

A high-contrast, black and white close-up portrait of a woman's face. Her eyes are closed, and her lips are slightly parted, showing a vibrant red lipstick. The lighting is dramatic, with deep shadows on the right side of her face and bright highlights on the left. The word "Farang!" is written in a large, stylized, red cursive font across the top of the image, underlined with a thick red line.

Farang!

David Thompson

FARANG!

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CHAPTER I

To tell the truth, I don't know what it was that started her off. Something trivial I expect. Something about money. It's nearly always about money. I don't earn enough, that's the problem. I don't make enough to take care of her and her family properly. Not any more. Nowadays I earn just about enough to keep us clothed and fed. Not much left for luxuries.

That was it. I remember now. It all started when she told me her cousin wanted to buy a small holding to grow rice. Yes, that was how it started. I told her I couldn't help, that I didn't have any spare cash. She sulked for a while, I remember that. The bloody sulking. Horrible that is. She's damned good at it too.

The problem is that I can't afford anything new. Can't even afford to buy a rice paddy and, God knows, it was certainly cheap enough. Not yet at any rate. I'm a teacher. I teach English to kids who want to learn. Most times I teach it to kids who don't want to learn. Doesn't matter to me. I still get paid. Admittedly, I don't get paid much, but I still get paid. I certainly earn a lot more than my Thai counterparts, and work less hours, but it still isn't enough. I'm a farang, that's the problem. Farang are *always* expected to have money even when they actually have none. It's all about the money. Nothing else matters. Not love. Not emotion. Nothing. Just the money.

That isn't true, though. Not the whole truth, anyway. It's not money she wants; it's security. A place and a life that makes her feel secure, safe and cared for. Same as any woman, I suppose. It's just that over here the pressure is greater. The pressure from her family, her friends, her associates. They expect her to have it all. Expect her to be able to help them when they need it. Because of who I am. A farang. They just don't understand.

To be honest, I think she's had enough of me now. I don't expect her to be around for much longer. Probably has her escape route all worked out. I've probably just played right into her hands and given her the perfect opportunity to leave. Shame really. I do love her. There are times when I don't *like* her much but, at the same time, I really do love her. I mean who, in their right mind, wouldn't? She's a beautiful woman. Very kind and caring most of the time. Well, when she's not sulking, anyway.

It all started when I first arrived two years ago. I hadn't known what to expect. I just came for a holiday. Two weeks in Thailand with one night in Bangkok. Yes, just like the song; *One Night in Bangkok*. I wanted to get that in. As it happened, I'd booked three nights in Bangkok. Doesn't sound as good though, does it?

I'll tell you the story. I might have to break off if the phone rings or there's a key in the door. I hope she comes back. I'd like to tell her I'm sorry. Try to explain to her where the good times went. Where all the money went. Try to tell her that I understand if she wants to move on. It can't be much fun for her anymore and, as I said before, I do love her very much.

In the beginning it was great. When the money flowed. Then she enjoyed herself; had a wonderful time. To tell the truth, so did I. Funny how life comes along and spoils things isn't it?

Anyway, I'll start at the beginning and see if I can explain everything. It's not easy trying to understand a culture that is so different from my own but I'll give it a go; tell you my story. Perhaps both of us will learn something from it. Who knows?

My name is Robert Church and I'm a forty-eight year old teacher. I've always been a teacher, ever since I left school. In fact you could say that I never left school. Started when I was four years old. Still there forty-four years later, and still learning.

Like I said, I teach English. Back home in England that's pretty easy. I mean, it's my language, right? Shouldn't be too difficult. By the time I reached forty-six I decided that it must have been nigh on impossible. In the last two years teaching had become a real chore. A daily grind that I continued because I didn't have anything better to

do. Something had gone wrong. The kids we were turning out could hardly speak their own language, let alone write or understand it.

Oh, there were a few. A few naturals. There were one or two that could actually decipher *Hamlet*, but the majority, the bulk of the kids, couldn't even spell well enough to write graffiti on the school walls, let alone know anything about the eponymous character.

I'm often reminded of the film *Life of Brian*. The scene when the Roman soldier tells the graffiti artist he's spelt it wrong and makes him write it out a hundred times. There were so many times when I caught a kid spraying something defamatory on a wall. I always felt the urge to tell him, or her, how to spell "fascist" properly.

I remember one time, I turned up for work in the morning, a Monday I think it was, to find that some kids had virtually covered the front wall of the school, including the doors and windows, with red spray paint. Names of teachers, the head teacher, even dinner ladies, all inter-connected with various vulgarities expounding the fact that the artists didn't much like them.

"What do you think, Church?" the head asked.

I had just strolled through the front gates and joined him and the other teachers who were all eyeing the large lettering with distaste.

I noticed my own name, alongside several others, that seemed to imply the school secretary was involved in some extremely peculiar extra curriculum activities. The drawings weren't too bad but the grammar was awful.

"Well, sir," I answered. "I think I'm going to have to go over possessive pronouns again."

"Yes. Very droll, Church."

The head was a bit of an old fashioned type when it came to his staff. We all called him "Sir" because we didn't want to use his chosen moniker of "Major" Wilkinson. Too many syllables. In turn, he used our surnames whenever he deigned to speak with us. I didn't mind him actually. A bit of a stickler when it came to the rules but, other than that, a good enough bloke.

"Gone too far this time, Church. Too far, by far!"

I could tell he wasn't too pleased. I guessed it was because his name was linked, quite unceremoniously, with the incredibly fat school nurse. I suspect he would have preferred my position alongside the secretary.

“Good job they signed their names then, sir,” I told him.

“Get ‘em up to the office, Church. Quick as you can, man.”

That was the stupidity we, as teachers, were faced with in England. At the beginning of this century the kids we were turning out were so bloody thick they even signed their handiwork. Seriously, I’m not joking. Four names, clearly written in red paint. One spelt incorrectly.

To tell the truth, I was beginning to show signs of boredom in those days. I didn’t recognise them at first. I was just going through the monotony of living each day as it presented itself. Get up in the morning, go to school, try to explain the English alphabet to fifteen and sixteen year old kids, go home, mark endless reams of homework, go to bed, get up and repeat. The weekends weren’t much better. Get up late, go shopping, do some laundry, go for a beer or three; that was about it. The only consolations were the holidays.

That was what got me interested in teaching in the first place. The long holidays. Six weeks in the summer, another three at Christmas, two at Easter and loads more little ones in between. At first it seemed like heaven but, after the divorce, after the smoke had cleared and the dust had settled, I began to loathe the holidays. Nothing to do. No one to do it with. Boring.

As the end of the summer term approached, I looked forward to another six weeks of holiday with some trepidation. I really didn’t know what I was going to do.

The other teachers had wives, husbands or, to be politically correct, partners. Some masochistic types even had children of their own. They all took off to some far-flung corners of the world and spent their carefree days relaxing in some tropical haven.

I was looking forward to one week in Blackpool visiting my sister, and five additional weeks of continuous tedium. Even the week in Blackpool wasn’t something I was looking forward to. Been there, bought the tee shirt, as the saying goes.

My sister, Susan, had moved north twelve years ago to be with the man she loved. Two children and a divorce later and she was still there. Called it her home. I suppose it was really. Twelve years in the same place and that place definitely becomes your home.

Since our Mother died she hadn’t been back down south. No reason to come all that way. Our Dad died years ago, when we were

both quite young, and to come all that way just to see a brother who lived alone in a three bed-roomed semi did seem a bit pointless.

No, the thought of spending another week in Blackpool with my sister and her kids didn't exactly fill me with joy. What I really needed was a kick up the backside. Something to jolt my senses back into the land of the living. Something different. Something that would take my breath away and leave me ready to start the next term with a renewed vigour for life. A test to prove I was still alive. A challenge of some sort.

Unbeknown to me, the so called "male menopause" was kicking in. In an effort to recapture our misspent youth some of my friends and I had bought super-sized motorcycles. Others bought themselves sports cars and another, in a moment of madness, had purchased a small aeroplane! My bike's a Honda Fireblade. Nine hundred cc's of pure power. A racing bike built for the road. Scare's the hell out of me, to tell the truth, and on the rare occasions that I ride it, I spend most of my time in third gear! It really hadn't done much to relieve the growing tedium of my life.

That night, after the head and I had finished speaking to the parents of the four kids involved in the graffiti, I went home to contemplate why we bothered.

"They're just kids." We had been told, time and time again.

The parents, two single mums, a single dad and one couple who weren't speaking to each other, just couldn't understand why we were upset.

"It's criminal damage!" the head cried.

"Well, it's not like they meant anything by it," the single dad smiled at his son. "He's just letting off steam."

"It's because they haven't got anything better to do," one of the single mums defended her spotty vandal.

"They could do their homework," I pointed out.

"That's the problem, you see," another mum jumped in. "It's all work for the kids these days. The pressure is too much for them."

The four teenagers sat there in bored resignation whilst we argued with the parents. One of them was picking his nose and wiping what he found on the chair.

None of the parents found anything wrong with their offspring's behaviour. Not one. I gave up and sat back in my chair whilst the head droned on about the virtues of military training.

It was all a waste of time. The kids couldn't care less. The parents wouldn't punish them and the country slowly but surely went to the dogs.

In the end, when the head had reached the end of his monotonous lecture, the parents left the office with their little lambs trailing along behind them. As they turned the corridor, I clearly heard one of them berate their son.

"What the hell did you sign your name for? Showing me up like that!"

With parents like that the kids didn't stand a chance. That was it, you see. No one gave a damn anymore. England, in those days, had no way of dealing with wayward children. Discipline didn't exist. There was no punishment that could be administered legally. Illegally yes, but even the head drew the line when it came to shooting graffiti artists.

We weren't even allowed to throw chalk at the little cherubs. Not that we used chalk anymore. It was all interactive whiteboards and computers. Waste of money, in my opinion. The kids soon learned how to copy and paste. Most times their homework assignments came complete with "*Encarta World English Dictionary Microsoft Corporation All rights reserved*" as a footnote. I always tried to set work that couldn't be garnered from the internet but it wasn't an easy task. Some bright spark had even invented a question and answer session for Yahoo! All a kid had to do was post up the homework question and an answer would arrive within seconds. Copy and paste; homework done.

Anyway, as I say, I went home to another evening of marking badly spelt essays and indiscriminate use of punctuation. Even the internet boffins made the occasional grammatical error. The red pen would undoubtedly wreak havoc on the scrawled attempts at English that night.

When I opened the door there it was. On the floor, amongst all the other junk mail and free coupons offering me ten pence off the price of a can of beans; a glossy flyer endorsing the holiday of a lifetime.

According to the leaflet, which I thumbed whilst putting the kettle on, there was “only one place in the whole world where a weary worker could while away a well earned holiday.” Whilst I pondered over the alliteration, and added sugar to my tea, I read on.

“The mysterious and oriental land of smiles welcomes you, the hard working westerner, to a tropical paradise. During your stay you will be able to partake of many things, including stunning scuba diving, beautiful scenery, ancient temple visits and significant landmarks of archaeological importance, as well as white water rafting, elephant rides and culinary the like of which you have never tasted before.

“Also, for those of you who are single, alone, or suicidal, the welcoming smiles of the Thai girls will make all your troubles go away. Come and enjoy the wonderful nightlife that can only be experienced in Thailand!”

Now, I have to say that, although the brochure was obviously written by someone who had yet to achieve anything higher than a D-minus in English, the photographs were first class. The smiling faces of beautiful young Thai girls beckoning to me to join them were captivating to say the least.

One girl, in particular, stared out at me with the most beautiful smile I had ever seen. Her hands were held in front of her, as though in prayer, and her delicate fingertips gently caressed the smooth roundness of her chin. Her deep brown eyes looked at me with all the guile and coyness of the Mona Lisa. One photograph of a young Thai girl and I was already hooked!

They have a way of capturing your heart over here. Your heart, your head, your soul and your wallet. A bit harsh perhaps. I mean, it's not like we have to fall in love is it? We don't have to give them everything they ask for, do we?

I'm getting a little ahead of myself. I'll get back on track. It's difficult to concentrate because I'm hoping the phone will ring, or perhaps there'll be a key in the door. Anyway, back to the story. The more I looked at the flyer the more I wanted to go and see for myself what Thailand had to offer. The thought of two weeks spent in the company of girls who would make all my troubles go away sounded most appealing and I wasn't even suicidal.