

1: Payback

Nobody in their right mind would fly all the way to Thailand only to shop in Prada, but that's exactly what Candice is doing. She could buy the same stuff back home for less money, since imported luxury goods are heavily taxed here. But, of course, she's not looking at the price tags. I'm sitting in Starbucks waiting for her. We've been in this mall for more than three hours already.

It's a high-end place, the customers falling into two categories: bewildered-looking tourists in cheap, un-ironed clothes and immaculately turned-out Thai ladies who lunch, all of whom seem to be toting small dogs and five-thousand dollar handbags. A few of these ladies' husbands are sitting near me in Starbucks, killing time on their mobiles and iPads. I see the guy at the next table check his Rolex and frown. Moments later, his perfectly-coiffed wife appears, trailing two giant Hermes bags.

I check my own watch. Where the hell is Candice?

When I spot her, I'm torn between dismay and relief. On the one hand, we can finally get out of this mall. On the other, she is carrying two large LV bags. Spending money – my money – does something to Candice's brain, releases serotonin or something. She pecks me on the cheek and takes a seat, her face frozen into the glazed, giddy look that toddlers get when they've had too much sugar.

"I found the cutest shoes ever," she says. "Do you want to see them?"

I've lived with Candice long enough to know that saying 'no' is not an option. Sure enough, she's already pried open the box and extracted some layers of tissue paper. I drain the last of my double-espresso.

"What do you think?" says Candice.

My wife is a beautiful woman, a former Miss Teen Texas. When I met her, she was stunning. In photos, she looks almost as good as she used to, but in real life, up close, the effort that's gone into maintaining her looks is unmistakable. I'm not sure what it is, because she's never overdone the plastic surgery, but it's like the difference between a real flower and a fake one.

"Martin?" says Candice.

I realize that I'd failed to respond to her question. "Nice," I say. "Yeah, those are quite something."

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They are something, just not something I'd want my wife to be spending my money on – a pair of red, strappy sandals that are ludicrously high. There's no way that Candice can walk in those things.

Candice pouts, her already plumped lips jutting out by a few more millimeters. "You don't like them," she says.

I fight down a sigh. "I do like them," I say. "You're going to look hot in those."

I refrain from asking how much they cost. Candice and I are going to be in Thailand for another week. While I don't expect to enjoy myself, I may as well make the best of things. If I see the price tags on those shoes, I'm likely to say something that'll lead to an argument.

After I've admired her other shoes – flashy silver sandals that are equally high – Candice goes off to order a skim-milk cappuccino. I try not to look, but a corner of the receipt is sticking out from a shoe bag. While I don't allow myself to do the currency conversion, one glance at all of those zeros gives me instant heartburn.

It's not that I'm poor. It's the principle. I'm a corporate lawyer and a partner in a big Houston firm: Burton, Gottgart, Gillard & Associates. But in the words of Dolly Parton, I work hard for my money.

"I got you this," says Candice. She sets a square of industrial-looking carrot cake in front of me. I know that she'll allow herself a couple of bites but no more. I'm not hungry, but pick up the fork anyway.

The cream-cheese icing isn't bad. Candice is describing all of the other items that she'd considered buying. I listen just enough to be able to nod at the right places, a skill that I mastered at work, decades ago. As Candice talks about this season's must-have colors and skirt lengths, I fantasize about Brittany, the new receptionist at Burton, Gottgart, Gillard & Associates. I started sleeping with her two months ago, and it's still in the fresh and exciting phase. While I don't actually miss Brittany, I do miss having sex with her. She's a nice enough girl, just fairly dull, outside of the bedroom.

This is a pattern with me.

Back before I made partner, Candice was the receptionist at Burton & Gottgart. I was still married to my first wife, Patty, with whom I have two sons, Karl and Martin Junior. They're both in boarding school in New England. It's costing me a fortune.

"They had some cute swimsuits in Prada," says Candice. "There were these white bikinis with little gold chains holding everything together."

"Oh yeah?" I say. Candice needs more swimsuits like she needs more Botox. Or like she needs more thousand-dollar shoes, for that matter.

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“Uh huh, but they didn’t have my size.”

Well thank God for that, I think. Then I imagine Brittany in a tiny white bikini. I picture her wriggling out of it. She’s nowhere near as pretty as either of my wives, but her tits are a whole lot bigger. They’re real too. I guess that’s what I miss about her.

“Martin?” Candice has the pinched look that she gets when she’s pissed at me. “You weren’t listening,” she says. “We finally get to spend some time together, and you aren’t even paying attention.”

Contrition seems easier than denial. “Sorry,” I say. I set down my fork and stage a yawn. “I think it’s jetlag. How about we go back to the hotel?” Sex with Candice would be better than nothing.

“Just come with me and look in Armani,” says Candice brightly. “They’re having a sale. It’ll only take a minute.”

I tell her that I’ll wait here. Candice promises to be quick. I retrieve the newspaper left by the guy with the Rolex.

I’ve made it to page five, and there’s still no sign of Candice. At the bottom of the page, there’s a short item about an Australian tourist found dead the previous week on Koh Phangan. Apparently, a young guy by the name of Jason Duncan Peal got drunk and waded, fully-clothed, into the sea and drowned. It’s been ruled an accident.

What catches my attention is how the story ends:

Mr. Peal is the fourth foreign national to have died on the island this month, with two of the other fatalities having been attributed to drug overdoses and the third to unknown causes. Meanwhile, it is thought that a Belgian woman found dead in a Koh Samui hotel two days ago committed suicide.

That’s five dead tourists in three weeks, in beach destinations that are marketed as tropical paradise. Candice and I are headed to the beach in two days’ time. Maybe Thailand’s not as safe as I thought it was.

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The next morning, at breakfast, I read The Bangkok Post. On page four, I find yet another short story about the suspicious death of a foreign tourist.

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Police in Chiang Mai have confirmed that a 27-year-old Dutch woman was found dead in her room at the Golden Dragon Hotel on Monday morning. While autopsy results are pending, severe food poisoning is suspected.

This woman, whose name has yet to be released, is the third guest at the Golden Dragon Hotel to have died under mysterious circumstances in the past year. Last March, a 65-year-old Danish man died in his room of apparent food poisoning following a buffet breakfast. In July, a 43-year-old female Thai tour guide was found dead in a hotel bathroom after complaining of stomach cramps.

In a statement issued to the press yesterday, a Chiang Mai police spokesman said: "There is absolutely no evidence to suggest that these cases are related."

I set down the piece of pineapple I'd been eating. Pre-cut fruit could be deadly. I shake my head. Three dead tourists in one hotel and the cops think it's a coincidence!

What kind of investigations are these bozos running? True, we're in a five-star hotel and the Golden Dragon is probably a shit-hole, but it still makes me scared to eat anything.

"What's the matter?" says Candice. She is holding a large plate bearing a single croissant. Surrounded by gleaming whiteness, the pastry looks small and sad, like a child's drawing of a frown.

I realize I'm frowning too. "Agh, just the news," I say. I fold up the paper. "It's the same shit everywhere."

Candice puts down her plate and takes a seat. "Are you going to eat that pineapple?" she says. I tell her to go ahead. I'm going to stick to bananas.

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The next day's Bangkok Post is even worse. I read it on the plane to Krabi. There are three separate stories, all of them short, but what it boils down to is four dead tourists in less than twenty-four hours: a sixty-four year-old Australian man found dead in an alley in Bangkok (drugs suspected, possibly not self-administered); a thirty-one year-old Nigerian man stabbed, also in Bangkok; and two Japanese drowning victims near Phuket, one a twenty-one-year-old woman and the other her twenty-three-year-old male companion.

Am I here at an unusually unlucky time? Or is this normal?

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It's not until my untouched in-flight meal has been cleared away that the idea comes to me. At first, it's just a crazy idea. But the more I think about it, the more sense it makes.

I am forty-nine years old. Candice is thirty-eight. We both have a lot of years ahead of us.

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I research the drugs on the Internet. There's a pharmacy about a block from our resort. In Thailand, no prescriptions are necessary. Of course, it's a risk to buy the stuff so close to where we're staying, but I haven't gotten to where I am in my life without taking chances. As it turns out, the teenage girl behind the counter is too busy watching a Chinese soap to even look at me. She grabs the stuff I've listed without removing her eyes from the screen, like a blind person moving by instinct. Even still, I am shaking when I hand over the money.

After that, I wait. It's one thing to think about something like that, and another to act on it. But Candice is driving me crazy.

Thailand is too hot for my liking, but I have to admit that the scenery around here is fantastic, with steep limestone islands as jagged as sharks' teeth. Me and Candice are set to explore them in rented kayaks. We'd planned to leave around three p.m., but then Candice insisted on getting a pedicure. By the time we get into our kayaks, it's well past four. Luckily, the sun's not as intense as it was.

"Are you sure we don't need a guide?" says Candice. She is wearing a tiny bikini and a massive sunhat.

"What for?" I say. "We'll just paddle around and stop on an empty beach somewhere." Stowed in my kayak is a picnic hamper. I've even brought a flask of Candice's favorite cocktail, a vicious mix of apricot brandy, gin, dry vermouth and lime juice.

Because the resorts around here are high-end, the beach is relatively empty. The bay is empty too, with just a few windsurfers visible down at the far end. The water is the same color as my swimming pool back in Texas.

It is late afternoon and the light has an incredible golden quality. We paddle towards the limestone islands. Everything – including Candice – looks more beautiful

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than it is. Looking at her tanned skin and expertly streaked hair, I almost love her again. Then she opens her mouth and ruins everything.

“This is hard,” she says. “I think we should go back. We’re not getting anywhere.”

I grit my teeth. Paddling is tougher than it looks. We must be battling a current. But I’m not giving up. “Not far now,” I say. “Just think of how many calories you’re burning.”

About twenty minutes – and as many complaints – later, we reach the first of the limestone islands. Up close, they look fairly creepy, with sheer, dark grey walls that tower over us like ruined castles. Paddling between them, we are in deep shade. It’s like entering a cave, the temperature noticeably cooler.

In the narrow channels between the islands, paddling is harder still. We’re getting tossed around. It’s a relief to round an island and see a stretch of open sea, and a deserted, sunny beach.

“Let’s stop,” says Candice. “My arms are going to be so sore tomorrow.”

When the water is waist-deep, we both dive in. It feels good to rinse the sweat off. After pulling the kayaks up onto the sand, I retrieve the picnic basket.

“I’m so thirsty,” says Candice.

Of course, I have a choice. I know this is wrong. Candice may be shallow, materialistic, petty and mind-bogglingly boring, but she’s not a terrible person. She doesn’t deserve to die. But since when was life fair? And I have to think of myself here.

I’m not even fifty yet. And I plan to be around for another three decades - years I don’t want to spend with Candice. But if I divorce her, she gets a huge settlement. It was bad enough with Patty, and I was worth a whole lot less back then. Just the thought of Candy walking off with half of my assets makes my blood pressure jump.

I grab the glasses and fill them. And then, when Candice is admiring the view, I sprinkle the powder into hers.

“To freedom,” I say. We clink glasses. I try not to watch as she takes a sip, but can’t help myself.

She makes a face. “This tastes different.”

“It’s the limes,” I say. “Back home, we use lemons.”

“Mmm. It’s not as good.”

I nod. “Try drinking it quickly.”

It takes about twenty minutes to see an effect. We are both lying on the sand watching the sunset. “Candice?” I say, but there is no response. My wife is sleeping.

She might, of course, just be taking a nap. I shake her gently, then do it harder. Five minutes later, when I’m sure she’s really out, I push her kayak into the water. I

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rinse out our glasses and the flask, then set them by the water's edge. The tide is coming in.

I go over my story one last time. Candice went out for a paddle while I took a nap. I woke to find her empty kayak floating offshore. Candice can swim, but she's not a strong swimmer. I didn't hear a thing. Yes, she'd been drinking.

I pick up Candice, along with her massive hat and her Chanel glasses. She seems heavier than usual, but she's still pretty light. Which isn't surprising, considering how little she eats.

I am at the water's edge when I hear something. Rounding the corner of the island is an open-decked, long-tailed boat. They must have just turned the engine on.

I freeze. The boat comes closer. On board are an old Thai driver and four Western kids. I can make out three guys and one girl. They look around my sons' age.

"Hey mister! Is everything okay?" yells one of the guys. Dressed in nothing but a pair of ragged pink cotton pants, he has a head-full of filthy-looking blond dreadlocks. The girl, meanwhile, has a crew cut. I was tipped off to her gender by small tits in a crochet bikini.

The boat slows. My heart is pounding so fast that I'm scared something will rattle loose. Candice is still lying limp in my arms. For once, I am speechless. I drop the sunhat and take a deep breath. "I ... I ... Help!" I yell. "Something has happened to my wife!"

The kid with the dreadlocks hops overboard and splashes towards us. "It's okay!" he yells. "I'm a doctor!"

I can't fucking believe it. Is this kid really old enough to be a doctor?

I set Candice down, and he leans over her, then applies a finger to her neck. I catch a whiff of pot mixed with coconut-scented sunscreen. But despite his youth, and all of the weed he's obviously inhaled, the kid seems to know what he's doing. I watch glumly as he checks her pulse.

"Let's lift her," he says. I want to punch the guy.

Aided by the rest of the gang, we lift Candice onto the boat. I climb in after her. The deck is littered with snorkels, diving equipment and bags of junk food. Sure enough, a bong lies near the prow. I could use a good hit. My heart is still racing.

The driver starts the engine. "Hold on," he yells. This is not a figure of speech. We are moving so fast I'm scared for my life. With each wave we hit, I imagine the boat flying apart. Candice is lucky to be out of it.

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She's lucky to miss the taxi ride too, and the sight of the crowds milling out front of the local hospital. Luckily for her, there's a special, overpriced ward where they treat foreigners. She ends up having her stomach pumped.

Not surprisingly, when she's released from the hospital, Candice wants to go home, pronto. I try to convince her that it was food poisoning, but some Thai doctor suggested she might have been drugged.

Naturally, she freaked out.

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So now, we're back in the same hotel in Bangkok. Our return flight to Houston is tomorrow morning.

"How did I get drugged?" says Candice, for about the hundredth time. She is lying on a white sofa with her slutty red sandals on. Even though it's not my sofa, this drives me crazy. Why can't she take her filthy shoes off?

"It must have happened at the resort," I say. "Maybe someone tried to drug both of us. At the buffet, maybe. It could have been a failed robbery or something."

Candice shudders. "We should have gone to the police. I almost died," she says. She downs the last of her gin and tonic.

I shudder too. If that boatload of stoners had rounded the corner just a few seconds later, they'd have seen me trying to drown my wife. On the other hand, if Candice hadn't insisted on getting that stupid pedicure, everything would have worked out perfectly. I was so close.

Fighting down a sigh, I stand up to fix us fresh drinks. When will I get another good opportunity to get rid of Candice?

"We should have gone to Hawaii," says Candice. She sticks out her lip. "I hate this place."

Since it was her idea to come here, she can't blame me, but I know she wants to. When Candice drinks, she gets argumentative. And tonight, she's drunk a fair bit. We both have, but I'm a lot bigger than Candice and can hold my liquor.

"We can go for Christmas," I say soothingly. Maybe Candice can fall from some steep mountain trail, or get pulled out to sea by a rip tide. But even as I think it, I know it's a bad idea. Hawaii has a modern police force. Proper forensics. It's not some third-world backwater. 'Life in jail' has a nasty ring to it. And back in Texas, I could even be looking at the death penalty.

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"Or how about Mexico?" I say hopefully. Mexico would be okay. Everyone knows Mexican cops are corrupt and useless.

"Hawaii," says Candice firmly. "Or Florida."

I ask if she wants another drink, then extract two tiny bottles of gin and a can of tonic from the mini-bar. It'll be at least another year before Candice agrees to go any place more exotic than Honolulu. Having had freedom so close, I can't help but feel bitter. I grab another bottle of gin and top up both our glasses.

When I carry the drinks back to the couch, I see that Candice has gone out onto the balcony. She's leaned up against the railing admiring the view. I walk out to join her.

We're on the sixteenth floor, dotted lines of traffic snaking far below. In the distance, I can see the bell roof of a vat, shining gold in its floodlights.

Candice takes the drink without saying 'thank you'. She takes a sip, then informs me that I've put too much tonic in it.

"You're drunk," I say. "That's why you can't taste the alcohol."

She tosses her hair. "I am not drunk," she says. "Taste this! There's practically no gin in there." She thrusts the glass towards me.

I know that Candice is drunk and that I should let this go. But I'm angry. "I poured it myself," I say. "So what, you're calling me a liar?"

Candice narrows her eyes. "Don't even get me started," she says.

Candice is tall and, in her new sandals, she's even taller. The balcony railing is low. It'd never meet building codes back home. But I guess that most Asians are short. It must have been built to meet local standards.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I say.

Candice sways on her feet. "You're so cheap, you probably poured half a shot to keep the mini-bar tab down."

"Cheap?" I say. "Who's paying for this hotel, Candice? Who paid for our flights, and all of that designer shit you're wearing, and your new tits and lips and everything else for that matter?"

Candice opens her mouth, then shuts it. I'm not usually that crude, or that blunt, but I'm too angry to sugarcoat things. I finish the last of my gin and tonic. Candice is still glaring at me. Any second now, I bet she'll start crying.

Instead, she tells me to fuck off. "You think I don't know about you and that little slag Brittany?" She laughs, or rather a strange gurgle comes out of her throat, half laugh and half cry. Her fat mouth looks twisted and ugly.

I am shocked. I didn't think she knew. Why hasn't she said anything?

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Candice's strangled laugh comes again. She has twisted around so that her back is to the view. She's got one elbow on the rail and her glass in the other hand. It occurs to me that she might toss her drink at me.

"I knew," she says. "And you know what? That bitch can have you. I want a divorce." She bares her capped teeth at me. "On the grounds of adultery."

I set down my empty glass. Has Candice been collecting proof of my affair to increase her settlement? All of a sudden, I feel totally sober.

I swallow hard. It's time for damage control. "Aw, come on baby. Don't be like that." I lean forward to touch her arm. Candice has many faults, but holding grudges has never been one of them. She's caught me cheating before.

"I'll make it up to you," I say, blinking real tears into my eyes. "I'll ... I'll go to couples counseling, or do whatever you want. Anything!" I take a step closer and reach for her chin. "You know I can't live without you."

She smiles, and for a moment, I think she's come round, but then there's a sharp pain in my shin. I stumble back. "Ow!" I yell. The little bitch just kicked me!

I look down in time to see her shiny red foot lash out again, but can't move fast enough to avoid it. This kick hits me in the left knee, causing me to gasp in pain. Candy throws back her head and laughs, her long blonde hair swaying over the rail.

"You bastard!" she says, and I see her foot recoil for another blow. This time, I manage to jump out of the way and grab hold of her sandal, Candy balanced like a teeter-totter until one upward tug sends those red shoes skyward.

While our fight happened very fast, she seems to fall in slow motion.

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I threaten to sue the hotel, on account of their railing being so low, but don't plan to go through with it. It's an international hotel chain, but the case would be tried in Thailand. I figure it's not worth the effort. Naturally, they raise all of the balcony railings and fix the banisters too. They also put up signs warning guests not to sit on the edges of their balconies, to cover their asses against possible litigation in case of future accidents.

The autopsy results show that Candy had a blood alcohol level of 0.24. Her death is deemed an accident. It warrants a brief story in the Bangkok Post, but is overshadowed by the auto-asphyxiation of a minor, has-been British pop singer in a hotel room in Pattaya.

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Rather than pay to have Candice's body shipped back to Texas, I opt to have her cremated in Bangkok, then repatriate her ashes. This saves me a ton of money.

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Back in Houston, I take Candice's ashes to her favorite mall, The Galleria. Like usual at this time of year, it's hotter than hell, but there's a decent breeze. I sprinkle her ashes outside of Saks, just a little at a time, since I don't want to attract attention. She was happiest here.

Standing out there in the parking lot with my empty urn, I can't help but feel a little nostalgic. After all, Candy did have her good points. We'd had some fun times together, especially before I married her. Since I don't know what else to do with it, I hide the urn in a planter.

I'm getting back into my Porsche when I feel something tap me on the shoulder. I spin around, but there's no one there. Must be my guilty conscience, because I also catch a whiff of Candy's favorite Chanel perfume. I have to admit that I'm rattled.

But then I tell myself to get a grip. Candice is dead, and that's all there is to it. I start the engine and crank the air con. Ghosts, God, karma – they're all a bunch of horseshit. I believe in the here-and-now, and right now, I'm a free man. I crank the stereo.

Maybe I'm driving a little faster than usual, but I see the light change with plenty of time to stop, except that when I tap the brake, the car accelerates. There's a loud screech and the blast of a truck horn, panic causing me to stamp on the brake. Still, the Porsche lurches onwards. I don't understand. Am I pressing the wrong pedal?

I look down, struggling to make sense of it, the smell of Candy's perfume so strong that it's hard to breathe. I see a flash of red down near my feet, the same shiny red as Candy's new sandals, the same red that shatters inside my head and runs into my eyes until everything fades to blackness.

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