

Bitch



The first I heard of the beach was in Bangkok, on the Khao San Road. Khao San Road was backpacker land. Almost all the buildings had been converted into guest-houses, there were long-distance-telephone booths with air-con, the cafés showed brand-new Hollywood films on video, and you couldn't walk ten feet without passing a bootleg-tape stall. The main function of the street was as a decompression chamber for those about to leave or enter Thailand, a halfway house between East and West.

I'd landed at Bangkok in the late afternoon, and by the time I got to Khao San it was dark. My taxi driver winked and told me that at one end of the street was a police station, so I asked him to drop me off at the other end. I wasn't planning on crime but I wanted to oblige his conspiratorial charm. Not that it made much difference which end one stayed because the police obviously weren't active. I caught the smell of grass as soon as I got out of the cab, and half the travellers weaving past me were stoned.

He left me outside a guest-house with an eating area open to the street. As I studied it, checking the clientele to gauge what kind of place it was, a thin man at the table nearest me leant over and touched my arm. I glanced down. He was, I guessed, one of the heroin hippies that float around India and Thailand. He'd probably come to Asia ten years ago and turned an occasional dabble into an addiction. His skin was old, though I'd have believed he was in his thirties. The way he was looking at me, I had the feeling I was being sized up as someone to rip off.

'What?' I said warily.

He pulled an expression of surprise and held up the palms of his hands. Then he curled his finger and thumb into the O-shaped perfection sign, and pointed into the guest-house.

'It's a good place?'

He nodded.

I looked again at the people around the tables. They were mostly young and friendly looking, some watching the TV, and some chattering over their dinner.

'OK.' I smiled at him in case he wasn't a heroin addict, just a friendly mute. 'I'm sold.'

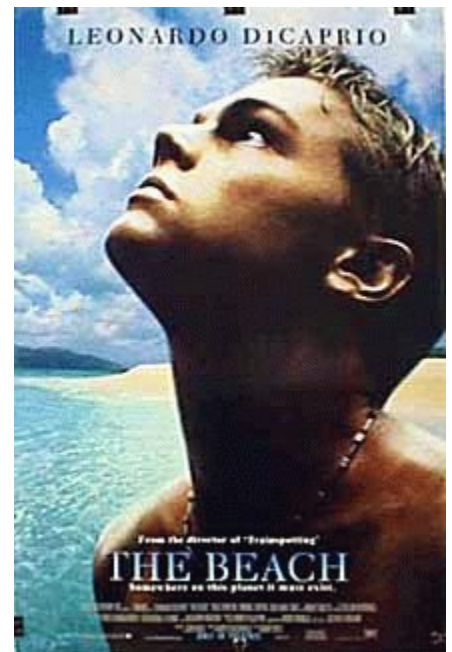
He returned the smile and turned back to the video screen.

Quarter of an hour later I was settling into a room that was a little larger than a double bed. I can be accurate about it because there was a double bed in the room, and on each of its four sides was a foot of space. My backpack could just slide in the gap.

One wall was concrete - the side of the building. The others were Formica and bare. They moved when I touched them. I had the feeling that if I leant against

one it would fall over and maybe hit another, and all the walls of the neighbouring rooms would collapse like dominoes. just short of the ceiling, the walls stopped, and covering the space was a strip

of metal mosquito netting. The netting almost upheld the illusion of a confined, personal



area - until I lay down on the bed. As soon as I relaxed, stopped moving, I began to hear
45 cockroaches scuttling around in the other rooms.

At my head end I had a French couple in their late teens - a beautiful, slim girl with a
50 suitably handsome boy attached. They'd been leaving their room as I got to mine and we
exchanged nods as we passed in the corridor. The other end was empty. Through the
netting I could see the light was off, and anyway, if it had been occupied I would have
heard the person breathing. It was the last room on the corridor, so I presumed it faced
the street and had a window.

55 On my ceiling was a fan, strong enough to stir the air on full setting. For a while I did
nothing but lie on the bed and look up at it. It was calming, following the revolutions, and
with the mixture of heat and soft breeze I felt I could drift asleep. That suited me.

West to East is the worst for jet lag, and it would be good to fall into the right sleeping
60 pattern on the first night.

I switched off the light. There was a glow from the corridor, and I could still see the fan.
Soon I was asleep.

65 Once or twice I was aware of people in the corridor, and I thought I heard the French
couple coming back, then leaving again. But the noises never woke me fully and I was
always able to slip back into the dream I'd been having before. Until I heard the man's
footsteps. They were different, too creepy to doze through. They had no rhythm or weight
and dragged on the floor.

70 A muttered stream of British swear-words floated into my room as he jiggled the padlock
on his door. Then there was a loud sigh, the lock opened with a click, and his light came
on. The mosquito netting cast a patterned shadow on my ceiling. Frowning, I looked at
my watch. It was two in the morning - early evening, UK time. I wondered if I might get
back to sleep.

75 The man slumped on to his bed, making the wall between us shake alarmingly. He
coughed for a while, then I heard the rustle of a joint being rolled. Soon there was blue
smoke caught in the light, rolling through the netting.

Aside from the occasional deep exhalation, he was silent. I drifted back to sleep, almost.
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'Bitch,' said a voice. I opened my eyes. 'Fucking bitch. We're both as good as...'

The voice paused for a coughing fit.

'Dead.'

I was wide awake now so I sat up in bed.

85 'Cancer in the corals, blue water, my bitch. Fucking Christ, did me in,' the man continued.

He had an accent, but at first my sleep-fogged head couldn't place it.

'*Bitch*,' he said again, spitting out the word.

A Scottish accent. Beach.

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