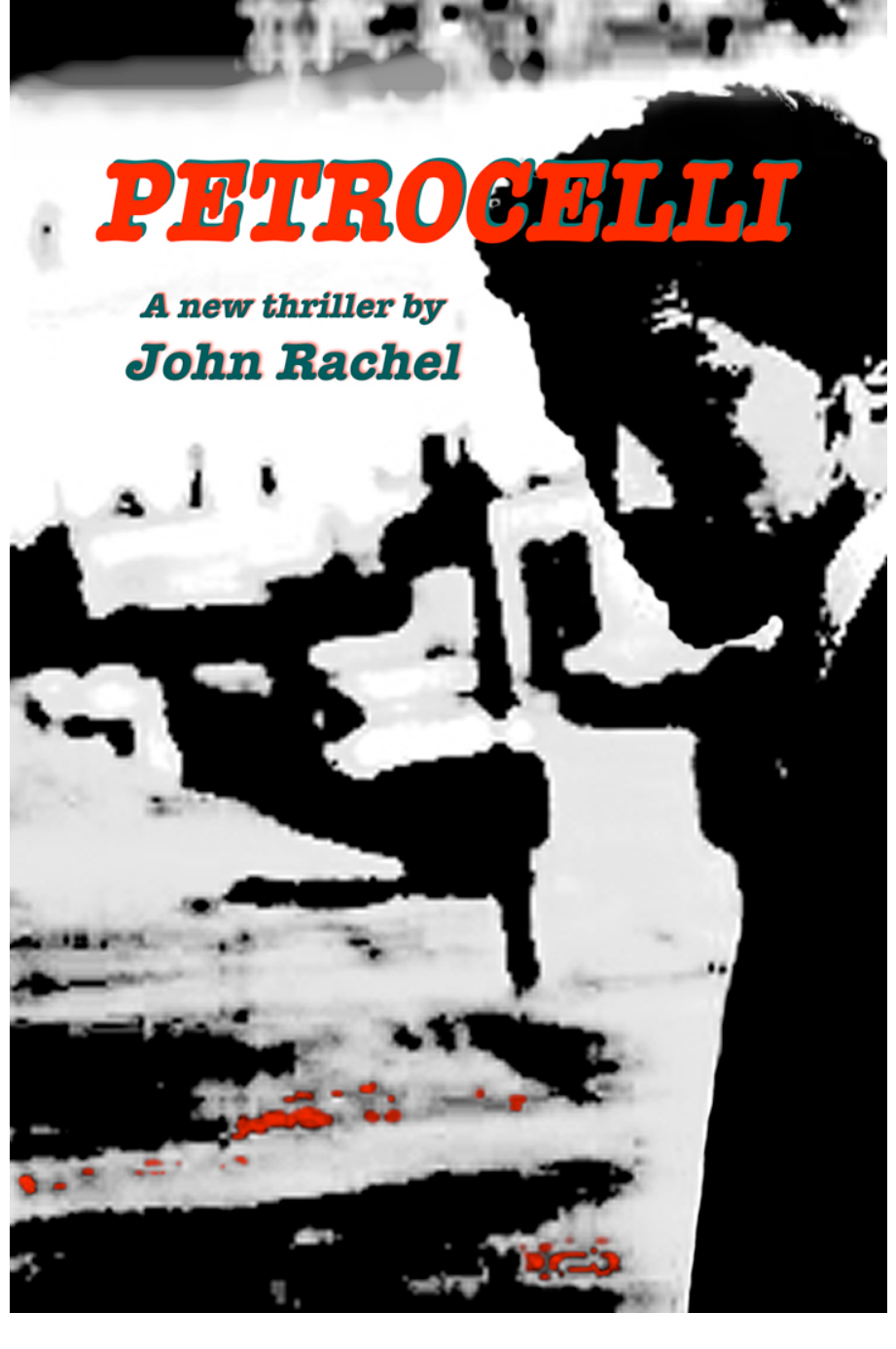




PETROCELLI

A new thriller by
John Rachel

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Chapter Two

[Sample Excerpt]

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Petrocelli
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by John D Rachel

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Cover Art by Timothy Rankin

Note from the Author

Various authoritative articles and news stories, and the widely reported protests against the use of child and forced labor by prominent American corporations or their direct suppliers — the Gap, Nike, Levi-Strauss, Wal-Mart, Phillips-Van Heusen, Hanes, J.C. Penney, Firestone, to name a few — had years ago piqued my awareness and concern about widespread practices related to trafficking. But it was the time I spent during 2007 living in Africa, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia which really codified my understanding of the flesh trade for both sweatshops and the sex service industry. It is currently estimated that human trafficking is annually a 36 billion dollar business worldwide. I have also read there are more than 25 million people in the world kept in bondage as slaves. I fear this is a low figure.

A non-fiction book I read while in Thailand called *Sex Slaves* by Louise Brown (© Copyright June 1, 2001: Vurago UK) became the central inspiration for this novel. It elucidates in excruciating detail what countless young girls (and boys) must endure as they are bought and sold in the ever-expanding global market for young prostitutes. This relatively brief but powerful book prompted the extensive research on my part into human trafficking, which became the factual underpinning for my story.

Though *Petrocelli* is entirely fictional, shortly after I finished writing it, I started to see more and more articles appear on credible online news services (e.g. mainstream sites such as bbc.co.uk and cnn.com) which paralleled my story line. These reports both confirmed the accuracy of much of what I describe in the book and illustrate the expanding scope of these criminal and abusive enterprises.

While there is no shortage of crises these days, human trafficking is emblematic of a sickness that is spreading throughout the world. It is a horrible and heartbreaking indictment of our lack of progress in many areas of human rights and one that goes to the core of pandemic contemporary amorality. Many thought we'd be doing better by now. Of course, that's just me talking and I am interested in what you have to say. Please feel free to email me your comments ... john@jdrachel.com ... though I am not accepting death threats or proposals of marriage at this time. You can be brutally frank, though understandably I would prefer you to be brutally kind.

Also feel free to visit my personal web and blog site: <http://jdrachel.com>.

Chapter 2

PASSPORT PLEASE!

In Bed with the King

Luxury hotel room. The Mandarin Oriental in Bangkok. Breathtaking view of the Chao Phraya River.

Christine is beautiful, blonde, smart and wholesome. Inviolably virtuous. The crucifix on her necklace is not a fashion statement. She is the real thing. She even saved it for marriage. God bless her.

"Christine?"

The phone rang and her anticipation was evident.

"Ohmigod. Tom, it's you! Oh sweetheart, it's so good to hear your voice. Things here are going great. They couldn't be better."

"Have they given you the grand tour? What's it like?"

"Wonderful. Wonderful. The kids are so beautiful. Their faces. Their eyes. It's all I can do to keep from crying."

"And they seem to have it together?"

"Oh yes. Very organized. We spent three days on the trip. Two whole days in Nong Khai. It's right on the border of Laos. They have like a school, or monastery, some kind of big ancient building. That's where the children live. For now."

"Boys or girls?"

"Both. Maybe more girls than boys."

"How old are they?"

"I'd say 10 years to maybe 14. It's hard to tell. But they are so adorable. The way they hug you. They're so full of love. Just craving some affection. They're a little shy but then they really warm up."

"Just so you know, everything here is fine. Megan might spend a night or two at her friend's house. Danny's his usual invisible self. I think maybe I hear some stirrings from upstairs. We're just getting our day started."

"So what time is it there?"

"A little after seven. It's early morning."

"Right right. Twelve hours. Oh goodness! I have to go. I really have to go. The banquet. Give my love to Megan. Tell her mommy misses her. And Danny too. Love you. I'll be back in just a couple more days. Love you. Love you so. God bless."

She looked in the mirror and frantically started to fool with her makeup but then looked at her watch. Better not. Can't be late for the big night.

The banquet hall was full, everyone in formal dress. She was escorted to her seat at one of the VIP guest tables by a short but very proper young man. A speaker was well into his oration.

“... one of the real rewards of my job, being part of something which is of inestimable value to everyone involved. Everyone here knows that this program has set a new standard for humanitarian assistance. And it provides an irreplaceable bridge between our two great nations ...”

“I’m sorry. But what is his name?” she whispered. Christine loved people but was so bad with names.

“Nitya Pibulsonggram. He’s the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Here, let me write it down for you. It’s a difficult spelling.”

“Thank you so much,” she pantomimed. She took the piece of paper and entered his name in her PDA.

Speaker after speaker came and went. Their English was surprisingly good but as the evening rolled on the speeches started to sound all the same. Even so, Christine’s energy was unflagging and she took care to catalog each and every one, name and title. You never know. Might need a favor down the line.

The banquet climaxed with a brief but ceremonious appearance by His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej himself. With the first lady no less, Queen Sirikit! Short speech. Miracles do happen. Unctuous applause. Kodak moments. Then to Christine’s astonishment at the close of his remarks ...

“Finally, I wish at this time to give special recognition to our American counterparts, three individuals who have demonstrated special commitment and extraordinary initiative in this effort. Mr. William Parker. Please stand. Mrs. Geraldine Freed. Thank you. Thank you. And last but not least, Mrs. Christine Lindholm. Mrs. Lindholm, stand so we can see you. Everyone, please show your appreciation for the hard work and dedication of these individuals. Thank you. Thank you. And now please enjoy the rest of your evening and the splendors and charm of my beautiful country.”

Their names read off of prompter cards. But it still felt good. Christine was reeling as she mixed with the guests and other dignitaries, now that the formal banquet program had ended.

Whew! What an evening! What an adventure this has been! God bless this amazing country and these fine people.

Children of Nong Khai

It was business. These pathetic women should be grateful for small favors. And now they think they can change their minds. Just like that. Sentimental old fools. They can’t afford to feed themselves, much less their children. So be it. At least the little fuckers won’t starve to death. Their husbands know the real deal. You don’t see them bellowing like swamp buffalos over this. It was business. Pure and simple.

Once the real money came in, Dok Phnom could claim clean hands and walk away from all of this misery. Unfortunately for now, he had to just sit tight. He sure hoped the Americans would come through soon. They promised. These children would be leaving early next week. The money better be here by then. He had to be back in Nakhom Phanom very soon. Had some handwringing Hungarian delegation coming. Some bleeding heart Belgians

right after them. This was almost too good to be true. He would retire within two years. Move back to America.

The Siddhartha Schools were a stroke of genius. Certainly he had no problem filling the schools with beautiful little starving faces. Poster kids for all of the relief organizations and their fundraising campaigns. Sad eyes and skinny limbs meant big bucks. From America and the EU countries. And he had them all coming to him! Beating down his teakwood doors. Save The Children. Children International. TEAR Fund. Compassion International. Christian Children's Fund.

It started way back. Maybe the toilets didn't flush but they had internet access at Vientiane High School in Laos, and that paved the way for his B. S. degree at Syracuse University in the States. Then on to the graduate program in NGO Management and Development at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey. That was where he really got wind of the goldmine there was out there. NGOs funded by all of the corporate foundations. CEOs trying to gussy up the image of the corporate plunderers with high-visibility philanthropy, squeezing every bit of public relations juice out of what amounted to pocket change donations. But all that petty cash coming in from a lot of different places added up. Some of these save-the-world institutions were awash in money. All you had to do was say the right things and on went the spigots. Make them look good. They write the checks. That was the name of the game right down the line. Everyone winked and slept well.

Dok Phnom chose his squalor with the eye of a saint and the heart of a pillager. It was ironic that these cesspools of poverty were to be his fountains of affluence. Chiang Rai was doing well. And Nakhon Phanom definitely held its own. But Nong Khai had been his first setup and remained the flagship in the fleet. Everything had fallen into place from the get go. The abandoned monastery was huge. Ready made for over two hundred kids, if you packed them in just so. And Nong Khai itself never ran dry of the on-the-brink-of-starving families ready to offload one or two offspring, just to ease the burden of survival. Both from the city and the surrounding countryside. The hill tribes were especially easy prey. Too dumb to breathe.

Dok took an almost sick delight in seeing the expression on a mother or father's face when they found out that not only would their child receive food and shelter but were being enrolled in a special school for spiritual development. Based on newly discovered secret teachings of the Buddha himself no less.

The child sponsorship groups loved it. Even if they weren't, the kids were billed as orphans. Poor little dears. No where to turn. But you can help. Put your bloated wallet to work and get a picture for your marble mantel, your own little sad-faced abandoned boy or girl from Bangladesh. Or Malaysia. The Philippines. Or Thailand. It didn't matter where. This was better than Prozac and a martini to wash away the white-guilt of the master race.

Everything went so smoothly until it was time to ship them out. Then the mothers started bawling. Oh how they wailed and whined. "I'll never see my

baby again.” Boo hoo. You’d never see them again if they had starved to death. You made your deal. This is business.

Dok never asked where they ended up. But it didn’t take a Rhodes Scholar to figure out where the market was for this kind of trafficking. Bodies were bodies and did what bodies did. They ended up either in a factory or on the streets in some big city. Boston. New York, London, San Francisco, Houston, Frankfurt. Even Bangkok itself. He was just filling billets. Nothing personal. And as far as he could tell, they ended up better off than they would have here in northern Thailand. In this disease-ridden filth and blight. If starvation didn’t take you down, then yellow fever or tuberculosis would. Or maybe H5N1 Avian or H1N1 Swine. That was the latest off the runway of human misery. Count your blessings, you little fucks.

One Night in Bangkok

After the formal banquet and especially after being personally singled out by the King of Thailand, Christine was beside herself with excitement. She wanted to call her husband Tom right away and tell him everything, but he would be at his office. It would have to wait. She tried to relax but couldn’t sleep. Finally the adrenaline dissipated and she managed to sleep a couple hours.

Next morning, she headed out early for a day of splurge shopping. Bangkok had everything. From junk and trinkets to high fashion. At the end of the day, most of the time being spent at the MBK Mall and Siam Discovery Center, respectively huge and exquisite, she had filled a newly bought suitcase with the day’s plunder. Clothes to die for, souvenirs for friends, shirts and silk ties for Tom, and a few gifts for her two kids.

When she returned she had a message waiting for her from Roger. He was an old friend from college who had kept in touch over the years and was now based in Bangkok. Finally, they would get together again, catch up, and certainly reminisce about their days together in Campus Youth for Christ, the organization where they had met. It was there, she was introduced to and charmed by her husband-to-be. Those were heady days. How much they all craved the chance to truly get involved and change the world. Spread the blessed teachings of the New Testament, try to eliminate some of the horrible suffering in the world, and in general just build on the good works of the Lord Savior Himself.

Christine got in the back seat of the bright pink taxi.

“Thongchai, thank you for coming so late at night. Good to see you again.”

“No problem. Good see you.”

“You have been so good to me. Taking me everywhere in this crazy city. You are the best driver in Thailand!”

Face beaming. “Tank you. Tank you. Where we go tonight?”

“I am meeting my friend Roger. It’s somewhere off Sukhumvit. I have it written down.”

“Long street. But not far way.”

Christine pulled her PDA out of her purse and started tapping on the keyboard.

"Here it is. I am supposed to meet an old friend at Nana Entertainment Plaza. Is that some sort of shopping mall?"

The look of mild shock registered on Thongchai's face in the glow of the dashboard lights. "Sure that right? Sure you want go to Nana Plaza?"

"Yes yes. That's the place. Nana Entertainment Plaza."

Thongchai headed down Sukhumvit Road, one of the busiest streets in Bangkok, where businessmen and tourists came from all over the world to enjoy the unique attractions of the city and spend copious amounts of foreign cash.

Christine was transfixed by the lights, the intensity of activity, the seemingly endless streams of people. They came to a very congested intersection and waited for the light to change.

Thongchai pointing. "Right there. Very close"

Beautiful young ladies, dressed immodestly to the teeth teemed the sidewalks.

"All of these girls. They are beautiful. But ... what are they all doing here?" Noticing one whose microscopic skirt showcased her exquisitely slim legs and whose D-cup breasts burst from her delicately provocative tank top. "My goodness, look at that girl in the white top and yellow miniskirt. She's a young thing."

Thongchai started to laugh but then respectfully stopped and smiled at Christine. "That no girl. That a boy. A ladyboy."

"That's not a girl? I am so confused."

The light changed and they edged around the corner, splitting the throngs of jaywalkers. Thongchai pulled to the side and Christine looked into what looked like a scaled-down but no less dazzling version of Las Vegas.

"There he is! That's him in the blue shirt. Can I get out here?"

"No problem. Me wait?"

"No no. My friend said he would get me back to the hotel. Thongchai, my friend, thank you so much. Kòp koon. Kòp koon. I go to the airport tomorrow. I guess I will see you then. Okay?"

"Have good time, Miss Christine."

She crossed the busy street, nearly getting hit by a motor scooter. Normally someone totally in charge, she felt uncharacteristically overwhelmed. The noise, the glare, the crowd, the frenzy, all came at her from every possible direction. She felt extremely vulnerable and struggled to get her bearings, when the strong reassuring arms of a still familiar thirty-something male, engulfed her in a big bear hug.

"Christine! My goodness, look at you. More beautiful than ever. Marriage is good for you!"

"Roger. This is crazy. What are we doing here? I'm sorry. I don't mean to be rude. It's so good to see you again. Really. I sincerely mean it. But frankly I am a bit dumfounded by your choice of meeting places. Where are we?"

"Don't worry. I'll explain. It will all become very clear. Let's walk."

Christine was tentative but Roger confidently led the way. They walked a short lane into a three-story mall. But a mall unlike anything Christine had ever seen, or could have even imagined. Bars fronted both sides of the lane. Each had indescribably sexy young girls seated on barstools, giggling and waving. Some held drink special signs, others just smiled and yelled out invitations to come in. Several paid special attention to Roger, coming up to him, trying to lead him by the hand or arm into their respective establishments. One very pretty girl in a bikini held a sign to Roger's face that read ...

Glass Beer All Night 60 B

Pussy Mirror

"These girls all seem to know you, Roger. I see you ... you've changed."

"No. Yes. But no. Them? I've never seen them before. They are just doing business."

"What kind of business, Roger? Or do I need to ask?"

They moved into the huge courtyard area, itself holding several cabana bars, also populated by young Asian ladies. There were scores of middle-aged white men scattered among them, luxuriating in the attention of the girls.

"I think I have seen enough, Roger. Can we leave?"

"Actually you haven't. Trust me. This is important."

He guided her forward. She couldn't help but stare at the huge fluorescent and neon signs advertising the names of the clubs ... Pretty Lady, Cathouse, Rainbow, Obsession, Voodoo, Fantasia, G-Spot, Lollipop, Spanky's, Playskool, Hollywood Rock. They all had very skimpily dressed girls, posing provocatively, seductively flirting with potential customers.

Christine shuddered, closed her eyes and shook her head. Roger took her by the arm and pointed to a door, above which chaser lights over a garish flashing background spelled out *Obsession*.

They walked in and Christine was immediately subjected to suspicious looks by the several girls standing by the door. But a waitress glided over and guided them to a bleacher-style seat close to the stage.

Embarrassed and growing increasingly angry, Christine hesitatingly glanced up at the raised catwalk in front of her. Eight stunningly beautiful young Asian girls dressed in miniscule silver lamé bikini tops and black fine mesh miniskirts, through which the shadow of their pubic hair could be seen, danced and swayed. Each had a spot marked by a pole and when a song ended, they would rotate to the next position, allowing the customers throughout the room the opportunity to see each girl. At the end of a rotation, the last girl would come off and circulate the club, usually going up to some man she had made eye contact with from the catwalk. A new girl would come onstage to replace her. In the club were perhaps twenty five or thirty equally bewitching girls, providing a breathtaking visual parade of young flesh that Christine could never have imagined possible. Astoundingly, this was just one club of dozens in the complex. Her face betrayed both her bewilderment and disapproval.

Finally, she could not look anymore. She had seen enough for an eternity. This was a corruption of God's design and a debasement of the human soul which filled her with a rage she had never had to brook. She turned to Roger, placing her hands directly on his cheeks, turning his head toward her. She held his face resolutely and stared directly into his eyes.

"Roger, yes or no. Do you still accept Jesus Christ as your personal savior?"

"Yes, of course I do. But ..."

"Then why did you drag me here? This is disgusting. What exactly are we doing in this child brothel?"

"Christine. Please, just listen. You're working for that child sponsorship organization, right?"

"Yes. What's that got to do with it?"

"I ... I ... I don't want to be the one to have to break it to you. But ..."

"But nothing. I am very offended. And I want to leave here immediately." She started to get out of her seat.

"Wait." He gently took her arm. "It's very simple, Christine. I just thought you should see where some of your young girls end up."

If incredulity were ice, then Christine instantly turned into a mountain-size glacier. Her mouth dropped open as if she had been shot full of animal tranquilizer. Her eyes were as big as saucers, as her thoughts tossed about in the blizzard of disbelief and shock Roger's last statement had unleashed in her head.

"You're crazy, Roger. I'm leaving."

"They toured you through a monastery in Nong Khai, right?"

"Roger, I'm leaving. With or without you, I'm leaving. Right now!"

"Wait." Pointing to a waifish little girl, perhaps the youngest one there, who was leaning against a table next to the stage. "See her. The one with the blue things in her hair. She came from Nong Khai. I'll go get her. You can ask her yourself."

Christine glanced over at the girl. She had to fight back the tears. This was an especially delicate looking one she had noticed right after they sat down. So young. She barely had breasts and still had the sweet face of a child. Twelve? Thirteen? Was that legal? Was Roger telling her the truth? She had been to the monastery. It had been one of the most special days of her life.

No! No! There was no way what he said was true. Something had happened to him. Maybe Thailand had driven him over the edge. Or he had embraced the dark side. If the Beast lived anywhere, it was here in Bangkok. In any case, this wasn't the time or place to analyze or judge any of it. For the moment, she only knew she had to get out of here. Immediately! Before she started screaming.

"Roger, I don't know why you're doing this. But you are making this up. This is some sick fantasy. Or maybe I should give you the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps you have just lost your mind. Whatever is going on with you, I don't know and I don't care. I do know I am leaving this playground of filth. Right now! Don't try to stop me. You will be in my prayers, Roger. Good night."

Christine was out the door before Roger even got to his feet.

“Please, Christine. Listen!”

The courtyard area was even more crowded that it was twenty minutes ago when they had arrived, but Christine pushed through like a Big 10 fullback. Roger couldn't begin to keep up, girls still blocking his way and grabbing at him as he tried to catch up with her. He made it to the sidewalk in front of the plaza just in time to see Christine close the door of a taxi, which quickly joined the line of cars turning onto Sukhumvit Road. He was devastated by his sense of failure. With her credibility and connections, she was his best hope. And now he doubted she would ever speak to him again. But she had to. Too much was at stake. He had to do something. As he headed back to his apartment, a single thought kept running through his head: You will be in my prayers, as well, Christine.

Siddartha Schools

The open-bed truck pulled into a small space next to the market. Driving over scattered piles of garbage. It was shortly before noon. And the market was teaming like a huge Petri dish. The air hot and thick with humidity and the vapors of desperation. Even the faces of the young looked weathered. The old mummified.

Rice, flour, oilseeds, fresh vegetables, fruits were portioned. A few measly bahts tendered. Hopeful tinges of gratitude softened the eyes of the vendors, at least for the moment granted another few hours reprieve from total hopelessness.

The monk and his assistant got out of the truck leaving the driver behind the wheel smoking a cigarette.

They circled through the stalls. The monk would point at a child crouching behind the bags of rice and cassava. The assistant would then talk to the mother or father, preferably the father, then gently lead the child back to the truck. Pat on the head. Maybe hold his or her hand for assurance. Then into the flat bed of the vehicle he or she went.

There were a number of markets in Nong Khai, each serving its area of the city. Today had gone well. They had over twenty children, all under fourteen or fifteen, more girls than boys, as had been instructed. The Master would be pleased. The school term was filling up fast. More young souls to surrender to the egolessness of Buddha's wisdom.

At the monastery, every day started the same. Up at 4:30 am, into the great hall by five. Each child brought a prayer mat and assumed the humility position, kneeling but curled forward in a little ball. Eyes closed and forehead on the mat. They stayed like that for only an hour but it seemed like an eternity. No sleeping allowed. The master had a sixth sense about that and dealt a cruel blow to the back of anyone who drifted off.

There was a gong struck at the beginning and end of the hour. Three severe looking monks off to the side provided the shrill mantra of backnoise music. More drone than melody, and not enough rhythm or dynamics to break the hypnotic, dumbing shroud weaved by the relentless inculcations of the Master.

What he said was of little consequence. It was the way he said it. Alternating between low, authoritative repetitions and a high singsong which almost sounded maternal, the words either drubbed their ears until they wobbled punch-drunk and defenseless, or the syllables danced a blissful but sedative ballet, rendering their inchoate little minds docile and contrite.

The Master's mesmeric evangelism trained on two parallel tracks: Obedience and discipline. Obedience to the random senseless demands of others who wielded the power. Discipline to immediately retreat into the void of comatose surrender whenever reality required it. Obedience. Blind. Unquestioning. Complete submission to the iron shackles of rolled dice tyranny. Discipline. Instantaneous and resolute. The inversion of consciousness when life became intolerable. Too painful. Too humiliating. Or just too inexplicably cruel.

Obedience.

Discipline.

One hour every morning. One hour every evening. Sunrise and sunset for little minds.

If the meditative brainwashing which opened and closed each official day of "schooling" was the theory, the long and exhausting twelve hours between them was the practice. Each and every day, the children saw the daylight hours come and go, working at a wide range of exhausting, arbitrary, and transparently meaningless tasks. Scrubbing to no visible effect the stone floors and walls. Digging and hoeing but never planting huge tracts of barren soil. Carting water from the wells to huge cisterns that seemed to feed no irrigation system or laundry or household room. Parading the grounds in "orbits of the sun and moon" to honor the spiritual quest and earthly mission of the greatest teacher of them all, the Buddha himself.

In the summer, this took place in a hot dank cauldron. In the winter, the cold air penetrated to the marrow of their shivering bodies. Which was worse? More children died of exposure in the winter. In the purgatory of summer they just collapsed.

The latest fresh batch was coming in at the perfect time. Probably won't lose any of them. Just need to make sure and move them out before the New Year and the onset of lethally severe cold.

Four months was usually enough training. The children arrived already weak in both body and spirit. Poverty delivers the perfect body blow to human tenacity. A void in the stomach creates a vacuum in the soul. And the Master was there to fill it.

The only relief from the tortuous schedule for the children took two forms: the tri-annual photo portrait sessions, and a rare visit by a group of well-meaning benefactors from one of the child sponsorship agencies. Just a couple weeks ago, a large delegation from New York came here to Nong Khai. The Chiang Rai facility had a delegation visit the previous spring — five hyperventilating round-eyes from Indiana and Illinois who smiled and cried and thanked the Lord for all the wonderful things everyone there was doing to give hope and make life more bearable for these beautiful little creatures.

Round-eye: "And what's your name?"

Little boy: "I'm hungry. Are you my new mommy?"

Translator: "He says he is Kongbej Mee. And he loves Jesus."

No one at the Siddhartha Schools had the entire picture. The young monks did as they were told and didn't question the severity or hardships, since the treatment of the children paralleled their own preparation for the holy life. Even the Master willingly adopted to a see-no-evil myopia. He merely focused on preparing the children for their new lives in the cradles of affluence, and so doing reaped the generous financial rewards for keeping his normally perceptive gaze blissfully averted.

Young monk: "The children are tired and hungry."

The Master: "And we are grateful for the strength these sufferings will engender."

Young monk: "The little one we called Yen Ying Pim passed away this morning."

The Master: "And joined the egoless Oneness that is All. We should envy this little flower."

After enduring four months of the spiritual boot camp, each new batch of Buddha's dutiful little soldiers were treated to a devotional rite-of-passage party. The monastery's main hall was filled with music, food, desserts, games, balloons and festive flags. Most of the children had not smiled from the day they had arrived. But the monumental contrast of this final lavish event with their prior spartan living conditions and with the Master's obsessive attention and smothering pedagogy, coupled with the realization that they were finally getting out of this dreadful place, brought laughter and cries of playful abandon to all two hundred plus innocent little faces. Which, of course, were photographed and videotaped from every possible angle and in every euphoric light. These were the photographs shown to inquiring dignitaries and prospective donors. These were the photos and video clips posted on the web, for the world to see and marvel at what the Siddhartha School was accomplishing in this blighted area of northern Thailand. The curious and concerned were awed and pleased. King Bhumibol Adulyadej was especially proud of the fine example set before the international community.

The children ate and played and sang and laughed. No getting up at 4:30 am tomorrow. Tomorrow began the next phase, their lives in the real world. So let them party themselves silly tonight. Because by this time tomorrow, they would all be gone. Making room for the next little orphan army. Buddha's little photo ops.

And that Dok Phnom. What an amazing and efficient administrator he turned out to be! Educated in America. Connected with every world-class child sponsorship organization in the world. He ran a tight ship. You could tell he really loved his work. He was as tireless as he was timely. At exactly 12 noon tomorrow, the buses would arrive. Thirty minutes later, off they would go.

Thus the children came and went. Photos landed in the mailboxes of their foster parents in America or Denmark or the United Kingdom. \$25 per month per sad face. The money was divided up. The Master's cut was deposited

directly by Dok Phnom in the Siddhartha School Enlightenment Trust. Praise the infinite wisdom of the Buddha. And the generosity of the round eyes.

And the children? Yes the children. Into the slipstream of fate. Fate and fortunes. Fortunes made and paradise lost. Little souls overwhelmed by the raw power of Original Sin. Little souls who would never get close to the Garden. Or be able to ask the round-eye God ... 'Why?'

The Saint and the Sinner

Christine could barely open her eyes? She was so groggy. What time was it? After 11. The morning was almost gone. How long had she slept? 12 hours. Jet lag was like major anesthesia.

She put on a robe and wandered down the stairs and into to the family room. There was her 12-year-old daughter consumed in a book. She looked over her shoulder and saw that it was the second in the Harry Potter series.

As she wandered into the kitchen to make some coffee, Tom swept by her and pecked her on the cheek with a kiss.

"Look who rose from the dead. I'll be right back. Gotta get something from the storage locker."

She made the coffee, strong but with lots of sugar and milk, then went back to sit in the family room. On her way to the sofa she bent down and wrapping her arms around her daughter, gave her a big hug and kiss. Her daughter was still engrossed in the book.

"Hi, mommy. Did you have a nice trip?"

"It was amazing, Megan, simply amazing. I am so tired, though. Still half asleep. Did you stay overnight with Heather?"

"No, she went with her parents to Connecticut for the week."

Christine sipped on her coffee and made the slow journey back to full consciousness. It was a very beautiful day. The late morning sun streamed in through the white voile curtains. The fragrance of jasmine and yew lightly tinged the warm breeze.

Suddenly, Christine was jolted out of her reverie. The image of the girls at the Obsessions girly bar in Bangkok with Roger sitting there, assaulted her like a mugger. Here was her beautiful daughter, just a few years younger, so innocent, so unaware of the ugliness and dangers of the world. She wanted to protect her from all of it but was possessed by a feeling of helplessness. What a sick world! Those poor young girls. Tears started streaming down her cheeks.

"Christine! Are you okay?" Tom was back and had his big loving arms around her. "What's upsetting you?"

It took a moment for Christine to get her composure back. She wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her robe and held on to Tom for dear life.

"Something happened my last night. Something so weird, so disturbing. It's hard to talk about ... I met with Roger."

"You saw Roger! How is he doing?"

"We should go in the other room. This is not for young ears."

They went into the kitchen. Christine talked as Tom made himself a sandwich.

"I ... I don't know what to say about Roger. He looked the same. At first it felt like old times and it was great to see him. But ..."

"But?"

"Well, he met me at this ... this bar for prostitutes. I mean these were really young girls, say fourteen to eighteen. Twenty at tops. Incredibly beautiful girls. All Thai or at least from somewhere in Asia."

"He took you to a pick-up bar? Full of prostitutes? I don't get it. What was he thinking?"

"I didn't get it either. It was horrible. I mean we are supposed to be open-minded and forgiving of others who have fallen into sin. And frankly, I don't think these girls had a choice. But there were so many of them. On display. All for sale. It was overwhelming. I tried to leave as soon as I got there but Roger kept insisting."

"Roger? *Our* Roger? I'm not getting it. What was his role in all of this?"

"Well ... he seemed to be saying that some of the orphans, these little girls that go through the child sponsorship program, end up like that. You know, working in a girly bar, selling their bodies. I didn't stay around to argue with him about it. It was repulsive. I was so upset I couldn't see or think."

"Roger is a good man. He is devoted to Christ and spreading Christian values. I can't ..."

"Is or was? I mean, I have given the whole thing a lot of thought. Truth is, I couldn't stop thinking about it. I was there, right there in the monastery, with the monks and the kids. And it just doesn't seem possible that somehow they end up the way Roger seems to think."

"Christine, I'm sure you're right. I hope you're right. All of your good work. There is too much negativity in the world. You are *doing* something about it. Something amazing and beautiful. Do you want me to talk to him? We still have his number, right?"

"No, love. Just hold off for now. After what I saw, I don't want Roger in our lives right now, no matter how far away he lives. I still shake when I think about it. That's why I was crying."

"I understand. But Roger has always been solid. He's a great friend. Hey, he introduced us! I can't put that all aside. Not yet. If nothing else, say he has flipped out or something, it's our responsibility to pray for him, reach out to him, and do what we can to help. That's our Christian duty."

"I just need some time. And I need to get my head on straight. I feel like I've been drugged. You never have this much trouble with jetlag, do you? I mean, you always seem to just snap back the next day."

"Well, I put on a good show. Just rest. Everything here is good. I'm taking Megan to soccer later. I'll pick up Danny from school. We'll have dinner when we get back, maybe rent a movie. We'll get you back on schedule."

"We had better! I have that fund-raising thing on Tuesday and don't want to make a complete fool of myself. Especially after this trip. I feel more on top

of it, more motivated than ever. I really know how this can work, why this is so important. It just takes money. As always. Money.”

“Tuesday? Yeah, right right. I remember now. Where is it at? Some school auditorium?”

“Yes, over in Brooklyn. They said that there will be a decent number of people there. They’re bringing in organizations from all the boroughs. So I need to figure out exactly what I’m going to say. The old speeches won’t do the job anymore.”

Christine spent two days working on her address. This meeting was more about getting other service groups involved with her work, than directly raising money. If she could make them aware of the incredible things the child sponsorship organizations were doing, show them the real impact their efforts were having on the lives of real children in the world, share with them her own personal experiences in Thailand, then these people would go out and rally their own troops, bringing in more money and volunteers to fundraise for the cause.

And while the confrontation with Roger still nagged at Christine, it didn’t lessen her commitment. Roger had to be wrong. She totally believed in what she was doing and was certain it did a lot of good in the world. Certainly far more good than harm.

The auditorium was packed. They had done a good job getting the word out.

A few minutes into her presentation, Christine realized this was a genuinely receptive and friendly audience. Abandoning her tightly crafted speech, she just loosened up and just started to talk. Talk from her heart about her visit to Thailand, the kids, the orphan school, living conditions in Asia, and so on.

By the end, practically everyone there was in tears. They rose and with enthusiastic and heartfelt applause gave her a standing ovation. At the informal coffee and cookie reception afterwards, she was bombarded by greetings, handshakes, compliments, promises to help, and specific inquiries as to what else individuals might do to reach out to these helpless children.

“Have you ever thought about adopting one?”

Christine had never heard that one. Caught slightly off guard, she looked up and took in the person asking the question.

Very interesting persona.

The girl had on a billowing burgundy headdress shaped like a pirate’s hat. Black velvet choker set with a huge green stone. Creamy white organza halter top, immodestly showing her ample breasts. Plaid demi-cape. Elbow-length brown suede gloves accessorized with a multitude of gold jewel bracelets. Definitely not your typical urban or suburban do-gooder, who tended to be either completely fashion-myopic or dressed like they were applying for a bank loan.

“Actually adopting a child? Not just sponsoring.”

“Yes. Legal adoption.”

“That’s an intriguing thought. I know some celebrities do that. But I hadn’t considered it myself. I have two children.”

“No room at the inn, eh?”

“And you?”

“Yes. I have been trying to adopt a ten-year old. Well, actually he’s eleven now. It’s been over a year. He’s from Indonesia.”

“And how is it going? The adoption I mean.”

“It’s a buncha shit.”

Okay, thought Christine. Mouth of a truck driver.

“So much bureaucracy. You’d think I was asking to test a fucking nuclear bomb in their country. It’s driving me crazy.”

“I’m sorry. I’m Christine. And you are?”

“Alicia. Alicia Peters.”

Well, Alicia Peters. You look great but you are certainly a little rough around the edges.

“And what do you do for a living, Alicia?”

“A lot of things. I’m a freelance journalist. I’m getting some of my stuff published but not quite enough, if I want to both eat and have a place to live. So I temp, pick up the odd job here and there. Which is a big factor in the adoption. I’m not what they consider ...” Making quotation marks with her fingers. “... the model career woman.”

“I see. I assume you’re not married.”

“Exactly. So there are lifestyle issues. No one man in my life. In fact the men come and go. More often than I care to admit. But I don’t think that’s the entire story. Something else is going on. And I can’t put my finger on it.”

Christine liked her. And despite the differences on the surface, she decided to take a chance.

“Alicia. I’d like to talk more with you more about all of this. Would you like to meet for lunch sometime?”

“Absolutely. That’s what I was thinking.”

“That’s what you were thinking? When?”

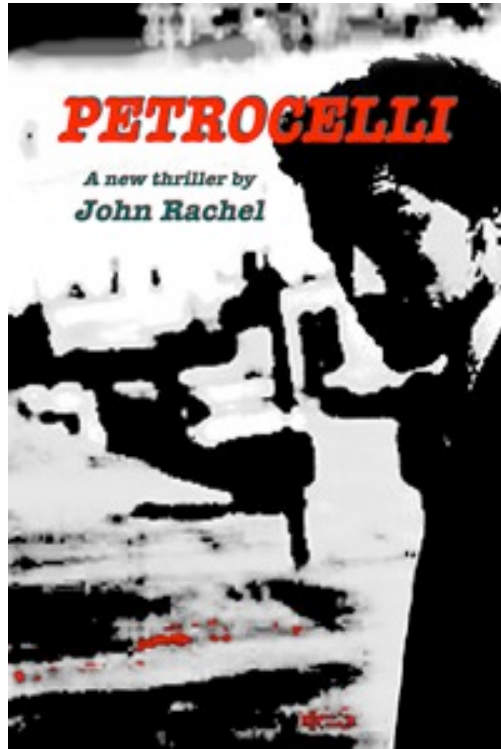
“When I heard about this meeting from my friend over there.” Points in the direction of a group of people talking away on the other side of the room. “When they said you had recently actually *been* there, in southeast Asia I mean, I was sure I had to meet you. So voilà! Here I am.”

Christine pulled out a business card and a pen. She wrote her personal cell and home numbers on the back.

“Here. Give me a call toward the end of the week. We’ll make a date.”

“Good. In fact, great! You’re not as stuffy as I thought you’d be. I think we’ll make good friends. Ciao.”

Christine followed her as Alicia headed for the exit. Stuffy? Did she say stuffy? Christine burst out laughing. Sometimes it’s good to see yourself from the outside.



Petrocelli is based on actual stories from the violent and gruesome world of human trafficking, where millions of children and adolescents across the globe are held in bondage as slaves.

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About The Author

John Rachel has a B.A. in Philosophy, has traveled extensively, been a songwriter and music producer, and is a bipolar humanist. He has spent his life trying to resolve the intrinsic clash between the metaphysical purity of Buddhism and the overwhelming appeal of narcissism.

Since 2008, when he first embarked on his career as a novelist, he has had eight fiction and three non-fiction books published. These range from three satires and a coming-of-age trilogy, to a political drama and now a crime thriller. The three non-fiction works were also political, his attempt to address the crisis of democracy and pandemic corruption in the governing institutions of America.

Never knowing when enough is enough, the hyperthyroid Rachel continues to be very busy. He has three more novels in the pipeline for publication late 2015 through 2016: *Sex, Lies and Coffee Beans*, a spoof on the self-help crazes of the 80s and 90s; *Love Connection*, a drug-trafficking thriller set in Japan; and finally *The Last Giraffe*, an anthropological drama involving both the worship and devouring of giraffes, which unfolds in 19th Century sub-Saharan Africa. Several major publishers have declared that they will do everything in their power to make sure these books never see the light of day.

Moreover, he recently increased his output of incendiary political blogs, sure to alienate the remaining few remnants of his meager literary following.

John Rachel's last permanent residence in America was Portland, Oregon where he had a state-of-the-art ProTools recording studio, music production house, a radio promotion and music publishing company. He still writes music and, much to the annoyance of his neighbors in the traditional rural Japanese town where he now lives, attempts to sing his original songs.

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*You can follow John Rachel's adventures
and developing world view at:*

jdrachel.com

• • •

*Since the open mind recognizes no borders, you are also
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The author also quoted song lyrics in the story which are attributed here: "I'm Too Sexy" performed by Right Said Fred, words and music by Fred Fairbrass, Richard Fairbrass, and Rob Manzoli, Copyright 1992 Gut Reaction, Ltd.; "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" by unknown composer, considered a tradition English carol dating back to the 16th Century.

Several adapted excerpts from *Petrocelli* first appeared as short stories in online and print publications: "Outsourcing" in Ascent Aspirations (Canada) March 2010; "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" in Midwest Literary Magazine (USA) April 2010; "Happy Meals and Kisses From The Earth" in Wanderings (USA) April 2010; "The Nice Thing About God" in Southpaw Journal (Great Britain) June 2010; "Butter" in Midnight Showcase (USA) Autumn 2011; and "Big John" in Million Stories (USA) September 2012.