

THE CASE OF THE WORRIED HEIR

Robyn was a well-spoken guy and sounded like he had his head screwed on right when he phoned me from the UK. He lived in Oxford and the way he told it he was one of the few guys who'd married a Thai girl and made a success of it. Sorry if I sound cynical, but in the Western world marriages have about a fifty-fifty chance of actually ending up as till death do we part. In the States most marriages fail, and the UK has the worst marriage failure rate in Europe. Throw in the fact that the wife was a hooker prior to tying the knot and that she is from a totally different culture and I'm always amazed to hear that a Thai-farang marriage has lasted longer than five minutes.

Anyway, when Robyn was in his forties he'd been in Thailand working for an NGO when he'd met the love of his life. He didn't say that he'd met her in a bar and I didn't ask. They'd married and he'd taken her back to Oxford where so far they'd lived happily ever after and raised a couple of kids. They were getting on fine, he said. He wasn't a rich man, far from it. He worked in a bookshop in the city centre and didn't seem to be particularly ambitious. But he wasn't worried about his long-term prospects because his elderly father was very wealthy. Robyn's dad, Jack, owned a huge farm on the outskirts of the city which he leased out while he lived in a bungalow. Robyn's mother had passed away a few years earlier, and as Jack was now in his late seventies it wouldn't be too long before the estate passed to Robyn. Don't get me wrong, I didn't get the feeling that Robyn was waiting vulture-like for his old man to pass on, but death comes to all of us and when the Grim Reaper called for Jack, Robyn would get his inheritance.

Anyway, Robyn kept telling his dad what a great place Thailand was and suggested that he head out to the Land of Smiles for an extended holiday. The warm climate and the hospitable people would be a tonic for the old man, and a welcome change for the grey clouds and gloomy faces of a typical English winter. Eventually Jack agreed. Robyn was all too well aware of the dangers of Thai bargirls so he made sure that Jack steered clear of Bangkok, Pattaya and Phuket and suggested that he rent a serviced apartment in Cha-am. Robyn's wife had friends and relatives in the beach resort, which is a couple of hours drive from Bangkok, so Robyn knew that Jack would be well looked after if he ran into any problems.

Robyn figured that his dad would have three months in the sun before returning to Oxford revitalised. What he didn't plan on was the Thai gossip

network, which went into overdrive almost as soon as Jack walked into his serviced apartment. A rich, elderly farang, staying alone. It was like a wounded tuna thrashing around in a shark-infested sea. Within days a beautiful young girl by the name of Ying was offering to show him around. Ying lived in the block and worked part-time as a real estate agent. The way Robyn told it, she'd started cooking and cleaning for Jack, telling him that she had a Thai boyfriend in the past but that now she was footloose and fancy free and much preferred farang men to Thais

Jack and Robyn spoke every few days on the phone and at first Robyn was happy enough that his father had someone to cook and clean for him and to show him around. But Robyn's happiness was short-lived when Jack dropped the bombshell that he and Ying had become more than just good friends. They were in love, Jack was going to marry her and as soon as the winter was over, he planned to bring her back to the UK. Jack was especially pleased that Ying was only a few years younger than Robyn's wife so she wouldn't be lonely.

That's when Robyn got in touch with me. He realised that if the marriage went ahead, the family estate would quite probably end up in the hands of a twenty-something Thai girl.

Like Robyn, I was hearing alarm bells ringing. A ten year age gap is perfectly acceptable in a relationship. I've known marriages work where the husband is twenty years older than the wife. But Jack was half a century older than Ying, and I doubted that it was his wrinkles or shrunken gums that she fancied. You didn't have to be a private eye to realise that Jack had been hooked by a gold-digger, but the old man was clearly thinking with his dick rather than his brain, so the son wanted me on the case. He'd found my firm on the internet and called me straight away. Robyn had already done a bit of detective work himself. His wife had recommended the apartment block to Robyn's father and she'd telephoned the staff there to get the low down on Ying. The staff didn't think much of Ying, apparently, and were fairly sure that she had a Thai boyfriend. I assured Robyn that I'd be able to help and gave him my bank details.

As soon as the retainer had been transferred I phoned my contact at the British Embassy. Generally the embassy officials are not too helpful to guys like myself but over the years my contact Clive had been less obstructive than most. I ran Jack's situation by Clive and asked him what the chances would be of Miss Ying getting a visa to the UK. 'About the same as a snowball in hell,' said Clive. In cases like that – which were not unusual in Thailand – the embassy would keep on stalling, hoping that the husband-to-be would come to his senses. I passed that information on to Robyn so that at least he could stop worrying about anything happening in the short term.

The next step was to have chat with Jack. I caught a VIP bus to Cha Am, then paid ten baht for a motorcycle taxi to take me to the apartment block. I asked the girls at the reception desk to phone Jack's room and five minutes later we were sitting at a beachside bar enjoying a couple of beers. I told him that I was from the British Embassy and that I had a few questions about his application for a visa for Ying. He didn't question the fact that I had a New Zealand accent, and he was eager to chat. I figured that during the weeks he'd been in Thailand he'd been starved of intelligent conversation. We chatted about his life in Cha Am, his family back in Oxford, rugby, football, and then eventually we got around to the subject at hand. Miss Ying.

It was Jack's first trip to Thailand, so I explained the basics to him. There are no pensions, unemployment benefits or sickness payments, so Thai girls would do whatever they had to do to survive and to support their families. And attaching herself to a wealthy older man was a much better option than planting rice by hand.

Jack shook his head, refusing to accept that I might be telling the truth. At his age he deserved a little pampering, he said. And he was sure that while Ying might not yet be in love with him, she would make a perfect wife.

According to Jack, she phoned him every morning, then came around in the early afternoon. Most days she went downstairs to the local hair salon to make herself look good for him. They would eat together most evenings, and then at ten o'clock she'd head off to her own room. They had become lovers he admitted coyly, but she didn't want to move in with him until after they were married. That set more alarm bells ringing in my cynical head. Ten o'clock was the perfect time for a young lady to head off to a nightclub with her Thai beau.

I had a couple of more beers with Jack and I told him a few horror stories of farang men who'd lost everything to their Thai wives or girlfriends, but he just laughed and said that Ying was different. If I'd had a dollar for every guy who's told me that his girl was different, I'd be a hell of a lot richer than I am. I didn't tell Jack that, though. I wished him well, told him that his application was working its way through the system, and I went off to phone Robyn.

I told Robyn that his father was still determined to marry Ying and that the next stage would be to start checking her background. He was keen for me to proceed and agreed to wire over further funds. I already had a game plan. In my experience, girls having their hair done tended to chat away merrily. In the past I'd tried using my wife to glean information from various hairdressers but she tended to march in and tell all and sundry that her husband was a private eye and ask her questions point blank. Her elder sister Boo was a bit more devious, though, and in recent years she'd had many a free cut and blow dry courtesy of my investigations. I left it until Friday afternoon, figuring that was a dead cert for

a day that Miss Ying would get her hair done. I took the VIP bus down to Cha Am with Boo. I showed her a photograph of Ying and made sure that she was in the salon by three o'clock.

Half an hour after Boo had sat down, Ying walked in. She was obviously well known and as luck would have it she sat down next to my sister-in-law. I love it when a plan comes together!

As it happened, Boo didn't have to any fishing. It turned out that Ying loved the sound of her own voice and she wanted to tell all and sundry about her good fortune. She had hooked a rich old farang, there was a huge dowry on the horizon and she going to be moving to the UK before long.

I'd briefed Boo too see what the hairdressing girls knew, so she used delaying tactics and asked for a dye job. They were still working on her hair when Ying dropped a big tip and headed into the apartment block for her rendezvous with Jack.

It was easy enough then for Boo to get the full scoop on Miss Ying. Later, as we sank a couple of congratulatory Jack Daniels, Boo told me what she'd learned. According to the girls, who were getting a bit fed up with Ying's boasting, she was the long time mia noi, minor wife, of a local car dealer and that he was also planning to move to the UK to set up a business exporting cars back to Thailand. The farang was old and according to Ying wouldn't be alive much longer and that she and her boyfriend would have the lot. I gave Boo a thousand baht bonus and complemented her on her red hair.

I put Boo on the bus back to Bangkok and staked out the apartment block in a rental car. If I had Miss Ying right, she'd be hanging out with Jack until ten o'clock and then she'd be out on the town with Mr Car Dealer. I couldn't stop myself grinning when at ten thirty an older model BMW arrived in front of the block, and a few minutes later Ying hurried out and climbed in to give the driver a peck on the cheek. Bingo.

I followed them to a trendy bar-restaurant where a local band belted out pretty good cover versions of Eighties songs to a packed house of middle class Thais. I got a seat by the bar and munched on my favourite snacks – gung shar nam pla, or raw prawns marinated in fish sauce and chilli, with lashings of raw garlic. Lovely.

Miss Ying and Mr Car Dealer sat at a table and sipped champagne as they listened to the band. There was a large group at the neighbouring table that were celebrating a birthday and at midnight a big cake was taken to their table and everyone began singing 'happy birthday'. I took the opportunity to poip over

with my digital camera and join the other revellers who were taking photographs. I managed to fire off a few shots that clearly showed Miss Ying and Mr Car Dealer together.

I booked into a hotel at Robyn's expense and the following day headed back to Bangkok. I emailed Robyn a full report and copies of the photographs I'd taken. I figured that would be the end of the case. As it happened, I was wrong. I hadn't taken into account how attached Jack was to young Miss Ying. When Robyn had told his father about Ying's boyfriend, Jack point blank refused to believe him. Ying had told him that the man was her brother, and that Jack was the only man she loved. Jack believed her, which just goes to show that there's no fool like an old fool. It's a standard lie for Thai girls to pass off their boyfriends, or even husbands, as their brothers. 'Oh, I share my room with my brother' they'll tell their farang sponsor. Bullshit. I've been at airports on surveillance jobs when I've seen a bargirl tearfully wave off her farang lover, accompanied by her 'brother'. As soon as the farang has passed through Immigration, the 'brother' and the bargirl are at it like dogs in heat.

Anyway, Robyn was starting to panic as he realised that he faced with the loss of his inheritance. He wanted to know what I thought he should do. I said that if he sent me another ten thousand baht I'd head back to Cha Am and speak to the girl. I might have given Robyn the impression that I was going to get heavy with Miss Ying, but in fact I was just going to play a mind game on her. It was clear from what Boo had told me that Ying wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer so I figured she'd be gullible to fall for any line I gave her.

I waited until the money had come through before catching the VIP bus back to Cha Am. I'd put on a suit and carried a briefcase and added a pair of spectacles to give me added authority. I knocked on Miss Ying's door, gave her the 'I'm from the British Embassy and I'm here to talk about your visa application' speech. I had a fistful of leaflets that I'd last time I'd been at the embassy, and I gave them to her.

Part of me felt sorry for the girl. She was only doing what she had to do to survive. If she'd been born in the West I doubt that she'd have thrown herself at an old fart like Jack or a married man like Mr Car Salesman. But Thailand wasn't the West and she would soon be thirty and in Thailand a thirty-year-old woman is well over the hill. But Miss Ying wasn't paying my wages and Robyn was so I hardened my heart and lied to her. I told her that she wasn't going to get a visa to the UK because the embassy was unhappy at the huge age gap between Jack and herself. I also told her that Jack had very little money, and that he lived off a small allowance. If he'd told her that he was wealthy, he was lying, I said. And I told her that any assets he had in England would, under English law, go to his children on his death. Even if they did go ahead with the marriage, all she would

be entitled to would be half of any money that Jack had in Thailand. And there wouldn't be much of that.

She took it quite well, under the circumstances. She nodded and smiled, fluttered her eyelashes and asked me if I was married. A real trooper.

Jack returned to the UK a few weeks later. I got an email from Robyn saying that I'd killed the romance stone-dead and that his father was busy sending off angry letters to the British Embassy complaining about no-good interfering busybodies and threatening to sue them. It would be water off a duck's back and I doubted that he'd ever get a reply. I figured Jack had had a lucky escape. He seemed healthy for his age and I got the feeling that Ying might well have been tempted to hurry things along, death-wise. It wouldn't be the first time that an old farang had been found dead at the bottom of the stairs by a tearful Thai wife. Divorce Thai-style, they call it.