



Thanadda Sawangduean



ตัวอย่าง

A tragedy of a Thai woman
who was destined to become a sex worker.

I AM ERI

MY EXPERIENCE OVERSEAS

The winner of the 2nd Chommanard Book Prize 2010
The Best of Non-fiction



ตัวอย่าง



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ตัวอย่างงาน

by

Thanadda Sawangduean





The winner of the 2nd Chommanard Book Prize 2010
The Best of non-fiction
'I am Eri'

'I am Eri' is a non-fiction book based on the real experience of a woman who worked as a prostitute in a foreign country in order to send money back to her family in Thailand. Her life had been in a circle of unhappiness to the point where she did not think she could step back anymore. This reflects a chronic social issue that keeps ruining a number of women's lives. Not only does the content of this book provide an example for Thai women, it may also create hope that it is never too late for them to start a new life.

'I am Eri' was the unanimous choice of the committees because of the content and the fact it is difficult to find a book like this one in Thai society. Although there are already some books about prostitution in Thailand, they are mostly written in third person by observers. *'I am Eri'* is the first narrative written firsthand by an author who actually experienced this life and agreed to pass the truth on to others sincerely. Even if the plot keeps a simple structure without many twists toward the end, we are certain that readers will be pulled into the story because of its uniqueness.

The fascination of *'I am Eri'* is how the author passes on her experience with true feeling, blood and tears to appeal to all readers. It also depends on the reader's perception and consideration to pick up on what is hidden between the lines. It was prized unanimously by the judges and deserved to win the non-fiction category by a female writer of the Chommanard Book Prize 2010.



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I AM ERI
MY EXPERIENCE OVERSEAS
by
Thanadda Sawangduean
Translated by Mimi Grachangnetara



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Praphansarn Publishing Co.,Ltd.
668-676 Jarunsanitwong Road
Bangplud, Bangkok 10700 THAILAND
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E-mail : Foreignrights@praphansarn.com

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PREFACE

The 2nd Chommanard Book Prize was sponsored by Bangkok Bank Public Company Limited to support female authors of non-fiction novels so that we are able to learn, through their writing, different angles of a story from a female perspective. This, we believe, will enable readers to understand another dimension of the female entity which is veiled in mystery and creative sensitivity.

We received applications from many female authors this year, but in the end, there could only be one winner. “I am Eri, My Experience Overseas” took home the top prize. You will have already read the reason why the judges came to choose this year’s winner in the prologue.

“I am Eri, My Experience Overseas” is a true story about a Thai prostitute who was forced into the flesh trade from extreme poverty. Like many other women in this trade, they are left with little choice but to offer sexual services abroad in hopes of making enough money to give their family members back home a better life. The author recalls feelings of desperation, happiness, sadness, loneliness and love – all feelings that every human being is no stranger to – during

these horrible times in which she was forced to be away from home. Her writing is so engaging and evokes feelings of empathy from the reader. She encourages her audience to keep wanting to turn the page to find out how she overcomes her next obstacle in life.

But it's not just the novelty of this nor the exciting plot which is a treat for readers. It is also a touching read in its own right and covers all aspects of society whether it be family matters, social inequality, or threats that the weaker sex face with on a daily basis. We also learn more about the the life of inmates, the justice system, and even the beauty of night life. Although the author's original intention was not to set the stage for the readers to engage in a debate on society, the words that she had penned down on paper are so genuine it's outshone the fact that she's telling a story.

This is the work by a Thai woman from a profession that nobody in Thai society wishes to glorify, for it is a profession that has never been accepted.

Woman Publisher is honoured to have been granted the publishing rights of this valuable title from the Chommanard Book Prize, which even the London Book Fair has praised it as the top Asian literary prize.

Woman Publisher



PROLOGUE

“I Am Eri: My Experience Overseas” is the true story of my life over the past 40 years and recounts all the hurdles that I’ve had to overcome. Some of you may think that these pages are a script taken from a soap opera, but I assure you that nothing has been made up. In fact, some of the stories that you’re about to read are rather embarrassing, but I want people to know about the crazy things that actually happen in this crazy world of ours.

I’m not hoping to win any awards. It’s just that I haven’t got much to do these days. I’m unemployed, but for once, I really want to work at becoming a good person and leave my past behind me. The trouble is, nobody knows how long this will last and whether I have really reached the end of my journey.

Thanadda Sawangduean



This book is dedicated to all my friends who shared my fate and especially to the female inmates who have been wrongly convicted and deprived of their right to freedom. I ask them to be strong and I hope that this book will at least serve as a cry for justice on everyone's behalf.



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BEFORE I BEGIN

First of all, let me stress that I'm not a writer and all of this is very new to me. I have no idea how to begin or end my story and whether or not I'm using the appropriate words. Let's just say that I'm about to tell you a story about my 40 years of hardship and what I've been through. Sometimes I compare my life to a soap opera. But all I'm about to tell you is true. I'm rather embarrassed to be bearing all my life's history – it's as if I'm airing my own dirty laundry and there are some aspects I'm ashamed of. But I want everyone to know that there are many things out there in this world that they never knew existed. I'm not hoping to win any awards here. It's just that I haven't got much to do these days. I'm unemployed, but for once, I'm starting to feel like a good person. You see, I used to work as a prostitute. I've been on adventures to many countries but I never made my fortune and so had to keep on doing it. Like a vendor selling earthen jars from his truck, I kept on moving. Sometimes I'd get the odd hunch that luck was on my side, but nothing ever happened. Now, let me tell you all about my exciting life.

ကျွန်ုပ်တို့



SKIVING SCHOOL

I was only five, but already, I remember my family not being so well-off. In other words, we were poor. I have three siblings. Tong is my eldest brother, Jiab is my eldest sister and Gai is my second sister, which makes me the youngest child. When I was five, Ya Lek and Pu Lek, my grandpa and grandma who were brother and sisters of my real grandparents, always came to collect me from my parent's house in order to babysit me. They had one daughter. I forgot to tell you that I'm from Bangkok. Pu Lek and Ya Lek had three sons; strictly speaking they were my uncle but I call them Pi (term of respect to someone older). There was Pi Noom, Pi Tui and Pi Gon, who didn't really like me. He was



(Front row from left) Pi Gai, my mother and me.

(Back row) Pi Tong and Pi Jiab



(From left) A family photo of Pi Tong,
my mother and father sent to me in Japan

jealous because Pu Lek and Ya Lek loved me. Pu Lek and Ya Lek worked at a grocery store at Talad Kru Nai market. As for me, I lived in Wat Toong Kru, which was just a stone's throw away from Talad Kru Nai market.

My father was a carpenter and he worked for a company near Wat Kru Nai. He loved his alcohol and drank nearly every day. Whenever he got drunk, he'd start arguing with my mother who worked in a textile factory. My parent's income combined was never enough for us to live on because, besides drinking, my father also gambled. He had a lover and they had two sons together. Pu Lek and Ya Lek adored me. If I ever got homesick, they'd drive me back home so that I could see my parents and they'd also give me food to enjoy with my family such as rice, preserved food and snacks, because they knew that we didn't have much. They'd do this until I was seven, when I started school. After that, I'd only stay with them during the school break. With the start of the new school term, they'd always give me money so that I could buy stationery and other school supplies.

As I grew up, I became more aware of the goings on inside my house and I realized that my parents were struggling to make ends meet. They'd fight every time my father came back home late at night, drunk. When I made my way to school in the mornings, my neighbors would always ask me: "Your parents at each other's throats again last night, huh?" I didn't think much of it at first. But as the jokes became

more frequent, I was ashamed of it. I felt very sorry for my mother. She worked hard to feed her children as well as to repay some of her debts. Basically, she wasn't making enough money for herself. As for my father, come payday and he'd always spend whatever he earned drinking with his brothers and sisters and then go over to see his lover. He hardly ever came home because he'd be with her. My mother had to carry the heavy load on her own. She would cry every night and I felt so sorry for her. Sometimes we'd go without food when my father didn't come home. My mother had to borrow rice from our neighbors and she'd grab a handful of morning glory growing wild in the fields and cook us dinner with them. This would be the right definition of "poor," don't you think? I'm lucky in that I had support from Pu Lek and Ya Lek. Thanks to them, I'd sometimes go home with food to give to my family after visiting them. My father brought his lover over to our house one day to live with us. I just couldn't understand how he could do such a thing. At first, he'd sleep with my mother every other night and spend the other nights with his lover. But after awhile, his lover insisted that he spend every night with her, so my father asked for a compromise. All three of them ended up sleeping together in one room. I felt so sorry for my mother but she had to accept this. She was very patient. I always knew that my father was in the wrong. In the end, the three of them couldn't stand sharing a bedroom so they reverted to their usual routine. My father's lover was a witch. She stayed with us for about two or three years before she moved out

because she became violent. I was so glad after she moved out because I didn't want to see my mother suffer anymore.

When I started Grades 5 and 6, I became more aware of my surroundings. Pu Lek and Ya Lek still cared for me. I hardly ever watched television because we didn't have a TV set. If we felt like watching TV, we'd go over to our neighbor's house, which was quite a long walk away. Back then, there were no street lights. Even though we lived in Bangkok, we were on the outskirts of the capital around Wat Toong Kru. We didn't have any electricity at home because we didn't have enough money to pay for it, so we used lanterns instead.

This was always been a sore point for me and I often asked myself why we were so poor. I wanted electricity, a TV set and everything else others had, but I knew that it was impossible because my father didn't have his priorities right. On top of that, he loved to gamble. We were so poor that sometimes we didn't have enough food to eat. But my brothers and sisters and I were too young to feel like we were suffering. In fact, we found it amusing having to sprinkle sugar onto a plate of rice or mixing it with recycled pork oil. My mother, on the other hand, would cry.

I had a boyfriend from Grades 5 or 6 because all my friends had one, but it was just puppy love and I was still pretty naive. I just wanted to do what my friends did; we never slept with each other or anything like that. My big brother

was very strict with me and I was terrified of him, even more than I was of my parents. Whenever I argued with my second sister, my brother would always hit me first no matter who was in the wrong because he knew that I was such a brat. As for my oldest sister Gai, she was so quiet and well behaved that I'm sure many people must have mistaken her for a nun. My second sister, Jiab, was a bit of a tomboy. She even had a girlfriend, you know. She's been like this ever since she was a kid so I don't think she'll change. As a child, I suffered quite a lot but it was the kind of suffering that I enjoyed. For example, when I was in Grade 5, I'd stay at my grandparents' all the time and not just during the school holidays because my mother didn't have enough money to give me to buy snacks at school with. I had to stay with my grandparents as I was growing up and their three children became less tolerant of me. They ordered me around and made me do all the household chores, including the washing, cooking, sweeping the floor, doing the dishes and on top of that I also helped Pu Lek and Ya Lek at the grocery shop every day. Whenever I felt like I'd had enough, I'd go home to be with my parents. During the holidays, Pu Lek would buy me loads of black beans and soya beans and leave them at my house because he was afraid that I didn't have anything to eat. But because I wanted to make money, I'd make soya milk out of the soya beans and sell it. People bought it even though I didn't really know what I was doing. Everything worked out in my favor. I didn't have to invest in anything.

After saving enough money from my little soya milk business, I'd buy snacks to sell at school because I wanted more money, plus I loved having my own business. I did everything I could for money, even if it was for 5 or 10 baht, which was okay back in 1978-9. In Grade 6, I had a best friend named Goong. Every day, I'd walk past her house on the way to school and on the way home.

I walked around 2 kilometers to school every day because I wasn't a kid anymore. If I took the bus, I would've had to pay an extra 75 satang and I'd rather use the money to buy snacks, so I walked instead. I always dropped by Goong's house because I fancied a boy there who was Goong's friend. Because of this detour, I'd often be back home late and my brother would always give me a hard time afterwards. Sometimes he'd hit me. I was terrified of him but I never learned my lesson.

My father got a job in Saudi Arabia when I was in Grade 6, which improved our financial situation somewhat. Everyone had pocket money for school and we had electricity at home. When my father came home one day, he bought a television, a radio and some cassettes for us as gifts, to our excitement. Even though it was a black-and-white television set, it was better than nothing. He'd visit us once every two years. But after his second visit, he started to gamble again and stopped sending us money from abroad. Sometimes we'd go through a two or three month drought of having no money

because he lost all of it gambling. My mother was forced to look for a job, and she borrowed money from many of the neighbors. She also took out loans and didn't have enough money to repay them so they ended up refusing her loans. She resorted to becoming a maid to make enough money to repay her debts. Sometimes her employer would give her food and household appliances including a radio and a TV, and my mother would take them straight to the pawnshop. She didn't even have enough to pay the electricity bill let alone have enough to buy food so they cut off our electricity supply. Everyone was frustrated with my father and nobody knew what to do. One day, my mother came back with piles of old cement bags and told us that we would have to start folding these bags so that we could sell them. Back in those days, there were no plastic bags, so we just folded these brown bags used to wrap fruit and rice. As soon as my mother sold these bags, we always got to enjoy a proper meal. It was hardly a feast but it was better than having to live with morning glory every day. Fruit was a luxury for us. Durian and apples were expensive and it was a big deal for us if we got to enjoy them.

I remember my mother bringing back two bags of noodles one day but we were told that all five of us had to share them. We also had to eat them with steamed rice to make sure everyone was full. I put up with all this for years and I would always long for the day I had enough money to live a comfortable life. Pi Gai and I would sometimes grab some morning glory

and ivy gourd leaves from the fields and sell them for 40 or 50 baht. We'd give this money to my mother who would then use some of it to buy us food and give the rest to us as pocket money. My father's sister had two children called Od and Ad. Every year during the school break, they'd come over to stay at my house. Od was my aunt's son while Ad was her daughter. We all had the same surname because we were first cousins. Od was two years older than me. Even though I kind of knew who they were, I fancied Od because I didn't know any better as a child. I didn't think this was a crime and, besides, it was just puppy love. We were seeing each other every year so we were very familiar with one another. Od lived in Nakhon Sawan.

I also had another cousin, Sriprai, who I was close to. She was the daughter of another aunt – my father's elder sister. Sriprai was a beautiful woman in my eyes. I'm not so beautiful but I love to dress up. I was jealous of Sriprai because she always had loads of men after her. Sriprai was my age but she quit school after Grade 6, which was why she seemed more mature than children her age. She dressed up quite a bit and had makeup. Unlike her, I wasn't even allowed any lipstick. My brother would kill me if he saw me with makeup on. Whenever I went out with Sriprai, she'd always be chatted up by all these men. Nobody ever looked at me – I was an ugly duckling. Even Od fancied Sriprai, which made me jealous. Of course, Sriprai didn't know about this. Soon she began working at a textile factory



Me (third from left) and Sriprai (far right)

which officially made her an adult, while I was still in Grade 7. I was at Buddhabucha Wittayalai School in the Bang Mod area.

Sometimes I'd bring snacks over to sell to students there. Tui, Pu Lek's son, would sometimes ask me to sell these glass roses filled with colorful liquid that were very popular on Valentine's Day. He'd give me a two percent commission on every rose I sold. On bad days, I'd get caught out and they'd confiscate all of my roses, which meant financial loss for me. When I started Grade 7, I'd get around six lashings a day for violating the school dress code. Somehow, I never failed to break the rules – whether it was my short hair, my high collar, my shirt tail, short skirt or my long socks. I never learned my lesson. I loved breaking the rules because I hated conformity and I had to be trendy. I loved being fashionable. After being punished at school, I'd sometimes come back home to reprimands from my brother whenever he saw me in a short skirt or a skimpy shirt.

On the way back home from school one day, I bought a red zalacca flavored popsicle. That evening, my brother got home before I did. When he saw me, he made a beeline for me and started hitting me countless times without any explanation. I had no idea what I'd done wrong. He then accused me of being a slut for wearing lipstick to school. I was speechless! When I explained to him that it was the popsicle that had turned my lips red, he refused to believe

me. What a loser. Couldn't he tell the difference between lipstick red and popsicle red? I was hit without any reason. And he'd do it with such force, using his hands to whack and slap me. My mother never said anything. She allowed him to treat me like livestock – like a buffalo or a cow. I became more stubborn and harbored bad feeling toward him. One day, I told myself that if I ever reached that point I'd find a way to get back at him.

Every time my father came back from abroad, he'd bring us loads of apples. We were thrilled at the sight of apples and chocolates because normally we weren't able to afford them. My father would come back home for a month before returning to Saudi Arabia. I was of the understanding that he was living a better life there. I never realized the hardships he had to go through. All I knew was that he was living in a beautiful country with good food and a better quality of life because the word “abroad” could only mean “a better life.”

My father would always complain about the intense heat and cold there. Sometimes he found it unbearable but he had to keep working no matter what the weather conditions. Our brother would force every one of us to write to my father every week. I'd ask him for money in all of my letters to him. I always asked for something – a doll, a guitar or even a bonsai. I knew I'd never get any of these but I just requested them anyway because I didn't know what else to write. I was

very angry with my father for failing to get me the things I wanted. I didn't understand why he couldn't do this when I asked for very little. We'd always see him off at the airport when he was heading back to Saudi Arabia. I once asked him if I could go and work with him because I really wanted to fly on a plane but he laughed, saying I was talking nonsense. I was angry at him for using that patronizing tone of voice. I thought to myself that one day I'd get to go abroad, obsessed with the thought of flying. Who cared if the plane crashed? I just wanted to experience it once in my life and it didn't matter what kind of job I'd have to do so long as I got to fly. Such was my way of thinking – one that only a young teenager who knew nothing better was capable of.

But the fact that my father was working abroad didn't mean that we were living it up back home. We still struggled to make ends meet because my father still gambled a lot. I knew that we would never be rich or get to enjoy a comfortable life because after nearly ten years of my father working abroad, we still suffered.

When he first went overseas, he used a title deed as mortgage collateral for his middleman to get him to Saudi Arabia. He had hoped that he'd make enough money to repay the mortgage in full after a few months. But things didn't turn out the way he'd hoped. We were conned into giving away the title deed for apparently violating part of the contract and lost our land.

When I was in Grade 8, we had to move from Wat Toong Kru to live with Uncle Rerng, our father's younger brother, who lived in Bang Sue. His already small house became even smaller after we came to live with him, his wife and his daughter. I slept with my sisters and my mother in a room that must have been about 1 meter by 3 meters while my brother slept in the basement together with one of our cousins.

I left Wat Buddha Pucha school halfway into Grade 8 and got transferred to another school in Bang Sue which accepted me into the second half of Grade 8 after much pleading. Sanpawut Bamrung School was a private school owned by a military official, so it was more expensive than a state school. But at least I didn't have to repeat Grade 8. I met a bunch of new friends there, most of them boys. I didn't enjoy the company of female friends especially the boring nerdy types, as much as I did men. I loved adventure, that's why I hung out with so many boyfriends. I only had four girlfriends and every one of them was a complete hussy.

Not long after I started school, I was faced with a string of problems – firstly, school fees; secondly, pocket money. I had to buy new textbooks and the teacher would keep nagging me about my school fees, which always embarrassed me. I was so poor I sometimes couldn't afford to buy lunch. It was a good thing school was close enough to where I lived so I didn't have to pay for the bus ride there every day. Although it was a long walk, I chose to save money. I only hopped on

the bus whenever I had money to spare. Sometimes I'd pay 1 baht and take the ferry over to the other side of the river. Sometimes I'd borrow money from my homeroom teacher who was always ready to help out without once complaining or asking me to pay her back. The more she got to know me, the more she began to understand why I was unable to pay for my school fees.

When I reached my teens, I no longer stayed with Pu Lek and Ya Lek at Wat Kru Nai because it was such a long journey from Bang Sue. I owed my homeroom teacher so much money that I was too embarrassed to go to school. I told my mother about it but there was nothing she could do to help. As for my brother, he was studying at Ramkhamhaeng University but he'd only go to lectures when he felt like it. Pi Jiab also enrolled into a private school, while Pi Gai chose not to continue with her studies because she never enjoyed it. She'd ditch school anyway because she wasn't the brainy type. I also skipped classes on a regular basis but it was because I didn't have enough money and because I was too embarrassed to ask my friends for money. Even though they didn't mind, I chose not to trouble them. They all wanted me to come to school because they said that the classroom was too quiet without me.

My mother soon started to make Thai sweets such as *Kanom Tom*, *Kanom Niew*, and *Kanom Tua Pap*, which she later sold in hopes of making more money. She would carry them

around in her hawker's basket, weaving through little alleys trying to sell them all day. I felt so sorry for her. After the first day, she came home with loads of leftovers but she still went out to sell them every day. I also relied on my mother's snacks and took a few to school with me, even selling them to my friends in exchange for some lunch money. After a week, my mother's business began to flourish. She used to leave the house at 8am and be back home by 1pm but as business picked up, she was already home by around 10 or 11am to catch up on some rest. Her sweets were delicious and anyone who tried them would want more. Because she was making money every day, we would have enough pocket money to go to school every day. But it was the same old story with Dad – he'd send over some money whenever he felt like it; I assumed it was because he was still gambling.

When I got to Grade 9, I started to work on weekends at a restaurant known for its Hainanese chicken rice for 80 baht a day. I waited tables and washed dishes. I also convinced my sisters to come along. My brother became a motorcycle taxi driver. He was quite shy and he never took off his helmet because he was afraid people would recognize him. I guess it was normal for any teenager to feel embarrassed. My second sister, Jiab, never really helped to ease the burden in our household. All she ever cared about were girls. It probably never entered her mind how poor we were and how our parents had to struggle to make ends meet. Pi Gai, however, was the complete opposite. She did everything she could to

help out. She just didn't want to continue with her studies but that was her choice. Pi Gai worked so hard and she would give all the money she earned to our mother. Poor girl, she was very different from the rest of us, almost abnormal when compared to her siblings. She was very polite and was quite the sulker, but she had a very good heart. I too did everything I could to make money. On Sundays, I'd wake up early in the morning to sell water at Nang Lerng race track to people who came to watch the horse races. I made a handsome income – 300 to 400 baht a day – which was a lot back in those days. In Grade 9, I fell in love with a boy from another school. I wasn't thinking about sex or anything like that at all – it was just plain old-fashioned love. The trend amongst my friends was to have sex with your boyfriend. I felt that the person I considered to be my boyfriend didn't like me the way I liked him. Maybe it was because I wasn't exactly pretty and I was too outgoing. Like I said, I'm not someone you'd describe as "beautiful," unlike my friends who were all good-looking. My friends would always fancy the same guy, and they'd always go: "Hey, I'll make this sacrifice for you 'cause I already have many boyfriends anyway." I'd feel so low whenever they said that to me and I'd tell myself that one day all the guys would fancy me.

When school reopened and I started Grade 9, Od came to see us like he usually did every year. But unlike in past years, Od had become a teenager and was already at vocational college, plus he was two years older than me. He looked

at me in a strange way and sometimes his choice of words signaled that he was hitting on me. I was very embarrassed. Sometimes he would hold my hand or touch my arms. It was a strange feeling, something that I had never experienced before.

During the school break, I visited Pu Lek and Ya Lek at Wat Kru Nai with Od, because they were his grandparents too. I slept with my grandparents, whereas Od had to walk over to Sriprai's house to sleep there. We were all related. Sriprai had already blossomed into a pretty young lady – much prettier than me – and I was convinced that Od fancied her or that they had been secretly in love with each other for some time.

One day, I asked my grandparents if I could sleep over at Sriprai's. That night, there were four of us sharing a bed – Sriprai; Od; Sriprai's mother, Aunt Jaang; and me. At 4am, Aunt Jaang left the house to buy vegetables at Pak Klong Talad market which she would then resell at the local market. Aunt Jaang was my father's elder sister. After she left the house, I saw Od hugging Sriprai and they kissed each other's cheeks. I was kind of shocked when I saw it but pretended to be fast asleep. I may have been young, but I knew exactly what was going on. Deep down, I was disappointed that Od would make advances at Sriprai because we were cousins. I was certain that Sriprai must have been emotionally affected because she was so naive. Like Pi Gai, she didn't enjoy

school and left after Grade 6. Od, meanwhile, seemed to be an expert, especially when it came to women, and he would make a move on anything with a heartbeat.

I was pretty close to Sriprai. We were literally joined at the hips and we went everywhere together. After that night, Od acted as if nothing had happened and went about without a care in the world. Sriprai, however, told me how Od would hug her every night and kiss her on the lips. He even grabbed her tits. That night, I told Sriprai that she should sleep with me at Ya Lek's house. She agreed. The next morning, when Od saw me, he was obviously pissed off that I had taken Sriprai for the night, but I didn't care. He went home to Nakhon Sawan after the holidays.

Uncle Jer's house was not far from Sriprai's. He was my father's big brother and had three children – Dang, who was the same age as Sriprai, and two baby girls. He was better-off than any of us in the family. He sold groceries near a textile factory and hired Sriprai to help out, so she ended up having to stay there. Every time the factory workers got off work, they'd all chat up Sriprai and totally ignore me. I was so jealous of her and knew that she was much prettier.

One day, Sriprai came crying to me, saying that Dang, our uncle's son, had raped her. Sriprai took off her shirt and showed me her breasts which were covered in love bites. I was shocked and suggested she go home. She didn't dare

tell anyone, not even her own mother about this. But she did tell Uncle Jer that she would go home to get a job at a textile factory so she could make more money.

I had already started on my final term of high school and wanted to go on to vocational college, but I wasn't sure if my parents had enough money.

Goong and Jang were my two closest friends since Grade 8 at Sanpawut Bamrung. They were lovely girls and both had large breasts. Goong was very pretty and outgoing – in other words, she was a bimbo. She was used to being swarmed by men and had lost her virginity in Grade 8. She'd had many boyfriends. As for Jang, she was the complete opposite. She came from a closely knit family and she loved me more than she loved Goong. Actually Jang and I got off to a bad start and we once had a catfight before we became friends. She was our school principal's daughter, and I didn't like her very much because she was such a spoilt brat. She really annoyed me the way she tried to be cute all the time so I slapped her. But after we became close friends, we were inseparable. All three of us would skip classes to either watch movies at Siam Square or go ice-skating or dancing at disco clubs in the afternoon (back then these clubs existed). Every time we went skating, we would go home with bruises from falling on the ice. I hardly had any money but Goong and Jang didn't have this problem and they were happy to pay for me. By the time I entered Grade 9, I'd lost all interest in

my studies and always ended up copying homework from my friends. Goong and Jang would remind me how I needn't worry about money. As long as I could skip school to be with them, they'd pay for everything. They insisted that it wouldn't be as fun without me.

I also had another group of friends who were boys. There were about four or five of us, and I was the only girl. These guys loved to skip school and we'd buy cigarettes and smoke them all day. Some would buy alcohol, but I didn't enjoy drinking either. Every single one of them loved me and they took me with them every time they decided to miss classes. When I resisted, they'd insist that I go along with them and I always gave in.

One day we were caught climbing over the school fence, which was very high and had barbed wires all over it, by a military officer named Seth who owned our school. He gave us all a good spanking – the kind only someone from the military would give his children – which meant scolding us at the same time. But we never learned our lesson. We were caught trying to skip school again, and I told my friends that we were dead meat this time. I was petrified of being spanked again because Seth really hit hard. One of them offered to take the lashings for me so I agreed. But when we saw Seth, all he said was: “Hey, I'm not going to spank you guys today. Go inside my house and grab something to eat. Go!” We were flabbergasted and sure he was up to

something. Seth then said: “I’ve had enough of you lot. You never learn and you’re not afraid of me.” All five of us went inside his house, still confused. After dinner, Seth told us that we weren’t allowed home yet, that we had to wash the dishes for the military cadets after dinner at 4pm. There were hundreds of them and Seth announced at the canteen that none of them had to do the dishes that evening. They all cheered and we were stuck doing the dishes until 6pm. When I got home, my brother asked me where I’d been. I didn’t want to lie so I told him what had happened. He then called me a bimbo as usual and hit me. I never skipped lessons again after that because I got hit twice that day. Just before finishing Grade 9, we had government officials knocking on our doors to conduct random interviews with locals. They asked us what my ambition in life was, what I wanted to study, what I wanted to work as. I told them I wanted to enroll at a famous vocational college called Uthen Tawai and I’d always dreamed about becoming either an engineer or an interior designer. My brother would belittle me and tell me that I was daydreaming. We’d always been at odds, my brother and I. He’d been hitting me since I was a kid and I never understood why he was constantly picking on me. I remember the time when he hit me like a maniac – slapping and kicking me. I remember being so pissed off with him. After he left, I went into his bedroom, tore up the pages of one of his textbooks from university because he loved them. I knew that he’d kill me when he found out what I’d done, so I went to stay with Goong at her house for two or three days.

My sister soon came after me, assuring me that my brother would not hit me if I went back home. He kept his promise. But he did stare at me with those angry, burning eyes when he saw me. I just ignored him.

I became stressed again just as I was finishing Grade 9 because I didn't have enough money to pay for the tuition fees and my teacher told me that I wouldn't be able to graduate if I didn't cough up the money. I had no idea where I was going to get it from. At the same time, I was also under a lot of pressure to enroll at a vocational college. I remember clearly how Thailand was busy with Her Serene Highness Queen Rambhai Barni's funeral. I finally bought an application form to Uthen Tawai college but didn't get to take the exams because I didn't have documents to prove that I had graduated from Grade 9 because I hadn't paid for the school fees. But in the end, I finally saved enough money to settle the debt. I took the second round of exams for Don Muang Technical College and chose to study fine arts. I got in, but didn't have enough money to pay for the school fees – what with the cost of school supplies, uniforms etc., I knew right away that I'd never get to continue with my studies because I came from a poor family. Pi Jiab too had to drop out of her vocational college. In fact, we all had to quit school – except Pi Tong because he had his own money and he was at university, so he could graduate whenever he was ready.

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Last Word, BK Magazine

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Miss Thanadda, or Eri, gave an interview to Marie Claire about her life during the time she was working as a prostitute, as well as a warning to all young readers not to choose the wrong path in life like her.

Marie Claire Magazine

(Thailand)

