

DERMOT O'SULLIVAN

SILOM ROAD

BLEARY SHEETS OF RAIN WERE DRAPING THEMSELVES ceaselessly over the skyscrapers, blurring the light from the few square, yellow windows which indicated the offices that were still at work. A helicopter was thrumming overhead, and in one of these offices Tan, distracted by the noise, paused from his work, looked at the floor-to-ceiling pane of glass before him, and witnessed himself trapped inside his reflection, his tiny cubicle like a huge box of light dangling over the precipice of the city. It was Friday night in Bangkok, he realized, and it was getting late. He should be drunk and chasing boys. It had been too long. His mind began to wander . . . On Soi 4 the terraces would be empty with the downpour, the waiters forlorn, silently vying for the few tourists wandering by ogling at the gay bars. Soi 2 would be quiet now too, but only because of the hour, and Tan could feel in his bones, as if they were slowly being filled up with marrow, the rising energy that would take over that narrow lane as closer to midnight the crowds would pour in, the lush frenzy of sex and money filling every one of the badly-lit nightclubs. He stood up, walked to the window, and pressed his face to the glass. Down below he could see the dark square of Lumpini Park and across the way the speckle of lighted windows in other office blocks. Rain plummeted past his nose, tumbling down past other windows below, the droplets lit briefly whenever they passed a flash of light, swerving and shuddering in the descent, colliding with one another and finally splattering the grimy canvas of the food-stand on the street below, beneath which a vendor was huddled, wrapped in a plastic poncho.

Staring at the continually shredded puddles, which told her—yes—it was still raining, she cursed her ill-luck. Nothing worse than a wet Friday night. That was her screwed for the week. She gazed down the street into the dark rainy distance. No one. But then a burble of voices caused her to turn in the other direction. A group of *farangs* was approaching, heads stooped as if that would protect them from the rain. She put on her best smile and when

they were close called out, “Hey mister!” They did not hear her. “Hey mister!” They looked over as if perplexed and kept on walking. It didn’t bother her. She was used to it. She could hear behind her the line of cars idling at the red light, the soft vibration of their engines a welcome relief from the roar of moving traffic. She relished these brief, quiet moments. Then came the rev of engines and the rumble of cars back on the move. Over already. She used to work nights on Silom Road, but it became too much of a bother: drunken queers, pimps, angry or overly friendly *farangs*, the endless tumult of pedestrians, and far, far too much competition. And the threats, so and so owns this corner or that and you’ll be in trouble if you sell here, all a bunch of hot air. Occasionally they would come and throw all her pans into the street, but that was rare. The real criminals were making a killing in Patpong and didn’t need to bother shaking down street sellers. Then one day a friend who was moving across the river to Thon Buri told her to take this spot around the corner before someone else did. It was good advice. It was much less hassle here, and there was no need to work all night. What you lost in profits you made up for in peace of mind. The days were long but stress-free, at least when compared to being right on the edge of a red light district until 6am six days a week. The trick was not to pack up when the offices closed—no, that would be to lose half the day’s wages. Just as profitable as rush hour were the three or four hours after, for those workers who stayed late were always famished by the time they got down to the street and few of them could pass up the scent of a hot meal in that state. Hunger was her business. She would always joke to her friends that if they could just make the whole world hungry they would never be short of customers. And now, thinking that to herself, she smiled. “Excuse me, two of those.” The hand pointed and without looking up the vendor pinched two sausages with her prongs and dropped them into the vat of bubbling oil. She left them for a few moments, then plucked them out, chopped them up on the greasy board and nudged them inside a plastic bag, into which she popped a skewer. Only then did she look up at the man. He was young, handsome, dressed in a suit, and holding a small, black umbrella in a pale hand. He seemed anxious, and the top buttons of his shirt were undone. “Going over to the girls now, is it?” She always said this to them, and the men obligingly chuckled, embarrassed and more often than not guilty as charged. But this man’s expression did not change. “Oh no,” he said absentmindedly, “not at all.” She hummed as if she doubted the veracity of his reply. “Long week, you deserve it,” she insisted.

And when she still did not get a rise from him, she said, “The boys then, is it?” She’d finally broken through. She could see it in his eyes even before he flashed her a smile. “Yes!” he said eagerly. She smiled back. “Handsome man like you doesn’t need to pay, I hope.” He laughed as he took the bag and paid, “I shouldn’t need to, but I do.” They both laughed. “Well,” she said, “make sure it’s a pretty one.” He winked at her like she had seen Americans do in films. “I will of course, no doubt about that.” Then they said goodbye, and Tan walked on in the direction of Silom Road.

Awkwardly, with one hand, he fumbled his earphones in and pressed play on his phone. The Doors exploded onto his eardrums, filling him with energy and purpose. He sped up, the throb of his feet against the wet pavement feeling good and healthy and full, the darkness of the park to his right, the black trees hazy in the rain, and the raindrops thick and visible on the road, glinting like flurries of tiny gemstones, thousands of them falling with each passing second. He felt energized by the music and excited about the night to come. He rarely thought about sex these days. His job exhausted him to the point that he rarely thought about anything but work and sleep and food—even on weekends, when he read novels, watched TV, or visited his parents in the suburbs. He did these things on auto-pilot, and while he did them he thought about his job, the deadlines, ways he could solve the problems he was facing with the project he was currently working on, a future project that he would be working on soon, or even some imaginary project that he would probably never work on but whose setbacks and issues could keep him occupied for hours at a time. He was a workaholic, and he loved it, but when the idea of having sex came into his mind there was little that would stop him from being satisfied, something of which he was quietly proud. This was why Tan was happy walking in the rain, as he already knew it was a done deal. A slim and beguiling shape leaned against one of the stone pillars that punctuated the park’s perimeter fence. Tan arrested his march and peered beneath the figure’s voluminous umbrella so that he could make out its owner: a very attractive boy with dyed blonde hair and a stud glinting on his nose. He smiled, and the boy smiled back. He took a step closer, and the boy said something in English. Although he loved all things American, Tan did not understand. Why would the boy speak to him in English anyway? Seeing his confusion, the boy repeated the phrase and then blurted something out in Tagalog. That’s why. Tan hesitated. Filipinos were the worst kind of trash, excluding the Vietnamese. Tan thought about

the dilemma briefly and then turned and walked away, leaving the boy perplexed.

Waga had not been in the country long enough to realize what had happened, but it did not matter. He did not feel like working anymore anyway and was only standing there out of inertia. His friends were working the clubs later, and he wanted go with them and enjoy himself, as it was Friday and he'd had a good week. He would dance, drink, gossip, and watch his friends pair off one by one with older men (hopefully) before he would find some young, hot American to go home with for free. He flicked his cigarette to the ground, shook his umbrella free of the excess rainwater, and began to walk, humming a tune in his head and thinking of Manila and the long, rainy days there that always seemed to be Sundays, after mass, the house morose and the streets bubbling with mud. He missed home—its smells, its weather—but here at least he was human; in the Philippines, he was just a dirty fag. He crossed the road with a skip and turned onto Silom Road. A few doors down was the McDonald's. He pushed through the door, and the air conditioning hit him with a chill. His umbrella dripped all the way to the till, drawing a baleful glaze from the security guard, who would have to mop it up. He ordered in English, sat down at one of the high tables, and messaged his friends to tell them to meet him there. They were probably on their way already. By the time he'd finished his burger he'd got a reply to say they were in a taxi and were very close. And by the time he'd slurped up the last of his Coke his friends were standing in front of him, laughing and already obviously tipsy. Bryan handed him a bottle of tepid beer and went up to order. John and Ulysses sat down and took out their phones. "Come on, get off your phones," Waga said in Tagalog. "It's business," John replied, and his two friends simultaneously turned their screens to Waga as proof. He recognized the yellow glow of Grindr and the rows of little boxes with the pale faces of *farangs*. Then they returned to their work, murmuring as they scrolled and typed, their words inaudible and probably meant to be little comments for themselves about the men they were looking at. "What about this one?" Ulysses said suddenly, turning the phone around and showing Waga the plump, bearded face of a middle-aged man. "Scroll," Ulysses said, and Waga obeyed, revealing a picture of a large, flaccid, completely shaven penis. "You've a tight ass," said Waga. "Only go if he has poppers." Ulysses hummed in agreement, and as he typed he said in English, word by word, "Do. You. Have. Poppers. Question mark." Bryan returned to the table with

24 chicken nuggets. He was wearing electric blue contact lenses, and his fingernails were painted mauve. “Any luck?” he asked Waga. “Nothing,” Waga paused. “But I don’t mind. I’ve had a good week.” Bryan giggled and took back the beer, which Waga hadn’t even tasted. “He doesn’t have poppers,” Ulysses mumbled. Silence. “I might,” John said reluctantly without looking up from his phone. “Why didn’t you say before?” “Because if he had them . . .” “Okay. Can I?” John looked up with a pained expression. “What if I need them later? I’m sensitive.” “Buy them,” Ulysses replied. “Get the *fa-rang* to buy them. I need them now. Give me.” John groped a small, black bottle from his bag and gave it to Ulysses. “Don’t waste it.” “Oh Jesus, relax!” Ulysses gave John a little slap on the cheek. Bryan laughed, and Waga pinched Ulysses on the ass. John laughed and said, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” “Well ladies,” declared Ulysses, dropping the bottle into his handbag, “I’m off,” and he strutted out the door. Bryan was chattering on about something, but Waga wasn’t listening. He could see Ulysses out on the street trying to hail a taxi—a hard task on a rainy night. Even though he’d had a good week, he was envious that Ulysses was off to a job. It was a habit to be envious where money was concerned. Finally a pink taxi slowed down and stopped for Ulysses, and at that moment Waga saw the man who had smiled at him by Lumpini Park walking past—or rather marching, as if he were in a hurry. Bryan’s mauve fingernails were suddenly flapping in his face. “Are you even listening to me?” By the time Waga batted the hand away, the man was already out of sight and Ulysses’ leg was disappearing inside the taxi.

The door snapped shut, and Ulysses told the driver to take him to the Parkview Hotel. The driver laughed, and Ulysses gave him his broadest smile and silently told him to fuck off. As he looked out the window, he absentmindedly watched the determined scissoring of the legs of a man in a suit, who was walking alongside the car as they approached the red light. They stopped, and the man passed them by, the white wire of his earphones dangling down his chest. He dodged through the traffic to cross the perpendicular road. Then the light went green, and the driver sped up. They passed the man, but Ulysses wasn’t really paying much attention, as he was thinking of the Parkview—its long, carpeted corridors; the cloned rooms; the awful minibars, which only had the cheapest, most foul spirits despite it apparently being a top-class hotel; and the corridors, where he would run into friends, rivals, and assorted queens walking back to the lift to go home. The Thai boys would always hiss at him if he were alone or smile if he were

with a *farang*. Business was business after all. The driver eventually pulled up, and a porter opened the door, but when he saw it was only a rent boy inside he turned away without a word, leaving the door dangling open as Ulysses paid the driver and gathered himself for the plunge. The *farang* waiting by the entrance gripped Ulysses' hand in greeting as the boy gave him his broadest smile and said, "I've got some poppers. My friend gave them to me."

In the McDonald's, this friend put down his phone and said, "Let's go!" John was tired of listening to Bryan and Waga chattering away as usual, and he needed to earn. "Let's go bitches!" The two finally looked up, startled. "Okay," Bryan said. "What's the hurry?" John tried to swallow the note of impatience. "You know it's after eleven?" And to himself he thought about the money he needed and the fact that, even though he had haemorrhoids, the plan was to off twice that night. He flounced out of the McDonald's ahead of his friends and stood on the pavement, feeling tired and not in the mood for prostituting himself at all. Bryan and Waga slowly came out onto the street, pushing the glass door open as if in slow motion and then pausing with the door half open, chattering. "Guys!" John barked. "Fuckin' hell, John, what's up?" Bryan asked. Waga shrieked, "My umbrella!" and then pranced back inside. A few moments later he emerged looking sheepish. "Sorry, John." "It's okay." Waga was such a sweetheart. They crossed Silom Road. It had stopped raining, but drops were still dribbling from the train tracks overhead. The footpath on the far side of the road was alive now, as all the vendors had pulled back their tarps. The crowds were sparser than usual for a Friday night, but it was still busy. T-shirts, lube, porn, woven baskets, and notebooks were all on sale here, and families of *farangs* were toddling from stall to stall, come, inexplicably, to sightsee in the red light district. John felt like shouting at them, "I'm a prostitute, look at me, look at *meeee!*" But he didn't. They entered Soi 2, dropped off their belongings at the cloak room, and headed towards the clubs. At the entrance to DJ Station the owner was sipping red wine from a huge, bell-shaped glass, one eye on the cashier, the other on whatever boy was stepping up to the counter at that moment. The drag show had already started. They all searched their purses for the 150 *baht* entrance fee and picked up their drink tokens in exchange. As they walked through the door into the darkness and the flashing lights, John heard Bryan whisper loudly to Waga (or to him, which would have made more sense), "Bitches, let's make some money!" It depressed John to

hear it said so brazenly, even though that was exactly what he intended to do and he himself had said these types of things many times more than he could count. They went to the bar and each exchanged a token for a long-neck Chang. Then they threaded their way through the crowd towards the stairs. Waga and Bryan were still chattering away together, and John was feeling increasingly tense and resentful. The current drag queen on stage was a stout Malaysian with whom John had gotten into a fight once when she called him a Filipino worm. What the queen didn't know was that it had been John who had flung the bottle at her face during a performance a couple of weeks later and split her forehead open, necessitating her departure from the stage for nearly a month. John got angry with himself for thinking about this again. He reran the whole episode in his head every time he passed her, and it infuriated him because he no longer felt any satisfaction at having hit the bitch square on the fringe, but he could still keenly feel the punch in the gut of the words she had spoken to him. She was twirling on the stage and singing, "If you want it that much there's no easy way out, if you need it that much . . ." And at that moment John caught sight of his English ex chatting up a young, trashy Thai boy whose only advantage over John was that he was younger and trashier. He needed to learn how to forget all these people. Then they reached the stairs, and Waga turned to John as they climbed, genuine concern in his eyes. "Are you okay?" "I'm fine," John replied and patted Waga on the back. Somehow Waga seemed like a little brother to John, even though they were the same age and Waga had worked the streets of Manila, where things were far, far rougher. It was his sweetness, John supposed. Upstairs they found a corner by the edge of the dance floor and settled there, sipping their drinks and eyeing up potential customers. There were three floors to this club, but this one was where most of the business was done. No one seemed interested in them, but then again it always felt like that until some guy bit. There was a group of youngish, attractive *farangs* chatting opposite them, but they'd never pay. Give them another five years and they would, but like that—still in their prime, though on the cusp of losing it—no way. John levered himself away from the wall. "I'm going to have a look around, okay?" Bryan called something out to him, but John didn't respond so he just rolled his eyes and returned to his conversation.

Waga was feeling uneasy with the way John was acting and annoyed with Bryan for not seeming to care. "Do you think he's okay?" Waga asked.

“Oh, that bitch always has a twist in his tampon, don’t pay him any attention.” “I thought you were his friend,” Waga protested. “Of course I am, but that doesn’t mean I have to *like* him!” Waga winced. “I hate when you say things like that.” “Oh relax!” Bryan rubbed his palm along Waga’s forearm. “You’re a bitch-queen, you know that?” Waga said. “And proud of it,” Bryan replied. Bryan began blathering away again—about a nose job or something—and Waga let his eyes wander around the room. The rent boys were leaning against the walls, chattering among themselves in groups of twos and threes. It was better for business to be alone, but Waga had yet to meet a boy who could stand the tedium of hustling in a nightclub without a partner. On the street it was a different matter, as you could sort of get lost in your thoughts, but that was impossible here. The group of hot *farangs* had moved to the bar, where they were downing shots and joking with the bartender. They were all tight t-shirts that showed off their thick biceps. They looked straight, which was exactly what Waga liked, but they were probably fucking each other. In any case, Waga was too shy to make a move. More people were coming up the stairs now, so the drag show must have ended. Waga looked around at Bryan. His friend was silent, arms folded, grinding his jaw and swishing the dregs of beer around in his bottle. His contacts, blue like toilet cleaner or bathroom tiles and without the human gleam of a real iris, made him look like he may be a robot—a very lifelike Japanese sex robot. “Do you want another beer?” Waga asked. “Let’s go,” Bryan said. “I can go, you stay here,” Waga replied. Bryan smiled. He was quick, and he knew Waga’s type. “You think you’ll go up there and come back with one of those *farangs* by your side and a thumb up your ass? They’d probably gangbang you in the toilets if you asked them, but none of them are going to kiss you if that’s what you’re after.” Waga laughed. “Okay, you do it for me then. I’m too demure.” “Demure?” Bryan gasped. “You’re a prostitute, and you’re calling yourself demure?” Bryan sighed dramatically. “The strangest thing is that it’s true.” Waga laughed again and slapped Bryan softly on the cheek. “You’re a bitch queen, I told you so!” “I’m a fuckin’ cunt is what I am, but I’ll get one of these protein-*farangs* for you, no problem.” Waga rummaged in his pocket for a token and handed it to Bryan. “Get me a beer as well.” Bryan gave Waga a kiss on the cheek and walked over to the bar. Waga was too nervous to look, so he turned around and watched the lights sliding across the far wall and the heads bobbing up and down the stairwell. Then he caught sight of John on the walkway overhead. He was talking to

the man in the suit whom Waga had met at Lumpini Park. Jealousy washed over him. The man was leaning his face in close, and it was clear that he was not enjoying himself. Suddenly Waga saw John's hand shoot out, palm upwards. John said something, and the man in the suit laughed. Then John agitated his hand impatiently.

The man in the suit placed a 100 *baht* note in John's outstretched hand. "What is that for?" he asked. "The pleasure of my conversation," John replied, and the man laughed again. "Do you think I'm stupid?" "You pay for what you get. If you won't off me, you have to pay to talk to me." "But you're Filipino. You're trash. You should be paying me!" The man in the suit found this hilarious and couldn't stop laughing. John just held his palm out again. "What's this?" the man asked when he had calmed down. "You just insulted me." "You are Filipino, aren't you?" "Yes." "So I'm right, amn't I?" "Give me 200." "Not a chance," the man said before falling into another fit of laughter. John stabbed a finger sharply into the man's stomach, grabbed his arm, and hissed. "200. *Now!*" The man shook himself free, and his features tightened in alarm. "You're crazy," he laughed once more, pretending not to be nervous. "Okay," he said, "I'll give you 100." "200." The man smiled, "Okay, 200," and he handed over the money. "Don't try to talk to me again unless you have another 100, okay?" Having laid down this condition, John walked away. He could hear the man shout after him, "Get the fuck back here!" But he knew that the man was a wimp and that there was no risk. The first thing you need to learn as a rent boy is who is dangerous and who is not, so you know when to be fair and honest and when to screw them for every penny they have.

Waga couldn't believe what he had seen and couldn't imagine what John had said to get the man to hand over cash for nothing. Maybe they had made some deal, but the way John had grabbed the man's arm . . . He felt a small flame of fury. He wasn't really attracted to the man in the suit, but after seeing him three times he felt a vague connection, like a friendship. "Hey fuck face, someone's here to see you!" It was Bryan, with the musculiest of the *farangs* in tow. "Hey!" Waga squealed, embarrassed at himself already. Waga shook hands with the *farang* as Bryan handed him a beer and whispered to him, "Welcome, bitch." "Do you?" the *farang* asked. "Do I what?" Waga replied. "The toilets." The *farang* smiled, and Waga giggled, "Hmmm, maybe later. So . . . what's your name?" "David." "And where are you from, David?" "Australia." "Oh Australia! That's so cool!"

John went off looking for Bryan, whom he found on one of the smoking balconies. “Any luck?” he asked. “No,” Bryan answered, “but you know what? I just couldn’t be bothered tonight.” “Lucky for some,” replied John, unable to mask his bitterness. Bryan’s parents sent him money—not enough to survive on, but enough to avoid desperation. “Me? Lucky? Bitch please!” “Whatever . . .” “You know what I’m talking about.” John did. “I’m sorry, you’re right . . .” John was weary. He wanted to tell Bryan how he’d gotten 300 *baht* without giving away so much as a kiss, but he didn’t have the energy tonight. He dropped his cigarette and stamped it out. Bryan put a hand on his friend’s elbow. “I want to get a nose job,” he said. “Then get one,” John snapped. “You need it.” Bryan slapped him on the arm and broke away. John saw the hurt on his friend’s face, and he knew that he would go to some corner and cry. These guys were so fucking predictable. He lit another cigarette, and a kiss landed on his cheek. He looked around and locked eyes with the man in the suit, who was holding out 100 *baht*. John took it and said, “100 more for that kiss.” The man laughed, held out his wallet, and opened it. “Take it all,” he said, “but then you have to do everything I ask.” John reached for the cash, but the man jerked his wallet away. “Deal?” “I’m a prostitute,” John replied. “What do you think?” The man opened the wallet again, and John reached in and flinched as he felt the thickness of the wad. “Let’s go,” the man said. John’s stomach clutched in fear as they made their way to the stairs. He knew this was a bad idea.

In the Parkview, Ulysses lifted his head from the crotch of the *farang* and fumbled on the bedside table. “What are you doing?” the *farang* asked. “You want to fuck?” Ulysses replied. “Not yet.” “It’s been a long time.” “But I like this.” And Ulysses, forgetting his manners for a moment, responded, “I know, but I want to get this over and done with.” The expected punch, when it came, wasn’t that hard. Instead of arguing, Ulysses just put his head back down onto the man’s crotch as the man murmured, “Yes, that’s a good boy. You’re a good boy after all.” Ulysses could hear the noise of a helicopter circling overhead, the sound of a toilet being flushed in the room next to them, the moans of the *farang*, and the blood thundering in his ears like galloping horses.

Waga led the muscly *farang* to a cubicle and locked the door. He kissed the *farang* furiously, his hands ploughing across the man’s torso, gripping folds of flesh in his fists, and pinching the muscles. He could sense the tension in the man’s body and his resistance to being dominated, but there

was a will inside Waga now and he refused to restrain himself. He unzipped them both and pulled their trousers down to their ankles. The *farang* placed a hand on Waga's head and tried to push him down to his knees. Waga shook his head free and tried to turn the man around, but the *farang* wouldn't budge. "I'm fucking you, don't forget," but the *farang* said these words more as a plea than a threat. The man gasped when Waga punched him in the stomach, and then Waga punched him again even harder. The *farang*'s face went bright red, and the veins stood out on his neck. Waga whispered to him, "I have a knife, and I'll use it." When Waga grabbed the man's shoulder and pushed him around, there was no struggle this time. Waga drew his tongue across his right index finger, thrust a finger up the man's ass, and began to pump in and out. He pressed his chest against the man's back, bit into the muscle of his shoulder, and began to jerk off, imagining that the man from Lumpini Park was fucking him in the ass at the same time. The man squirmed in protest when he licked and pushed in a second finger, so Waga bit his shoulder harder and punched him again just below the ribs. The man spluttered and moaned, and Waga shoved a third finger in—this time without licking it first.

Bryan sobbed to himself in a corner, each shudder of his shoulders in time with the hammering beat of the music, until he didn't want to cry anymore. He touched his nose nervously, as if ashamed, and then looked around the room at the lights crawling across the walls and the couples pairing off. He placed a hand up to his mouth and began to giggle.

Tan woke up the next morning in his own bed alone. His wallet was light, very light, but his heart was lighter still. The sun was playing on the back wall, and the fat, declawed cat that only the cleaner ever bothered to feed was rubbing her flanks against his bedstand, mewling between her sharp white teeth, and padding on her soft grey paws, reminding him of the night before when he shut the door of his apartment on the Filipino boy, trundled back to his room, and flopped down, exhausted and ecstatic, to the finest night of sleep he'd had in a very long time.