

Dinner with a 'Sex Worker:'

The value of money and people

By Jeffrey Warner

This is the tale of a late-night encounter with a troubled, yet weary and gentle "sex worker" in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Using more money than she attempted to solicit me for sex, we experienced a humane, calorie-enriched and nearly speechless exchange that, to me, depicts the power of choice [especially with finances], value of people, life and the limitless depth of the human spirit.

Humans fundamentally seek understanding and support. And sometimes, all someone needs is to receive an extension of kindness, compassion, dignity and respect. We are often quick to judge others.

I had been living in Chiang Mai for merely a few weeks. Likewise, my naïve perceptions of this magical city were still strewn with pixie dust.

She was perched amid the mouth of a narrow alley – clad in black shorts. As though wrapped in bars, a black and white-striped shirt covered her ghostly white skin. Her soul peered at me through dark, sunken eyes as I sauntered past her. I experienced an intuitive connection with her, as though we knew each other somehow.

I brushed it off and continued walking towards the 7-Eleven store. As I approached the storefront, a young, pasty-skinned, drunken fellow stumbled through the doorway and made his way down the street towards the sex worker.

After purchasing cell phone credit, I meandered back down the street towards my motorbike that was chained to a sewer grate. Like a turtle flipped over onto its shell, the chap who had just come from the store was haphazardly lying atop a bush, his belly exposed.

The street woman was half on top of him, as though a vampire latching on to its prey. The young man appeared bewildered and helpless – confused, tempted by her assertive attention but not strong enough to wisely handle the situation properly. I somewhat coldly stepped over and past them and walked a couple of blocks before mounting my motorbike and turning the key.

*"No money...
no farang.
No hotel...no money."*

As though the street woman had recognized a more succulent opportunity, she approached me. I was slightly perplexed by how quickly she had caught up to me, and I briefly wondered what happened with the other man.

Violating my physical comfort zone, she offered her carnal services for a pricetag of merely a few American dollars. I declined, repeatedly. Her desperation increased, and she began to whimper slightly. The

exchange continued. However, I stood my ground, informing her that I "won't do that" to her.

Somewhat defeated, she gracefully lowered herself to the sidewalk and hovered her head near my feet before standing again and moving towards me. She looked emaciated and sick, with boney cheeks and a face that was slathered with white, seemingly cheap, foundation cover-up. Underneath this mask, she was pretty; just, weathered.

"No money," she said slowly, with a low, raspy and desperate tone. "No money...no farang (foreigner). No hotel...no money." She motioned her arm towards the street, channeling my attention towards the waning number of bar-goers who were making their way home for the night. I was gaining an understanding of her situation.

I had learned [mostly through intense, non-verbal communication] that "Ghi" was primarily homeless, had no money and worked this street three times per week. She told me that she's 26 years-old. However, I didn't buy it. I suspected that she likely wouldn't sleep that night because, with the eastern skyline beginning to glow, she probably wouldn't be able to secure a suitor before the sun's wrath was in full-force. I was perhaps her last hope.

Carrying a worried look, which for a moment spread throughout her entire face, Ghi peered down

the street. She quickly rubbed her stomach in a way that appeared as though a nervous twitch. I didn't necessarily feel sorry for her because this would have been judgmental. However, it was obvious that I was quite possibly face-to-face with true misery. "What can I do?" I asked myself.

I dismounted my motorbike and instructed her to meet me back at the 7-Eleven store.

I place the microwaved rice and spicy chicken atop a stack of boxes placed outside the store. Ghi makes certain that both our portions are equally split before she begins wolfing down her steaming meal. I'm not thinking, just eating. As though pals who've known each other for years, we are eating together silently. The meal, along with this experience, tastes surprisingly scrumptious – as though this is exactly what's supposed to happen.

Ghi's attention occasionally darts towards the street, and I am expecting her to walk away at any moment. She instead gulps down some bottled water and attempts to tell me I'm "a good man," pointing at me and offering a thumbs-up gesture. Ghi squeaks out a smile, temporarily revealing her inner glow. She's happy; I'm happy. We're happy. Everything feels right. For this short while, we are present. Nothing else matters. Dessert time.

I once again enter the store, collect a cup, bottle of chocolate milk and a bag of M&Ms, place it on the counter and ask the store clerk how to say 'dessert' in Thai. After which, I receive a slightly derogatory comment from her about my new "friend."

I'm realizing that Ghi and I have likely put on a display outside the store. Who knows what others may think when a foreigner is hanging out with a person who others may deem as merely street trash. I could care what anyone else thinks. Their opinion is really none of my business.

Ghi accepts into the palm of her frail hand two small doses of candy and slowly swigs her chocolate milk.

The sun has risen. And, like flipping on a light switch, Ghi is suddenly warped back to her stressful reality. Once again, it's as though she's here, yet somewhere else. "No farang," she murmurs.

I put my hands together and make a sleeping gesture.

"No sleep," she says with a determined gaze, as though trying to tell ask me something.

I pull a 100 baht bill from my pocket and hand it over to her. She snatches it, opens her bluish-colored, zippered purse [which is empty] and stuffs the money into the bag. Ghi peers at me and rubs her stomach; this is food money. I pull out three 20 baht bills and


attempt to give them to her. She refuses, gently pushing my hand away before lowering her gaze. She looks back up at me.

To relieve some awkwardness, I initiate an arm-flexing contest. After several teeth-clenching postures, she wins. We laugh. It's time for me to move on, and we walk back to my motorbike.

Ghi is so petite and emaciated that, as I give her a hug, I feel like I could twice wrap my arms around her. She seemingly doesn't know what I'm attempting to do at first. After three waves of hugs from me, she finally holds me tighter – as though this is her first experience with human affection.

I mount my motorbike and witness Ghi reassessing her situation. I offer another hug. This time, she switches into service mode and attempts to massage my lower back. I stop her by grabbing onto her hands, before holding her for a bit longer. We say good-bye and, like ripping off a bandage, I drive off into the early morning sunrise.

After a 40-minute ride to my country home, I scale the wooden stairs leading to my bedroom and waver from exhaustion.

I feel deep guilt knowing that this house harbors three empty beds supporting nothing but air, and certainly not a troubled but weary and gentle woman in Chiang Mai, Thailand... 



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