



## *The Grand Opening*

Last night was the grand opening of Pipeline Pete's Whiskey and Beer Bar on the beach road in Chaweng.

It's the only opening of any kind I've ever been personally invited to in my life. That is, aside from the City of Chicago inviting me to attend court for opening testimony by the arresting officer on charges of drunk and disorderly conduct. (But let's never mind about that.)

Pipeline Pete is a colossal, brawny hulk of a man with a sometimes irascible temperament who worked for several years on the Alaskan oil pipelines—hence the sobriquet—where he managed to distinguish himself by being run over by a snowplow. It was a very big snowplow owned and operated by the US government; the very same US government that sustains itself on a budget of hundreds of billions of dollars—and didn't think much about peeling off a few hundred thousand to compensate Pete for a pulverized vertebra and an assortment of nerve damage.

When Pete was back on his feet, he moved to California to be near his mother who lived on a small farm, and as he said, was getting up in age. Unbeknownst to his dear mom, Pete started growing marijuana, which he had found to be very helpful for soothing his various skeletal discomforts.

The US government found it to be a very helpful warrant for recovering a portion of the money it had doled out because of the snowplow affair.

Pete paid the fine, moved to Hawaii, and—apparently unaware that Hawaii is now a state, and thus subject to the same federal laws as California—was once again apprehended for possession of the rapturous weed, and the government got back more of his money.

One day, shortly thereafter, Pete met somebody who told him there was a country named Thailand that offered many of the same tranquil seascape charms as Hawaii, plus it wasn't part of the United States.

"You mean I can smoke marijuana without breaking the law?" Pete asked.

"Well, not exactly. I mean, yes and no. Yes, you can smoke marijuana, but no, not without breaking the law."

"Well shit!" Pete barked, "I can do that here."

"Yeah, but here the government tends to enforce the law, whereas in that part of the world...."

Pete bought some guidebooks on Thailand, liked the pictures, but worried about his mother, who was then resident of a nursing home in Honolulu. He started talking to other guys who had been to Thailand for vacation. They not only substantiated the bit about marijuana, but also informed him that Thai women were beautiful and especially affectionate.

Pete got himself a passport with a nice blue cover. He'd never had one before. Still, he worried about his mother.

Then, on a Friday night, Pete was at a bar drinking three-dollar whiskey and sodas with a few of his new pals who had all been to Thailand several times....

"And, another thing," one of them said, "you'd love the whiskey. Tastes a little bit like rum, but it mixes great with soda and a pinch of lime. A big liter bottle costs less than four bucks."

So . . . great marijuana; beautiful, affectionate women; and big bottles of whiskey at less than four US per issue.

Pete stopped worrying so much about his mother and caught a flight to Bangkok—where he did just that for the next two weeks. Then he traveled around the country for a while—Chiang Mai, Nong Kai, Sukhothai, Pattaya, and Phuket.

"From Phuket," he recalled, "I took a bus and a boat to Samui. Got in late, tired, hung over, and my back was achin' something fierce. Woke up the next morning in a little bungalow on Chaweng Beach. It was Valentine's Day 1985. Thought I'd died and gone to heaven. Flat out fell in love with the place. You can't believe how beautiful, how peaceful it was back then. Never mind the whiskey and women, the marijuana and the magic mushroom omelets . . . it was the whole atmosphere of the place. All I can say is, if that wasn't heaven, then heaven ain't for me."

Pete alternated between three months on Samui and three months in Hawaii with his mother for the next seven years. In May of '92 his mom expired, passed away, caught a flight to Cleveland . . . whatever . . . she was out of the picture. Pete sold everything, bought a one-way ticket, and was back on Samui a week after the funeral.

Over the course of the next four years, Pete got to know just about every bartender and bargirl on the island. There wasn't a bar on the beach road that didn't have a partially consumed bottle of Mekong whiskey with "Pipeline" written across the label.

Rumor has it that a few bargirls even sport "Pipeline" tattoos on a certain part of their anatomy. A rather private part of their anatomy that . . . well, I mean.... Ouch!

Pete carried on living his own bawdy version of the life of Riley until one day he said to me, "You know, I'm spending too much money drinking other people's booze. Think I'll buy a bar and start drinking my own booze. What do you think?"

I said, "Uh?" and he kept talking....

"Got me a good steady woman, Naow, and she'll work it with me."

"Who's this woman you got?" I asked.

"Naow?"

**"Yeah, the steady one. What's her name?"**

"Naow," he said.

"What do you mean now? How many other names has she had?"

"Naow's her name, you idiot. Always was her name, far as I know."

"Sort of conveys a sense of immediacy," I suggested.

"Right. Living in the moment. Live for now. Yep, good name, good philosophy."

So Pete said, "Let's get us a bar, Naow." And Naow agreed. And now he's got one.

There's nothing special about the bar itself other than perhaps the fact that there *is* nothing special about it. It has the same shantytown aspect as any one of the half dozen beer bars that butt up against each other along a dilapidated stretch of the beach road. They all have shabby-looking gray tile roofs supported by posts dubiously constructed with one part porous cement and two parts wishful thinking.

Wobbly wooden stools are scattered around a three-sided bar made out of the finest second-hand plywood money can buy. There's a television for spectator sports, and stereo equipment that could blow the lid off of Carnegie Hall. Add to that a big ice bucket, a fridge, lots of booze, a barrel of peanuts, and five cordial young women; hire a monk to bless the joint, put a signboard out front, and—bicarbonate of soda—you're ready for business.

These bars cater to a certain type of clientele. Namely, low budget, low brow, single, adolescent white males of all ages who come to Thailand for cheap booze and cheery women.

Pete's concubine recruited the girls from her hometown of Surat Thani, which lies on the mainland about fifty miles west of Samui. They're all twenty to thirty years old, poorly educated, divorced, and have at least one child by a Thai man who first abused, and then abandoned them without support.

These girls are quite agreeable to the proposition of leasing their affections to a Western man who'll offer them a little bit of attention and, hopefully, twenty dollars every once in a while.

In addition to the women, Pete hired one *katoey*.

*Katoeys* are human creatures, especially prevalent in Thailand, born with all the physical apparatus of a male, but who, for one reason or another, develop a very strong predilection towards behaving like

females. Brazen, sexy females. Indeed, many of them behave more like females than females do. It's for that very reason that some bar owners like having one or two of these anomalous curiosities on the premises. They not only spice the place up a bit with their outlandish mannerisms, but they also tend to inspire the genuine girls to be more girlish.

An interesting consequence of the *katoey* factor is that in Thailand, aside from being heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual, it is furthermore possible to be trisexual. A trisexual is quite simply (if that's the way to put it) a man or woman who enjoys the erotic pleasures of sexual affiliation with both of the orthodox genders as well as with someone that looks like a woman, walks like a woman, but quacks like a drake.

Earlier I indicated that last night was the grand opening of Pipeline Pete's Whiskey and Beer Bar. Actually, it was the fourteenth grand opening in the past two weeks. Pete likes grand openings. It attracts people, he says.

Last night it attracted a dozen of them. There were Pete and Naow, the five meant-to-be-charming hostesses, nasty natty Natasha the *katoey*, a couple of ruddy-looking British blokes, a guy named Harold from Kokomo, Indiana, and of course, my one and only self.

For a while, Pete and I were providing Harold with the simplest though most prized form of entertainment known to man—we were listening to him talk about himself. He claimed to make a living traveling around the world to beach resorts looking for lost jewelry. The tools of his trade consist of a facemask, a snorkel, and a lightweight, waterproof metal detector.

"Found a gold wedding band and twenty dollars worth of Thai coins this afternoon," he said. "Wedding bands are my biggest catch. My meat and potatoes, you might say. People get all greased up in suntan oil, go swimming, and the rings just slip right off. Got the idea for doing this on my third honeymoon."

"Your wife lose her wedding band?"

"Not exactly. She took it off and flung it into the Caribbean. Montego Bay along Ocho Rios. I went in looking for it, found it and another one as well. The other one was a beauty—three ounces, 22 carat. Must have been a man's ring, or else the bride was a real sow. Anyway when I got back to the room, my new wife had packed her things and vamoosed. I sold the rings and had a great honeymoon without her. Plus, I was on to a whole new career. Guess the bitch did me a favor when you think about it."

"Damn right she did," said Pete. "Did me a favor too, 'cause otherwise you wouldn't be here making me rich sipping on one stinking bottle of beer for the last hour."

Pete tends to speak his mind—what there is of it—until sometimes jaws get broken. In this instance, Harold merely broke wind, paid his meager tab, and moved on.

That still left the two Brits, Colin and Nigel to deal with. They were halfway through a big bottle of whiskey and half looking at the replay of an American football game. Nasty Natasha was imitating the cheerleaders and doing a fine job of it. She was sort of wearing what remained of a pair of blue jeans after they'd been cut off just below the belt loops. A screaming-pink halter top with SMOKE MY MELONS stenciled across the front, and a pair of glossy, knee-high, plum-colored boots made up the rest of her ensemble.

It was hard to tell which point of focus had the Brits most confused, Natasha or the American football game.

Colin turned towards Pete and asked, "Are you the owner?"

Pete acknowledged that he was.

"Well then," Colin continued, "maybe you can explain to me and my mate what this American so-called football is all about."

I honestly think Pete would have been quite willing to oblige the fellow. I certainly would have been. But, before either of us could respond, Nigel joined the fray in a manner indicating that they weren't particularly anxious for an explanation.

"Compared to rugby, it's a game for bloody sissies, if you want my opinion."

"Exactly," said Colin. "I mean, what's with all the girly padding? Then they stop playing every ten seconds and form a huddle for five minutes. What are they doing in there?"

Pete had an answer for that one, and it went something like this:

"They're making strategy," he said. "They're preparing to attack, which is something you cauliflower-eared rugby Brits ain't got the brains for, and that's why we Yanks gotta keep bailing your butts out of losing wars against the Krauts. So stick that in your cup of tea and smoke it!"

"Well, bloody hell," Nigel said. "Why don't we just run the Stars and Stripes up a flagpole and all sing *America the Beautiful*."

"If you guys are so bright," Colin asked, "how come the best-looking woman in this bar is a bloke?"

"Naow's not a man, you asshole," snapped Pete.

"Well okay, maybe not now, but she sure as hell used to be," said Nigel.

"That item behind the bar," Colin said. "The one with her naked arse swinging in the breeze and her tits hanging out."

"No. That's Natasha," said Pete. "Naow's my wife."

Colin and Nigel looked at each other totally bewildered.

"She's not a bloke?"

"Who?"

"Your wife?"

"Hell, no!"

"You said Natasha is now your wife."

"No I didn't. Natasha's a lady-boy. Naow's my wife. I mean we're not officially married or anything, but I call her my wife just the same."

"Natasha?"

"Get out of here, you assholes!" roared Pete. And they did.

After regaining his composure, he said to me, "I don't know pal . . . fourteen grand openings and I'm still my own best customer. The damn *katoey* gets taken out more than the regular girls."

"So hire more *katoeys*," I suggested.

"Could do," he said. "What else?"

"Might help business if you stopped calling your customers 'assholes.'"

"Well, damn it, those guys were assholes."

"Well, yeah. But they were customers first of all. In a joint like this most of your customers are going to be assholes. Make them feel welcome. That's your business."

"Yeah, you're right. Hell, I'm an asshole myself. Maybe I should name the place Pipeline Pete's Whiskey Bar for Assholes. Anyway, no more grand openings. I got a new angle. Tomorrow night's going to be our third-week inaugural party. What do you think?"

I said, "Uh?" and he kept talking....