

BANGKOK POOL BLUES

Tom Crowley

Mettavisions

Author's words

My deepest thanks to Tew Bunnag, brother, mentor and editor who laboured mightily and is responsible for whatever value is to be found in the text he rescued from my scribblings.

FIRST EDITION: 2010

ORIGINAL TITLE: Bangkok Pool Blues

AUTHOR: Tom Crowley

DESIGN AND LAYOUT: Etervisual

PUBLISHED BY: Mettavisions Ltd.

© OF THIS EDITION: Mettavisions Ltd.

www.mettavisions.com

ISBN:

This is a work of reportage. All rights reserved. No part of the text or the photographs may be reproduced in any form without agreement from the author and the publishers.

Content

1 · Background	09
2 · The Scene	28
3 · The Owners	44
4 · Gamblers and Gambling	58
5 · The Thai Players	72
6 · The Foreign Legion	98
7 · Late Thoughts	146
Appendix	152

5 · THE THAI PLAYERS

***Rail Shot:** A shot taken when the object ball is resting on the side cushion, or rail, and the goal is to make the cue ball run along the rail into the corner pocket.*

Gai

My perceptive son once told me, as we discussed my hobby of shooting pool, “Dad, there are a lot of bad characters hanging around pool halls.” I acknowledged at the time that he was correct. We all know how easy it is to get into an argument during a pool match. What I didn’t say, and certainly it should be said, is that there are also a lot of very interesting characters hanging around pool halls, especially in Bangkok. The Thai pool hustling lady, Gai, is one of them.

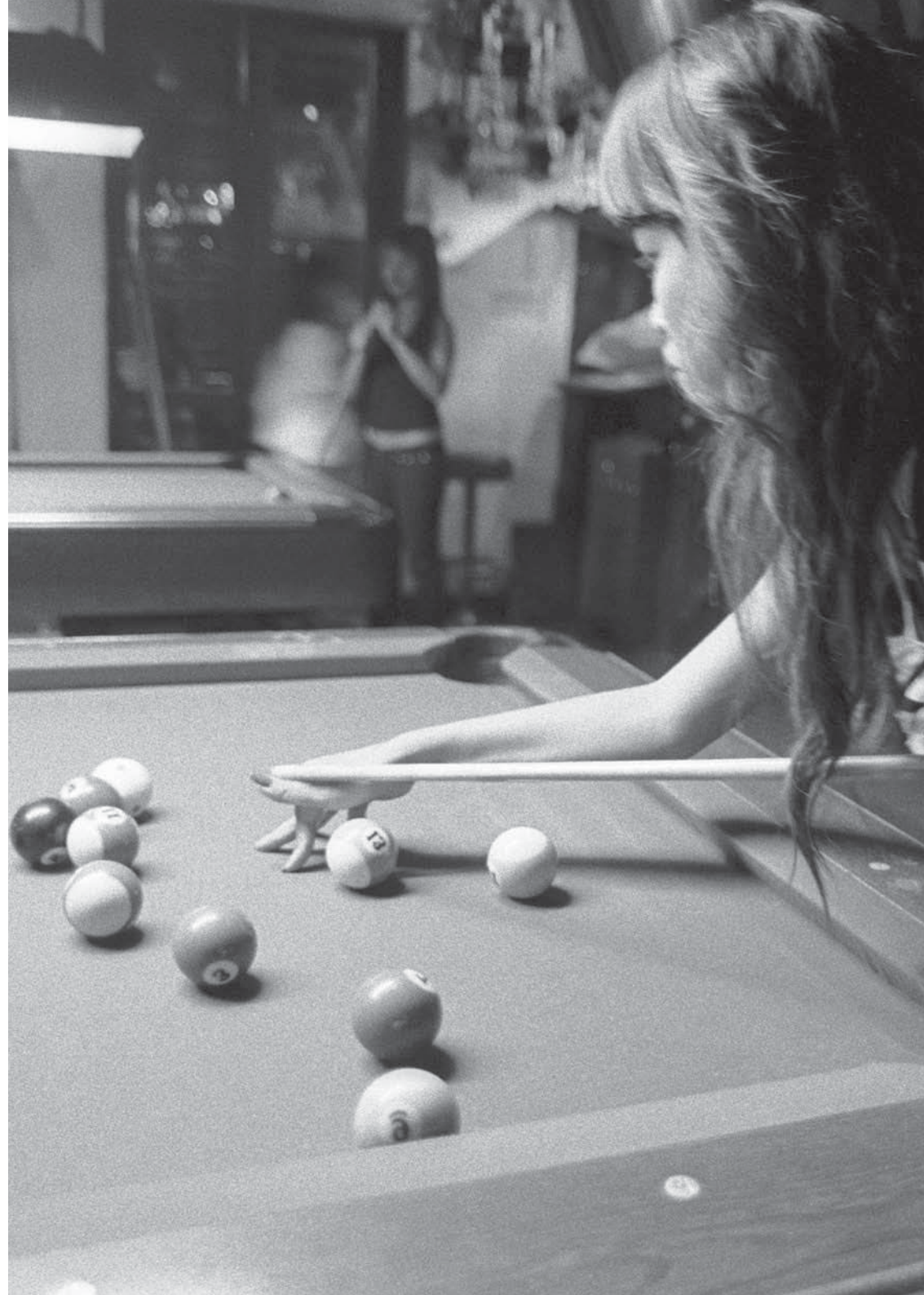
Gai is her nickname and it means chicken but in this case it should be a bird of prey. All Thai have nicknames and I am unsure of the source of the tradition. The Chinese traditionally gave a child a nickname at birth so that the ever present ghosts wouldn’t know that the family had been blessed with good fortune and try to turn it around. As a result often the nicknames would be derogatory in nature, such as “little pig” or even “ugly one”. In Thailand it could be just that the legal names, descriptive in nature of the hopes the parents hold for the child’s life, can be long and complicated. For instance someone’s real name may be translated as “Highly privileged; professionally competent.” I think you can see the problem. It is difficult going round saying: “Good morn-

ing, Mr. Highly Privileged”. Much better to say: “Good morning, Mr. Chicken, or Mr. Small or whatever. At least the Thai feel that it is.

Gai is a Bangkok night scene success story. When I first met her several years ago, shooting pool in a local bar bia, actually at Patti’s, Gai was a relatively successful prostitute, or working girl as is the preferred phrase here in Thailand. “Prostitute” seems too rude to most Thai unless there is a moral purity drive underway, as happens from time to time. Gai had secured a foreign business executive as her sponsor - a popular word in Thailand - and had ample funds and substantial leisure time at her disposal while he was working or occupied with his wife. As long as things were ok with her sponsor, meaning he was providing a good monthly endowment, Gai was happy playing pool and cards and gambling on both. She was also active in the sense that, as an attractive Thai woman of 30 or so, with adequate English language skills, she could have a foreign customer whenever she wanted. Gai has a model’s figure, but wiry not skinny, and is tall for a Thai woman, about 5’8”, with very long, sleek black hair worn down the back as the Thai country girls prefer. She has good clothes sense and wears loose, black, designer label clothes and spike high heels. Gai could walk into any high-class bar, salon or restaurant in the world and fit right in. That is until she opened her mouth, when the country girl in her would pour out. She was unique in that she could hand pick her customers and, having a passport and English language skills, would periodically travel to Singapore, where prostitution is legal, and where she could work for several weeks with a round of expatriate businessmen who would be willing to pay fees of an international standard, possibly US\$200 a turn, much more than the standard Bangkok fee of \$30 to \$60.

In any case, this generous sponsorship left Gai free to treat her

return trips home to Bangkok as holidays, in which she could indulge her passion for gambling. Shooting pool was, in the beginning, just a pleasant diversion. However, as time went by, Gai began to enter local bar tournaments, eight ball and nine ball, developing both a passion and a skill for the game and beating all the women entrants and most of the men.



Gai came into her own as a pool hustler not because she is the best player around or even the best woman player, but because she is quite attractive and sexy as well as being a skilled player. Somehow this disarms the foreign men who come to the pool hall looking for a game with some money to put down on the side. It seems to be a combination of thinking, “Hey, I can beat a girl”, and “Anyway, she is really sexy so I will enjoy the game more”. This phenomenon resulted in Gai playing and beating a number of foreign men who wouldn’t have taken a chance on gambling against the best male players, but were willing to put their money down for a chance to beat Gai. Of course, the male contingent of local hustlers became quite jealous and this resulted in some bad feelings and problems later.

The pool of cash Gai played for grew, game by game, day by day, until she found herself involved in, and winning, matches for over \$1,000 at a time. On one occasion I saw her end a four hours match with a foreigner with a pot of cash amounting to around \$4,000. This is big money most anywhere for a pool game and definitely for Bangkok. Gai, in Thai fashion, was generous when she won, which was most often the case, and would buy drinks for all her friends who supported her. Many of them made money by contributing to the pool of money Gai bet, as she herself would not usually carry more than \$500 with her at a time, or betting on the side that she would win. So in general her wins aroused a very positive sentiment in the pool hall with the staff and her friends.

However, jealousies had been aroused. Another Thai player, a man, had introduced her most lucrative foreign mark, the \$4,000 payday mentioned above, to the pool hall where Gai was hustling. This led to a belief on his part that he should share in Gai’s winnings. Also several of the lesser Thai hustlers, all male, approached her with differing ideas of how she could help them score off the mark but Gai rejected them all out of hand. This was

her mark and they could do their own hustling. Then one night, after moderate takings, Gai took a taxi home at 2am, got out of the taxi in a dark side street of Bangkok, and as the taxi drove away, faced three men wearing black ski hoods waiting near her apartment. They jumped her, threw a hood over her head, put her in the back seat of a car and drove away. They held a gun to her head and relieved her of all her cash winnings (only about US\$500 on that particular night), and her gold bracelets, necklaces and special “Jatukam” good luck amulet.

This event marked the beginning of a decline in Gai’s fortunes as a pool hustler. She was absent for about two weeks and the next time she showed up at the pool hall she was accompanied by two rough looking guys dressed all in black with big Jatukam medallions hanging on chains around their necks. These guys were, I was told, her bodyguards. They continued to be around for the next month or so until she felt that the threat had diminished. However the bloom was off the rose in terms of her hustling for serious money. The foreign mark responsible for her big scores got into a fight with his Thai girl friend and beat her up. The girl friend called the police and the guy decided other areas of Thailand might prove safer ground than Bangkok. Gai kept on drinking and playing but couldn’t replicate the winnings she had scored previously as she was now known to most players, Thai and foreign. Eventually her money began to run out and, after a fight with her “toyboy” Australian boyfriend (she used her sponsor’s money to pay for him), who foolishly tried to get her to cut back on her drinking and gambling, Gai decided it was time to go back to sex work. There was also a rumour going around that the guys who had robbed her once were still in business and possibly had her marked for a second try. I did see her again, once or twice, looking for a money game at Jacks bar, but it was obvious that she had lost some of her confidence and she soon stopped appearing at all.

Through a mutual acquaintance I have recently heard that Gai has travelled to Hong Kong where the pay days are more lucrative for a beautiful Asian girl who speaks good English and understands the personal attention a tired executive wants at the end of a hard day. However, apparently there are also many gambling opportunities available in Hong Kong, as Gai has just phoned back to a girl friend in Bangkok and asked her to wire a loan of \$300. Gai won't give up on gambling of course. As all real gamblers know, a big pay off is just a bet away.

Lek and her 100 year old granny

***Makee:** In the Thai snooker world this is the Tenglish (combined Thai and English) name for the ladies who rack the balls and keep (or mark) the score and who often shoot pool with the customers. Not surprisingly some of the makees become excellent players in their own right and the Thai pool scene has some who have come to play at the top level of competition. One piece of advice for those new to the scene; these girls only make about 4,500 baht a month or US\$135 and work six, eight to nine hour days a week. They deserve at least a smile and a good tip.*

The first I knew of the 100 year old granny was one day while shooting pool at Patti's bar. My friend Peter, a middle aged expat Swiss businessman and I would meet to play about three or four times a week after work (actually usually leaving work early and meeting at 4pm to play a few hours before dinner). It was a fun competition as we were on a comparative playing level. Often the "makee", who was a girl from the Northeast called Lek would join the game and during that period the three of us grew quite close to the point that we would go out of our way to play

with each other even sometimes electing not to play if one of the others was not on hand. It was natural that there was a trust between us after so many hours over the pool table.

