

Expatriate

Brian spent his last hundred baht on a beer for a woman whom he'd met five minutes before. If he'd have known at the time that it was his last hundred baht, he might have tried a little harder to talk to her. Or hell, he would've saved the beer for himself. But as it was, he slid the bartender the cash, she slunk back to her friends with a new beer, and he walked home through the pouring rain alone.

Five years he had been living in Thailand and still he hadn't bought a rain jacket. It just didn't feel right. People who lived in Portland or Seattle owned rain jackets. In Thailand, people were supposed to wear a uniform of cargo shorts and flip flops year-round. Or so he told himself during the four months of monsoon season as he shuffled through the muddy streets in his sandals.

One street prior to home, a one-bedroom condo he rented in Kata Noi, he stopped at the ATM to get some cash for cigarettes he could smoke to warm himself up. But when he tried to make a withdrawal at the machine, he was met with an error message. And then another. He cursed to himself under his breath while he brought up the banking app on his phone to clear whatever block had been put on his account this time. He leaned closer to the wall, trying to shield his phone from the rain under the slight awning above him. He checked his balance and saw that every card read \$0.00.

For a moment, standing in the street, still decently drunk and soaking wet, Brian felt the strangest sense of elation he hadn't experienced since the first time he'd first visited Thailand. He felt like he was at perfect balance with the rest of the world. That he didn't owe anyone

anything, and he owned nothing of anyone else's in return. He felt as if, in ridding himself of his worldly possessions, he had accidentally stumbled upon a kind of nirvana.

And then he shivered in the cold and remembered he had no way of paying for his cigarettes.

Brian woke up several hours later to the sound of his phone ringing and a terrible backache. He'd fallen asleep on his couch, one of those expensive pieces interior decorators talk you into buying to make you look sophisticated which have too many right angles to ever comfortably be used.

He sat up, massaging his sore back with one hand, as he reached for the phone with the other, praying it was good news.

"Hello?"

"The fuck is this, Brian?"

Though her voice was slightly warbled by the long-distance line, Cindy sounded much like how he remembered her, direct and unflinching.

"It's an invoice," he said.

"I know what a fucking invoice is," she replied and he had to pull the phone back further from his ear. "I mean why did you send it to me?" she asked.

"It's for the year you and Danny spent living with me."

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "You're retroactively charging me rent?"

Brian sighed. "You don't have to make this argument."

"Tell me, how I should take it then?"

“I was happy to pay for you guys when I had the means. But now I’m in trouble, and I need you to return the favor.”

“It’s been five years with no messages from you. You could’ve been dead for all I knew..”

He felt he should make some excuse for the lack of communication, but none came to mind.

“I wouldn’t send it to you unless I really needed the money.”

“Blow it all on booze and poker already?”

“My business partner here stole from me. Drained my account and left the country. And since I’m not a citizen and legally my name couldn’t be on any of the papers, my lawyers told me I’m basically shit out of luck.”

“Fuck,” Cindy said.

“I wouldn’t bother you if I had anyone else to ask.”

Brian could hear Cindy take a stabilizing breath on the other line. “Brian, I’m sorry that you’re in this situation,” she said. “But this isn’t a great time for me. We’re just getting back on our feet now.”

For a moment, Brian couldn’t quite process what she was saying. He had never really considered she might say no. Sure, she might fight back at first, offer a little resistance, but then he would emphasize his need and she would of course help him out. After all, that’s what he’d done for her.

“It’s not like I’m asking you for a favor here,” he said. “It’s just what you owe me.”

“I didn’t realize you were keeping a running tab during our relationship.”

There was something about this comment, part of its suggestion that Brian had somehow been a villain for lending her money in the first place, that really pushed him over the edge.

“Look, I’m trying to do this in the nicest way I can. I don’t want to pursue legal action but I will. You’re gonna spend way more than 10,000 in legal bills trying to fight me off, so you might as well just accept it.”

He wasn’t sure that he would actually be able to prove his case in a court of law, much less afford the lawyer to do so, but he was hoping that the threat would be enough to scare some sense into her.

She was quiet for a moment.

“Tell your lawyer to talk to my lawyer, asshole,” she finally said and the line went dead.

Brian knew there was a parallel universe out there where he never left the States, where he stayed in Michigan, proposed to Cindy and moved into a nice-sized home on the water with her and Danny. He knew it existed because he had almost lived it.

When Brian started dating Cindy, he had never expected to like playing the suburban dad role as much as he did. Growing up in a little New England suburb, he thought his parents’ lives seemed so boring and so sad when the highlight of their week was making food for the block party or the one hit their kid made for their little league team. But once Brian started dating Cindy, he discovered that he actually made a pretty good potato salad and that helping to coach Danny to play baseball almost felt like being a kid himself again.

Brian had thought Danny was a hopeless case at first. The kid was terrified of the ball. No matter how much Brian padded him with protective gear or tried to ease him with a soft

pitch, Danny always flinched before the ball even got close enough for him to swing at. Brian was almost out of ideas of how to coach him when one day Danny finally worked up the courage to take his first hit, swung at the ball with all his pent up anxiety and ended up knocking it clear of the park fence. As Brian stood cheering with the rest of the parents, watching as Danny rounded the bases with his bat still clenched in one hand, he was surprised to find himself having to hold back tears at such a mundane moment.

Now five years removed from life, living on an island far away from everything he'd known, relearning how to live for himself and himself alone, these memories felt strange to Brian. It was as if he were looking into the past of some parallel self, a man he might have become if things were different, but in whom he no longer recognized himself.

“It’s a steal. Couches like this go for at least 30,000 in the States.”

“It feels like I’m sitting on a block of concrete.”

“You can sell this and buy ten more comfortable couches.”

“Then, why don’t you sell it?”

“Because I need the money now.”

“And I need a couch I can use.”

Brian led yet another lost customer out of his condo and shut the door behind her a little harder than necessary. How his life had come to this so quickly, from an early retirement with enough money to live a comfortable life to trying to pawn off his furniture was astounding.

He’d still yet to hear any leads on where his business partner might have gone. He had been late on his rent payment yet again and was notified via a note on his front door, and he had

only two more days to pack his belongings and leave. He was almost at his credit limit on all his cards, and after that, he had no idea what he would do.

He tried to trace back his decisions to find the one that brought him to this moment. His instinct was to say when he chose his partner, but really it felt like it all happened before then. It started the day a mudslide buried his hostel. He was a recent college grad with a new passport he planned on getting some use out of while he still had the chance. For a week he had stayed in Phuket and already he was in awe of the pristine beaches barely touched by the outside world, the coral reefs that were so colorful they looked painted on, the natural beauty of the untamed jungle. But what really changed him was the day he arrived by boat to one of the remote islands just off the coast and found the village he was planning on staying in for the next few days had been reduced to a pile of wood and mud.

In fact, most of the homes on the island, little structures stood up on four posts with tin roofs that barely held out against the rain, had been brought down. The mud that had sloughed off the side of the mountain that morning had raked through every building, filling the streets with artifacts of people's lives: the broken legs of bedside tables, plastic remnants of children's toys, shattered dishes and ruined photographs.

And yet, though the disaster could not have been more than a few hours old, people had already begun gathering in the streets to clear the wreckage. He saw more people out helping that day than he had seen in his entire week in Thailand. Not only first responders or people from the village, but it seemed the entire surrounding area had mobilized to help. As if what happened to one neighborhood happened to them all. So naturally, he picked up a shovel and joined the crowd.

Throughout the rest of the week, he and several other people suddenly without a place to stay were taken into the homes of strangers, given food and shelter for nothing in return but his dinner conversation. It all seemed so much simpler than the world he'd known back home, so much closer to the essence of life. And it gave him a plan. When he returned to the States, he would get an office job somewhere where he would work like a dog, make as much money as quickly as possible, so that he could return for good to this paradise.

It required more sacrifices than he could have imagined at twenty-two. He had to give up the golden years of his twenties and thirties while his friends were off partying or starting families so that he could work twelve hour days six days a week. But by the time he was forty-two, he had finally saved up the money he needed to leave when Cindy called him to her house one night in a panic.

On his advice, she had quit her corporate job to pursue her dream of opening an assisted living facility out of her home. But all the red tape and legal complications of her plan were starting to drown her in debt before she could even get started. And now, it seemed the mountain of unpaid bills was threatening to consume her whole life.

“I don't know what I'm going to do,” she'd told him.

And that's when he had an idea. “Come with me to Thailand.”

“What?”

“If you come with me, I can pay off your debts, and we can start a new life there. I've got enough money that neither of us would have to work another day.”

“And what about Danny?” she asked.

“He can come with us,” Brian said, getting more excited about the idea as he spoke.

“They’ve got international schools there where they teach in English. Just think about how much he could learn in a class with kids from all over the world.”

“He just started middle school,” she said. “I can’t ask him to move to another country.”

Brian thought about it for a moment. “Then, let your ex take care of him during the school year, and he can come spend all of summer with us.”

She hesitated and for a moment he thought she just might say yes, but she shook her head. “I can’t. Not right now.”

That’s when Brian delayed his trip the first year, thinking that maybe as Danny got older, as he helped Cindy get back on her feet financially, he could convince her to move with him. But then a year went by and then another as Cindy came up with more excuses: she couldn’t leave behind her job, her friends, her family. Until Brian suddenly realized one day that he would never be able to convince her to leave, so he left without her.

By the time he finally made it to Thailand, the paradise he had been waiting all his life to return to was already gone, overtaken by the sudden rise in tourism. What was once a cultural haven had become the wasted host of a parasitic brand of tourism that sucked up everything that made the place unique and left behind long rows of chain restaurants and resort hotels. Much of the jungle had been cut down to clear room for new condos, the coral reefs were all dying from water pollution, and some of the beaches had become so crowded that the state had made them part of protected land so that people could no longer visit them.

If he had left a few years earlier, when he had initially planned, he thought he might have been able to make it there before the tourism took over entirely. He might have found the fading

shadow of that paradise he'd so loved and been able to follow it wherever it went after it had been chased out of Thailand. He might have been able to reclaim a little bit of what he had lost.

But he hadn't because of her, because of them, and the more Brian thought about this, the more frustrated he got. He had given everyone else in his life everything he had, and all they had ever done is taken from him in return. So he would do what Cindy had accused him of doing. He would create a running tab of everything he had ever given to anyone else. Every grocery bill and every month of rent he paid. And he wouldn't stop there. He would count up every hour he spent under the hot sun watching baseball, every painful conversation he could've avoided, every moment he spent missing them, every pain he felt at his wasted dream.

He created the list with the painstaking attention to detail of an accountant, assigning a monetary value to every moment of his life with her, and when he finished, he searched for her Facebook, the only channel through which she hadn't already blocked him, when her most recent photo caught his eye. He clicked on the image to expand it.

The boy's face had lost the softness of childhood by now, but he still had the same stern look Brian remembered. He couldn't have been more than a few years off from how old Brian was when he had first visited Thailand. Brian could see he was posed with one knee bent, baseball cap pulled low over his eyes, holding a bat in one hand. *Just got recruited to be a pitcher for Villanova next fall. Proud mom!*

And suddenly Brian felt tears, which could not be accounted for by any sense of reason, begin to flood his eyes.