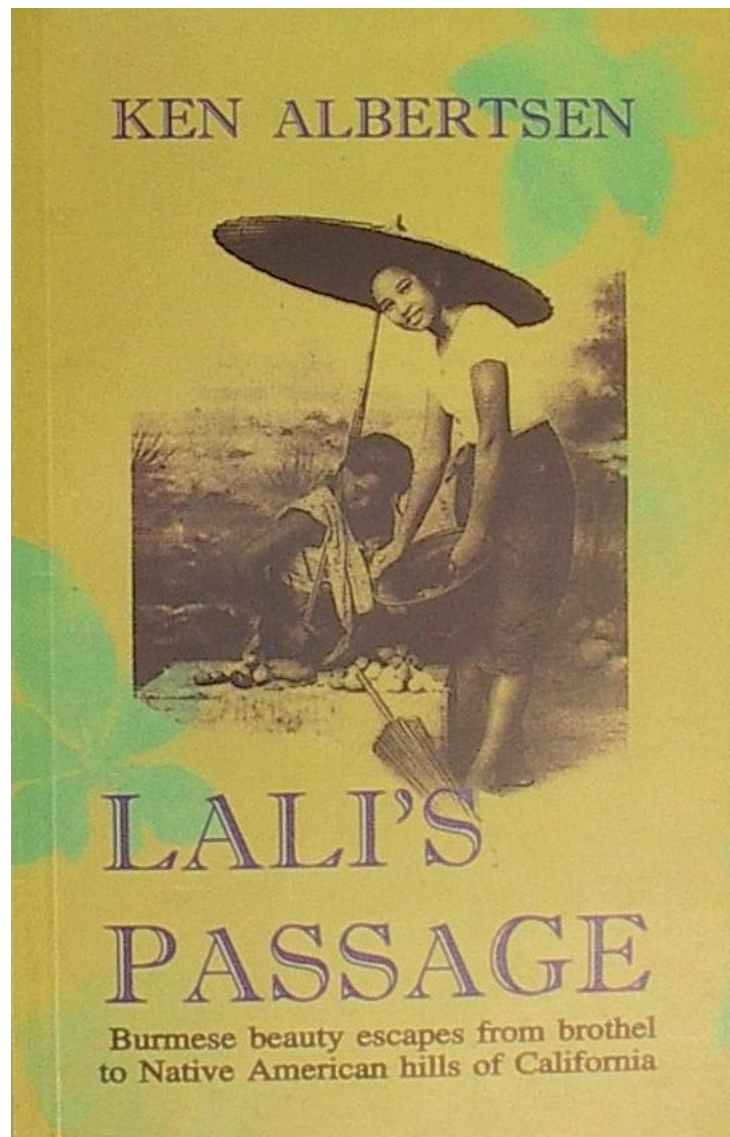


Here is a brief intro to the novel; **Lali's Passage**
– which is available as a paperback or as an Ebook.

This page: 2nd edition paperback original book cover

Page 2: actual reviews from Book reviewers
– when the book first came out, early in the 21st century.

Pages 2 through 23 First four chapters.



"This book had a lot of details as to what southeast Asia is really like. Lali was a delightful character! I enjoyed following her story and seeing the world through her eyes. She was refreshingly innocent in her own way! All-in-all, I found this book to be a very good debut novel that anyone interested in Asia would enjoy!"

Detra Fitch, Huntress Reviews

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"I really enjoyed reading the book. The tale of Lali's adventures as she struggles to cope with the complexities of western culture is both hilarious and thought provoking. With a treasure hunt thrown in, Lali's Passage is a book well worth reading."

Marge Robbins, Simegen.com Book Review

Preamble.....

The Diamond Buddha was not made of diamond any more than Thailand's Emerald Buddha was made of emerald. The latter was sculpted from green jade, whereas the Diamond Buddha was crafted from a tortoise-sized chunk of flawless clear crystal. According to legend, it first appeared at the small Mahabrahmani temple in northern India where Tilopa gained enlightenment. Tilopa, the originator of the Kagyu branch of Mahayana Buddhism, was an anomaly in that he had no guru. In other words, he had no spiritual teacher as was so common among holy men of those times. India, 800 years ago, was a land where ascetics were as common as migrating birds. Tilopa, who grew up tending cows, attained spiritual enlightenment while solemnly walking through the seven gates of the temple - a feat that comprised most of the night. The next morning, villagers found what was to become known as the 'Diamond Buddha' within the uppermost shrine room. Tilopa had left.

At various times during the ensuing centuries, sightings of the Diamond Buddha were reported. At the dawning of the fifteenth century, it was said to have found a home in central Ceylon, at an altar near the relic of Buddha's tooth. It somehow disappeared under nefarious circumstances and was believed to have been spirited to Southeast Asia by Dravidian pirates. The most reliable sighting since then was made by a wandering monk who visited the Khmer kingdom in what is now Cambodia. During his time of seclusion there, he wrote a letter dated 2105 (A.D. 1562), wherein he claimed to have seen the Diamond Buddha in a secret chamber within the Prasat Baboun temple close to the Angkor Wat complex. When an earthquake collapsed the temple years later, no evidence of the Diamond Buddha was reported to have been found in the rubble.

1. One Hundred and Eighty One years later

General Hiruma was pacing around his field tent like a lion with his tail burnt off. British shells were falling within his perimeter. He re-read the de-coded dispatch from Regional Command with disdain; "We regret that you cannot hold your position STOP Your request to retreat has not been approved STOP Troop transport planes will arrive at nightfall to evacuate wounded STOP All other infantry should hold position STOP Wounded soldiers should carry no gear as planes are laden with return fuel and are limited by weight STOP.

It was that last sentence that angered the General the most. He spit each word out as if they were maggots caught in his mouth. He could self-inflict a wound to gain entry to a medi-vac plane - that was no problem. It was the demand to 'carry no gear' that burnt his biscuit. It so happened the general had painstakingly pilfered quantities of valuables during his campaign through northern Burma, and he wasn't going to let those efforts amount to naught.

As for doing the honorable thing and leading a strategic fighting retreat over land with his men: "The monsoon is only half gone" he barked to his assistant, "and there's no way in hell that I'll direct my men to roll oxcarts through endless muddy troughs - with those damnable British bulldogs nipping at our heels."

The Brits ruled the air and had the luxury of provision drops along their path. All they had to do was mark their position with colored smoke and, like magic; dry crackers, tinned ham and ammo would get parachuted right into their laps. Hiruma's dog-tired Japanese troops didn't even have decent motorized transport any more, and barely enough bullets to kill dogs for dinner. His men would get rape crazy every time they came upon a Burmese village. That, along with forcing the local men to work as slaves, and pilfering valuables didn't endear his troops to the locals. "No wonder the peasants scatter through the countryside as we approach their villages," the General grinned sardonically. "That would never happen in Japan. We would stand and defend our women's' honor with our last drop of energy."

He ordered everyone out of his tent except Captain Yoshida. Yoshida was the son of his best friend from his home town. "I'm going to get us home aliveand with honor." Hiruma said to his protegee after the room cleared. "Not only that, we'll both be very rich. Your father will be proud of you." He paused to bask in what he assumed was the young man's admiration. "Here is the plan: I want you to get three strong Burmese men and bring them here. If any of my staff asks what you are doing, tell them you are carrying out direct orders from Regional Command." He waved the paper dispatch at the young man.

The General instructed his staff regarding the evacuation of wounded by plane. Foremost in his thoughts, however, were his plans to hide the commandeered wealth - valuables that he had collected during the past weeks of his column's retreat.

A few days earlier, he had a crew dig a gun emplacement within a nearby monastery. He personally picked the foxhole site, not only because it rested alongside a temple platform, but because of the riches that might lay beneath that mass of rock. He had swept aside protests by the few monks who were still straggling around - finally resorting to having them run off the temple compound by fixed bayonets. As soon as the foxhole was dug, he had two soldiers dig a lateral tunnel - to see what they could find under the Buddhist shrine that sat in the middle of the platform. It was well known that valuables were buried in such places. No one was fooled when the general insisted they were looking for buried explosives. Two hours later a soldier, slathered in mud, came to the command tent to report that nothing of value had been found.

An hour after that, Captain Yoshida returned with three local men.

"Tell those betel-chewing boys to grab those sacks and let's go," the General ordered. The dark skinned men, their wrap around cloths thinly veiling spindly legs, strained to lift the two hefty sacks. The young Captain held back, then relented and grabbed one end of the second sack - while cursing the General under his breath for not thinking to get four workers instead of three.

He looked over to see the Burmese porter at the other end of the load flash his red-stained teeth. Yoshida didn't know whether he was being treated to a smile or grimace.

By the time the men arrived at the temple site, drizzle had turned to rain and gusts of wind were flaying the tops of the palm trees. The three workers were soon basted in mud as they pushed the bulky sacks deep within the narrow tunnel that ran under the temple platform. "Maybe they think we're adding spiritual offerings to their pagoda in supplication for our bad deeds," General Hiruma quipped while wiping his nose with his sleeve.

The Captain was stone faced. "No use trying to explain to them. There's the language barrier to overcome."

"Hey, these miserable peasants won't even be alive in a few minutes any way," The General added sardonically. When the workers emerged, the General ordered the tunnel opening closed and the foxhole filled in. He then turned to Captain Yoshida and ordered him to execute the workers. "Shoot the brown bastards!" he called out as his orderly hesitated. The General drew his sword and held it high over the Captains head. "Shoot, or suffer for not obeying orders!"

Yoshida drew his revolver and shot two of the workers. Then, thinking that the General would in turn slice his head off when all the workers were killed, turned to aim the gun squarely at the General's chest. The general drew his samurai sword and brought it to task swiftly. The Captain stepped back in horror as he saw his own severed hand and pistol in the mud. The General lunged forward to finish him off but slipped and fell.

Yoshida scrambled to where his lifeless hand lay, picked out the gun and emptied its magazine into the General's forehead. Bits of cranium and brain colored the saturated soil. He dropped the gun, grabbed the stump of his wrist to squeeze it shut but he'd lost too much blood. He staggered a few paces then collapsed. The next morning, a group of monks found four bodies cold on the ground - two locals and two uniformed Japs.

2. Fifty Five Years Later

"Lee, come," my two teenage lovelies called to me from outside the shop window. Shoulders scrunched, they shifted from leg to leg as if that generated more warmth. They were creating wet spots on the sidewalk and their hair, their blouses, their shoes were all drenched. "Come on Lee, Songkran. We go!" they called out beaming like toddlers in the midday sun.

These gals had been my buddies for the past three weeks. It was a package deal; I courted one and the other came along - no strings attached. Mae and Yo had been friends since they were little kids. Even now, they slept on the same pad together. That funky mattress and a vanity were the only furniture in their threadbare apartment.

"Lee, come," Mae pleaded. "You, me, Yo go ride motobike together!"

"Ok, ok, I come. Wait a moment."

It was my first Songkran - the ten day water festival that hits southeast Asia every April - their warmest month. I'd heard how people spent their waking hours splashing water on each other, but nothing prepared me for the real thing.

I kickstarted the motorbike and the girls hopped on, Mae in front and Yo snug up in back. With me sandwiched in between, we took off down the alley. Trading their wetness for my body heat, we headed downtown in this northern Thai town called Chiang Rai.

The first gauntlet was a family group fronted by little kids with water pistols - who gleefully squirted us as we slipped by. The scene up ahead was more ominous. The muffled commotion was like an action movie stretched on a screen between the corner buildings.

Riding into the melee, we were met head-on by a squad of gangly boys who unloaded point-blank broadsides of water on us from plastic buckets. Their leader was a shirtless guy with a green bandana. Wielding a garden hose, he alternated between filling his buddies' buckets and taking a few shots at his new targets; two girls and a farang on a motorbike. Farang (pronounced "falang") is the Thai word for foreigner. His mirth spilled over as he broadsided us. Drenching a farang at Songkran is worth a fistful of bonus points.

As we entered the main thoroughfare, the full scale of the festivity came into view. There were drenched gangs of teenagers lining both sides of the street with buckets, hoses and water guns. Open pickups crept up and down the street, each manned by bucket brigades and supplied by on-board 55-gallon drums of water. One gang was adorned in matching red and yellow feathered headdresses with two younger kids beating tom-toms. Prodigious amounts of water were being thrown about.

I was as happy as a turkey in a typhoon as I slowed the bike, looking for an alley to escape the watery riot. My laughing bikemates would have none of it, imploring me to ride headlong into the fray. Not wanting to appear timid, I steeled my resolve and aimed the motorbike for a slight opening between a line of pick-up trucks and sidewalk revelers. Not one of my smartest moves. On the ride home I found myself reciting 'Mary Had A Little Lamb,' while inserting variations of the phrase; 'discretion is the better part of valor' at places where I forgot the words.

Arriving finally at the sanctuary of my small house on the outskirts of town, I parked the bike, walked to a sunny spot, stripped to my shorts and wrung everything out on some potted plants. The girls were percolating with residual laughter.

Mae chided me, saying, "You a cat, you no like water."

"And you're two Labrador puppy dogs, you like water," I retorted.

"Lababo puppy dogs - what is that?"

"You Lababos," I said while grabbing their giggling bodies and mashing them into mine.

'Smart play Montana,' I told myself, realizing I was wet all over again.

We took off shoes and went inside. I grabbed an armload of towels, and the three of us got to toweling each other off. I tossed them T-shirts and boxer shorts and within moments we were all warm and fuzzy.

Yo sat on a floor mat to continue the jigsaw puzzle that she started in the wee hours the night before. I asked if anyone wanted to watch cable TV. Yo grabbed the TV schedule and, reading carefully, announced, "I want watch disco very."

"Ok, you want to watch a music video channel? That's cool as long as you 'mute' it, 'cause we already have music playing on the stereo."

"Lee, 'disco very' it not music channel, it science and nature channel."

I put on my reading specs and looked closely at what she was pointing at in the TV

listings. "That's Discovery channel, babe. Sure, let's do Discovery. You can watch the lions and baby polar bears, but let's kill the audio - ok?" She looked at me askew.

Mae put her arms around my waist and asked to see the photos that we'd taken a few days ago on our outing to a waterfall. I took one of her skinny arms and pretended to break it at the elbow - showcasing the anatomical marvel of how far her arm hinged in the wrong direction. She slapped my shoulder and shoved me. I clicked on the computer while she slid onto my lap and we were off to find the digital photos.

A bit later, two of their lady friends showed up carrying plastic bags of food and a cacophony of good natured Thai banter filled the room. They'd also been running the gauntlet of water brigades. They towed off and went straight to the kitchen and began arranging the food they'd brought. I was reminded how Thai social life revolved around food and, at any given time, they're planning their next meal. I noticed the jigsaw puzzle sitting by itself and asked Mae where Yo went to and was told she was busy cleaning my bathroom.

I grumbled in mock indignation whether that was a commentary on my standard of hygiene and went to look into the bathroom to see if it was for real. Sure enough Yo was there, down on one knee facing away from me. I marveled wordlessly at the intensity of her tile scrubbage - especially when she took a screwdriver, removed the stainless steel floor drain. She then scoured both sides of it with the cleaning brush before screwing it back in place.

The phone rang, and Mae handed it to me. It was my Welsh friend Geoff. "My man, your presence is needed. I got four choice ladies here and I don't know if I can handle them all by myself." Mae, who spoke some English, looked over at me. She couldn't completely understand what I was saying, but she got the gist of it. She gave me her intrigued puppy dog look; half curiosity, half consternation. "Yeah you're gonna get drenched no matter what," I continued into the phone, "try wearing just shorts and sandals." Pause. "No, just bring yourself..., oh ok, go ahead and bring a fistful of flowers. Mixed color roses, why not, they ring the ladies' chimes,yeah, get your Limey buns over here. This is the happenin' place."

I felt an urge to hear Junior Walker, so I slapped in a cassette and his "Pucker Up Buttercup" filled the room. I picked up a banana, cradled it like a microphone and in a flash was belting out a duet with Junior.

'Pucker up Buttercup / I want to kiss you one time, Pucker up Buttercup / I want to kiss you one time, I want to ho-old you / Buttercup I want to show you how.'

Next morning, I woke up wondering who left the curtains open. My eyes focused just enough to see two girls sleeping on the floor cushion, illuminated by the salmon pink of dawn. Out on the porch still asleep on the reclining deck chair, Geoff and Yo lay bare-chested and wrapped in each other's arms - a Matisse study in pastels and cafe au lait. Lying next to me was Mae, wrapped in a yellow towel with her head at the foot of the bed. I gently grabbed the little foot in front of my face. She mumbled something in Thai

and jiggled her 90 pound frame further from my reach. I sat up, bent over and kissed her on the cheek. I thought about how different life had become.

When people would ask me why I took the plunge to move to Thailand from America, I used to fumble around for an altruistic-sounding answer like; 'to reside in a Buddhist country' or 'to be able to help disadvantaged people.' Though there's some truth to those reckonings, the bare-knuckles reason was 'the ladies.'

As for ladies in the States; no doubt there are gaggles of attractive women, but how many would give a hoot for a middle aged guy like me? Guys of a certain vintage know what I'm talking about; that listless feeling of 'being a nobody.' Stateside, a hundred women can promenade by, and not one will appear to notice - beyond the mere physics of there being a body they need to avoid bumping into. Southeast Asia is a whole new world in that regard. In Thailand, a old coot like me can actually get eye contact and share smiles with ladies while out and about.

In America, a middle aged single guy has three basic options in the relationship department: One, he can pursue women with a resurgent burst of high school enthusiasm and chance to suffer all the inherent frustrations. Two, he can withdraw and stuff his loneliness and horniness into the shadowy abode of his residence. Or three; if he gets lucky he can embark on a 'serious relationship' with a real live woman. Such a situation may flower from mutual attraction, or it may even be sparked by real love. The un-pretty reality is many relationships that endure do so out of 'commitment' rather than a genuine desire to stay together.

But hey Erasmus, cattle have commitment to their pasture. Commitment is the same word used for people who get taken to insane asylums against their will. Granted, a long-term marriage is rarely a wall-to-wall loony bin, but resigning oneself to being shackled up by default is not a whole lot better. There are a dozen sappy excuses a guy can give for sticking with his dog-tired relationship, but given a non-messy way out of it, he'd be out the door quicker than you can say 'unlock wedlock!'. The other question that comes my way has to do with how I make ends meet. The answer to that takes a bit longer to articulate.

It was in San Francisco. I had some spare time so decided to go to the Exploratorium - a grand hands-on science place where school teachers and parents bring their kids. Inside the front entrance was a large display table. A bunch of kids were gathered around having a fun time. I glanced over their shoulders and saw what looked like a large version of one of those coffee table curiosities that have dozens of vertical blunted pins hanging down. This table sized version had thousands of pins. A kid would stick his hand under it, lift it up and the metal pins would slide up to show the shape of his hand. A little girl did the same with her doll, revealing its shape in the pins rising above... Fun stuff.

The kids were carrying on and I was thinking about my little boy in Portland - wishing his mom wouldn't make it so damn difficult for us to stay in touch. I got to thinking about getting in touch - literally. On the Internet, there's e-mail, there's audio and there's video.

Three ways to communicate; writing, hearing and seeing, but no touching. So, I started tinkering with these contraptions in my basement and put together two identical boxes - each one about the size of a round loaf of bread. Each had 448 tiny metallic pins which were separately wired into a central control mechanism. The whole array was covered by a flexible synthetic material to give it a seamless feel.

The easy part was getting the two boxes to inversely mirror each other. The trickier part was getting some sort of curvature in the pin mechanism. After weeks of tweaking and fine-tuning, I got it to squeeze open a Concord grape - from the other side of the room. I was jazzed!

I did a demonstration for a fellow tinkerer named Cedrik who also lived in San Jose at the time. He thought of adding tiny carbon nanotubes bonded alongside the metal pins in order to increase the device's sensing capabilities. The nanotubes were a tubular form of 'Buckyballs' - a lattice-like matrix of carbon atoms. They're giants in the molecular department, but only a hundredth the width of human hair.

Cedrik had bundled them together and devised a way to gauge their abilities to convey subtle electrical impulses by incorporating their hyper-sensitivity to minute temperature and skin vibrations. Adding piezoelectric circuits enhanced the contraption's ability to convey the sensation of a person's touch. Since he owed me a big favor for something special I did for him a few years before, he declined my offers to have him share in the patent rights. My insistence bordered on pleading, but only elicited added reasons from him, such as his self-imposed 'vow if poverty,' to excuse himself from any legal involvement with the invention. He went on to introduce me to a couple of guys who headed a Silicon Valley tech company named Zcomm. They were interested in developing a commercial version of our device. At that time, I was set to move overseas to Thailand, so I wasn't in the mood to devote much time to shopping the invention around to different organizations.

In exchange for exclusive fabrication rights, the Zcomm people offered me a monthly stipend while the product was in pre-production, and per-item royalties if and when it became commercially viable. It was a push-over bargain for them, as I was eager to strike a deal and get on with my travels.

The first thing they did was drop the name I had given it, "Tactile Communication Device" or TCD for short, and give it their mass-appeal sounding name; Symtouch. I promised Cedrik that I'd buy him a big house with a science lab when I made my first million. He said he'd settle for a cottage and a candle shop.

Mae shifted her lithe body and, without opening her eyes, elicited a slumberous observation, "Lee think too much."

"So true," I concurred. "Hey bud," I whispered to Geoff, "let's go out to breakfast."

"Right-o, where do you want to go, then?"

"How about the place on main street that's \$1 for chicken, rice, sliced cucumbers and soup."

I leaned over to kiss Mae again. She brushed me off sleepily, mumbling some phrase with the word 'shave' in it. I told her it was Ok to stay and sleep, or eat, or whatever. I slipped a twenty dollar bill into a pocket of her jeans that lay crumpled on the floor. She noticed and protested meekly but I waved her off saying, it's for 'perfume, make-up, condoms, whatever...,' knowing it would most likely get mailed away to her mother.

"So Geoff, my man, what do you think about my favorite little breakfast place?" As we entered, I glanced into the barrel-sized metal pot filled with brown fluid, sitting atop the gas burner. I couldn't quite discern whether some of the shapes floating within were their eyeballs or their feet, but the end product was some fine tasting chicken soup. As we found our table, Geoff commented on how well Mae and I seemed to get along.

"Yea, we have a lot of fun. But you know, before coming here from the States, I was so hyped to get cozy with an Asian lady that you could have brought the ugliest, hair-lipped Thai woman to my house and I'd have been groveling on the doormat just to touch her thigh. Now I'm one spoiled hound. Look out the door, man. Cute gals zip along on their motorbikes, hang out on the sidewalk....,"

"Yes, but many of those ladies are 'in the business', as you would say."

"Right, but I don't have a problem with that. Don't get me wrong. Mae is definitely one sweet gal. But the reality is I've become such a dog breath - awful boyfriend material."

"You mean because there are so many choices available?"

"Yea, like a bear at a salmon convention. You remember Marvin Gaye?"

Geoff started to hum an off-kilter rendition of 'Heard It Through The Grapevine' with a 'Waltzing Matilda' lilt that didn't quite fit. Across the street, a dog moaned.

"Actually, Gladys Knight did that song before Marvin, and she did a better version."

"Yeah, ok. So...?"

"When Marvin first showed up at the Motown studio in the sixties, he was this knockdown handsome young man and all the ladies went blotto for him. This was when Motown was just getting started - at that time it was a bunch of young black musicians trying to make their mark."

"They called them negroes back then, but ok, go ahead."

"So, mysterious Marvin shows up, and some evenings, when the day's sessions were over he would go down to the studio in the basement. Some of the lady back-up singers would still be hanging around. Marvin would sit at the piano and start into some romantic melodies. The ladies would gather around and add some back-up vocals."

"I get a feeling there's some point to all this."

"Yeah Geoff, the point is Marvin never singled out one gal for his own. You see what I'm saying? By being sweet with all the gals, he kept them all interested."

"I see. In his way, he was romancing them all." Geoff was perusing the newspaper, one of his less endearing dining room habits. "Blimey!" He scanned the article, "they found this crazy Alaskan guy who got lost in the Australian outback for twenty days. When the rescuers found him, the first thing the guy says was, 'I owe my survival to the Bible I carried with me the whole time, I guess.'" Geoff emphasized the 'I guess' and added a spin with his 'dumb red rooster' voice, "Duh, I guess the Bible saved me in the desert, duh, I don't really know, but it sounds like the right thing to say. What if he'd been carrying an old Mad magazine around that whole time, would he have attributed his survival to Alfred E. Neuman?"

I paid the \$2 and we split. Geoff expressed a concern about getting his passport visa renewed. He knew about going up to the Thai Burmese border to do that, but was unsure whether the border was currently open. I didn't have the latest info but told him about an ex-patriot named Royce who knew about such things.

Geoff hopped on the back of my motorbike and we headed up the road to Royce's place. Along the way I advise him to keep it sweet and simple. "Don't get Royce engaged in weighty subjects. Once he gets started, he can go on talking for hours."

"...like religion talk?"

"Yea that, and I've heard him go on about right wing conspiracy-around-every-corner stuff."

"...like?"

"Like the Federal Reserve printing the world's money for free and the Trilateral Commission controlling the world's governments," I continued while swerving onto the shoulder of the road to avoid a zero-clearance passing maneuver by a badly listing truck. "Basically the idea that every fiscal thing that happens is manipulated by some small nefarious group of men in business suits."

We found Royce sitting in his wheelchair by the wading pool while cradling some small electronic device. One of his Thai lady friends was busy clipping his toenails, while

another was tidying up the kitchen. "Lee, how's it hangin'? Good to see you, Blood. Have a smoothie. He called out to the kitchen, "Two smoothies, tee rak (darling)."

Geoff made a comment about the sweeping view.

"You like it?" Royce said, "I chose this spot back in '86. Ten years before that I was a hired gun, property of Uncle Sam. After Nam, I went back to the States but just got depressed there. So I sold everything and moved my crippled butt over here." He pointed northwest, "see those hills in the distance, that's Burma."

"Did you see combat in Vietnam?" Geoff asked innocently while admiring the shellacked wicker design of the man's wheelchair.

I gave him a roll of the eyes.

Royce noticed my gesture. "No, that's cool. The short answer is yes, the long answer is it's best left for another time. So, the real question is, 'where's the best border crossing now for a visa renewal?' Shoot, I don't know, but I got a new friend in the Thai government who just granted me a year's visa. Let's say I nurtured the deal with a little 'tea money.' He winked, "...otherwise known as a bribe. Anyhow, I believe the border crossing up at Mae Sai just opened up." Royce rolled his chair toward the far side of the pool and motioned for us to follow, "whether you got business there or not, it's a cool place to visit."

"How's that," inquired Geoff innocently enough.

"Let's just say they got some darn lovely ladies working up there,"

Royce whispered, attempting to shelter his English-speaking girlfriend, Da, from knowing the truth about his rakish character. "It's no nonsense in Mae Sai. Not all the song & dance of meeting a gal at a bar, engaging in lengthy conversations, buying rounds of drinks, and on and on. Up there, you just show up, sit down, and some guy gives you a little 'menu' with photos of the available ladies. You make a choice, maybe haggle a bit over price, and pow - you're in! Wham, bam, kop kun ma'am - it's so nice and simple."

Royce had a habit of laughing at his jokes as if his own personal applause sign started blinking. His staccato laughter would redden his face while he repeatedly slapped his thighs.

In a sobering tone, Geoff asked if he has any qualms about procuring sex from an unwilling teenager.

"These gals are not unwilling, my friend. They even compete with one another for clients' attentions. Only the choicest gals are even allowed to strut their stuff in those places." Royce looked at me, and decided to lighten up. "I hear your concern, man. I don't doubt that some of the young ladies would opt out of the business if they could, but realistically, what would they go back to? Most of them are from Burma, and

unemployment is all that's happening there." He took a swig of fruit juice and wiped his mouth with a hairy arm. "If a girl went around asking for a real job, she might, if she's lucky, get an offer to be a housemaid or a shop worker for - and I figured this out," he checks his dog-eared notepad - about ten cents per hour. That's for a seven day week working 12 to 14 hours per day."

"And that's if they even get paid," I added.

"So a lady-of-the-night can earn as much per hour working in a brothel as, say...?" Geoff reckoned.

Royce's voice rose as he warmed to his subject, "in a half hour, a chick can earn as much having sex as she can in a week of menial labor - and in that half hour, she may have a damn good time." He looked back toward the kitchen, hoping that his current lady wouldn't catch on about too much of his rakish ways.

"If they're with you, I'm sure," Geoff jested.

"Huh? Oh yea, a particularly lascivious time if they're with me!" Royce's machine gun laughter kicked in.

"And what about AIDS? Aren't you concerned about that?"

"Of course. A guy's got to keep his Leroy wrapped. But hey, shit can happen anywhere. It's probably more dangerous to take a three wheeled tuk tuk through Bangkok than to have unprotected sex in a Thai brothel."

"I read in the paper that the Thai government complains that too many foreigners see Thailand as a sex haven - they say it's bad for their national image."

"The sex industry is the engine that drives the Thai economy," Royce said. "The government, rather than chastising those girls, should put them on a pedestal. Heck, the government should give those girls monthly welfare allowances."

"And monthly health check-ups," I added.

"Ahh, here are the smoothies. Thanks Da."

"You're welcome Royce the cynic," she grinned while giving him a mock slap across the face.

"That's Da's new English word - she learned it last night."

"Cynic," she called out again while inspecting a potted agave plant. Royce spun around deftly in his chair and escorted us further along the deck to view another expansive view of the rice fields ripening in the valley below. He pointed out the

intermittent brighter green rectangles that were seedling beds. "George Carlin recently said, 'if you scratch a cynic, you'll find a disappointed idealist. Sure I'm cynical, but you know, they called Joseph Kennedy cynical when he would gripe about business leaders mishandling their corporations in those times just before the Great Depression. But guess what? While the other fat cats were dancing around the Roaring Twenties, getting big bank loans without collateral, old JK tucked his money away in a safe place. He made it through the Thirties in pretty good shape."

"Sounds a lot like the what happened in Thailand in '97." I couldn't resist giving a hand to Royce's tire roll.

"Uh huh, what with bankers and businessmen wanking each other off with non-secured loans - all thinking the bubble would expand forever. Back in the mid-90's, some banker's brother-in-law could get a fat roll of money with just a phone call."

A yellow & green bird flew to the roof eave and entered a birdhouse. Royce had crafted it from a large African gourd. After it dried, he cut a hole in it for a passage way, then scraped out the seeds and let nature take its course. "But you know, I'm not cynic-ridden to the core." Turning to me, then back to Geoff. "The other day I was watching the sports channel, and there was this marathon with world class women athletes running through the streets of Seville - in Spain. And all along the route were spectators, regular people, who were clapping for all the athletes as they ran by."

"The winner was a North Korean woman," Geoff added.

"Ok cool, you saw it. Anyhow, all those spectators didn't so much care what country the athletes were from, they were happy just to clap and yell encouragement to all the superb athletes in action. Watching that brought tears to my eyes."

"Kon Royce, you want kin kao (eat rice)?" Da called out from the kitchen.

Royce asked, "are you fellows hungry? I think she's fixing some chicken thing with Indian curry."

Geoff nodded, "no thanks, we just ate."

"They no kin kao, Da sweetheart," Royce called back to the kitchen.

On the way back to town on the motorbike, Geoff asked what I was planning to do later that evening.

"I'm going back to my pad and see whether the girls cleaned up from last night. Then I'm going to siesta. After that I'll probably go out and get a massage."

"How many women do you get intimate with each week?" he wondered out loud.

"No man, just a Thai massage. I'm not a total degenerate."

"What's up between you and Mae?" Geoff asked.

I tell him Mae's a definite sweetheart, but I'm too much of a bachelor to do right by any one lady. I can sense that Geoff is interested in her, but I don't want to make it too easy for him to move in on what I still consider my territory.

"You and her little friend seemed pretty cozy last night in that big chair," I told him.

"Oh yea, Yo is a very attractive lady. I think she likes me too."

"Go for it, Geoff."

3. Warm Hands One

Some people think a Thai massage parlor is synonymous with a whore house but that's only partly true. Though most masseuses are young ladies, only some will conclude a massage by having sex with a client, and then only off the premises. A two hour massage with an intimate conclusion can vary in cost between \$15 for a lady from a regular place and \$1,000 for an up-scale resort arrangement. A lady from a 'regular' massage parlor will tend to be shorter in stature, less educated and more down-to-earth than her sister at a high priced spread. In the heat of passion, with the lights down low, there's scant difference.

The evening street lamps were sparking to life as I approached one particularly familiar parlor. Greetings and small talk were bandied back and forth with some of the regular masseuses out front. They were lounging in plastic chairs, munching dried squid snacks and smoking individually-purchased cigarettes. The parlor's exterior wall was a long length of smoked-glass upon which were painted life-sized depictions of sensual massage.

I strolled inside and was greeted by the mama san (manager woman) and her painted-on smile. Dressed in an array of manifold nightgowns, she took me by the arm and mumbled a few phrases in Thai. Her tone was hushed and confidential and, though I understood only a few words, the message got through: She was assuring me that I was a special customer worthy of a discount and that she'd got 'just the right lady' picked out for me. Weeks ago I had grown weary of telling her that my grasp of the Thai language was tenuous. Heck, she might have been telling me my motorbike had just been trampled by Godzilla for all I knew.

She motioned for me to go upstairs. We both knew there was scant difference between the skills of one masseuse and another. She also knew I like new blood, so I was content

to let her choose a recently arrived masseuse for me. I dutifully went to the dimly lit room where the mattresses were lying side by side. I changed into the ludicrously loose pajamas which lay folded there, and went to stretch out in the dark. I was as vulnerable as a newborn pup.

The curtain to the cubicle parted and the newly appointed masseuse walked in. She went to her knees, head bowed and offered a cup of straw tea. Though I could discern just her silhouette and movements, I was content. She had me lie on my back, then went to the foot of the mattress and started kneading my feet and toes. As her unhurried hands moved up my legs, so too my hands explored her body - ever so gently; a touch on her thigh, the squeeze of a fingertip. We played each other like musical instruments - she the conductor and I adding subtle accents. Whenever I transgressed upon unspoken boundaries such as breasts or buns, she deftly pushed my hand aside. As for spoken words, there were no soliloquies - just muted niceties related to 'name?', 'age?', 'where you from?', and 'why you no have girlfriend?' Her grasp of Thai was scant better than mine, so I figured she either wasn't a native of Thailand - or else she was a bit daft.

Along the way, she accentuated her phrases with subtle chuckles - seemingly to atone her poor grasp of English. There were times when I could sense she was smiling while speaking but the light was too muted to know for sure. She was Burmese, her name was Lalita but she said everyone called her Lali.

At various times, she deftly repositions my legs, arms and torso to positions that dovetailed with her body parts. Her warm hands dug into limb muscles at just beyond the comfort zone. In a whispered groan, I pleaded 'bow bow,' which is Thai for 'easy does it.'

An especially satisfying part of the massage came near the end when, while seated with legs crossed, she put a pillow squarely on her lap. She motioned for me to stretch out again on my back and put my head on the pillow. With her upper body bent over close to my face, she commenced to massage my head. Except for my adam's apple, no part of my scalp, face, ears, and neck were left untended. Somehow, the top knot holding her hair came undone. Her silken locks dropped down, gently swooshing my face - scenting my world with a subtle mix of shampoo and feminineness. A light came on in another cubicle. I looked up to see her silk blouse housing the most heavenly twin peaks and valley I had ever laid eyes upon.

Massage over, she escorted me downstairs. As we turned together into the well lit entry hall I beheld her features for the first time. Even in a land that hosts a multitude of stunning women, her beauty was exceptional. From her cafe-au-lait skin to her slit almond-shaped eyes that turned slightly up at the edges and, ...and then she smiled. I was smitten.

Mama san saw me beaming like a schoolboy and stepped in to tell me that this lady was not available for 'for take out.' I momentarily pictured a mini-Lali packaged in a white paper take-out container. I then turned to the mama san and feigned indignation that she would assume I harbored such lascivious thoughts - and went on to say that I just

wanted to hang out and fraternize for awhile. Mama san took me by the elbow and escorted me to the door, saying, 'miss Lali must go back work tonight, bye bye.' I was in the middle of asking 'what time do you open tomorrow?' when the glass door ushered me onto the sidewalk. A high voice from inside said, 'six o'clock evening.'

Some guys connive a thousand ways to get a particular gal to drop her panties and hop in bed with them. I had bigger plans for Lali. I wanted to make her a fashion model - world-class, and I would be her manager. If she also let me roll with her between the sheets, so much the better. I saw her stunning beauty as my ticket, our ticket, to a ritzy life of adventure.

The pieces were flummoxing together in the jumble of my mind. We would have to go together to the States. With the monthly income from my invention I could meet expenses - so long as things didn't get out of hand. That brought to mind an earlier relationship I had had with a Thai woman. She had an annoying habit of cajoling me into gift stores every time we strolled downtown together. It steadily became clear that she expected a steady stream of gifts for as long as we stayed together, which thankfully was not a long time. I dearly hoped Lali wouldn't be so inclined. And there was the not-so-minor detail of extracting Lali from her job - that could be a challenge. For that matter, how would Lali react to these plans?

And what to do about my little sweetheart, Mae? I didn't want to break her heart - I'd have to tell her the truth ...well, near enough. I'd tell her that I had to go back to the States to deal with the invention business. No one knew how long I'd be tied up so she wouldn't need to wait for me. I wondered if she would go for that? It was partly true anyway. Oh well, she's a survivor.

I called Geoff and gave him an overview of my plans. He thought I had gone bonkers and even had me chuckling at my presumptuousness. First for assuming that Ae would be heartbroken if I cut off our short-lived affair. But mostly for assuming that the new girl would even want to run off with me - a guy twice her age whom she'd just met, and could barely converse with.

The next evening at five fifty-five I was standing in front of the massage parlor door while leafing through a magazine. The curtain parted from inside and I looked up to see Mama san give me a tired visage.

"Where's Miss Lali?" I asked.

Mama san called her name up the stairs. She let me in.

Lali appeared at the top of the dimly lit stairs dressed in a willowy nightgown. She shuffled half way down, stopped to survey the various people viewing her and said with a sleepy half smile, "Hello kon (mister) Lee."

"Hi Lali. Come here," I motioned to the window, "look at this magazine." I hadn't felt

this much like a breathless kid feeling since I don't know when.

"This is a big time fashion magazine."

"Big time. Like long time?"

"Lali, you see these ladies? They are models. You could be one of these ladies too. You could be model, same same."

"I know this magazine," she said.

Mama San, acting nonchalant a few paces away was going through motions of straightening the drapes and fluffing pillows on the furniture.

"These models very rich, make lots of money."

"I like model."

I escorted Lali to a far corner of the room. "Lali, I want you come with me, we go America. I make you model." I chose the 'simple speak' method of talking.

Mama san, with field mouse-grade hearing ability, stepped into the conversation. Looking at me earnestly she said, "Wait, wait. Lali no can go with you. Wait moment." She hailed one of her other workers over and spoke to her heatedly in Thai.

The other lady spoke up, "Hello, my name is Pad. I speak little bit English. Mama san says if you want take Lali with you, you have to pay."

"I understand. How much?"

"How long you want take Lali?"

My mind spun. "One or two weeks."

After more animated discussion between Pad and Mama san, Pad said, "Mama san said she no believe you bring Lali back after been two weeks. She say she like you so she give you good deal. You can buy Lali's contract for 500 dollars U.S."

I looked to Lali, "You want to go with me?"

She nodded yes.

"You've got to stay with me, understand? We're talking a lot of money." I saw Lali mulling over the words to a language that she had only a rudimentary handle on. She knew these were serious negotiations, so she wanted to get it right. A smile sufficed as an answer.

"If you be nice to her, she stay with you," Pad volunteered.

"OK, \$500. Thai baht OK?"

Mama san nodded in agreement.

"I'll bring the money day after tomorrow, in the afternoon," then turning to Lali, "Can you be ready to go that soon?"

Lali turned to Pad with a quizzical look. Pad translated and Lali looked back to me and said ok. Things were falling into place pretty darn quick. Before leaving, I mentioned that Lali should study English. All agreed and Pad offered to get Lali started on an English tutorial right away. Her fee was \$5 per hour for a one on one session. I handed \$20 to Lali for them to get started as soon as possible.

Five hundred buckaroos, not bad for Lali's contract, I reckoned. I really had nothing to compare it to. For all I knew, mama san could have scored Lali's services by just having her walk in off the street as a free agent.

My pulse was geared up a few notches. And even if Lali bolted from me..., well that was just a chance I'd have to take. It was just past eight in the evening and the air was cool as I walked back to my house. Dozens of working gals live along that little road situated close to the red light district and bordered by small apartment buildings. Some ride motorbikes and some walk to the bars where they work. They leave between eight and nine in the evening and when they get back is, well, about as predictable as a polecat's schedule from fence to fence. All smartly dressed and made up, they conserve their acts for the stages they'll be performing at for the next eight hours; the bars.

Next morning's business was with a travel agent. I was about to book two plane tickets out of Thailand when it dawned on me that I forgot to ask Lali if she had a passport. On second thought, her having a passport is about as likely as the Jesse Jackson having a KKK membership card. Even if she had a frumpy little Burmese ID card, it wouldn't do us any good for the business at hand. That brought to mind a time when I had to get some phony papers for a friend in Bangkok. Thais are nothing if not among the best counterfeiters on the globe.

We could get a phony passport then head to the states in a westerly direction. Entry into Europe is more lax than entering the States. Next stop Canada, where our papers would be under less scrutiny than if we were coming straight shot from Asia. Coming across the Canadian border into the States shouldn't be too tough. I decided to run the plan by Royce and get his spin on all that.

I caught up with Royce as he was sitting down to eat Thai spicy salad at the long teak table that separated his kitchen from the living room, "Lee, don't worry about getting a phony documents. Listen, a year ago I got a Thai passport, legal and all, for my gal Da here. I was going to take her over the big pond to see Las Vegas and Disneyland."

"That's what Asians want to see."

"Yeah, and then the big news broke with planes plowing into New York skyscrapers, and that sort of put ice on our traveling plans. Plus, I don't want to go back to the country that cornholed southeast Asia," Royce stuffed another spoonful of salad into his toadish mouth. "I figure we got no use for that passport." He paused and looked up at me, "So you want it, you got it." With an index finger he stuffed a few straggling bits of carrot between sealed lips.

"Sounds pretty cool, but wouldn't we have to change the photo?"

"No problemo amigo. Does your new gal look like this?" He flicked open the passport and showed Da's photo.

I was reminded how Asians never smile for official photos and amazed at how well Da's features matched Lali's.

Royce appreciated my grin. "The passport's yours bud. You can mail it back to me when you get to where where you're going. Da has no attachments to it. The image of people riding a multi-ton petrol bomb into a building is still searing synapses in her brain." He handed it over. "Just don't tell anybody where it came from." We turned to watch Da and a friend cleaning dishes on the other side of the room.

I wondered out loud about whether my eagerness overshadowed common sense in agreeing so quickly to the \$500 for Lali. Royce opined that he thought that was a fair price. He then went into a monologue about what happens to girls when they first arrive at a Thai brothel. I interject by saying I found Lali at a massage place, not a whorehouse. No matter, he was on a roll.

"Lee, you can guess who's the first to have sex with a new girl that shows up. The head pimp - ok that's a no-brainer. Then whatever other guys are hanging around as part of the brothel's operation get their freebies before the girl is put in the line up for the swinging dicks like you and me."

"You once said something about cops getting their piece of the action."

"Oh yea, sure. Word gets out to the police captains and other local heavyweights such as military brass and politicians. They all want to get in on the early action. But what I'm getting at is, you can bet that the slimeballs that live and work at the brothels all have HIV - sure as shootin'. And I doubt they wear any protection."

".....but wouldn't the owners want to keep their girls healthy - for their business?"

You'd think so, but if he infects one of his new girls with HIV, it will take several years for full blown AIDS to take hold. During that time, she can generate revenue for him - around 200 customers a month - and he keeps 90%. He figures he's got it made in

the shade. As long as the girl is cute enough to keep attracting clients....,"

"...and doesn't get pregnant."

"Right, that too,then she's making money for him. As soon as she gets to be a drag, pow! He boots her out the door." With a hand, he jerked up his lame leg in a kicking motion. A little bell chimed. I asked if that was the doorbell. He chuckled and motioned me over to his computer console.

I was about to grab the handles on his wheelchair to help wheel him over but he waved me away to show his adeptness at moving around on his own.

All the gadgets were spread out over two large tables. "That ringing sound was my e-mail alert," he grunted while reading the monitor, "just a little note from an on-line service that sends mentions of hot new stock picks to watch out for." He pressed a few buttons on the keyboard. "Hey, I got a new toy, check this out. See this? This little white thing is the video camera, and this plastic stick is the skinny little microphone. I may be the only person in Thailand with a video telephone."

I chose not to tell him that those gadgets were nearly ancient history where I came from. Peering over his shoulder, I looked again at the email with the list of twenty or so stock picks. One symbol stood out. "ZCOM. Cool, that's my company!"

"Your company?"

"Well yea, in a sense. They're the ones dealing with my invention."

"Ok, I remember you telling me about inventing some computerized touchy-feely thing. I thought the company was called 'simulate feel' or something."

"Symtouch, that's the product. The company is called Zcomm, so ZCOM must be its stock symbol."

"Sure, why not?" He pondered another moment and declared, "Let's call those Zcomm guys on the video phone. Are they west coast?"

"Sure, and they must have a video hookup on their end." I know I'd been delinquent in not staying well enough in touch with them. "Let's see, it's mid-morning here, so with a 15 hour difference it's early evening over there." I pulled out my address book and gave him the number.

"Not the phone number, my man, we do this by way of their email address." Our timing was good. The connection with California began with sincere noises of surprise and pleasantries. Then Royce motioned for me to take over the keyboard and whispered, "ask him if he's got a video link." It worked.

"Hi Lee, great to hear from you." It was the VP, a friend of Cedrik's, "Wow, a couple guys from the epicenter of the world's opium production calling the epicenter of the world's computer industry - on a video phone no less! You got a Symtouch on hand?"

I was going to tell him that Afghanistan now had bragging rights to being the world's largest producer of opium, but I let it pass. "Haven't got Symtouch on this end."

"I'll send three units, hot off our first assembly run, to your Thailand address."

I thanked him, but advised that he wrap it in a plain wrapper with no corporate logos showing. "Make the package look like it's holding a cake from grandma, and declare a low value on the paperwork. Thai customs officials are like highway robbers. They've been known to add over 100 percent duty payments on anything that's shipped into the country especially packages addressed to a non-Thai name."

The VP then told me about a woman friend of his who was a writer for a women's magazine. She was intrigued by the Symtouch device and asked to know more about the inventor. He told her the few things he knew, and then mentioned that the inventor had moved to Thailand. That especially piqued her interest because she had been planning a trip there. She could deduct the trip as a business expense.

I told him I was open to meeting her. VP got her on a separate phone line and found that she'd just booked a flight and was expecting to arrive at the Bangkok Orchard hotel the following Sunday night. He patched me in to the conversation and we made arrangement to rendezvous.

In the monitor, Royce and I observed the VP facing sideways while cradling the phone and nodding his head in agreement. He then turned to smile at his phone-cam, "sounds good. Anything else? Oh, and Lee, not to worry - your invention is shaping up very nicely. We do a press release tomorrow, and the next day there's a spot on Good Morning America."

"Does that mean I get some added royalties?"

"Contingent on sales as per our agreement Lee. Not to worry, all systems are go go go on this baby. I got a good feeling that Symtouch is going to make big waves. Everything's real busy here and we do an IPO for ZCOMM next month." We signed off.

"I don't know about that guy, Lee. I would keep him on a short leash, you know what I mean?"

"You think so?" I tested the strawberry yogurt that Da slipped in front of me while we were engaged in the video call. "Dee aroy maag (delicious)!" I told her from across the room. Then lowering my voice to Royce, "Man you should see this lady I just met!"

"I hear you man. I could sense you were charged just by the way you were talking when we doing the passport business. So this is the one you're gonna take her to the States to be a super model - sounds like a big plan. Hope you haven't bitten off more than you can chew."

"...in a masticational sort of way"

He peered at me with raised bushy eyebrow, "a guys got to be wary you know, there's some hungry women out there." He probably thought I said a word related to 'masochistic' - which actually would have fit the subject well enough. Having lived in a foreign country for so long, he was accustomed to misinterpreting half of what he hears spoken.

+++ end of first four chapters of the novel; 'LALI'S PASSAGE' +++

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