyboard. My phone—will it make a sound? God I hope it makes a sound right now! What will my shit look like tomorrow? This racing heartbeat. Will I ever fall asleep? Do I just pop a few T3s? Can I mix them with all this alcohol? My trembling hands and that itchy spot underneath my nose. This displeased reflection. The disapproving shape of my eyebrows. That hard lump in my earlobe that I won't stop digging my nail into. The head of my dick and the hairs on my balls. I'm flipping through these pages to see how much I wrote. Is it enough? Will anyone like it? Will I even let anybody read it? What will my family think? Do I leave things out? How would that make *me* feel? How *do* I feel? Do *I* feel anxiety?

What am I getting myself into.

The Frog Man

I can't remember how exactly or at what time, but I was eventually able to pass out after last night's self-inflicted ordeal. I woke up to find my clothes were still on, and my head lying sideways in a very uncomfortable position on the harder of the two pillows. In my dream, I remember struggling to fall asleep. My eyes were spread open to the blue sky, my bed stationed in a thick forest beside an active train track. A steam engine, with a seemingly infinite amount of cars linked up to the back flew past me at full speed while I just lay there motionless. The engine car was nowhere in sight, yet I could still hear its horn blaring for seemingly no reason other than to irritate me. Eventually, the violent clapping of the pistons mellowed out and transformed into a series of gentle, lullaby-like wisps; the percussive thumps of the rusty wheels as they jumped over the links on the track became the accompanying metronome. The birds began to sing and I woke up to find that another

monsoon hit last night. I climbed onto my balcony through the window for a morning cigarette only to find that my AC unit was sitting in four inches of water due to the drain being plugged up with a thick clump of cigarette butts.

A walk around Khao San Road this morning feels quieter than usual. Only a handful of food carts are set up, and most of the clothing stands are either hiding underneath some dirty tarps or tucked away. Most of the tourists are out of sight and the Tuk-Tuk drivers, with nobody to bother, are fast asleep in their carriages. The air is more humid than usual, causing the cheap lacquer on this table to stick to the hairs on my forearm while I try to write in my notebook. I'm sitting on a five thousand square foot patio outside of Starbucks with a massive backdrop of Burger King's all-new Spicy Chicken Burger behind me. A lone waitress, who won't have any customers for at least five hours, sweeps the excess patio water onto the street while a cheap set of speakers blast poorly recorded song covers of various hits from the last few decades. There's something so lifeless about how they cover these songs. They're saying all the right words, and hitting the right notes—but it's obvious they have no idea what the hell they're singing about. Perhaps that's the reason I often come here to listen to them: there is so much disconnect in this sort of half-assed mimicry—it helps to maintain the illusion that my bubble is impenetrable.

So far, the only other tourist I spot this morning is an older man in maroon parachute pants, crocs, and an unkempt ponytail, sitting one table over from mine. Every now and again he throws me a look. His face reeks of desperation for human contact; mine hides it behind a finely honed look of indifference. I've laid down so much judgment toward this man at this point that I would be unable to

carry on any sort of pleasant discourse with him. He looks like the sort of person that likes to casually slip an intimate detail of his life, or an insecurity or two into a conversation to see how the other person would react, ultimately making the entire exchange uncomfortable. I find that the most insecure people are the ones who try so hard to make sure everybody knows about their problems without needing people to relate, empathize, or understand. They need to see how little others care to give them a quick reminder that no one really gives as much a fuck as they want them to. Narcissism is all around us, and the struggle to upkeep your individuality, whether it's through clutching onto your pains, ambitions, or that random strand of hair you like to let loose to the wind is nothing but a façade leading toward a secret path to that sweet relief of learning that you're not so special after all. What a relief it would be to stand yourself up on a self-made pedestal, in front of the entire world, with the intent of hearing a single collective sound emanate from their mouths: 'Meh'.

At this point, even a gentle nod of acknowledgement would provoke an unwanted 'howdy' from the other creature sitting at this patio. I think I'll have to pass—I'm feeling way too vulnerable for this sort of shit right now.

I've gone and done it again—I've burned myself out. That sharp, lingering pain is developing in the left side of my head, squeezing at my temple from the inside. My eyes are bloodshot, glossy, and sport that exhausted look—as if I'd just gotten out of an unproductive waterboarding session at Guantanamo. Whether I'm indoors or out, these sunglasses aren't coming off for a while. My chin lacks the will to stay up, my nose flares, and my mouth is fixated in that sort of frown someone makes when they smell really putrid gas. The

inevitable depression is going to hit me any moment now and I can feel the strength leaving the tips of my fingers as I try to write, but my will to write is dwindling, so I light up a cigarette after every couple of words to hide the fact that I can't stay focused.

Last night I was so busy congratulating myself for having re-written over fifty pages of "John Loves a Hooker" that I completely neglected the fact that I've sustained myself with nothing but a croissant, a coconut, and lots of beer mixed in with Johnny Walker in those fourteen hours. In a futile attempt to apologize to my brain and body I started this morning off with a liter of water, an American-sized continental breakfast, a slice of fudge cake, two slices of banana coffee cake, two iced coffees, and a fruit smoothie. The smoking won't cease, but I'll give the alcohol a rest for a few hours. All this food in me, along with an inevitable sugar and coffee crash, is going to make for an incredible mid-day nap...

It feels as though I've been waiting for this #15 bus for over forty minutes now and it's still nowhere in sight. I give up and just jump on the #35. I figure the bus looks about the same, it's pointing in the right direction to where I want to go, so what harm could it do?

For the first fifteen minutes I'm going to where I think I want to go when the bus unexpectedly takes a right turn, making its way south. Thirty minutes later, I end up at Sathorn. After a few 7-Eleven beers, fried street Pork, and a stroll around the block, I find myself back at the Sathorn Unique building, also known as The Ghost Tower. This massive fifty story 'could've-been' started being built with the economic boom, and abandoned shortly afterward when the entire economy went back to shit. Some of the more traditional locals, who don't believe in economy, would tell you that the halt of construction was because the building was facing the

wrong direction in relation to a temple. They must have built a new temple somewhere nearby since the word on the street is that the building has been bought out, and that construction is set to resume in a few years. Right now it's nothing but a tourist attraction for those who have an extra 200 Baht lying around and are not put-off by eerie graffiti, misplaced toilets, and open elevator shafts.

This Ghost Tower, so appropriately named thanks to a Swedish tourist who decided to hang himself there not too long ago, is also the stillborn brother of the Sky Bar—now known as “The Hangover Bar” located just a few blocks away. Inside, the uneasy feeling of abandonment, much like in the Ghost Tower, is still present, except that in here, all the surfaces are polished and any big drops come strategically equipped with a series of suicide nets. A large poster of the cast of “The Hangover 2” sits near the entrance to greet you as you enter the massive lobby.

Aside from capitalizing on generic sequels of movies that stopped being popular in North America a month after they came out, the Thai also seem to be huge fans of sticking big-ticket words onto everyday things to make them seem more high-end. I always found them to be too on the nose for my tastes. Cars with stickers on the trunks would read: ultra, excellence, super drive, VIP, faster, high, and zooming. The names of various massage parlors would start with something like: premier, luxury, extra, teen, and testicle. The word ‘inverter’ is used on all the popular 2015 model home and kitchen appliances, ranging from AC units to washing machines to toasters. Everything is ‘inverter’, and none of it makes any sense. ‘Drug Free Zone’, ‘Weapon Free Zone’, and ‘Alcohol Free Zone’, are just some more words that don't hold any meaning in this country.

I catch a train to Victory Monument in hopes of starting this

night off at The Saxophone, since it's the only decent place I know of so far in this city.

Other than a small handful of what seem to be regulars, the bar is nearly abandoned. I sit in front of the stage to get the best view. Not the band I was expecting from the last time I was here. No, this stage is now comprised of a lonely old Thai man plowing through a number of fingerpicking covers of Eric Clapton's greatest hits. The man, who looks like a frog at best, sings like one too. A frog that hits all the right notes, but nonetheless—a frog. He sports a pair of John Lennon-like glasses that hang off the tip of his nose, and his big, round eyes behind them stare off into a void. His fat, collagen-looking lips are completely disproportionate to his pointy chin and narrow jawline and his teeth have clearly never agreed with one another over which direction they wanted to grow in. His thin, dry, black hair with short uneven strands scatters across his wide wrinkled forehead. A street shop-looking necklace, strung together by a random arrangement of silver and black beads, wraps around the saggy old skin on his neck, the rest of which is hiding underneath a black V-neck with white pinstripes. To complete the look of somebody who travelled in time from the 60's, he sports jeans with flares so wide that one could hardly make out the alligator skin boots with pointy tips concealed underneath. Aside from the disfigured elephant man I saw at the temple by the water a few days earlier, this man could be the ugliest man I've ever seen in this country so far. But none of it matters when he begins plucking the strings on that Taylor acoustic.

Be it a miss-pick or a dull note, The Frog Man doesn't flinch. Not even once. Nothing. He doesn't let the audience know that he's aware of the mistake by scrunching his face or gritting his teeth. The muscles in his picking arm don't tense up and the fretting

fingers don't come down harder than they need to in order to compensate. No, this man knows how to make a mistake. He knows how to move on. He just stays in it, he keeps going—how this man stays in the zone is unfathomable. The wall keeping it safe is impenetrable. His ignorance to the outside world and all of its judgments is mesmerizing. Every bead of sweat that forms on his forehead and every smiling bite of the lip are inspiring. The gentle, continuous stomp of his heel stays with the rhythm no matter what. This man knows something about life. This man really knows how to not give a fuck. This man knows what it means to be an artist.

The finale, "Tears in Heaven," is met with a series of gentle, forced applause from about three pairs of hands. The next band isn't coming on for another forty minutes so I decide to go for a walk and kill some time; otherwise, I'm going to keep drinking—and the drinks here aren't cheap.

Unable to find any other decent bars in the area and fed up with maneuvering my way through all these food carts, I decide to take a stroll through a quieter part of town. As I walk further in, each block is whittled down to a single café or bar and I begin to feel like I'm steadily becoming the only white person in the neighborhood. Based on looks I'm getting from the locals, my theory is validated. Maybe here I'll get a taste of this other Bangkok people warned me about. Fifteen minutes in and I'm all alone on these streets, with no shady characters to be seen—yet. I keep walking, playing around with my wallet, taking out the cash and shuffling through the seven-something thousand Baht I have left in there. I take a hard turn into a dark alleyway where the only light source is the one coming from my phone. Fed up, I sit down in the middle of the road and smoke a few cigarettes. Some scooters and stray cats pass by, I eventually get bored and head back to The Saxophone.

The “crazy” is more difficult to find around here than I had expected.

It’s nine-thirty now and the bar is packed. Luckily, the waitress saved me my seat. I joked when I asked her to do that, but I was dead serious when I told her earlier that she smelled incredible. The new band is on their third cover of some Stevie Ray Vaughn. The lead singer sings beautifully and wears a ponytail that makes me slightly jealous—that confident prick. The drummer has a perpetual grin on his face, something like of a child who gets to celebrate Christmas every minute of his life. The bassist is a stylish, handsome, hipster who has suspiciously great chemistry with the fat keyboard player who sports an unkempt beard. On the second electric guitar is a skinny, twenty-something who looks like a student. So clean and proper, with the sort of youthful innocence only a shy little Asian schoolboy could posses.

Halfway through a jazz rendition of “I Shot the Sheriff,” the schoolboy’s guitar solo comes in. He plays lighting quick, his left hand makes use of every square inch of the fingerboard; the pick on his right seems to be in six places at once. The confident hammer-ons, the perfect pull-offs, the string bends so intense that when they hit that peak, you can’t help but imagine the string snapping and taking somebody’s eye out. I’m sitting just six feet away from this kid and I begin to feel the sweat build up in the palm of my hand as it grips the saxophone-shaped mug tighter with each beat.

The highs pull me in closer; the lows hold me frozen in place. It just keeps going—every time he’d let up for just a moment my heart would stop, only to bring it back ten times harder. I’m hypnotized. My eyes jump around as they follow his left hand’s every movement. I feel like I can’t let my body break free of its frozen state or I might

jump out of my seat and put on a Tom Cruise run down the middle of the road until every ounce of energy is expelled from my body—but even that wouldn't stop my mind from racing. Another sharp squeal of the bend and I can feel the muscles in my thighs and around my knees tense up as my ass unglues from the chair when I start to stand up. My face is struck with a permanent grin; I'm just about ready to burst into tears. The lead guitarist walks up to me from across the stage, locks eyes with me, and reciprocates that same grin. It's nice to know that I'm not the only one who's feeling this.

I can see the immeasurable pride the lead has for this kid—the quiet one, the elusive prodigy. The one who will remain modest throughout his entire life. The same modesty, unfortunately, that will most likely keep him from moving further up unless luck decides to intervene. I can see in the lead's eyes that he knows he will never be this good—and he's content with that, and more so, thrilled to have someone of this caliber playing alongside him.

My eyes rapidly shift back and forth between the two guitarists. The solo beautifully mellows out as the song transitions into the third verse. The lead and I exchange one final look before he walks back to his station. The kid, it seems, finally takes a breath and lets out a quick, happy exhale as his eyes stare off into the ceiling. I realize that I'm still standing, but I don't care. I keep on clapping until the band puts their instruments down to take a break. There's my cue to take one too.

Sitting out on the patio, I recognize an accent asking me when the band will be back on stage. Seeing as she had no tattoos or gold chains I thought I'd strike up a conversation. Lyuba, from Russia—an older woman in her fifties, and from what I understand, is vacationing all by herself. Her hair is curly blonde and her bangs

lightly brush up against the top of her eyebrows. Her eyes are a striking blue, and her smile is gentle and perpetual when she speaks. She's wearing a flower print dress that's held up by a string that wraps around her neck and converges at the top. Her skinny fingers pull out a cigarette from a turquoise cigarette case while she tells me that she can't stand the gory pictures they put on the packs here. She lights it up with an identical lighter to mine—the cheap plastic one with a red tint. The one I carry around with me as a spare.

I haven't spoken this much Russian in one go for decades and I can feel it slowly coming back to me. She tells me she has kids back home who are of my age, with kids of their own now. A traditional sort of Eastern-European, yet, she poses no judgment when I tell her I dropped everything to live abroad and pursue writing. She starts reminiscing about how she always wanted to be a pilot. Her uncle was an airplane mechanic and every now and then, he would take her on field trips to his place of work and show her around. Now she's knee deep in paperwork, she tells me. Although stable, and with a pair of kids who don't disappoint, she's thrilled for me, and what I am doing even after we both agree on how incredibly juvenile and shortsighted it actually is. I tell her about my novel and how it took me so long to finish because every now and again I would realize that I was not nearly mature enough to handle the subject matter. The excuses just keep coming. I can't help myself.

She playfully calls me a child, yet admires my open-mindedness to change and grow. I assure her that I already know these things about myself but then quickly shut my mouth when I realize that I'm doing that thing I do so often... so I try to keep it together and not go off on a rant when I start to wonder: at what point did this perverse sense of self-awareness, the type where you don't use it to better yourself, but rather point out your own faults before anyone

else can become the new trend among the masses? Call it a preemptive strike against any incoming criticism. How did I manage to hop onto this asshole train along with so many others? And how the hell did I fall into the trap of becoming another self-proclaimed ‘intellectual’ who uses this knowledge to do nothing but stroke my ego until I find myself in some wicked wonderland? I truly do believe that we’re only getting smarter, the real challenge is figuring out constructive ways in which to apply all this intelligence. I’m beginning to think that this all may have started with the growing popularity of self-deprecating humor and a skewed idea of what it actually means to be able to laugh at oneself. The tolerance shoved down our throats regarding everything from five-hundred pound sacks of lard who can’t get around without a scooter to adult men who fall in love with cartoon ponies left little to judge and ridicule out in public. In the end, the only thing left to criticize and poke fun at was yourself. And what more productive way is there in avoiding to become a better person but to tell the entire world that you’re a piece of shit, and immediately follow-up with a harmless: “I know, right?” and simply laugh it off. I like to think that sometimes, some forms of bullying may have their merits and we were too quick to give it such a bad rep. If some Wal-Mart patrons can apply for disability then unjust, shortsighted condemnation toward those that may or may not deserve it should perhaps be just as widely accepted. Everything in balance—isn’t that what keeps this big world turning?

I figure that to call myself out on my own bullshit in front of her right now would be counterintuitive.

I pause the conversation between each fresh cigarette to make sure that I’m not talking about myself too much—it’s a bad habit of mine when I’m drunk. If you don’t talk about your novel—did you

ever really write it? I'm starting to feel like one of those obnoxious aspiring actors who can't help but to tell every person at an industry party about their passions, inspirations, methods, etc. She reassures me that she loves hearing about my life—I'm sure those actors hear that shit all the time as well. On the other hand, the Russians are quite blunt so I'm sure she would've told me if I was being obnoxious. That, coupled with the fact that her body is slowly creeping in closer, and with each relaxed exhale, her smile so inviting, there's no need to feel self-conscious.

Every now and again my eyes would involuntarily start looking down at her breasts. I keep catching myself doing it, and when I do—my eyes would promptly apologize; hers would smile and forgive me. It's difficult to read this woman—everything from her eyes to her body language is so inviting, yet, intimidating. There's definitely sexual tension here, but I know she's just toying with me.

After about five cigarettes and completely missing the band's second set playing behind the glass, I get a message from Anita: she wants to meet up again. I conclude my interaction with Lyuba with a warm farewell and a deep, long-lasting hug. She wishes me the best of luck with my work and reminds me to eat once in a while. With the pen she takes from my front shirt pocket she writes my name down for herself, and tells me that she will keep an eye out for my work. I think I just gained my first fan. I'm still reluctant to call myself a writer of any sorts, but when people keep pounding it into your head that you should continue doing something, or try to do something that you've always wanted, it might be a good idea to explore that option—even just a little. Sure, they don't know what's going on in your life, they don't know what's going on in your head, they don't see what you see—and you should never expect them to. But you don't know what they see when they look at you. Being

misunderstood never felt so right.

On the phone, Anita tells me about the hell of a day she's been having while helping plan for her sister's wedding and all. Her mother uninvited me after the other mornings' incident. I'm a little bummed, but in a way, relieved that I won't have to stand outside in a tuxedo all day long. After what felt like ten minutes of listening to her complain about the problems she's having with her mother I quickly remind her, in the gentlest of ways, that I'm not *that* guy in her life, and offer to finish what we had started the other night.

I get a chance to take a shower and change out of my writing shirt by the time she shows up at my hotel. Unfortunately, walking down the stairs to meet her instantly covers my skin in a fresh layer of sweat. The herd of Tuk-Tuk drivers know better than to chase me down the street tonight and offer their wide array of services when they see Anita pull up and get out of her car. By this point, after two weeks of staying at Khao San Road, they know that I'm not interested in special massages, Ping-Pong shows, or escorts of any gender, or cross gender for that matter. Now they just do it to mess with me—and we laugh about it. Sometimes, I like to lead them on by taking the brochures out of their hands, and pretend to be interested. Sometimes I jump into the back of the Tuk-Tuk, wait until they get excited, and quickly jump out with a “Nope!” when they get into the driver's seat. I make up for it with a friendly pat on the shoulder or a hug.

Anita is very persistent in trying to get a read of the many pages I scribbled in about the night I met her. She playfully fights with me to get the notebook in her hands. I think of non-confrontational ways to display my persistence in not giving it to her.

“I want to read!” she nags.

“Not in this form. Not in the rough! It’s all over the place right now. I’m really fucking insecure about people seeing that sort of shit! Seriously though...”

The scribbles. No person should ever ask to read another’s scribbles.

“You funny when you talk.”

The play fighting continued until I eventually threw her down on my bed and tossed the notebook somewhere behind the fridge. She forgot about the damn thing after I pinned her down by the shoulders and thoroughly scanned over her entire figure. I rolled over beside her, pulled her in, and we started to kiss while our bodies conformed to each other’s contours...

Her eyes were angelic when she moaned. Her lower jaw was relaxed and wanting. Her nails dug into my back and brought me in closer and deeper.

She told me she came at the same time I did.

Right.

Whatever.

No big deal.

Let it go. What would The Frog Man do?

The Hunger

Tuesday, December 2nd, 2014, 21:07

It's oddly exciting to think that any time I walk out of this door at night, a Sikh gangster or two might run up to me and put a few bullets through my chest. While it's exciting to think about, in reality, the chances are fairly slim. It's not me they're after.

Still, I know they watch me sometimes.

A few days ago, while I was standing outside the shop relaxing with a cigarette in hand, I saw a twenty-something brown kid suspiciously walking around on the opposite side of the road near the large construction site. He was pretending to sip from a cup of Tim Horton's coffee, and I say pretending because the way he held the cup when it was away from his face would've spilled any liquid that could've been inside.

I pretended not to watch him as he approached; he would hide his face behind that cup every time I turned my head toward him. He came almost directly across the street from me when he disappeared behind a large work van and didn't come out from the other side. I walked over to the shop, opened the large metal door, and slammed it shut as loud as I could to make it seem as if I went back inside, but instead, I just hid behind my truck that was parked out front.

Who knew—after a few moments, I popped my head up from behind the truck and saw him standing there in place, looking directly at the shop. His face froze when he saw me giving him a friendly wave, and after a few moments of awkwardness on his end, he marched on down the rest of the street at full speed, his head turned away from me the entire time.

...these fucking clowns.

Maybe my friends are right after all about my life becoming sketchier with each day. Maybe it's difficult for me to grasp the dangers of the entire situation because I'm finding it all to be so thrilling.

It's exciting to think that when I walk out of this shop in a few minutes to go and get that Big Mac I've been craving all night, something interesting might just happen. As improbable as whatever that something might be—I can't help but to let my mind run free and wander around in that dark place. To let that something inside of me quietly whisper in the back of my head: "Tonight might be the night."

And what a better way to go than to have somebody say: "He was on his way to get a Big Mac when it happened?"

Tuesday, December 2nd, 2014, 21:24

Think about it now—as good as this Big Mac is—was it really worth potentially maybe perhaps risking your life over? Just go to sleep already. Idiot.

"Everything"

Another massive rainstorm hit last night, complete with ear shattering thunderclaps and flooding in the roads of my neighborhood. Again, my mind was blown away by the fact that this didn't seem to bother any of the locals. Not the scooters with their narrow wheels as they cut through more than six inches of water, not the pedestrians crossing the intersections—no, their sandals just strolled, well, dragged along through the gigantic puddles without a hint of discomfort on their faces.

The owner of the café where I was having my usual pork Pad Thai and Chang began wrestling a twelve-foot wide umbrella over me when the first few raindrops started to turn my meal into their terminal station. I didn't even feel the slightest hint of guilt for not helping him out with that umbrella because the look on his face was just so reassuring. Soon enough, the massive thing began swinging in all directions, just barely missing the cabs' windshields and the

heads of frightful tourists. Midway through erecting the umbrella I couldn't take it anymore, when the scarce raindrops suddenly turned into a complete downpour. I jumped out of my seat and grabbed on to the post. The owner chuckled, waved his hand in front of me indicating 'no', and asked for my cigarette. After he took a long drag, he handed it back to me and softly put his hand on my shoulder in a gesture for me to relax and sit back down. I did just that and a massive stream of water rolled right off the umbrella, right onto where I was sitting and over into my food, my beer, my head, and worst of all—my goddamn cigarette. I looked back from the soggy mess of tobacco in my hand, to the owner's goofy face, to the umbrella and finally back to him to search for a hint of guilt in his eyes. All I found was a mouth that was unsure as to whether it should bite down on his lips or smile. I couldn't stay mad at that mug and burst into a short fit of laughter. He laughed along, gave me a new Chang, and offered me a free lunch when I come tomorrow.

All the beer from earlier in the evening had filled me up plenty so I'm not too worried about the soggy, unfinished mess of pork Pad Thai I left behind on the patio. I can't feel bad about the wasted meal when I have a free beer in my left hand, a fresh cigarette in the other, and a cool enough breeze outside that enables me to wear a pair of pants for once so that I won't feel like a fucking animal. Suffice it to say—my mood is just right.

I decide that it's best to keep my spirits high and not waste an hour waiting for the #15, transferring to the sky train, and then maneuvering through two blocks of food carts, window shoppers, and cheap sandals in order to get to where I'm going. I walk for about ten minutes to get myself just far away enough from where

the cabs and Tuk-Tuks make their business by religiously ripping off tourists who don't understand that everything in their two-kilometer radius is up for bargain. And since the area is so saturated with money from these people, it is more difficult to get a good deal on transport. The minute I lose sight of all this madness I immediately hail down a Tuk-Tuk. He wants 200 Baht to get me to a place that an honest cab driver would get me for 70. I offer him 60.

"180!"

"No, 60."

"140!" he flails his hands.

At this point I like to turn around and start walking away to see if they follow me down the road. This one didn't.

One hundred feet down the block I find another one waiting outside the bus stop, hoping that the tedious wait times would get some folks to change their mind and hop in.

"Victory Monument, 60 Baht," I stick my head in through the front opening.

"Victory? Where that? No man, 200 Baht!"

"60 Baht! A cab ride is no more than 50."

"100 Baht!" followed by a 'You're breaking my balls, man!' face scrunch they all do.

"50 Baht and a cigarette," as I slowly back away, "...and a hug?" The hugging, in many situations, has worked wonders so far.

"Ayyyyy man, ok. No hug, no hug. Cigarette." I barely get a chance to plant my ass on the red and yellow vinyl bench with the massive blue 'VIP' letters when he shoots off into traffic without even checking his surroundings. The best part about taking a Tuk-Tuk, or a motorcycle taxi, is that the harder you low-ball them—the harder they go. And he's going hard. I almost forget to hand the lit cigarette to him as I clutch on to the rail while he cuts off the other

cars and bikes, locking his rear wheels with every hard stop, or taking the opposing lane toward other motorized death boxes.

The eardrum-shattering wail from his huge chrome exhaust subsides and putters as he slows down before I hear a loud clatter coming from the rear wheels when he taps the brakes. I reassure myself that he probably knows about it, and that no matter how crazy the drivers here may be—everyone's got a will to live. I hand over my cigarette and take the pause in traffic to light myself another one. He thanks me with a nod and takes a long drag before taking a sudden hard left, exhales the cloud of smoke, and waves to me with his cigarette hand to indicate another thank you. I suddenly realize that I just took a hand off the man responsible for my life. But this is what I paid for—so I tell myself. Laugh it off, just take another drag.

The Victory Monument: a statue commemorating the victory of something I haven't yet been able to get to the bottom of. It stands in the center of a massive round-a-bout close to five-hundred feet in diameter. The sort of limbo spot during rush hour traffic where the road becomes a massive free-for-all and the road rules, along with traffic lines are mere guidelines—something the motorists can look at every once in a while to make sure that they are in fact still on a road. All four corners of this intersection are littered with dimly lit plazas, far enough away from one another that the bands performing poor song covers don't overlap and interfere. Surrounding these little plazas are more stands selling tank-tops with obnoxious slogans or local beer brand logos, sandals, food stands selling meat, vegetables, fruit and noodles—which, surprisingly, have not yet given me violent diarrhea.

It all so similar as I look down from the massive overpass connecting these four intersections, so when the driver drops me off

in front of what I assume is the bar I'm trying to get to, it turns out I am in fact as far from it as I could be, and he had already left. But that's what I paid for, isn't it?

As I regain my bearings, I find my route and begin the last part of the trip I was trying to avoid by getting a ride in the first place.

I find myself at The Saxophone just in time to find the band I met last night hanging out on the patio, on their break, drinking their beers and smoking cigarettes. The saxophone player, a forty-something year old who could easily be mistaken for a cab driver, but who can improvise sax solos sexier than "Careless Whispers," spots me from fifty feet away and runs out to greet me.

"My friend! I have something to show you. Come!"

He wraps his arm around my shoulder and walks me over to the parking lot to show off the Harley he rode to the bar tonight just so I could take a look at it.

"Sit, friend. Sit!" he says while straightening out the handlebars. My ass feels great on the custom leather seat. The handlebars, supple and comfortable, ease me into a firm grip. I admire the custom paint job on the tank and sides, consisting of gold flowers strung together with beautiful fine woven lines. I look up at him and give it a gentle nod of approval. His face lights up with a child-like exuberance.

The other night when we got drunk after the show, my limited knowledge of music, coupled with my impatience to speak about subjects I'm not well versed on before I start to make up bullshit, had shifted our conversation to motorcycles. I showed him a picture of mine, the one I sold before leaving for Asia, and told him how much I missed it, the work I put into it, and the crazy story of its inception. He sympathized and bought me a beer. We then drew comparisons about how crazy it was to ride a motorcycle in

Bangkok versus Vancouver. No contest—Bangkok definitely takes the cake.

My hands now covered in soot from sticking my fingers into his exhaust, and after a failed attempt to convince him to replace his rear tire, we retreat back to the patio to find the drummer and bassist sitting quietly, staring off into the distance with cigarettes hanging from their mouths. The drummer, who is also the band's leader, is coming up on his 50's. He's bald, burly, with a mean goatee, and has the look of a celebrity chef. He gives me a firm handshake and a greeting that spans a few sentences—none of which I can understand. I exchange the sentiment and play an air-drum solo to indicate that I'm looking forward to the show. The saxophone player tells me that if I were to write a book—I should write it about this drummer. This man here has seen some shit and really been around. So he tells me.

"I'm listening..." pulling out my pen and notebook.

"Oh, you'll have to ask him."

"I don't think he speaks English." Damn him for getting me so excited.

"Hah, no. But just look at his face. This man crazy man! This man seen things! And this guy—look at this guy!"

Diverting my attention to the bassist sitting across from us: a young, cartoonish looking fella with big eyes and massive square glasses with thick frames. If anything, he looks like a really handsome, well-groomed, starved African child with massive teeth that show when he smiles wider than his face allows. His arms no wider than a beer bottle, and his long bony fingers look as if they've been stung by bees at the tips. He speaks no English, so I play an air-bass for him, specifying that it's bass by making low-pitch hums as I go along, to indicate that I'm excited for the show. He smiles

and shows me those African child teeth, shakes my hand, and loses track of the conversation when the sax player talks about how the girls love those bony fingers of his.

At the mention of girls and fingers, the conversation between the sax player and I quickly turns to him running through a list of all the massage parlors he loves to spend some nights at. He gets so into it that I completely forget about my writing tools sitting on the patio table in front of us. I'm so engrossed with what he's telling me that once I do remember the notebook, I don't want to disrupt the flow of things by scribbling it all down. "You know I'm going to write about this too, right?" I interrupt him.

"Oh, you cool, motorcycle guy! You can write it all!"

It's been interesting to see how people react when you tell them that you're going to write about them. At first I expected them to tiptoe around me, put on a show, behave as best they could—but that hasn't happened yet. A show of sorts is being put on, but the people entertaining me want to see how far they can take it themselves. They want to look for that thing that's hiding inside of them—a spontaneous child, idea, or thought they wouldn't bother exploring on their own. They want to give you their rawest and they want you to tell them that it's ok, and read it back to them from a romanticized, but hopefully objective, perspective. When you know there's a chance you can truly show yourself to the world while there's someone holding your hand and telling you it's ok—it's enlightening. Whether it's some guy you probably won't ever see again, or a million faceless strangers reading it off their screen, it's enough to be able to reassure yourself that there's someone out there who at one point or another in time will be able to comprehend it, be inspired by it, and relate. Ultimately, no one should ever feel alone once their story, however exposed, is put into

words for others to read. We're all just a little bit misunderstood, but this here is a small step toward a more enlightening direction.

"One of this massage girl, with pigtail—on the side you know. Mmmmm. She takes little bit of oil and like to massage the tip of my asshole. I pretend like she surprise me every time. So good buddy. I like more than the boom-boom!"

The show's about to start and I feel like the boss around here when the keyboard player gets up from his station, walks across the stage over to me, and shakes my hand. I try to contain the grin attempting to break free on my face when the bar patrons next to me start to wonder who the hell I am. The keyboard player's instrument reads 'Mr. Piano' on the side, but his actual nickname is 'Golden Cockfingers'—a nickname, which I assume, was given to him by the saxophone player. A nickname that makes the keyboardist, a forty-year old, and the only one wearing a suit, smile shyly while giving out an 'Oh stop it!' hand gesture. He doesn't look Thai at all, and nobody, including the keyboard player himself, seems to know what his roots are. He appears to gravitate toward Koreans in his romantic relationships. A few years ago, he woke up to find his crazy ex-girlfriend trying to cut off his magic fingers after a fight broke out between the two.

"Better the dick," he told me the other night.

The kid on the electric guitar, with his loose t-shirt and scruffy hair, looks less like a musician and more like a Korean college student who plays too much StarCraft. His solos are the least impressive of the group, and whenever they come up, the keyboard player looks back at me, strums his air guitar and waves for me to come over and replace him. He must assume that when I told him I've only been playing the acoustic for a total of a few months I was

just being modest, because at this point, I can't tell if he's just teasing me or he actually wants me to come on stage. I doubt the audience would want to know what it sounds like to hear a fingerless monkey play the acoustic—because that's what I would give them. It would be quite an honor though, that is, if I *were* able to play well—this bar doesn't allow farangs to play unless the bands have personally invited them in.

Coming up on their last few songs, I grab a napkin and on it I write: "Summertime." The singer smiles and gives me a reassuring nod. She passes the napkin around to the other band members who react the same way, and I anticipate the moment the current song will end. The singer is a twenty-three year old with an afro spanning two feet across her head, looks like a smaller, more Asian Beyoncé. Her voice is more mature than almost anyone else I've ever heard—she sings her heart out during the song; ripping mine out in the process. The band gives it their all, every instrument gets a solid five-minute solo, they just won't end this song, and I'm loving every second of it. Except for maybe the StarCraft player's part.

As the show approaches its end I get a message from Anita, who's now changed her mind about coming to meet me tonight. I say my goodbyes and give out my strong bear hugs like candy before going off to sit on the curb where she said that she'd pick me up.

A few cigarettes later she pulls up in her little blue Suzuki hatchback with white checkered racing stripes and I hop in. Her face lights up from a sort of forced excitement that makes me feel a little uneasy.

"You want something to write about? Right?" Biting her lips.

She's a bit of a crazy driver, tonight a little more than usual. The officers at the traffic checks don't flag her down—and she doesn't seem to want to slow down either as her car flies past them.

“Ok...” My pen awaits. I don’t plan on writing anything while I sit in this car, and I don’t know what the hell she wants—it’s more symbolic than anything.

I have a bad feeling that she feels pressured to show me a good time, and that the last few nights haven’t been exciting enough to constitute some fine scribbles.

“We’re going to have fun yeah!...?”

I try my best to reassure her by reciprocating the emotion and thanking her for taking me out, since she seems to be questioning her ability to excite me. Before she even gets a chance to undo the seatbelt after parking her car, I pull her toward me and violently make out with her while she moves her hands to all the right places. I pull my face away to see that smile she smiles. Now we’re good. And once again—I have no idea where the hell I am.

She looks back with a devious smile while taking me down a narrow set of metal stairs into a dim lobby where the furniture is lined with stained copper trim, the lights are a deep orange, and the wallpaper is a dark yellow with a pattern of black flowers and shields. I hear the eardrum-shattering bass of German-sounding techno coming from behind a black curtain. Damp, musky air fills my lungs as I part the curtains to reveal a medieval themed bar, almost completely deserted. I assume because it’s a Wednesday, it’s right to see that its only patrons are a group of white businessmen in suits sitting in one corner and a bunch of young Thai girls in little black dresses in the other. A fat black midget wearing a jester hat with bells, green cape, green speedos, and pointy shoes passes in front of me while pumping his fists to the heavy beat. To my right, a Chinese woman with heavy make-up in a black dress with silver speckles and matching shoes sways gently on a wooden swing while blowing bubbles into the smoky atmosphere. Her face is locked in a

trance, and the motion of her hands in tune with the movement of her body, back and forth, is fluid and perfect in its perpetuity. In another corner sits a spray painted silver metal piano with DJ equipment set up on top while the DJ stands behind it, bopping his head to the beat. His motions are jagged and broken up as the pulsating blue strobe lights repeatedly bring him in and out of the darkness. He too is in his own little trance. In the center of the room I find a ten-foot by ten-foot bar locked behind a cage constructed of rebar with only a few small slots to slide drinks through. On each end of the bar are two waitresses standing motionless in black robes with golden ropes hanging loosely from their waists. Golden bands hold their black hair back. Their hands hang in front of their bodies, locked together, like their eyes, staring dead ahead. Anita sits us down at the bar and asks me if I'm going to write all of this down.

"Don't worry, I won't forget it," I reassure her with a pat of my hand against the notebook in my breast pocket.

She orders us two very expensive drinks and the bartender almost has to slap my hand away when I reach for the shot glasses—he's not quite done yet, and pulls out a torch, setting the shots on fire. I contemplate how I'm supposed to take this down, and almost just go for it when I see a hand reach through the hole of the caged bar with two straws for us. Way to take the fun out of it. Before I even get a chance to start complaining about how those shots weren't worth 700 Baht, Anita grabs my face and starts making out with me in front of the bartender. I comply, but can't help to break away when out from the corner of my eye I spot the black midget humping a girl's leg while she's casually carrying a conversation with her friends. Anita understands and watches with me before getting the crazy idea of taking us into one of the private rooms

with the big vault-like submarine doors.

We casually walk past the statuesque waitresses as we reassure one another that it's fine to just go into the private rooms.

I try to smoke my cigarette while she climbs on top of me and continues the make-out session. Fine. I put the cigarette out. She asks me if I'm going to fuck her in here and I'm suddenly very happy to have remembered to bring condoms with me this time. I answer her by getting up, swinging the massive door closed, and turning the wheel to lock the vault. Our hands begin reaching into the happy places when one of the statues unlocks the door from outside, swings it open, and without a single word, stares at the wall behind us for a few moments before resuming to her post. We laugh, make out for a little while longer, and decide to take off from this cock-blocking establishment.

On our way out I stop in front of the midget in hopes that he will want to switch over and hump my leg instead, but I don't think he's paying any attention to my plea. His focus, determined and unshakeable, is on that girl's leg and absolutely nothing else in the world matters to him right now. What dedication. When have I done anything with this much passion? I start to wonder what drives him, but perhaps, one has to pay this midget to get their leg humped. This is something I really need to find out someday.

Before I spread the exit curtains open I can't help but think what the end result to all this humping will be. I really do hope that it will be more than just a simple hand-off of monetary goods into his little hands.

While driving down to Silom, Anita starts telling me about the dinner she was having with her family tonight. Her driving begins to start making sense when she tells me how much wine her and her

celebrity friend drank. She parks the car on a dark street corner and we get out. When, she walks off to ask some of the locals if her parking spot is legitimate, I notice a food stand and make my way over.

I follow my nose to some delicious smelling pork skewers, which, to my disappointment, won't be ready for another couple minutes. Leaning up against a fire hydrant I see a short, but very built bald man waiting for his skewers. The Thai version of Dwayne Johnson, only a foot or two shorter. A gentle giant with a grin on his face so endearing I just want to pat his bald head, but I'm not nearly drunk enough for that yet—and that is probably for the best. He laughs at me when I compare my biceps to his; shoots me a 'you got me' face when I point out that I'm taller. I go in for a hug but his eyes shoot past me instead, and he bows. I turn around to find Anita bowing even lower, before she takes out her phone and gets us all in for a selfie. Not knowing why yet, I bow to him. The man grabs his pork and walks off while Anita explains to me that we just met Khun Buay—one of Thailand's biggest superstars. She pulls up a picture of him on her phone and scrolls through a series of seriously impressive abs, but nothing indicating what sort of superstar this guy is.

We stroll down the streets of what is supposed to be the party area of Pat Pong, but I'm not seeing any partying. The same food and clothes stands, but here, I don't have as hard a time walking through them. It all seems fairly deserted. We come across an alleyway and head into an empty bar where the only person we see is a lonely Italian bartender. He whips us up a Long Island while telling us the story of how he left Italy four years ago and will never go back because Bangkok is where all the opportunities are, but they haven't really presented themselves since he's been living under the

radar for the last three years. We grab our drinks and take a few minutes to assess our sitting options before settling on the bench most out of the Italian's line sight so he can't see us fooling around. Whether it's the lack of life in the atmosphere or knowing in the back of my head that the Italian has nothing better to do than watch us, I decide it's time to move on to the next place.

She takes me further down the same street while reminiscing about all the fun she'd had with her friends when she lived here. I keep reminding myself that although she's a lawyer in her thirties—she too must've gone through a crazy wild girl phase, indicated by the butterfly tattoo on her left butt cheek.

Reaching a narrow plaza where every couple of feet we come across signs plastered on the walls that read: 'Beware, Pickpockets', I know this is the real deal, so I cram my wallet and phone into my front pockets. The bouncer for one of the clubs at the plaza makes us pay a ridiculous 300 Baht for entry, but those warnings make it seem worth it. I hand over the cash and he sloppily stamps my forearm, pats me down, and lets me inside.

I get a mischievous-looking smile, accompanied by a few wags of the eyebrows, from the bartender when Anita and I walk over to bar to grab our rum and cokes. I dismiss the friendly invite and turn around to watch some half-naked sweaty bodies bump and grind to the sort of music Europeans usually dance to. A young guy in a maroon dress shirt, overly tight jeans, and a gay smile, gently grazes my back with his hand on his way to the bar. I ignore it before he walks by again, this time, grazing my ass on his way back to the dance floor. I give him a stern "NO" and continue talking to Anita while trying to figure out if grudgingly shifting my feet from side to side as a form of dance is appropriate for this sort of music.

It finally hits me when I see a sweaty old sixty-something white

man in booty shorts grinding with a thin Thai boy in a mesh tank-top just a few feet away—I'm at a gay club. The most flamboyant of them all from what she tells me while trying to contain her laughter. Suddenly, the pounding laser show begins to make sense, the not-so-secret hand jobs, the eyes fucking me from every direction and all these touchy fingers—hah! I've been looking at it this entire time and it took me this long to realize it. I must have had more to drink than I originally thought.

The guy in the maroon dress shirt turns around to smile his fabulous smile at me again and I can't help but to walk up to him and put my death grip on a big chunk of his ass. I don't know what I was hoping to achieve by doing that, but it didn't help. He pushes away the Thai boy he was dancing with and rushes toward me. I use Anita as my shield—it proves ineffective. He's trying to talk to me, I can't hear a word he's saying and all I can do is shrug my shoulders and point my finger at Anita. "With Girl! Girl!" I can't shake him off, and neither can she. We break free and try our best to swim through this sea of wanting eyes, hungry erections, and desperate hands in an attempt to lose this guy. Fuck, he's persistent. His eyes are still locked on me; his smile—gay as ever. He may as well have a neon sign over his forehead that reads: DMYTRO—I'M GOING TO SUCK YOUR COCK AND THERE'S NOTHING YOU CAN DO TO STOP ME. I feel like the teenage John Connor running away from the T-1000. We get to the base of the stairs leading up to where Anita politely asks a pair of oily abs to act as a barricade. They comply, and we climb up while that persistent smile continues to fuck the back of my skull from down below.

The upstairs is less animalistic and much more intimate—it's where the ones who have found mates would go to procreate. We find a balcony and go sit outside while we finish our drinks. I need

to take a piss and ask Anita to keep guard while I'm in there because the layout of the bathroom couldn't be more awkward. It consists of a four-foot tall wall of urinals strategically placed in the center; on the other end of the wall are the sinks—where I accidentally lock eyes with a tall man washing his hands who is really, really, taking his time. I make haste to get out of there as quickly as possible and spot a crowded smoking room on my way out. I ask Anita to join me because I don't want to go in alone. She refuses. I determine I don't really need a cigarette after all.

We decide it's best to just get out of here and go home. Even for a native Thai girl, this place is just a little too over the top tonight. I reach the bottom of the stairs only to find that smile, determined as ever, waiting for me—his arm reaches out to reveal three little white pills in the palm of his hand. He moves in closer. We try our best to avoid him as we make haste for the door where we encounter the bouncers, laughing their asses off when they see the look on my face on our way out.

I realize how drunk I am after what seemed like more than ten minutes of driving around I hadn't asked or wondered where we are going or what the plan is. I'm still entranced with my thoughts over the future endeavors of that midget from earlier. I begin to question Anita's sobriety when I notice that we hadn't really stopped at any intersections and that we've been passing all the other cars on the road much faster than we probably should. We're flying by the Tuk-Tuks and taxis. I reassure myself that nobody really stops at intersections at nights here anyway, and that we're not really going 90KM/h. My drunk eyes must be deceiving me. She's not letting the mopeds pass, and when they do—she makes sure to tailgate them the second they get ahead of us. I ask her if she realizes how

fast we're going and she just tells me that it's probably okay. Her foot slams on the accelerator upon reaching the ramp that takes us up on the highway. My head wobbles drunkenly from left to right to make up for her lack of proper shoulder checks.

"Do you have enough to write about?" she lets go of the steering wheel to dig around in her purse, "...it's been a fun night, right!" her strong accent more prominent than ever after some drinks. I hold the wheel while she reaches into her purse to pull out an eight-ounce bottle of Smirnoff Lime and proceeds to take it down. About a third of the way though, she forces an uncomfortable gulp and begins a violent coughing fit. I think about how logical it would be right now if I were to just climb out of this window and jump onto any open-air bus we might pass next. My hand hovers over the handbrake, but at this speed I realize how pointless it would be and how it could just make everything even worse. No, it would be absolutely futile. It would be as if I had jumped out of an airplane without a parachute and my only hope would be to try and air-swim my way toward the other skydiver with a parachute, while trying my best to hang on to their gear as we're falling only to go plummeting to the ground before the chute opens and the sudden change in speed would cause me to lose my grip. I let go of the handbrake. I wish I could be more frightful as all this is happening but images of me flying toward the dirt at terminal velocity keep flashing through my head and excite me more than they should. Every now and then I point out to Anita that we're going sort of fast.

"What, oh—I didn't know, ha-ha. But you had fun right? You can write now?" She eases on the accelerator whenever she needs to talk or take another sip.

"Yes, I can write now."

"What you gonna write about?"

“Uhhhh—the midget.” *Think about something else, what else was there?*
“The bubble girl, all those gays!”

“What about me? I thought you were gonna write about me!” she takes another drink.

“Of course I’m gonna write about you! Do you even see these mopeds?”

The vodka! I grab the bottle out of her hand and take the rest of it down in one long chug.

“You jerk!”

“You weren’t sharing.”

Problem solved. Now, just keep her talking.

We arrive and park out by the gate in front of her house. She can’t figure out how to open the damn thing to get us inside, let alone remember where her shoes went, or the car keys. I’m sitting on the hood with my back leaning against the windshield, smoking my cigarette, and closing my eyes every now and again while letting my head fall back to get that rush—the one that makes me feel as if I’m going down a roller coaster. I’ve always loved that rush—I love trying to see how long I can keep my eyes shut, how long I can ride that rollercoaster for. But, every time that I open my eyes and snap back to reality, I feel as if I’ve let myself down, knowing that I could’ve kept it going for a while longer. She finds her shoes that were hiding behind the pedals; the key fob to the car wedged in the seat behind her ass.

“Come on—let’s go to bed,” she smiles that smile that just isn’t doing it for me tonight, “...you can write about it again!” She takes my hand and pulls me off the car.

“You gonna write everything, right?” She takes the pen from my pocket, clicks it a few times, and waves it in front of my face.

“Sure, everything.”

It's four in the morning and I'm way too tired to be giving anyone a talk. I'm way too relieved to be disappointed. And I am definitely way too drunk to fuck.

Trim, Trim, Trim

It was a brisk Sunday morning last September when it happened. [Ex-boss] called me while I was on my way to catch a ferry to Victoria, which I was already running late for. I usually never pick up the first time he calls me on my days off and let it run to voicemail, and if he calls a second time—I would consider it. I feel a little bad about ignoring him since I'm the guy he depends on most, but our conversations just run way too long—with an average run time of about half an hour. Five minutes for business, or for him to update me on the status of the copyright case that he was battling over with [bad guy], and twenty-five minutes on talking about women and relationships. He would never spare the gory details of his love life to me. I always found it somewhat amusing to see how much two people with such a large age gap could have in common when it came to the topic. One is no wiser than the other is naïve. I guess that when it comes to some things, boys *will* be boys.

[Ex-boss]—the sixty-four year old Vietnam vet, the ex-mercenary with a mysterious past which he never wanted to talk about, the crazy Texan in love with all things excessive. It wasn't until I got to the ferry terminal and realized I was too late to make it on the 8 AM ferry before I decided to finally check the voicemail he left me.

“Hey Dmytro, it's [ex-boss], I need you to get a key to [ex-boss's friend] so that he could get to the shop and take care of [ex-boss's dog] for the day. I'm just here... [bad guy] tried to kill me this morning, I've been shot. I'm at the hospital for a couple of hours. Thanks... talk to ya later!” he finished enthusiastically.

I could imagine what went through his head when he tried to think of an appropriate way to end that message.

“Hey [ex-boss],” some of the words in that voicemail were difficult to make out. I listened to it about four more times before calling him back.

“Hey Dmytro!” he grunts on the other end. He was the sort of man who always seemed to exaggerate his grunts—I never gave it too much thought. “How ya doin' buddy!”

“I uhhh—what?” I was walking circles around the ferry terminal's parking lot, trying to gather my thoughts: Shot, hospital. It could make sense that he was getting shots... perhaps... at the hospital—and got side effects. When I listened again and heard the name ‘[bad guy]’, I thought that he might have slipped it in there by accident since he was perhaps on some drugs they gave him. Maybe he had some business he wanted to talk about and changed his mind halfway through.

“Uh, [ex-boss], I'm not sure if I can make out the details of what your voicemail said.”

“Oh yeah—I just need somebody to watch [ex-boss's dog] for the day. I figured you'd be busy, but maybe you could get your shop key

to [ex-boss's friend], he'll take care of her."

"Ok... but about the other part," I was still in denial over what I heard in the message.

"Oh yaaaa," he was definitely high at that point, "would you believe it! They tried to kill me this morning. HAH!"

"WHAT. In where... I mean—how?"

"Oh yeah, shot up the entire shop. You should see it—holes everywhere—but be careful if you go, I'm warning you! But, you definitely should see it, blood everywhere!"

"Alright—but, are you okay?"

"Oh yeah, son of a bitch got me in the leg—took a huge chunk out from the back too. I'll let you see it when we get a chance. Hospital is on lockdown right now—bunch of cops here. Just get [ex-boss's dog] taken care of okay?"

"Gotcha."

I was back to work the next day. Our driveway was painted with puddles of blood spanning a good forty feet throughout, with bullet holes scattered across the front of the building—walls, windows, and door. I spent the first few hours of work trying to find where the bullet that made its way into the shop ended up. No luck—back to business as usual. The police left a cruiser parked outside for a few weeks and advised [ex-boss] to keep away from the shop for a few days. And he did—mostly.

It's amazing what this incident had done for the business. Word spread fast in this industry, and when people learned what had happened to [ex-boss] and how the guy working for him didn't jump ship, but instead kept the business going—the sales started going through the roof. Not long after the incident we had to start hiring more hands just to get us up to speed in production to keep

up with the increasing demand for our product.

Industrial [legal plant] trimming machines is what we produced. I was working for the company for almost two years at that point, before speculation had started that I was set to be running the company in the not-too-distant future.

Shortly after [ex-boss] refused [bad guy]'s offer to buy several hundred of these machines all at once for a few million dollars in cash, ultimately using us to launder the money he obtained through trafficking, this bitter, entitled psycho wanted to get back at us by using the same money to make knockoffs of our designs and sell them for a much lower price on the market. This didn't work out too well for him as [ex-boss] knew everyone on the entire damn continent who worked in this industry (it seemed), and they knew him. Everything happening with [bad guy] put his reputation in the shitter before he had a chance to release his first poorly conceived knockoff on the market. His attempts at forgery were further compromised when he tried using the same parts from manufacturers we were using—the same companies with whom [ex-boss] had close relationships with for decades. Nothing in [bad guy]'s plan to get back at [ex-boss] was working in his favor. But he had cash to spare, so he just kept going. Lawsuits, threats, even emotional phone calls in the middle of the night—he tried it all. I guess he had an entire East Indian mob looking down at him for being such an idiotic child, watching his every move—he had to prove himself. He *had* to do something. Anything.

On that brisk Sunday morning [ex-boss] was loading his boat up for a nice day out on the water. Before he was spotted, the gunman

ducked underneath the truck, out of sight, and fired several shots at [ex-boss's] legs. He fired several more shots, leaving a trail of bullet holes in the shop, as [ex-boss] ran for the front door to lock his dog away, before turning back toward the gunman, grabbing a rock, and chasing him down the street forty feet further until the gunman eventually disappeared around the corner.

For the next few weeks following the shooting everyone from detectives, to building inspectors, to [ex-boss's] friends were coming by the shop on a daily basis. It was a riot as he was on heavy medication the entire time, and I can't count the number of times I heard him tell the same story over and over again while he unwrapped the dressing, exposing the meaty four inch exit hole, (which, given it's size, the doctors didn't even bother to stitch up), to anyone willing to take a look.

Business was going great, but there was little evidence surrounding the incident to put away the man responsible for this. The best the police could do was to keep putting pressure on [bad guy], in hopes that it would deter him from doing anything stupid again. But the thought was still there in the back of everyone's mind. The 'what if?' Or, for some—the 'when?' Any knock on the door would be met with apprehension and a careful look through the window to determine who was on the other end of it. Any time someone were to leave the shop, especially at night when the streets were dark and empty, they would have to look three ways before exiting, the doors would be double-triple locked, and the thirty foot stroll to the car would be taken one dreadful step at a time.

About a month later it was decided that it's best this whole business gets moved down to California—something that would've made sense even before the shooting. I was set to start taking over

and set up shop down south while [ex-boss] wrapped things up in Vancouver. In a way, it was for everyone's safety, and as much as he wanted me to stick around—something was bound to happen one day, as the investigation was going nowhere, and they couldn't keep that police cruiser parked outside forever.

I agreed to do it, and was intensely excited about the prospect of moving to California, but then the fear of being trapped with a stable career, and an income of proportions a guy of my age just doesn't need, began to manifest inside my head. The discomfort of the thought of living a comfortable life slowly grew and ate away at me until one unremarkable morning: “[Ex-boss], I think I'm going to go and do something else with my life—this job has run its course for me.”

“Yeah bud, I could tell you haven't been too happy around here recently. Still want to be a writer then, huh?”

“I do.”

I was expecting to hear a lot worse from someone whose business largely depended on me being present. For a guy that loves to talk—the conversation was over quicker than I had anticipated. I gave him a four-month notice to make the transition smoother for him and began packing up my things.

Roses

It's my last night staying on Khao San Road. I'm drunk, grumpy, and my mind won't stop racing—these scribbles are sprouting up inside my head faster than I can write them all down. I'm sleep deprived; my level of energy is seemingly limitless. I've been surfing on this wave of second winds for as long as I could remember. I should eat, but the amount of beer I can drink at this point keeps my belly nice and full without becoming sick. It's just past midnight and I've been trying to fall asleep for the past hour, only to jump out of bed every couple of minutes to jot down yet another persistent scribble.

It's around one in the morning and I figure I should take one final walk down this street. Tired of pushing myself through crowds of drunks, I sit down underneath a five-foot tall speaker blaring bass-heavy techno at a patio overlooking this madness. All the other

restaurants across the street are doing the same—a dick-measuring contest of who can be louder. By the time all the dials are turned up to eleven, the music stops being music and begins to sound like a construction site where all of its workers and machinery are high on PCP.

The scribbles keep coming and all of my judgments and observations about the environment below, along with the bass so loud it's tossing my hair in each and every direction, isn't slowing them down but rather making them go to that place in my head where I don't want to be right now. The pair of Swedes beside me don't know how to pour a fucking beer into a glass, and by the third time the guy who's trying to sell that taser comes up to me I start to think of all the creative places I could shove the thing into. I'm plowing through one beer after another, each sip interrupted by a quick scribble; each scribble with a compulsive scratch of the back of my head or pinch of my earlobe.

On the other side of the patio I can see a group of about a dozen hanging out, drunk out of their minds, having the time of their lives. With each sip of my beer I see a number of them with their heads turned toward me, not judging—just scheming. After a few minutes of this, the young black man from the group approaches me, grabs me by the hand, and walks me over to their table where they already have a beer waiting for me. I reluctantly accept and begin exchanging names with the rest of the group. With the music blaring so loud—I can't hear their names, or what they're saying. But it's starting to matter less with each passing moment as a dozen genuine smiles surrounding me.

We're a few drinks in and the black man, who is sitting closest to me, becomes the only person I could somewhat have a conversation with. He orders a bunch more beers and hands another one over to

me. By this point in our conversation, I'm confident in knowing that he finds me to be an alright enough fella so that when I take the beer from his hand and say, "My nigga" as a thank you, that it'll go over well with him.

"Mah nigga," he reciprocates and we hug it out. "TIME TO DANCE!" he jumps out of his chair and yells, "do you dance, my friend?"

"Not really," I pull my chair back to reveal that I'm wearing a pair of jeans and flip-flops.

"Nigga this ain't a night for jeans!"

I shrug.

"COME ON EVERYONE! LET'S DANCE!"

He helps me up from my chair. The group follows his lead into the massive crowd of drunken sweaty bodies dancing on the street. I follow, only to hesitate and stop halfway through as I watch the group disappear into the rave. I don't dance. I really don't want to dance.

I slowly retreat back to the patio where instead of going back to where I was sitting earlier, I park my ass at a table occupied by two Argentinian girls who I noticed were watching our group earlier from up above.

"Oh what," the younger looking one turns to me, "no dancing for you?" She laughs and follows it with a bright, welcoming smile.

"Well..." I tilt my chair back to show her my flip-flops.

"Oh, really now?" She does the same.

"Well. Fuck." I laugh it off. "Dmytro," I reach my hand out.

"Mariana," she takes it.

I turn to my right to greet the other girl, "Ludmila," as she puts her hand into mine.

We bullshit for about half an hour while taking down a few more

bottles of beer and the occasional shots. With their thick accents, I can't understand half the shit they're telling me, and whenever the two of them need to exchange some words with one another in their language, my mind can't help but to use this free time to work out the logistics of what my drunk ass believes will lead to an inevitable threesome at the end of the night.

"Dance?" Mariana grabs my hand and gives me a cheeky smile.

I grunt.

"Daaaaanceeee?" She tilts her head to the side and spreads her smile even wider.

"Oyyyyyy."

"Dance! Dance! Dance!" She slides her chair back, throws up her feet and flip-flops onto my thighs, and gives me her best puppy dog eyes.

"That's cheating, you know." I get up and give the girls my best 'I don't do this sort of shit' look as they walk with me hand in hand right into this Khao San madness...

Shortly into getting over myself and allowing the liquor to take control of my feet, the joints in my elbows, and the symmetry of my eyebrows, a Canadian approached and politely asked for a cigarette. I let him have one. The vodka bucket he was holding was using up both his hands, he put it into mine so that he could light the cigarette.

"No-no-no-no-no!" He stopped the bucket as it made its way back toward him, pushed at it from the bottom up to my face, and placed two straws into my mouth. I complied.

"Right?" His head bopped back and forth while his mouth grinned some giddy grin.

"Yeah." I agreed and began to lower the bucket away from my

face after a quick sip. He stopped me again and shoved the straws back into my mouth.

“Right?!” His laugh grew wilder.

“Yuhhh!” I mumbled through them. After a few long gulps, I stopped. My eyes looked up at him.

“RIGHT!”

I pushed the straws out of the way, grabbed the bucket at the sides with both hands, and began taking the thing down in massive chugs. “YEAH!” I handed the bucket back to him.

He threw the straws down on the pavement and began to chug.

“Right?” I laughed manically.

“Yeah!” He yelled into the bucket.

“RIGHT!” I grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him violently.

“YEAH MOTHERFUCKER!!!”

The Argentinians got lost in a crowd somewhere, I was sure I would find them again if I needed to have that threesome. In the meantime, the most important thing at the moment was for the Canadian and I to find another vodka bucket.

We did. And on the way back to the spot where we first met, we ran into a Danish man who looked like he was in desperate need of a vodka bucket too. After a few hugs and a meet-and-greet I shoved the thing into his face while the Canadian and I drank from the other two straws. The Danish man began talking about LeBron, or Tiger Woods, or something along those lines; I started speaking to him in Russian every time sports would come up so he would understand what it felt like to not know what the hell he was talking about.

After a few more shared sips, and with my face being so close to his, I suddenly realized how magnificent this Danish man’s beard

was from up close, and so, I began to play with it. He allowed me to, and was almost flattered by the sentiment. My audible admiration for his facial hair grew louder and wilder, the Canadian agreed with me and joined in. Before we knew it, a crowd of over a dozen other drunks had gathered around us so that they could have a go at stroking this man's beard.

All this beard business and we realized that we had already gone through another vodka bucket. The Canadian, the Dane, and I began our journey through those massive crowds, and toward another restaurant that would serve us. On our way there, two men in bright neon outfits cut through the crowd, holding a long stick by the ends between the two of them. I wondered why it was that people started gathering around a bunch of guys with a long stick. And then I saw it—limbo.

I got lower each time I went through. Massive line-ups formed on each end of the stick, a swarm of overconfident drunks who had something to prove—I was no exception. After about fifteen times through, the stick got low enough that people began to notice my fearless limbo skills. I realized that my flip-flops were broken up and off to the sides somewhere, and that the insides of my feet were torn up and bleeding all over the road. A tall, drunken brown man saw my feet, grabbed my hand, raised it up into the air, and declared me the champion of limbo.

“Bro, why are you wearing jeans?!” someone yelled out from the crowd.

The limbo scene was broken up by a few police officers, and so everybody went back to the usual bumping and grinding. A shy, skinny German helped me gather the bits and pieces of my flip-flops and began cautiously admiring the chunks of skin hanging off my feet. He then went on to explain to me, in a very matter-of-fact

manner, that with my build, my body shouldn't be able to bend in the way he saw it bend. I laughed; he was dead serious. Perhaps Germans only know how to laugh on the inside.

The German was going off about how much my limbo form could improve if I were to simply just change my outfit when the Canadian and the Dane found us in the crowd, with a brand new vodka bucket in hand. The other two asked me who the new guy was.

"He's the Joyman," I tried in my best German accent.

"FUCK YES!" The Canadian pulled us in for a group hug with the vodka bucket and a bunch of straws in the middle.

The Canadian, the Dane, the German, and I spent some time strolling through this mad street, getting progressively drunker. It was nearing four in the morning and the majority of the crowd had dispersed by now, leaving just the ones dedicated enough, or on drugs, out to wander.

Most of the bars were closed at that point, but on the outskirts of the road we spotted a tiny kiosk that allowed us a final vodka bucket.

The guys and I sat on the curb outside where we shared intimate details of our lives while pretending to understand what the others were talking about. The accents were difficult enough—the fact that everyone was just about ready to pass out on the sidewalk made it near impossible to understand any of it. But nevertheless—it felt like we were relating.

The Canadian was in a middle of a story of how he accidentally ejaculated on a girl's dog when a fifteen-year-old girl, cradling a few dozen roses, walked past us and spotted the gory mess on my feet which I'd forgotten about a long while ago. She stopped in her tracks, walked over to me, and gently tossed the roses into my arms. The guys and I were equally baffled when this girl crouched down

beside me, pulled out a pocketful of bandages, and started patching me up. She got up and reached her hand out to me, I thought she wanted the roses back so I nudged them toward her.

“Baht,” she said.

“Oh.” That’s fair, I thought. I only had a 100 baht left on me by the end of the night so I pulled it out and handed it to her.

She scrunched her face as she took the bill. I tried to hand her the roses again but she just took off.

“Did she just touch your feet bro?” The Canadian seemed most baffled by it.

We sat around for a little while, drunkenly trying to make sense of this flower girl. The German finally broke the silence and started on his story about how his neighbors caught him masturbating. He couldn’t finish a sentence without bursting into laughter every few words. I don’t imagine he was used to sharing such intimate details with others.

The flower girl showed up again. We all froze in place and watched as she sat herself down on the pavement, pulled out a plastic bag filled with medicine, and carefully got to work on my wounds.

“What’s she doing man?” The German let out.

“I... don’t know,” I grunted and shrugged my shoulders.

“Yooooo...” The Canadian added.

Propped up on her thigh, one at a time, she massaged my feet and toes when the burn from the rubbing alcohol became a little too much. She thoroughly went through every crevice, cutting off any thick bits of skin that had no chance of healing, cleaned everything out before applying gauze, and finally, neatly wrapped it all up with tape. When the dressing was done, she pulled out some antibiotics, an Advil, and a bottle of water and handed it off to me one by one

as I slowly took it all down.

The flower girl signaled me to get up onto my feet and walk around to make sure that the dressing wouldn't fall off. I was in a trance and didn't know what to do but to follow her every order. With the flowers still in my possession, I tried to hand them back to her. She refused them. I stood there motionless as she wrapped her hands around me, gave me a long, deep kiss on the cheek, took my nice pen out of my front shirt pocket, and walked off.

The Canadian, the Dane, and the German stood up, slowly walked over to me, and formed a line with everyone's arms resting over each other's shoulders. We just stood there, my hands still cradling the few dozen beaten up roses and didn't make a peep while we watched this flower girl walk down the road and disappear into the distance. No one said a single word. Not a sound came out of anybody's mouth. Nothing-at-all. We couldn't do a single thing that wouldn't make any of us burst into a fit of manly tears.

Our arms slid off of one another's shoulders as we shuffled around into a circle while we picked our jaws off the ground. The guys and I distributed the roses evenly between the four of us, formed a diagonal line on the road, and made our way toward what was left of the Khao San madness. Whether they wanted it or not, each and every person remaining on the street at that hour got a rose, a hug, and a kiss. Some would try running from us; the majority would reciprocate the love.

Everything was just alright.

That night, the flimsy sandals flopped and danced happily about. The parachute pants never looked more comfortable; the Chang tank tops—refreshing. The liquor was communal and the straws were aplenty. The guys were rowdy, the gals ran wild. All the foreign

The Sponge

languages serenaded my heart and left my mind in wander of their stories.

With all this then, it was a good time to say: Farewell, Khao San Road.

The Thirst

“How is going?”

...

At the time, I had my mind set on moving north to Chiang Mai once my hotel reservation in Bangkok came to an end. It was two nights before my departure. It was the last time I saw Anita.

We started the Friday night off at her friend’s apartment, Poh was her name, she had just arrived in town after being gone for a month and was definitely upset over something. The guy smoking cigarettes and drinking German beer with me out on the balcony was Nicky—half Thai, half German, and spoke with a mixed accent that was just as strange.

It seemed as if an old gang had gotten back together after a long time away, and so their plan was to spend a night reliving the days

they spent together as youngsters, drinking the same drinks they drank, and getting up to the same sort of no good that just felt so right back then.

After two six-packs of imported beer we began making our way to our first destination—the same bar with the lonely Italian bartender from the other night, near Pat Pong. The bar where the gang used to start their nights by drinking overpriced drinks up on the top floor. When their only plans back then were to simply be as spontaneous as their imaginations would allow.

Often, when they would go on about how *crazy* their nights were, I wanted to interrupt and inquire about some of the details, but I would constantly stop myself from doing so. It was clear that it was not the details that mattered but simply the feelings they shared while experiencing these things, so I tried to not be the prick that would burst their bubble.

At this bar we met with another group of four of their old friends. Poh was plowing through her margaritas while I had to endure through what seemed like a solid ten minutes of selfies with a psyched group of Asians who hadn't seen each other in a long time.

Click. Review.

Click. "Somebody's eyes were closed."

Click. "Do one with flash."

Click. "No, keep doing them without the flash."

Click. "Ok, now do it on *my* phone."

Click. "Ooooh—now I sit beside *her*. And you sit beside *him*."

Click. "Do one in front of the bar!"

Click. "Now a silly one!"

Click. "Uhm, that won't work on Instagram. Leave more space on the sides."

Click. “Oh, you have to press the button on the side. No, that’s the gallery—don’t look at it. Here, just press *here!* Okay!?”

And here I thought I was hanging out with a bunch of career adults. I did that face I do when I’ve stopped finding the situation amusing and allow my eyes to wander off where they caught the sight of a skinny Russian model, overdressed, of course, at the other end of the bar. She was dancing, her eyes and body in a trance, in an imaginary circle with a diameter of no wider than three feet. A sleazy, longhaired fat man, who was with her, smoked his cigarettes and watched her pretty, unenthused face swaying side to side by his bar stool.

Liffy, the only girl in the group who understood my current agony, had to take off shortly afterward, leaving me to suffer through this narcissistic madness all on my own.

Soon the group separated and it was back to Anita, Nicky, Poh, and I. We were in Pat Pong at the time—the world-famous night market. Also, the world-famous red light district, where the go-go bars are kept a good distance away from the gay bars. Perhaps, in case a westerner might stumble into the wrong bar and get offended or discover a thing or two about themselves.

We made our way to Black Pagoda—a go-go bar that’s positioned on a bridge between two buildings, comprised of glass walls so to enable people a sneak preview of the: “What!?! No, I didn’t come here for *that!*”

Our entry fee bought us drink tickets which we spent on some Coronas, meanwhile, Poh threw back several gin and tonics. The patrons here were more disgusting than I could’ve imagined. Sitting next to me at the bar was a forty-something ex-pat. A dancer on a stool was pulled up next to him, her legs spread open and resting on

his shoulders. The two laughed along while the ex-pat poked at her cunt with his index finger, grinning like an idiot. A few Chinese tourists walked circles around the five hundred square foot space in sunglasses, unsure of how they were supposed to approach the situation. The young white guys were the worst, two of them just sat back in the corner with looks on their faces indicating something along the lines of “I’m too cool for this sort of shit, but, if anything happens—sure. Yeah, whatever.”

We stood around for a while and sipped our drinks while the ex-pat began to reach further into the girl’s crotch. She asked him for something, I’d assume money, while seductively wagging her finger at him. He fumbled around, uncomfortable in the position he’s been sitting in, but was finally able to grab his wallet to hand her some cash, before pulling her champagne-colored G-string off to the side, far enough to get him a good look at the glory the Western world had been promising him his whole life, if he were to just work hard enough—but never delivered on.

Moving along to explore a little further, Nicky ran into a pair of six-foot tall German lesbians whom he met a while ago when he lived in Germany. I split off from the group for a bit and began talking to a twenty-something American girl who claimed that she worked *with* the girls. When I asked her about the details of exactly what it was that she did, I immediately got the cold shoulder. The hairdresser? The manicurist? The recruiter? I’ll never know. Another case of blue-balls.

Poh was bumping into way too many things before the group agreed that this place was not what they remembered it to be, and so, everyone decided that it was time to move on to the next place. The elevator was taking way too long to arrive for a mere two floors, so we tried to get Poh to walk down the stairs with us. That seemed

to trigger something inside her, causing her to stand on the edge of the stairwell and scream over how she discovered her boyfriend's online dating profile, which he apparently made in the month she spent away. Eventually, we were able to get her down and into a cab before she decided that that was the night, the perfect time, to finally confront her boyfriend.

It was just Nicky, Anita, and I now and it was decided that our next destination would be down the street, where the plaza that housed all the gay bars was located. The group split up when the other two had to use the bathroom. I was stumbling around upstairs when one of the doors opened—it was Anita, she pulled me inside and we fooled around in the bathroom for a little while before we heard Nicky call out for us from the lobby.

A very revealing drag show ensued in the bar, and we watched while drinking what was claimed to be 'the gayest drink ever', before fighting through a crowd of hundreds, trying to get from one bar to the next. Once we made it back outside, Nicky and I finally had a sit and a cigarette while he reminisced about the good old days. He had a sour look on his face about the whole scene in front of him as he went on about how it was different back in his day, how he was able to really let loose, but also—how it's the *place* that's changed. He insisted that we drink until we couldn't stand and so we backtracked again to look for a quieter bar to sit down at.

I decided it was time to put an end to the night when Nicky fell over twice while trying to make it to the other bar. He still insisted, and found a bar where he began to obnoxiously initiate conversations with all the other patrons who tried waving him away. He ordered a Long Island, not realizing that he had no more money on him. I insisted that I wasn't going to pay for it and that he should go home, but then Anita paid for it. I managed to get him out on

the patio so that at least he wouldn't be bothering everyone else at the bar. We all shared the drink and Nicky and I smoked a few cigarettes. He may have passed out at one point when he let his eyes close for a few short moments.

We gave him some time to regain himself and made our way to a 7-Eleven where I bought a bottle of water and gently forced the entire thing down his throat. I remembered I ran out of cigarettes, and while paying for them, realized that Nicky had disappeared—he was nowhere to be seen in any of the aisles. Anita had no clue he was even gone; her head had been falling asleep on my shoulder the entire time.

I took to the streets to look for the guy—still nowhere to be seen. I looked around a few corners, the bar where we sat at just a few minutes ago, and didn't find him until I went back to the 7-Eleven to buy myself a bottle of water. There he was, hugging it out with the German lesbians from earlier. I told him that I was going to call us a cab, but he insisted that he wanted to hang out with his sisters. Sure. Anita and I caught a cab. Luckily that night, Poh had an extra apartment in her building where we could crash.

I woke up to find Anita running her index finger through the four-inch long scar going down the middle of my stomach, and an uneasy feeling that she felt more for me than what is appropriate for this sort of relationship. I subtly reminded her that it would be the last time she was going to see me and figured that doing the alphabet in Morse code would be an appropriate going away gift...

It was nine in the morning and Anita and I were getting ready to leave when Nicky showed up at our door. Unable to contain himself, he yelled out, "I FUCKING LOVE DRUGS!" as he barged into the

apartment.

He told us about how he and the Germans had been doing cocaine all night. How he hadn't slept yet.

He walked circles around the apartment and proclaimed to the entire world about how young he felt once again.

That morning, Anita and I had a quick breakfast, reminisced about the good times, and said our goodbyes. That morning, the sunlight hit her head just right.

Chiang Mai was a ghost town and I was sick of it after less than a week. I've always considered myself someone who enjoys some quiet time away from people, and I've always done well for myself being in isolation. But, when you're trying to live in a town that caters so heavily to tourists, and the only reason that it's deserted is because it's not tourist season, the feelings toward that place change. I found myself back in Bangkok within six days. What can I say, the place grew on me, and I was feeling optimistic about the idea of getting up to experiencing more of the peculiarities this big city had to offer.

"Hey!" I sent her a text as soon as I got back to Bangkok, "So, Chiang Mai was not very exciting. How you been?"

She didn't reply—I didn't think too much of it. I moved on. I thought I'd use this time to regain my focus and do what I came here to do in the first place—polish off the mess that is "John Loves a Hooker."

"How is going?"

It took her a month, but she finally got back to me. At that point, I told myself, I had completely lost all interest and found no

motivation to start something back up again.

“How is going?”

I let it sit for a day or two. The words kept running through my head. I wanted to reply. I was curious to see what would happen again if I did. But I was also scared for the girl’s health, as I wasn’t sure if her intentions coincided with her actions.

Hell. She leaves for LA in a few weeks... what’s the worst that could happen? Soon enough she’ll forget about me and I will be nothing but a spec of dust floating around in her atmosphere among a million identical others. Just a blip on her radar that will slowly pulsate its way out from the center of the screen until it eventually falls off the edge.

“How is going?”

I’ll just vanish. Poof. It would be as if I had never existed. But I want to let the thought bounce around for a little bit longer than I should, and then tell myself that the most difficult thing to accept is the idea that one day, the pain might go away. Come on. People don’t care nearly as much as you think they do. How vain of me would it be to think that I had any sort of meaningful impact on this girl’s life—at least enough to constitute any sort of justifiable pain.

“How is going?”

Just answer her goddamn it.

“How is going?”

It’s been several days now and I continue to allow the words to linger in my head. I let them stir my thoughts and keep me awake at

nights until it begins to resemble real pain. I allow the words to follow me everywhere I go. I allow them to manifest into something that I can put down on a page, and take me to that place where I can convince myself that I'm hurting another human being. I want them to hurt her; I want them to hurt me even worse. I want to embellish, romanticize, and squeeze every painful sentence out of this entire thing so I can construct more material to write about. How perversely desperate have I become in my pursuit to write an entertaining story?

Is this what we do—fabricate ghosts and personal demons just to have something to talk to when we get lonely? Do we *want* to be haunted just for the mere idea that something out there would finally start paying some attention? To look at us once in a while? Something to reflect off of?

It's been over a week and nothing exciting has happened. When the expectations run high, and the amount of drama is just not enough to cut it, that's when morals, and their flexibility, come into question. How far can I push myself until I give my mind a hemorrhoid? A cranial prolapse. This fear of a potential creative constipation that's got me compulsively cracking my knuckles and eating the insides of my cheeks—I should know, at this point, that it's only temporary. But I'm having an increasingly difficult time reminding myself of it. I need to stick to a diet of mental fiber—living—and just let this shit flow out naturally. Otherwise, I'm scared of what might happen to me.

Recently, I've been chatting with another girl online. She was intrigued, and wanted to meet me because I reminded her of her dead boyfriend, who was also a writer. I wanted to meet her for the

sole reason of getting to the bottom of the story of what a church sex cult had to do with his recent suicide—just so I could have something interesting to write about. I questioned the morality of it at times. Bullshit. I kept telling myself that if I were to write it in an objective enough manner that I'd be able to live with myself.

I decided it was best that I don't meet her after all.

The most important thing to do when staying in this 'character', I think, is to know that when the words, "Am I turning into a sociopath?" begin to materialize inside of your head, it's time to take a step back and rethink some things.

Here's the funny thing about being a sponge: you're *always* thirsty.

"How is going?"

More time went by, and after an in-depth analysis of my scribbles, I've decided that it may be time to start thinking about wrapping some things up. Somehow down the line I'd forgotten that I'm a happy person. Somehow I'd forgotten that I actually enjoy life—but it was these scribbles here that tried to convince me otherwise.

I found myself walking down a path where I fought to keep my head from looking toward the exit that led to being funny, sincere, and genuine, and walked straight into being another naïve child who thought he had figured out all of the world's problems just because he was able to string a few words together nicely—if only somebody would listen. When the world and all of its hypocrisies, conundrums, and contradictions just quit being amusing, when you're no longer a comedian, but a preacher, when you dig yourself into a hole so deep that you can't see or hear anyone else, it's easy to assume that all the dirt you're shoveling out of the hole is receiving the praise and applause you think it deserves, and not just a

patronizing flick of the wrist and a ‘poor you’. It’s easy to think that just because you’ve put all of this blood, sweat, and tears into this excavation, that you’re entitled to any form of recognition whatsoever.

You’re not. Nobody is. But it’s nice to stick your head out once in a while to see where it’s gotten you.

We’re raised to think that we have the power to change the world. We’re always reminded of the power we have to rape, murder, steal, cheat, lie, etc.; we’re rarely reminded of the power we have to help, heal, get better, to just simply be content. Death, on the other hand, is abundant, frequent, and an indisputable constant, yet, to be reminded of it on a more personal level is considered taboo. Maybe that’s just the kick in the ass everybody needs once in a while—a friendly neighborhood reminder plastered onto every lamppost, train station, and mirror; a text message you receive every morning, a banner on every street corner, billboard, and self-help website. As much as this is beginning to sound like another cookie-cutter motivational quote a naïve teenage girl would plaster on her Facebook wall: Why not then live as if you’re dying? Love as if you’re dying? Write as if you’re dying? Because who isn’t?

Just a gentle nudge to help people battle that crippling disease everybody suffers from once in a while—the lack of effort.

Yes, when you never try, it’s easy to stand up in front of the entire world and have that expected dull ‘meh’ leave you completely unaffected. There would be no moving on from it because there would’ve been no displacement in the first place. But how would it feel to stand in the same place, admit that you actually tried, and anxiously wait to receive a reaction that’s a million times more terrifying and exciting—an emotion.

This cynical optimism of mine: the world is a shithole, and if you look closely enough, you can watch in real time as it decays underneath our very feet, but hey—we'll be alright.

But cynicism isn't a full tank that eventually runs dry when you use it as fuel to keep the fire of your one-sided preconceptions about life burning bright. No, cynicism is a vicious cycle of "Out with the old, in with the new." It's the acne cyst on your cheek that grows larger and uglier every time you squeeze out the sebum. Eventually, once it grows large enough, it gets so deep into the follicle that with every squeeze of the white goodness, a trail of watery blood and pus will spill from the hole. You squeeze that blood out enough times and eventually it will turn into a deep round crater on your face—the little hair that could've been, it had a chance to be something nice if only you'd have learned to leave that little white bump alone.

Fuck cynicism. Everyone's a certified cynical asshole these days. Nobody gives a shit about finding a solution to anything anymore. We're just obsessed with finding problems with trivial everyday things, get our quick fix by garnering recognition for it, and then simply move on to the next thing. We do it to be heard. It's our fast way of finding some common ground between one another, to relate, and filter out the 'toxic' people in our lives.

"Oh the calamity!"

I don't have solutions. I sure as hell don't know where to look for them. I'm trying to remain an optimist despite the fact that I can't help but to think that the same traits which help us advance as a species are the same as those holding us back: teamwork, an absolutely necessary herd mentality, and a set of uncompromising words to live by from the few who are willing to admit: "Nothing in moderation."

But then again—we'll be alright.

This is getting hard.

“Cynical optimist.”

“Piece of shit.”

“Writer.”

How easy it is to throw labels around and think that you’ve got yourself pinned down. But the entire concept of ‘knowing yourself’ is flawed and impossible to grasp when you realize that the only constant in this equation of life is change—and even that is consistently inconsistent. When the change does come, labeling oneself a total hypocrite in order to decline the said change is inevitable. It’s dangerous to go down the route of allowing yourself to think that you know your life well enough to imagine that you’ve found a pattern—because soon enough you might get it into your head that it’s true, and ultimately adhere to that pattern for the rest of your life. The idea of breaking free would become something even less than a simple daydream.

I don’t know much about myself except for the fact that my conscience can be a real torturous motherfucker sometimes.

“How is going?”

What are you waiting for?

“How is going?”

This tragedy isn’t coming.

“How is going?”

Expectations. Expectations. Expectations.

I start to think up all the ways in which my initial text message may have gotten misinterpreted.

Now I think I’m *really* beginning to understand why it is that writers,

or privileged white kids who thought they knew what these authors were really trying to say, would want to travel abroad to get their juiciest writing done. You can take this foreign environment, abundant in multi-dimensional people and environments, and strip it down to just the bits and pieces that cater to your story and mindset, and out of them, construct a romantic backdrop onto which you can project all your thoughts, disdains, and insecurities.

It may have been the ice in my drink—the reason why I’ve been shitting my guts out in these last three weeks, and because of these antibiotics I’ve finally decided to consume, I haven’t had liquor for a few days—I think my mind is beginning to clear up just a little bit. After days upon days of crouching down in front of the toilet, meticulously analyzing my fecal matter floating around in the toilet that I’ve frequented over six times a day, I couldn’t help but to cringe, and grow increasingly depressed every time I looked down and saw massive blobs of mucus floating around the bowl. No fasting, or fuck me—eating like a vegetarian for several days at a time did my insides any good. Today though, I took a closer look and realized, that although seldom, there would be slightly more solid pieces floating around the mess. I would grin like an idiot child every time I spotted something that would resemble a solid, healthy bowel movement, and realized just how much I’ve been taking my solid shits for granted. I don’t know if I lost my mind just a little bit—but right now I feel more sane than I ever have. The little bits of anger begin reminding me of the happier moments. The bitter is becoming the sweet once more. The short-term block of the mind has me reminiscing about those moments of real inspiration—and how they *always* came from the most unexpected places.

Analogies are...

“How is going?”

It’s easy to let yourself fall into this trap when you just let your eyes close and allow yourself to fall backwards into a sea of deep words without realizing you’re merely dragging your feet through a kiddypool of shallow thoughts. No amount of jerking off to “The Alchemist” is going to make any real sense, except perhaps to provide you with a short burst of euphoria that will get you to do that thing which you’ve wanted to do all your life... for a about a week—until reality sets in again.

I’m constantly finding myself reiterating the same thoughts and ideas that I’ve probably heard and read somewhere else over a thousand times before. There’s a fear that gnaws at the back of my brain constantly telling me that I’m not being original enough. That I’m not going deep enough. That everything I write today will feel trivial or juvenile the next time I read it. That everybody’s already thought or heard of it—so what’s the point then, of potentially saying it again? In that case—why do anything, right? At the end of it, these thoughts, conclusions, and resolutions really mean nothing at all, and it’s how you go about getting them into your head in the first place that really counts. Symbolism, analogies, metaphors... whatever—it’s all just masturbation right now. It’s been said a thousand different ways before, and a million more to come. There’s really no reason to be a pretentious asshole, and beat around the bush about trying to convey the only important message that holds the most meaning, and in the simplest of words: It’s not about the destination; it *really* is about the journey.

“How is going?”

...

However I go about dealing with that message—it's not going in here. I don't even know who I'm writing this for anymore. Either way, I'm putting an end to it. It's time to get real and get over myself: I am not an 'as-objective-as-I-can-be-observer'. To be without opinion is to be without character, whoever that may be—I'm not out here writing a fucking school paper about endangered rocks. I am not here for a harmless 'quick in-and-out'—whatever happens, whatever I do—it will stay with me. How was I just 'going with the flow' when throughout the entire trip I felt such immense passion, whether positive or negative, toward the people and environment around me?

Everybody breaks.

Ha! Who the hell am I kidding, I am no sponge.