

# THE ROOM

By Jonathan Gray.

**B**ongcha stared down at his hand and slid a pair of fours between the other cards hoping he would discover a flush, or at least another four. He swallowed hard. After he had finished several combinations, there was still only one pair and his last five hundred baht was up for grabs.

One of the five players slammed three aces onto the green cloth; it was over. Bongcha's hands dived into his empty pockets and he kicked the doorframe on the way out.

This was not the first time Bongcha had gambled in the room at the back of the Black Boot ago-go, and it wasn't the first time he had left with empty pockets. He told himself countless times that he would never to go back again, but the temptation gnawed at his belly every time he had some money. He had lived alone in the small room in Pattaya Tai for two years and had never got used to the noise of the night life. Light sleepers should never live near bars, and never next door to a gambling room. He planned to move when he had enough money, but that moment never came.

His life turned in another direction when he took the room. At one time he did not slept all day and did not gamble all night, and the baht bus did not drive itself, but that was long ago, when he lived on the north side. Hunger Pangs in his stomach took him into a minimarket and he asked the owner for

any broken cookies or food that was out of date. The owner replied by smacking him round the head, and told him to get a job.

Things started to look up when he went into the watch business. The farang took the Rolex and turned it over in his fat hands and asked Bongcha how much. Bongcha took the plunge, the big sting, one thousand five hundred baht. It was the farang's first day in Thailand, and Bongcha's first lucky day.

"Okay, I'll take it." Bongcha wanted to dance in the street, he wanted to kiss the farang, but he did not want to be thought that sort of person. That sort of person is at Boystown.

He clutched the money. This was the most he had ever earned in his life and it was only his third day selling on the street. The other farangs had reduced his prices and his profits to only a few baht. If he could get a big score once, he could do it again.

The watch dealer took his two hundred and fifty for the watch and Bongcha handed back the other watches, he had finished for the day and it was only two o'clock.

Da was sitting at one of the tables by the food stall and Bongcha sat opposite. He had known Da romantically for a couple of years but the gambling table had always got in the way. In spite of this, their relationship ticked over like an old model T. Dates with Da were spent sitting on the beach wall watching the farangs walk by, and perhaps sharing some fried locust with the working girls.

He never invited her back to his room; he was too ashamed. The mattress on the floor was grimy and the curtains were torn. Cleaning materials cost money and eating was more important; almost as important as gambling. He told her he lived off Second Road and that the owner's ferocious dog did not like strangers. She accepted the situation and never asked to go there.

Now he had a job, and he wanted her to consider their relationship permanent. She

agreed and suggested they move in together. Her place was not an option as she lived with her parents, but she could get used to the ferocious dog. He couldn't tell her the truth, and Bongcha choked on a fish ball at the thought of them living at Pattaya Tai.

Once he got away from the Black Boot ago-go he would be away from gambling for good, and he gave Da a thousand baht for a deposit on a home. Back at his room he stepped over the note from the landlord about the arrears. It was two months this time. He packed his belongings into a bin liner and sneaked out the door.

They needed cash for furniture and his luck was running high. He remembered the smack in the face. It prompted a plan. The owner of the minimarket was dusting the cigarette shelf behind the cash register. There were no cameras and nobody else in the store, and although the owner knew where Bongcha lived, he was now out of there and untraceable.

Bongcha took out his thousand baht note and put it on the counter with some chewing gum from the dispenser. The man picked up the note and held it up to the light. His back was turned and the cash drawer was open. Bongcha pushed him away and grabbed all the money he could get in his hands. The door seemed a mile away and took precious seconds to get there. At last the street.

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