



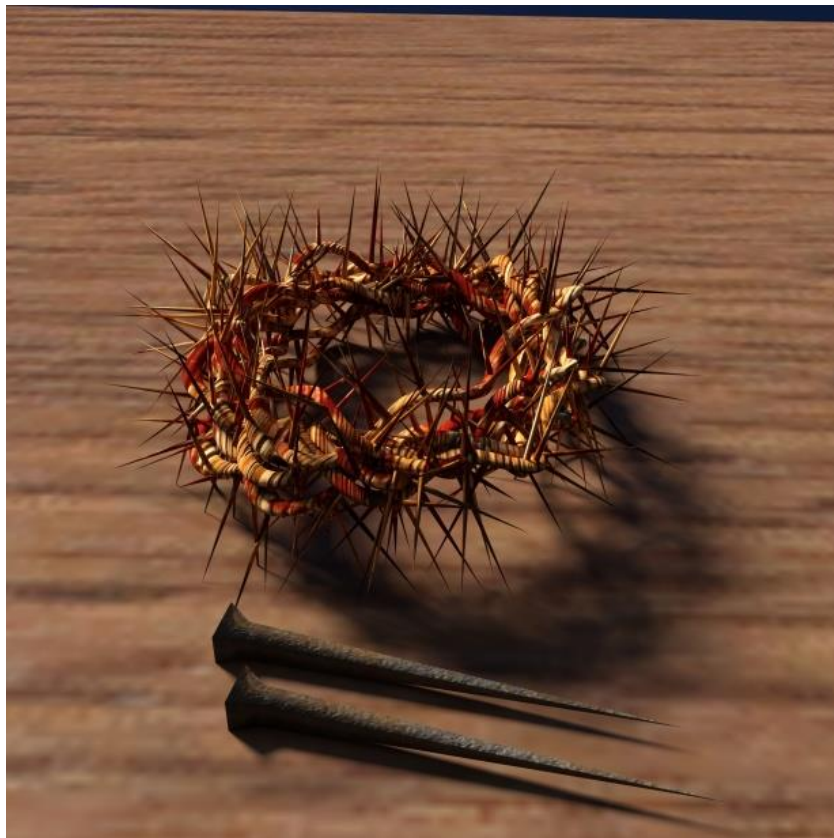
*Teaching Experience at
St. Benedict College,
Bangkok, Thailand*

Kink Bundy

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By Kink Bundy

An ESL experience at a for-profit college in Thailand.



BACKGROUND: Originally, I'd been in business, as an insurance underwriter, but left that occupation when my company was decimated by the "Great Recession" of 2008.

The following year my wife and I divorced after a short, unhappy, childless marriage.

I decided to change careers. Reinvent myself. Do something more rewarding.

Having taught English in Europe, during a backpacking stint after college, and having loved it, I figured I'd try teaching as a career.

But, after getting licensed as a high school teacher, I was having difficulty finding full-time teaching positions, even though I had an MBA and prior teaching experience.

All I could get was part-time substitute work...

A classmate of mine from grad school, in a similar situation, had been teaching English in Asia and encouraged me to try it.

Since I've practiced martial arts my entire life, I've always been fascinated by Asia, Asian cultures, and have always wished to travel there.

But the time was never right. It being an expensive, 15-hour plane ride, didn't help, either.

However, now the time was right.

The divorce was amicable. There were no kids, no debts, and no alimony payments.

I'd lived frugally, had money saved. I was still somewhat young. The time had arrived for such an adventure. It was then or likely never.

I found a few ESL, TEFL job websites, posted my resume.

With my MBA, business experience, teaching license, and prior teaching experience, I found that I was highly sought after.

I decided on a college in Korea that hired me to teach business courses and conversational English. The thought of being a "university lecturer" intrigued me and was a lot more prestigious sounding than working at a training center, cram school or high school.

It'd look sweet on my resume, too, if nothing else.

I planned to stay a year or two in Korea, rack up more teaching experience and head back to the States. But that anticipated short stay morphed into a prolonged stint at a public college in Korea. 8 years in all.

I'd stayed because I liked it.

A lot.

I had a fantastic overall time in Korea, enjoyed the teaching, the respectful, hard-working students, helpful staff, friendly deans, and I especially liked and got on well with my perpetually half-drunken, backslapping school president.

I liked most everything, except being forced into working the occasional extra-curricular activity, mostly as a judge for contests, debates, talent shows, and except the excessive weekend drinking culture and casual racism I faced...

Such as Korean women gasping, clutching their purses as me, a middle-aged white man, in a suit and tie, passed by them, being followed around stores by suspicious shopkeepers and refused service at the occasional bar, restaurant or taxi; many NPC, everyday Koreans I encountered seemed genuinely afraid of foreigners...

Aside from those trivial annoyances, generally my time in Korea was an immensely happy one. I learned Korean, learned to love kimchi, and loved my job, role at the school.

Not only did I like the work, but the position had its perks too, namely tons of time off, and I used the ample vacation time I had, and generous salary, to travel the world, hitting Australia, Canada, parts of the States, but, the best by far, was traversing the entirety of Asia.

My favorite spot- definitely-

Thailand.

The "Land of Smiles" as it's called.

The friendly people, fascinating culture, the food, the kickboxing.

Having been into martial arts forever, and seeing movies set there, I'd always been intrigued by Thailand, and found myself in love with the place, the fun and sun, particularly the bustle of Bangkok, with its crazy nightlife, and the jaw-dropping beauty of the numerous Thai islands, their cerulean waters, white sand beaches, conical, jagged mountains jutting from the seas.

I was instantly hooked, and once I'd been to most every country I'd wanted to visit, and between visits to other countries, I revisited Thailand at virtually every opportunity.

It had pretty much become my vacation home. And I daydreamed of someday working or living there.

But, in Korea, I had a great job, and had been with a great girl, the first serious relationship I had since my divorce.

We got along tremendously. She was gorgeous, could have been a K-Pop star, maybe. She worked in administration in my school's admissions office.

Sadly, our ethnic differences would be what doomed us...

Her family wanted to marry her off to another Korean family; for racial reasons, they couldn't accept their daughter married to a foreigner.

Although I was financially secure, had saved money, and was making decent cash as a university lecturer, when my girlfriend came out to them, about me, after us "secretly dating" for years, her parents vetoed any chance of us being together and forced her to marry a man, a policeman, she had no interest in.

Due to traditions, filial piety, she had no choice but to do it, and, even though she initially offered to “run away with me,” possibly to another country, I couldn’t let her do that. I couldn’t make her choose between me and her family.

So, we split up. It was one of the most difficult, gut-wrenching things I’d ever done. Worse than my divorce.

From then on, I decided I needed another change.

On a trip to Thailand, I decided to see what was available, on the job front there, and see if I could use my MBA and over 8 years’ teaching experience to land work there...

But it was a struggle to find university work in Thailand.

In fact, due to the rising cost of education, the lower birth rate, many colleges, universities in Thailand have been closing, and I’d read in the Bangkok Post that official estimates forecast perhaps up to 50% to 75% of higher education institutions will close throughout the 2020s.

I didn’t wish to teach high school or middle school, especially after hearing firsthand accounts of tiny, crumbling classrooms with no AC, warped blackboards, and *Lord of the Flies* type atmospheres...

The teaching conditions like a zoo, kids running around, going nuts, admins completely inept, often hostile to foreign teachers, teachers having to “clock in” every day like a factory worker, having to ask for permission to leave the school grounds, having to do “gate duty”- stand outside the school’s front gates, in searing heat, breathing in diesel fumes from cavalcades of motorbikes and pickup trucks while waving “hello,” welcoming somnolent kids to school in the morning.

It sounded like hell.

The training center jobs I saw, with their assembly line teaching, dancing monkey duties- literally having to sing and dance for clapping children- that didn’t sound much better.

The training centers also were corporate operations, chains, offering little vacation time, short contracts, and low pay, unsteady, often part-time hours, probably, largely, due to the plentitude of foreigners already in Thailand, especially the backpacker, begpacker sorts, who’d teach for scraps.

I’d seen almost no universities hiring, and read that to get a uni job, one needed to contact the schools directly.

So I emailed several, asking about vacancies but didn’t hear anything. The search was looking grim, and I figured I’d either return to Korea or perhaps look back into teaching in America, as the economic situation there had improved.

Suddenly, lo and behold, a job ad graced my phone.

It was from a school, on the outskirts of Bangkok; a college, A COLLEGE! A private college called: “St. Benedict International College.” It was a Catholic school, in Thailand, about 20 years old, claiming to be a top ranked school.

The ad listed a decent salary, for Thailand, 40-60k baht, per month, and the ad’s pictures displayed a sprawling, verdant campus with macadamized walkways, marble statues and palm trees everywhere.

They were recruiting university lecturers, particularly those with prior teaching and business experience...

Being a school founded 20 years ago, there was shockingly little online about the school aside from official school promulgated information, school created Facebook groups.

There weren't many previous teachers' experiences or reviews posted anywhere. Only a handful of positive reviews on Glassdoor, and nothing on Dave's ESL, ThaiVisa, except a previous applicant asking if anyone had info on the place.

Many advise speaking with current teachers at the school to ask questions, speak with before you apply or accept a job offer at a school abroad, but the problem with that is schools will only provide well-adjusted teachers as references.

(I know, because I was asked by my previous school to help recruit!)

So I figured, whatever, I'd take a shot. It's only a one-year contract. Might as well apply. See what happens...

APPLICATION PROCESS: I followed the usual interview protocol. Sent in my CV, cover letter. A few days later, I had a request to set up a Skype interview.

The interview started with a stressed out looking middle-aged lady from HR, asking me a few basic questions, probably just gauging whether or not I was sane, didn't have a speech impediment, a thick regional accent or that I wasn't too old or disabled (in Thailand, there aren't the same age, racial, handicapped discrimination laws as there are in Western nations, at least ones that are regularly enforced...)

Stressed out lady then asked me to hold on, while she got the school's president to come speak with me.

I was made to wait for nearly 10 minutes.

To me, as a Westerner, this would normally be considered rude, inconsiderate, waiting so long; however, having spent much vacation time in Thailand, I knew they often operated on "Thai Time," where things are done at a slower pace...

People walk slower, are usually late for anything (unless direct payment of money is involved, then they're generally quite punctual!) so I didn't think much of it.

When the president arrived, we had a positive chat, chemistry, and I liked her idea of creating an international school, a college, with teachers from around the world, providing the students an English environment, where they could not only learn, enhance their English, but could concurrently enrich their knowledge of the world, being exposed to teachers from a venerable UN Council of Nations.

There were around 20 countries represented at the school, she said.

She was an elegant, charismatic woman, I must say, the president.

She was a tad older than me, at 46, and slightly chubby, but she presented herself well, wore heavy makeup and an exquisite aqua blue taffeta dress.

Moving her hands as she spoke, I saw she was donning hefty gold rings, and her pearly necklace and diamond earrings sparkled prismatically, like lightning off my laptop screen.

Her smile too, was high-voltage, electric, and as she spoke, in near-perfect English, I could envision her being a keen, shrewd businesswoman.

I wanted to work with her. I wanted the job. It'd been exactly what I'd hoped to find, for some time, and, with alacrity, I told her I'd be happy to work there.

Our interview ended well, and I figured I'd passed the test and might have an offer.

But nearly a month passed with no response. I considered contacting them, to inquire, before I sent off any additional resumes.

It wouldn't be necessary. A couple days later, I received an offer from St. Benedict and was elated.

I still had a semester remaining at my college in Korea, though, and I promptly informed the Korean school I'd be leaving and emailed St. Benedict that I'd take the job and signed and returned their contract.

Their contract, like my school in Korea, had vague, legalese language, as most contracts do.

A lot wasn't clear.

There was nothing in it about office hours, which I didn't have at my school in Korea.

There were similar contract-breaking penalties as my Korean contract, but those are fairly standard in ESL jobs.

The only thing I didn't like was that the plane ticket, visa application fees were to be covered entirely by me, whereas my previous college, many other colleges, schools will reimburse that or at least a portion of it, and that St. Benedict's probation period would last four months, and during this time, I'd have no health insurance.

But, nothing's perfect, and I was ready to sacrifice financially, to an extent, to be in a less xenophobic, warmer, friendlier place.

The school was also to provide an apartment close to campus, plus a shuttle bus, daily. I'd been living on campus, and preferred that, but I figured that I'd be close enough to school that it wouldn't be a big deal.

The school had sent me a picture of a nice, sunny, big furnished apartment, with a king-sized bed, fridge, and big screen TV.

My current place, as is typical in Korea, was super small, though clean and upscale, so I looked forward to having more space.

I looked forward most to living in Thailand, really, and being around friendly, fun, kind people, getting lots of sun and not having to return to frigid air and cold faces.

The whole term, I prepared for arriving in Thailand. I began studying rudimentary Thai. I learned about the history, culture, do's and don'ts. I researched the area I'd live.

Soon enough, my arrival date approached. Aside from a holiday greeting I'd received from HR, I'd not had regular communication with anyone.

The time to collect paperwork from the school, for my visa, came, and I fired off a few emails requesting basic, crucial documents.

I also emailed the Thai consulate near my hometown.

Neither the school nor the consulate returned any of my emails.

I phoned both places. Nobody answered the phone.

I emailed the school again. Again, no reply.

I wasn't sure what to do. Perhaps the lady from HR, the one who'd sent the holiday greeting, was gone? On vacation? Left the job? Who knows.

But someone should have responded to such serious requests for visa documentation. Not that I expected an instantaneous reply, but two weeks went by, and there'd been nothing, and I was getting worried...

VISA ISSUES: Since I wasn't receiving any replies, I decided to search the school website and email several other addresses, practically begging for a reply, clearly stating my situation, hoping a kind soul would be charitable enough to answer.

(My Korean visa was about to expire, and I needed to vacate my Korean apartment. Time was becoming thin...)

It was a day or two after my email carpet-bombing campaign that I finally received a reply and got a couple of the documents. But not all of them.

I emailed back but didn't have any response, for a week, until I again carpet-bomb emailed various departments to finally get the documents I required.

Although this was disheartening, all throughout I never took it personally, got angry, or sent all-caps emails or anything of the sort.

I thought this to be more of the "*mai pen rai*" "*sabai sabai*" sort of commonly Thai attitude, that maybe "Thai Time" included emailing too.

My term was to start in the fall, and over that summer I came by the school, for a visit, and to collect a few documents, provide the school documentation they'd need to process my visa, residence permit.

Most international schools, at least in Asia, when a foreign teacher arrives, will send someone to the airport to welcome and bring the teacher to the school...

Arriving in a foreign land, can be nerve-racking for novices, first timers, especially coming to countries as diametrically different as those in Asia, where many nations are developing, in flux, chaotic...

Additionally, a foreign teacher will probably have spent ten to twenty hours on a plane, be terribly jet-lagged, so any postulant arriving into that sort of situation would likely necessitate such procedure from a practical standpoint, if not a moral one.

Most international schools in Asia do take responsibility, ensure a teacher who has just travelled fifteen thousand miles has, at least, a ride to the school, basic accommodation, upon landing.

However, no offer of pick up or anyone meeting me at the airport was provided from St. Benedict.

Since I was already in Asia, had been to Thailand many times, this wasn't a big deal for me. But for others, it could be.

The school not offering a simple pick up at the airport was, though, a massive red flag...

Along with the red flags raised in how little info about the school there was online, and how I had to carpet-bomb email them and beg for critical visa documents, red flags were now popping up everywhere, like a beach before a storm.

And I began to see myself as a surfer standing under a molasses of dark clouds, on a windswept beach-about to jump into the maw of a swirling, angry ocean, somewhat nauseous when I clicked "confirm" to purchase my plane ticket.

But, what the hell, it was only a one-year contract...

ARRIVAL: I spent the first couple days in Bangkok, at a cheap hotel, and received a phone call from the school, asking when I would come there. We arranged a day and time.

I was impressed they called.

(At this point, my expectations, the proverbial "bar" had been lowering, further and further downwards, like a limbo contest...)

I thought they might send a car to get me, but no offer was made, nor did they provide a car when I asked, so I had to book a taxi out there, pay and find my own way...

The school was a good hour and a half from downtown Bangkok.

I knew this going in, and it wasn't a problem.

I'd been in an industrial area in Korea, that had air pollution issues, and I'd been looking forward to being in a cleaner, bucolic surrounding, at least that's what the pictures, Google maps, website of the school had led me to believe.

I thought I'd head into Bangkok once or twice a month, on weekends, holidays, for fun, but mostly I was happy to be living out in the Thai countryside and was wishing to explore the nearby national park via motorbike, as I done in the north of Thailand, traversing Esan, the Laotian border, on a previous journey to Thailand.

But as the taxi approached the school, the uglier and uglier the outskirts of Bangkok became.

Decrepit buildings, bumper to bumper traffic, even an hour outside the city. Though I did see the occasional gorgeous temple or decent looking school, half-built or unsold condo.

The further we got, the closer to the school, the more it looked like I thought. Sprawling green rice fields, canals, egrets soaring by, even the hovels lining the canals had a rustic charm to them.

The cab driver had trouble finding the school, because it was so remote, so I had to call the HR lady to help give him directions. Fortunately, she picked up her phone and helped.

When we got there, though, finally, 10 minutes later, no one greeted us at the school, at the gate or at the door, and the HR lady didn't answer her phone.

Stepping into the administration building, which sat at the head of the small campus, I noticed immediately that the building was in shabbier shape than it seemed in its photos.

It was dark inside, with paint chipping off the walls, and there was a damp, moldy smell...

I plopped my bags in the hallway and wandered around until I found the office responsible for foreign teachers.

Immediately upon entering the office, I could tell something was amiss. The office didn't seem like a happy place. There was a palpable tension that I sensed just stepping foot inside. Something ugly in the air. Something suffocating.

The secretary, contrary to many Thais, who smile upon greeting a stranger (mind you they were supposed to be aware of my arrival, too, and I was dressed in a suit and tie), the secretary, with a stone cold, unpleasant, exasperated face, asked simply if "she could help me..."

Her words broke off like icicles.

I smiled and told her I was a new teacher and was here to meet with HR, provide, receive documents for my visa.

She begrudgingly asked me to sit down (as many Thais do; they'll often ask, albeit more politely, for you to sit down if you have entered an office).

I waited for around 20 minutes, flipping around on my phone, but largely taking in the disturbing vibe I was absorbing from the place.

Panning my gaze, scanning the office with analytical eyes, I could tell that everyone there seemed generally miserable.

No one was smiling. There was no jocund chatter or laughing. Everyone looked solemn, downtrodden.

This was not *sanuk*.

Eventually the head of HR received me, a tiny, 60ish lady, half-German, half-Thai, and 100% mean.

Her gray hair was dyed into a neon green shade, and her angular, jagged, bird-like face made her appear sort of like the Grinch.

The Grinch, in true Grinch fashion, herself had no smile.

I sat down into her cramped, messy office that she shared with two other bureaucrats.

Two towering mountains of bureaucracy sprung up like fangs from opposite sides of her desk; the assorted stacks of papers, manila folders flanked and framed the Grinch, forming a gorge, an aperture to her sharp face.

She launched into a tirade about the poor behavior of foreign teachers at the school, how awful so many of them were.

She mentioned current teachers, by name, saying how one was “okay,” but another was “difficult,” one was “rude, with no people skills,” two others had “terrible” classes that she’d had to coach them to improve.

She mentioned a Russian lady there, teaching English, as having handwriting so atrocious it was too difficult for students to read.

Then she went into a rant about a teacher who’d recently left. A girl from Australia, who’d been unhappy with everything, especially the school’s accommodation, and the Grinch mocked and scathingly rehashed the Aussie’s complaints. The grievances had obviously bothered her deeply.

I made a mental note not to complain much about my accommodation.

I also made a mental note to avoid interaction with this lady as much as possible. Her bitterness was upsetting. It was as if she was embalmed in malcontent.

I can certainly see her being descended from Nazis.

(Sometimes you’ll meet a nice German and think, wow, how could his/her family have done that... But this lady, it was pretty obvious...)

And I’d never, not once, had an HR person complain to me about her employees, especially calling people out by name, badmouthing them to me, when I’d just walked in the door.

After using me as an emotional toilet, emptying her mental bowels, her diarrhea of disdain for her employees, she did speak of her teaching at the school and a couple accomplishments, students she was proud of.

Although she was a Grinch, she, for a moment, struck me as a caring, dedicated teacher.

(I mean, not ALL the Nazis were bad, right? They built nice cars, the autobahn, had cool clothes and logos. If you get past the genocidal racism and just think of the good...)

While perhaps a good teacher, the Grinch seemed to have genuine issues with foreigners, which could have stemmed from negative past experiences with foreign coworkers, employees.

(Buddha knows many a feckless *farang* has [dis]graced Thai classrooms.)

Or maybe she had daddy issues related to her German father, or maybe it had to do with experiences she’d had studying in America.

Who knows. But I knew to steer clear of the green lady as much as I could.

After that encounter, I was brought to see the vice president, in her tiny office, which she had to herself.

The office was freezing cold and dark as a tomb, with no windows and flickering, weak fluorescent overhead lights, and as opposed to the other bureaucrats, the office had no decorations, postings on the wall, pictures of family members.

Its desk was entirely empty.

The vice president was another administrator who most definitely made a memorable first impression on me...

She was far older than the Grinch, a cadaver of a lady, practically a corpse. She was tiny, maybe 4'11, with a humpback.

Wan, almost deathly pale, she looked like a zombie and didn't walk, but sort of hovered, casting not exactly a shadow, but a spectral penumbra.

Her facial features, facial structure made her appear more upper-caste Indian than Thai, and around her long lavender batiste dress, she was mummified in a wrap-around white silk shawl.

Her skin sagged and dripped from her face like hot wax, and she'd dabbed on dense blotches of makeup, heavy splashes of Diptyque Paris Eau Rose.

Her bulbous mutton fat jade earrings and a string necklace of crystalline pink pearls implied wealth...

Her opal eyes seemed three sizes too big for her face.

The Corpse spoke in a quiet, soft-spoken voice, almost syrupy susurrations, finishing most every sentence with the Thai polite particle "*na*."

During our first (of what would be many) meetings, she rambled on, also badmouthing a couple current teachers, by name, and asking questions and immediately answering her own questions about school policy, referring to the students as "children" and that we could "call their parents" if we needed to and that if a girl came to my class wearing too short a skirt, I should demand her to leave, go change into a longer one.

At my past college, although many of my Korean students acted immature (a consequence of only studying throughout high school, not doing much socially, leaving their emotional development stunted), still, we, me, the school, treated the students, mostly, as adults, and so her monologue was unexpected.

I guess, being a Catholic school, I should have expected it, but she wasn't a nun. I'd have been more comfortable with an old nun having this sort of soliloquy, for some reason, possibly because it's what I'd expect from a nun, not what I'd expect from a Thai corpse.

Following those two meetings, my last meeting was with a very un-Thai Thai. An HR hench(wo)man in charge of visa procedures, paperwork. Maybe the person I should have emailed with, long, long ago...

The Corpse did at least force a smile as she spoke. This henchlady didn't. She was gruff. Laconic. Phlegmatic. Didn't smile. Once. Made no pleasantries whatsoever.

She greeted me coolly with a copy of my bachelor's degree to sign, for the visa paperwork. I asked her if I also needed to sign a copy of my MBA. She then asked me if I had an MBA.

The HR person in charge of handling my visa paperwork didn't know or have my correct degree. She'd probably not seen my CV. Or didn't care.

Things weren't off to a great start. I left that office with a terrible feeling in the pit of my stomach. What the hell had I gotten myself into.

Red flags were everywhere. This place was becoming Tiananmen Square.

But hey, it was only a one-year contract...

THE APARTMENT: I wasn't much happier upon arriving at the school provided apartment.

The school had a nice lady from the accounting department drive me there, because it was on her way home.

She, the accountant, was a true Thai, as I'd known them. Friendly, smiling, helpful, patient as we circled around, lost, seeking the apartment, which turned out to be far farther from the school than I'd thought.

It was nearly 40 minutes away and in a neighborhood near an industrial area.

Nauseating burning plastic smells from a nearby garbage fire filled the air... My throat got sore and eyes burned...

I was shocked how crowded the streets were, compared to the area around the school.

There were swarms, floods of motorbikes.

Motorbikes driven by men, women, children as young as 9 or 10, motorbikes with 3, 4, 5 people, whole families, a baby or toddler stuck up front, motorbikes carrying large loads of food, bags, boxes, work, construction equipment, long, lance-like poles, live animals, things I couldn't imagine could fit onto a motorbike.

Everywhere there were street side, makeshift restaurants, butchers, fishmongers, vendors of all sorts, lining the main road adjacent to the highway, and twin Seven-Elevens on every permutation of parallel blocks.

The air was blanketed in diesel exhaust and charcoal smoke... The AQI must have been China-level...

It was way busier, noisier, and chaotic than I thought, but the Big C supercenter containing a massive grocery store, restaurants and a movie theater across the street made me feel better about living there and about being so far from campus.

Not only the area, but the apartment itself was not as advertised.

It was further down a side street; nearly 10 minutes-walk from the main road, which was nice, because it was far quieter and the air not as thick with diesel fumes.

But I'd been sent a picture of a spacious studio, with a big screen TV, fridge, two chairs and a small table.

And what I received was a tiny studio, with no furniture, no TV, no fridge, and only a rock-hard box spring mattress.

The place had no windows, though a sliding glass door leading to a tiny balcony funneled in a trickle of sunlight (much of it obscured, however, by a rolling tarp, controlled by pulleys and rope, which I tried to roll up to the summit but broke in the process, and I was forced to tie it via laundry line rope to the balcony railing).

Worse than its size was its smell. It's common in Thailand, and other Asian countries, for pipes in the bathroom to be built in a straight or slanted, / shape, and not the U shape found elsewhere.

The straight-line shape pipes allow in stinky funkiness to bubble up from the sewer or septic tank, and the bathroom being tiny, lacking a window that could be opened, or any sort of ventilation, didn't help with the smell, either.

Then the "wet" shower (one w/no curtain or glass casing) didn't have a water heater, and the building didn't pipe in hot water, which wasn't always a problem, given the tropical climate of Thailand- except for when I did want a warm shower.

Though I was misled, at the end of the day, the place was free, not including utilities, so I couldn't complain too much. However, I did need to pay rent until the semester started, a whopping total of \$100.

I couldn't grumble too much about that. You get what you pay for.

The lower cost of living certainly was a benefit of Thailand and Southeast Asia in general...

Given the red flags raised in my first visit to the school and how incompetent they'd been throughout the visa process, I decided not to make myself too at home, though, in the apartment. I bought only bare-minimum essentials, sheets, pillows, towels, cleaning supplies, a kettle and coffee maker.

Bloody hell was I glad I did. Especially that I didn't buy a hotplate, TV, fridge, or other heavy electricity consuming appliances, because it turned out the apartment management was charging the building's foreigners electric fees that were far more than the official government rate of 3 baht per kilowatt.

We were being charged 9 baht per kilowatt, 3 times the government rate...

This practice is, officially, illegal in Thailand. However, when foreigners who can speak little to no Thai, or even those fluent in Thai complain, nothing is usually done.

Despite receiving electric bills nearly equal to, often more than, far more than, our rent, and many previous teachers complaining to the school, the building continued to charge the inflated rate, and so I decided to hold off on buying any electrical appliances and was glad I did when I saw what my neighbor was being charged for using his AC, TV, fridge, and cooker.

Nearly \$300 per month...

THE TEACHERS: That neighbor was one of the foreign teachers at the school. Many of the teachers came from India, Bangladesh, but the majority hailed from the Philippines.

(It wasn't until later that I'd discover how these racial dynamics affected work relations...)

Most of the guys (and I do mean guys, 90% of foreign teachers in Asia are men, white men, usually) most of the foreign teachers in my building were of the handful of *farangs* the school employed.

The neighbor being charged \$300 a month for electricity was a guy named Will; Will came from Canada; he was 50ish, had a buzzcut, pearly white teeth and cut, lean figure, and scabrous legs from a motorcycle accident, a serious one, which rendered him clinically dead for almost a minute.

The accident left him with TBI (traumatic brain injury), and while he seemed quite together, well-dressed and sharp, when first meeting him, the cracks would show later, as he'd fly off his knurled handle on a whim, verbally assault coworkers, and, for no apparent reason, get up and leave work, disappear for a short time, or exit our school van while it was stuck in traffic, walking down the highway, off to who knows where.

He'd carry his backpack, a heavy bag, filled with books and a bulky laptop, in the crook of his arm, like a waiter delivering a dish on a silver tray.

His lessons consisted of using small packets of candy as extrinsic motivation for the students to stand in front of the class and read from their books. He'd had no previous teaching experience, aside from a short TEFL course in Phuket.

But he was white.

Another teacher was named Terry. A tall, 50ish, Irish American from Boston, with a big bulging beer gut, bouffant hairdo, fat head and florid face, gummy smile and raspy, clam chowda accent.

He walked with a limp-like gait, always shaking his hands and legs, complaining of arthritis.

An anomaly, he'd been in Thailand since the 1990s, originally as a Peace Corp volunteer teacher, and had just stayed, teaching at various schools and colleges throughout the Kingdom.

He spoke perfect Thai, and had a Thai wife, who he rarely saw, and fought like crazy with on the phone, practically every night.

Although he'd been in Thailand for nearly three decades, due to Thailand's ethnocentric and stringent citizenship requirements, even after close to 30 years, he still didn't have a Thai passport or a long-term visa, and would every year, every 90 days, really, be required to renew his papers.

Terry spoke in hushed tones, often mumbling. You'd have to lean in to understand him, ask him to repeat himself.

While he was once health-conscious, he'd taken to smoking cigarettes and drinking 5 or 6 tall bottles of Thai beer, via glasses filled with ice cubes, every night, saying that after he turned 50, he didn't care anymore.

"Who wants to live to be 80?" he asked me, once, mentioning how miserable his mother was, dying a wrinkled shell of her former self, in a nursing home that reeked of piss and puke and that sort of smell only old people make.

Terry'd sit out in front of the building, drunk, and would rant, in mumbles, usually about Trump, or something he saw on Fox News, like how over 70% of people in America speak other languages than English at home, and occasionally using racial epithets to illustrate a point.

He once said how his hometown was like the Congo these days, there were so many...

The guy he'd smoke, drink with, was a weasel face, rat-tailed, beady eyed South African guy, 20ish, who didn't teach at our school (instead he taught at a nearby private middle school).

Weasel face liked to reminisce about South Africa and how much better his family said it was during apartheid.

A guy weasel face worked with, lived next door to, was a 30ish, super-skinny, tall, high pants wearing, pedo-looking Hungarian, who didn't talk much with anyone in the building.

Perhaps because he was fighting a war with the building manager's dogs.

Every time he'd leave the building, the (usually docile) dogs would go berserk, barking like mad at him. He'd curse and scream back at them, in a mixture of English and Hungarian and would kick the dogs...

There were a couple other *farangs* in the building, but they didn't talk to anyone, just kept to themselves.

One (who lived there before I arrived) was a heroin addict who flipped out in 7-11, throwing instant noodle packs at the clerks, storming out, because they wouldn't sell him booze (it was either a Buddhist holiday or before 5pm).

The guy wound up dying, as do many foreigners in Thailand.

This *farang* overdosed on smack.

When the cops, paramedics brought him out, Terry Mumbles said that, along with a river of takeout food trays, empty bottles, they'd found dead lizards, geckos, scattered around his apartment.

Apparently, he'd been stabbing the lizards with a switchblade knife and smearing the lizard guts and blood on the walls, writing gibberish and random curse words, drawing pentagrams with the blood.

The last *farang* I knew living there, Stan, was a 40ish fellow, with a hook nose and a shiny bright bald head; 5'5, skinny, he wore huge horn-rimmed coke bottle glasses and had electric green eyes that'd rubiate.

He'd sometimes wear suspenders, bowties, but often wore short sleeve, button-down dress shirts with a necktie.

He played the ukulele in his classes and taught his students how to prune topiaries.

Stan spoke in cyclic bursts. He intensely disliked Hillary Clinton and Greta Thunberg.

No one talked much with Stan, though (other than his students, me and Terry Mumbles).

Most everyone was scared of him after Stan'd gone postal, one scorching hot day, the previous term...

That morning in the school van, after starting a near fistfight, with another teacher, over a seat in the van, he'd become apoplectic, barging into the Grinch's office, ripping up sheets of paper, shrieking, cursing everyone out.

His rampage culminated in he and the administration in a running shouting match throughout the office, one that ended with him banging and breaking a drumstick on a desk, throwing a chair into a wall, bursting into tears and running like a spider out of the office, face red as a tomato.

After that, amazingly, his contract was renewed, but he wasn't asked to any more meetings and was excluded from most school activities.

He was barred from the school van, too, so he bought an old beat up navy blue Toyota, slapped tons of NASCAR stickers, MAGA stickers on it, and would leave the car running for 10 minutes every morning outside the apartment building, creating a massive cloud of black smoke.

(The Canuck would grumble that there was no way that vehicle could have passed any sort of emission test.)

Pretty much everyone was afraid of Stan, after his meltdown, and he ate alone in the cafeteria, and rode alone to work. He rarely came to the office, either, spending his time in the library, with his head down on a table, sleeping...

The other *farangs* at the school, not living in my building:

Ronald: A 60ish Brit, former soldier in Northern Ireland. He had slicked back salt and pepper hair, a furrowed forehead and crazy blue eyes; one eye always squinting.

Irascible, Ronald hated the school, everything about Thailand. Everything about Thais. Every time you encountered him, he was pissed off, venting, on about something Thailand.

I couldn't figure out why, if he detested Thailand so much, he'd married a Thai lady and bought a house in the countryside nearby.

Allegedly he'd gone to Cambridge.

I wondered why he even worked.

Don't UK military servicemen get decent pensions? What would possibly make him stay living, let alone working, in a place he completely despised? Was it Brexit? It must have been Brexit.

(Disgruntlement was a common trait among many Western expats in Thailand; especially online, sites like ThaiVisa, message boards catering to and seething with venomous Thailand bashers; mostly grumpy, gray-haired, portly geezers grumbling about anything, everything Thailand. Yet they remained in Thailand, visited Thailand, year after year...)

When I respectfully quizzed Ronald as to why he remained at the school, Thailand, he said he stayed for the students, that they're the best he'd had in 5 years of working in Thailand.

Nah, I thought to myself. It was probably because of Brexit...

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