



## MIKE TALPLACIDO

### Open Water

#### *Part 1: The Grinch's Christmas*

Congratulations. We are pleased to offer you acceptance to our MBA Class of 2010. Those were the words written on my acceptance letter from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which I received sometime in early 2008. Ever since I permanently moved to the US back in 2003, I always had this dream of one day attending business school.

Holy fuck, I thought. This is it. My chance to finally achieve my dreams. There was just one slight problem. Getting accepted at UNC meant I had to move to North Carolina. So, I thought, what about Sergey? He and I had been seeing each other for almost a year now and we had recently moved into our apartment together in North Plainfield.

"It'll only be for two years," I told Sergey, assuring him that my move was only going to be temporary and that my plan was to come back to New Jersey after graduation.

Later, that summer, I officially made my move down south. I quickly became preoccupied with school activities. In my first few weeks alone, I was already overwhelmed with balancing my time between attending classes, working on projects, preparing for internship applications, and getting to know my new peers. There were also a lot of social activities, lots of drinking, and games



about drinking, including beer pong, flip cup, and “*never have I ever.*” In a way, going back to grad school, and specifically attending UNC was my indoctrination to America considering I was a transplant from the Philippines. Meanwhile, Sergey and I decided to continue a long-distance relationship while I was working on finishing my MBA.

During Christmas break I went back to New Jersey to spend time with Sergey. He had already moved to a new apartment in Secaucus to be closer to his work in Manhattan, so it was my first time seeing his new apartment. I took the taxi by myself and we agreed to meet at the main entrance of this massive, modern-looking, condominium-style complex. I arrived during the week, sometime before dinner so Sergey was still working in the city when I reached his place. There was a small reception area in the main building which was where I waited for him until he arrived. I did not have my laptop with me, so I spent the whole time reading some of the printed materials from my classes and other stuff related to my internship applications.

“Hi, *Babichka,*” Sergey said as he arrived at the lobby of his condo, using his term of endearment for me.

“Hi, you’re late,” I said. It was a few minutes past seven at night and I had already been waiting close to two hours for him to arrive.

“I know. I’m sorry,” he said, apologetically, although he didn’t elaborate further.

We headed straight to his unit on the third floor. It was a single-room condo with a modern design. The ceiling was high, all the appliances were



stainless, and he had hung some modern art paintings on the wall. Paintings which I had never seen before when we were living together in North Plainfield.

“Oh, this looks nice,” I said, referring to one of the paintings.

“Yeah, Jerome gave it to me as a housewarming present,” Sergey replied.

“Who is Jerome?” I asked, confused since I had not heard that name before.

“Oh, I haven’t told you about him? He is Filipino, too,” said Sergey.

I did not ask any further. However, I was deeply suspicious because he had not mentioned Jerome to me before. I was a bit skeptical when he said, “He is Filipino, too.” I had never introduced him to any of my Filipino friends so I had no idea how he could have met other Filipinos casually, and since Sergey was not really the social type. I pondered that maybe the only way he could have met them was through the hookup sites, which was where Sergey and I had first met initially. This new information about Jerome seemed fishy. There was something about it which I could not quite put my finger on.

This was not the first time I was suspicious of Sergey. When I first moved to North Carolina at the beginning of summer, I had often called him on his phone. Sometimes I would dial him around ten at night to catch-up or say goodnight. There were several times when he didn’t pick up, and then a few times when he’d simply sent me a text message or two telling me that he was still in the city with his friends. But since I was busy with business school, I did not think anything of it.



“So, how was the trip?” Sergey asked, slightly changing the topic about the housewarming present which he had received from Jerome.

“Fine,” I said. He then asked me how long I was staying in New Jersey, and I told him I was staying until early January.

“Oh, I will have to leave for Russia on the twenty-fifth of December,” Sergey said, sounding surprised upon hearing my schedule in the northeast.

“What? I didn’t know that!” I said. “I thought we were going to ski in the Poconos after Christmas.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m sorry but I had to see Martina (Sergey’s kid) since she and her mom wouldn’t be able to come to the US for a while to see me. So, they had asked me to visit them in Russia,” Sergey said.

“Ugh. So, I will be here alone?” I exclaimed.

“Sorry about that, Babichka,” replied Sergey.

We didn’t talk any further that night. We didn’t even have sex either.

The next morning, we both acted as if the conversation about me being alone on Christmas and New Year never happened.

I asked Sergey if I could use his computer to send some emails.

“I didn’t bring my laptop with me, but I want to send messages to my friends in the area to see if they had holiday plans I can tag along with,” I added.

“Sure, sure,” Sergey said, while unlocking his computer for me. After entering his password on the screen, he rushed to catch the train so that he could get to work on time.



As I sat in front of Sergey's computer, I noticed that many of the applications were left running. It seemed he had left his computer on since the night before, which he often did, even when we were still living in our apartment together.

When I opened the Internet browser, I noticed there was an open tab for his email account. I clicked on the tab until his email inbox popped up on the screen. I then typed "Jerome" in the search box.

My heart was pounding as I continued with what I was doing, knowing that it was wrong to look at other people's emails. I was convinced there was something I needed to find. My search returned over fifty results, showing the multiple emails with this mysterious new guy named Jerome. I didn't read all their back and forth emails. I didn't see any actual conversation that confirmed they had sex either. But there were references to them calling each other "*papi*" and other items related to their meetups and dates at some random bars in the city.

I was becoming angry but nervous at the same time since I knew I was still looking at Sergey's email. I quickly closed the email tab and opened the hook-up site *Manhunt*. On the login page, Sergey's username and password were already stored. I clicked the login button, hitting the "Inbox" link on the left side of the screen afterwards. I did not hesitate to look at the messages—Sergey's messages—which he was exchanging with so many random guys online.



*Holy fuck*, I thought. Sergey had been talking to these dudes as early as the summer, not even a week after I had moved to North Carolina. It seemed he had hooked up with several of them too, and all this happened behind my back. Everything was making sense to me now. All my phone calls to him that went unanswered. All the coy text responses telling me he was still in the city, even late at night. He was cheating on me. He fucking cheated on me. Worst of all, there were conversations that were happening even while I was living with him in New Jersey.

*Was he cheating on me then, too?* I wondered, although I could only assume so given what I was seeing now. I was furious. My hands were shaking. My heart was pounding. I took a deep breath and decided to turn the computer off. I quickly changed into my exercise gear and went out for a run even though it was cold outside. I needed to clear my head and plan my next move.

I was hurt. I found myself crying in the middle of my run. The cold December weather was brutal. And it was the holidays, too! Worst of all, Sergey was not even going to celebrate Christmas and New Year with me since he would be in Russia with his family.

When Sergey arrived home from work, it did not take long until I confronted him.

“You fuck!” I said. “Did you have sex with Jerome?” I asked him, as he was placing his backpack on the living room floor.



“Huh?” was his reply. Sergey was looking at me, confused and trying to figure out how I suddenly came to that conclusion.

“I know you had sex with him. I know that he helped you move to this apartment and that he decorated this place,” I continued.

Sergey breathed a heavy sigh, but he did not say a word. He neither acknowledged nor denied my accusation either. “You’re unbelievable. I can’t believe you’ve been cheating on me ever since I moved to North Carolina!” I exclaimed.

“But you left,” was Sergey’s response. “I need sex. I have a sex addiction. I can’t live without sex,” he added.

“Fuck you! You are so selfish.” My voice was louder and firm. I continued to shake my head in disbelief.

“You know what? You can go to hell!” I screamed. I then grabbed Sergey’s car keys, which he had placed on the kitchen countertop and headed straight to his car in the parking lot.

I turned the car engine on. I could feel the sadness on my face as I drove out of the garage. I drove miles and miles without having any destination in my mind. I soon found myself somewhere in the Fort Lee area, over twenty miles away from Sergey’s apartment in Secaucus. I stopped the car somewhere in front of a park. The city across the river was visible. It was beautiful, and perfect. The skyline of Manhattan at night is just stunning. It was at that point when I realized that my life was just the complete opposite: I thought I was on my way to fulfilling my dreams but now felt like my relationship was



ruined. I felt that maybe it was my fault. Sergey said it too: that it was me who had moved to North Carolina and that I had left. Shit. Maybe that was what I was good at. Leaving. I had left people so many times. I left the Philippines to pursue my dreams. But then I left New Jersey too, to move to North Carolina. And for what? Was this MBA dream worth it?

Once I was calm enough, I went back to Sergey's apartment. When I arrived, he was still in the living room, watching TV. I did not say a word. Neither did he. I simply headed straight to his bedroom and slept on his bed alone. He did not come to the room, either, to sleep next to me as I found him asleep in the living room when I woke up the next morning.

A few days later, Sergey and I still had not talked. On Christmas morning, he left early for his flight to Russia. I was able to catch him before he was gone and the only thing that he said to me was, "Can you leave the keys at the reception, please?" He sounded calm and polite, like nothing had ever happened the night before. I simply responded with, "Okay." I did not even know how he managed to get to the airport. Maybe, his fucking friend Jerome was picking him up. Whatever. Sergey left on Christmas day, and I simply had to face the reality that I was all alone.

I started writing some random notes in my journal. Just a bunch of one-to-two-liners, in quotation marks. I had not had an actual physical journal before but thought I could start now so that I could capture what I was feeling. About Sergey, and everything else. Some of my entries are below:

*"I'm not a fool."*





*"You can do whatever you want to do in your life. I don't give a fuck."*

*"You're a bastard."*

*"Babichka, my ass!"*

*"You're a fucking moron. Eat his vajayjay, you fuck!"*

*"Asshole."*

*"Not anymore fag."*

*"I hate you."*

*"I loved you but that was a mistake."*

*"Damn you fool."*

*"I gave you everything and I don't deserve this."*

*"I will not cry anymore."*

That last statement was not true though. I soon found myself crying later that night. I decided to play some songs while I was all alone on Christmas night. The first song on my list was "All by Myself," by Celine Dion. It was a fucking mess. I was miserable. Alone on Christmas Day. Shit. Fucking Shit. I was having my "All by Myself" moment. I kept thinking that maybe it was my fault. Whatever. I simply just kept singing more sad songs. And then I cried some more. Aside from "All by Myself," the other songs in my "Broken Hearted" playlist included:

If I Were a Boy, by Beyonce

Big Girls Don't Cry, by Fergie

Take a Bow, by Rihanna

Better in Time, by Leona Lewis



So Over It, by Katherine McPhee

Because of You, by Kelly Clarkson

Beautiful, by Christina Aguilera

I used to love Christmas. But not anymore. Ho ho ho. It's the fucking Grinch here. Or maybe I was Mr. Scrooge now. Whatever. It didn't matter anyway. I was still alone. However, I knew I needed to figure my shit out, and there was no way I would be able to do that if I was a fucking softie. I needed to toughen up. I needed to change my perspective. I felt like a new me was emerging, I could just feel it.

### *Part 2: Eurovision*

I returned to North Carolina in January 2009. While I was still furious at Sergey for cheating on me, I was also confronted by my intense feeling of loneliness. I had never felt so incredibly alone. There were not a lot of Filipinos in the Raleigh-Durham area that I knew either, people whom I could relate to culturally. And yes, I had my MBA friends whom I saw socially from time to time but what I needed most was someone to be intimate with. I didn't feel like starting all over again; going out on dates, getting to know people, and investing a lot of my time nurturing a new relationship. So, I resorted to checking out some of the hookup sites yet again, resulting in my meeting a few random guys in person, but none of those meetups was filling the void inside me. I needed Sergey. *I needed someone like him.*



Soon, Sergey and I started talking again on the phone. He still called me Babichka and I was a lot calmer when we spoke. Less hysterical and less emotional than the last time we'd conversed during the holidays. We decided to try an "open relationship," which meant we were still a couple, but we could have sex with anyone we wanted. It was me who had brought up the idea because I knew that Sergey was not capable of being in a monogamous relationship. He said he "needed sex," and that he was "addicted to sex." So, I thought maybe, that dilemma of needing sex was a real thing. I also recognized that I needed him, so I reckoned it was a reasonable compromise on my part to give him a pass on his extracurricular sexual endeavors.

Since we were sort of rebuilding our relationship, I brought up a few of my concerns to him, too. I told Sergey that it would have been nice if he had at least tried to visit me in North Carolina. I was the one who had taken the step to see him in New Jersey during Christmas, even though that had not turned out so well.

"Okay," Sergey said, although sounding confused as to what he should have been doing.

"It would have been nice to at least see an effort," I said.

"Tell me what I should do," he asked.

"Well, Valentine's Day is coming, so maybe you can come visit me in North Carolina?" I suggested to Sergey.

"Okay, Babichka. I'll try," he replied.



The following month, on Valentine's Day, Sergey visited me in the Tar Heel state. When I picked him up from the airport, he brought me a dozen red roses, chocolates in a heart-shaped box, and a Valentine's Day gift—a Logitech iPod speaker dock. Granted, his present was a bit techie, but that was the “System Engineer” in him. The important thing was that he tried, at least that was how I convinced myself anyway.

“Happy Valentine's Day, Babichka,” greeted Sergey.

I cooked him a nice dinner that night and then we headed to the mall to watch a movie. I wish I could say it was one of the best Valentine's Days ever. It wasn't. Sergey only stayed for the weekend. He arrived on a Saturday and left the following day. It also seemed that he only came because I asked him to. Sort of like a checkmark on his list. Not only that, but he also complained the whole time that there was not much to do in North Carolina. It seemed he was looking for something more exciting, like the nighttime bustle of Manhattan. Bars. People. Dancing. Drinking. Whatever. On the other hand, I was just hoping to have a nice quiet time with him in an intimate setting. But there was none of that. We did not even have sex.

Several months later, I was on my way to the UK to participate in a study exchange program at the Warwick Business School. I was feeling brave, travelling on my own to Europe. Frankly, it was a nice distraction too, from all the Sergey drama.



I brought two luggage bags with me, filled with lots of clothes and personal items including several business outfits as my plan was to travel directly to Thailand for my internship once the study exchange program ends after four and a half weeks.

I arrived at Heathrow Airport in London on a Saturday night. It was chilly, foggy, and damp, the kind of crazy weather I had always heard about in the UK although there is a saying that goes “there’s no such thing as bad weather in the UK, only unsuitable clothing.” I made sure I brought enough jackets with me in case it rained although thankfully, the forecast for the weekend was only a light overcast.

Warwick Business School, or WBS, is one of the most prestigious business schools in the UK, if not the world. It is part of the University of Warwick, located on the outskirts of Coventry in Warwickshire and occupying over seven hundred acres of land. In simple terms, it was in the middle of nowhere although the campus was pretty and has lots and lots of greenery.

When I arrived at my apartment somewhere in the school compound, the view outside was so peaceful. There were trees swaying as the air blew while making those whooshing sounds which I found ever so calming. I also heard a bunch of geese quacking and cackling in the morning as they strode towards a murky pond. I heard these geese were properties of the Queen, or maybe they were swans. Either way, I reckoned that as a visitor to the country, I should not mess with these animals. Not that I was going to anyway. I simply enjoyed



watching the beauty of the countryside, which oddly, sounded like an activity that seemed so *English*.

During one of the weekends while on the exchange program at Warwick, I decided to check-out the gay nightlife in London. I had a cousin who lived somewhere in Essex who had agreed to offer me a place to stay for the night. Off I went to the city of Big Ben, which was a term I came up on my own since nobody ever called London that. When I reached my cousin's place, I dumped my backpack and then headed immediately to the city. I spent some time looking at the local sights including Buckingham Palace, the Tower of London, and of course, the iconic Big Ben that sits alongside the Palace of Westminster and the Abbey.

Once I was done sightseeing, I grabbed a quick bite and soon found myself inside a popular gay bar in the Soho area which was called, quite literally, G-A-Y. The place was a massive three-story party bar with lots of plasma screens that were showing SFW and NSFW video clips. Loud music was heard everywhere. Each level had its own bar too, with hot bartenders offering and mixing drinks for the patrons, along with a dance floor, a DJ, and sparkly disco balls that were hanging from the ceiling. It reminded me of Splash in New York although G-A-Y was much, much bigger.

I stayed on the main level. I sat at the bar by myself and ordered a glass of rum and coke. Several minutes and more rum and cokes later, an Eastern-European-looking dude sat next to me and started a small chit chat.



“You look really cute,” he said, in a thick accent, although I could not tell if he sounded Russian, Polish, or something else.

“Oh, thank you. WOOH HOOH,” I replied, yelling like an obnoxious semi-drunk person in his late 20s, who was out and about and ready to party in the city.

“Where are you from?” asked the Eastern-European dude.

“Well, I’m originally from the Philippines but I live in the US now, in North Carolina, and I’m here in the UK for an MBA exchange at Warwick,” I replied, offering way too much information to a stranger.

“Cool,” was his only response. “I really like your eyes,” he added.

Mr. Eastern Europe continued to flirt with me. He moved his chair closer and soon our shoulders were touching side-to-side.

“You look hot, and exotic,” he whispered in my ears.

I blushed and chuckled slightly. I had not had sex in a long time, so I instantly responded to his flirtatious antics and quite eagerly even. I started touching his thighs, moving my fingers up and down while I asked him, “So you like exotic guys, huh?”

He looked at me and giggled. He touched my hand and rested it above his thighs. He then leaned his face towards me and kissed me. Without hesitation, I kissed him back. Soon we were making out in front of the bar, on the lower level of this exciting place called G-A-Y. We made out for a few more minutes until he whispered to my ear again.

“Do you want to sit in the back?” he asked.



“Sure thing, let’s go.” I said to him, ready and willing to move to another table in the back of the bar at that very instant. I was thinking that maybe this dude wanted to make-out with me some more, somewhere else in the bar that was more private.

When we found a table, we sat down. But then he excused himself immediately after only a few minutes.

“Let me get us some drinks,” he said.

“Sure,” I responded.

While I was waiting for this Eastern-European guy whose name I didn’t even know, I found myself observing the crowd. I looked around and saw that everyone was having fun. Everyone was laughing and chatting and drinking and enjoying the night. I was having so much fun, too. I could not believe I was in a fucking gay bar in London by myself. I felt so adventurous. The music was loud, but I did not care. Nobody cared. I moved my head side-to-side as if dancing to the tunes, with my upper body occasionally swaying too. Then, Mr. Eastern Europe came back.

“Here you go. Rum and coke, right?” the Eastern-European guy confirming my drink choice upon his return to our table.

“Oh wow, how did you know?” I asked.

“Well, that was what you were drinking at the bar, right?” he said.

I was surprised that he was paying attention. *He must really like me*, I thought. We then spent the next few minutes making out some more, and then him getting more drinks for us, intermittently. I could not remember how





many more drinks I had that night, but it was a lot. I was really drunk. Like almost ready to pass out. I then excused myself to head to the bathroom and while I was walking on my way to the *loo*, I felt so dizzy although somehow aware that I was walking in such a staggering and wobbly way. It was like I was out of my body and that I could see myself just striding in a funny, totally drunk way. I kept singing to the tunes too. Britney's song was playing, and so I was humming along to Oops I did it again.

When I returned to the table, I told the Eastern European guy that I was ready to leave.

"Oh, let me walk you out then," he said.

We left this G-A-Y bar promptly and then walked towards the nearest subway station, which most Londoners refer to as the *Tube*. As we reached the station, this no-name Eastern European guy told me that he had forgotten something at the bar, so he left hurriedly and ran away. I grabbed my wallet from my pocket and was ready to use my train ticket until I came to the ugly realization that all my money had been stolen, along with my cell phone and my debit and credit cards that were with me that night. And the culprit was this Eastern European guy who pretended to flirt with me at this fucking G-A-Y bar.

*Holy fuck*, I thought to myself. My drunkenness had somehow subsided. I became more aware of the situation. I realized that I had been a victim of a pickpocketing scheme in London. I was so scared. My hands were shaking. I ran away from the scene quickly and found myself boarding the next bus that I



saw. As soon as I found a well-lit area with some shops and establishments around, I hopped off the bus and walked some more. Eventually, I found a McDonalds which was not open yet. When I got there, I saw another random guy passing by the store. He was wearing a dress shirt and a pair of gray wool pants. He looked professional but seemed semi-drunk, too. I figured that maybe, he was coming home from a party somewhere. So, we started chatting and I found out that he was indeed coming from a company event hosted by Deloitte Consulting which I was familiar with.

“Hey, can I ask your help?” I asked.

“It looks like I had just been pickpocketed, so I lost all my money. Do you mind if I use your phone? I just need to call my cousin,” I added.

“Oh, shit. Are you okay?” the Deloitte guy asked me.

“I’m okay, but I’m a little shaken.” I replied.

“What happened?” he asked.

I told him what happened that night. He was nice enough to let me use his cellphone. I quickly called my cousin and relayed to her the incident that had just transpired. My cousin was deeply concerned for me, especially since I was travelling by myself in London and it was during the wee hours of the night though already close to morning. Using this random guy’s phone, I also called my bank, and the credit card companies in the US to cancel my cards.

I thanked the Deloitte dude for his help. He really saved my life.

Afterwards, I took the train back to Essex. Luckily, my ticket was still valid so I was able to get to my cousin’s place unharmed. I was glad I had not brought



all my money and all my credit cards with me as I had left some of them in my backpack at my cousin's place. But I was so fucking close to almost losing everything! It would have been a nightmare if my passport was stolen. But Mr. Eastern Europe had been considerate enough to leave me my wallet, along with my driver's license and my existing train ticket. He knew exactly what he was doing. I wondered if he had put anything in my drinks too. *Holy Fuck.*

I felt so stupid. I was an idiot. I tried to forget about what had happened and focused on the fact that I was unharmed and that I still had all my essential documents with me. But it was a crazy experience. I learned an invaluable lesson, indeed. I reflected on why I even went to a fucking gay bar in London by myself. Part of it was just this curiosity to see a new place. Like wanting to see something completely different from this other side of the world. I was feeling brave. I was feeling adventurous. But part of it was due to my loneliness, too. I was lonely, so I wanted to get some action. I was longing for Sergey. I was longing for someone. Anyone.

When everything else was settled, I called Sergey. I told him about the incident, and he was sympathetic. I informed him that my new debit and credit cards would be mailed to his address in New Jersey and asked him if he could send them to me once I arrived in Thailand. I also brought the idea that maybe he could visit me there too, since I would be staying overseas for a while for my internship.

When the study exchange program at Warwick ended, I flew directly to Bangkok to start my internship. The shock from my pickpocketing incident in



London was finally behind me. And now, I was looking forward to more exciting adventures, this time in Southeast Asia.

### *Part 3: Open Water*

There were eight or nine students from UNC including myself who were part of the ten-week long internship program. Our mission was to work with the different government agencies in the country and come up with a marketing plan to promote the province of Phang-Nga, a region located in the southern part of Thailand that was hit by the devastating tsunami in 2004.

Sometime during my internship, I was able to convince Sergey to visit me. I did not think he needed much more convincing because he seemed willing and eager to see the country and had asked me about the “gay scene,” specifically in Patpong, an entertainment district in Bangkok. And by *entertainment* district, I meant it was a *red-light district*! Although sex tourism is illegal in the country, the industry has flourished throughout the years and was valued at around \$3.2 billion as of 2009.

Patpong was one of the first few places Sergey and I visited upon his arrival in Thailand, sometime in July that year. We took a taxi from my apartment and were dropped off on Surawong Road. There was a train track above the street for Bangkok’s rapid transit system, commonly known as the BTS or the Skytrain. Several stalls were on display on both sides of the road, with vendors offering different street food including noodles, rice dishes, fish



balls, and others. The streets were busy with many different types of vehicles passing by too, including several taxis, cars, and the *Tuk Tuk* tricycle.

Occasionally, you would see locals walking with their elephants and they would then offer tourists to ride those elephants for thirty minutes or so, but for a hefty fee. Everywhere else, there were lots and lots of people walking and striding in various directions. Many of them were tourists and possibly in the area for said “entertainment.”

Sergey and I walked along a road called Patpong 1, one of the two parallel side streets that comprised the general Patpong area. The second parallel road was aptly called Patpong 2. Both these streets offered many different types of bars and restaurants that were already open that night when we arrived. Several neon lights were flashing in front of these establishments, many of them containing Thai letters and characters which neither Sergey nor I could understand. Most of these places also had these young Asian ladies standing in front of the bars, wearing skimpy outfits and hollering at random by-passers with remarks like “hey come over here” or “you wanna come inside?”

We kept walking on Patpong 1 and then we took a slight turn to the right, followed by another immediate right to head back to the main road, although this time via the second parallel road called Patpong 2. We saw the same types of establishments with those neon lights in front and the young Asian girls who were aggressively pushing us to come inside the bars. Once we were back on the main road, we took another stride on the third parallel street



called Silom Soi 4, often referred to by tourists as Patpong 3 and was also the gay section of Patpong. The bars on this road had the same lights flashing from the glass windows too. And there were young Asian guys standing in front, hollering at people to check out what was inside these bars. Sergey suggested we go inside and said, “Let’s check this one out.” And so, that was what we did!

It was dark and smoky inside, with loud music playing. Occasionally some of the tunes were in English like Lady Gaga’s “Poker Face,” but for the most part, the music was all in Thai. A stage area was propped in the center of the bar where young Asian guys wearing only underwear were standing and walking from one side to another, parading their bodies as if they were contestants at a Miss Universe pageant. Each one of them was wearing a ribbon on his right-waist area. Each ribbon corresponded to a specific number from one to twenty-five or so. Some of the guys on the stage would dance intermittently, their movements slow and seductive as if trying to elicit a response. Trying to pique the patrons’ interest so that these guys on the stage can be picked-up for the night. Patrons could request a number that corresponded to one of the guys on stage. And from there, anything else could happen. The Thai boys could continue to provide some more private entertainment somewhere else in the bar like give a lap dance, but patrons could also choose to pick-up these young guys, a bit like checking-out grocery items from a local convenience store.



Sergey asked me if I wanted to pick a number and take a guy with us back to my apartment. He seemed entertained by the whole thing. *I wasn't*. I could not fathom the idea of me paying someone for sex. I could not believe any one person would choose this profession deliberately either. However, I did not want to pass any judgment. As much as I did not want to think of the whole thing as disgusting, it felt somewhat disgusting. I just found the whole thing quite sad, because maybe, some of these guys, and the girls too, might not have any choice. I did not know what their specific circumstances were, like how they ended up working at these places. I reckoned that maybe, some of them might have been victims of human trafficking, which was sad and depressing.

I took Sergey to Patpong because he wanted to see the “gay scene” in Bangkok, but there was no way I would pay someone to have sex with us.

“No way,” I responded strongly.

“I was just kidding,” Sergey said. Although I was not sure if he truly was. I think that if I had said yes, then maybe, he would have gone for it.

After a few minutes, Sergey and I went back to my apartment. However, he told me that he was horny. He suggested we find another gay person online who was available for a threesome. So, we soon found ourselves checking out a few of the hook-up sites. We used Sergey's profile and had updated his heading to convey that we were a travelling couple, one Caucasian and one Asian, and that we were looking for a third person. I could not remember



whether it was through *Manhunt* or *Adam4Adam* where we finally found our person. But we eventually did.

We found a young, thin, effeminate Thai boy named Thuy. After chatting with him for a few minutes, he agreed to head over to my apartment somewhere in Bangkok. And upon Thuy's arrival, the three of us immediately found ourselves almost naked on top of the bed, kissing, and cuddling, and touching each other's bodies. Sergey stood up from the bed and took a packet of condoms from his bag. When he came back, he told Thuy to turn around and lie on his stomach. As the two of them got more intimate, I tried to caress either Thuy's back or Sergey's chest using my hands. I tried to participate in the threesome. But soon, Sergey was enjoying Thuy, while Thuy moaned and screamed, "Oh My God."

The whole time the two of them were busy with each other, all I could do was watch, while occasionally trying to participate by touching or caressing one of them, or both. It became clear to me that Sergey only wanted to have sex with Thuy and not me. Thuy did not want to do anything with me either as he had only wanted Sergey.

It was the worst sex experience I had ever had. I pretended I was having fun.

But deep inside, I felt hurt and I was completely ashamed of myself. I had never felt so humiliated before. I felt like I was the third wheel here instead of Thuy and I was Sergey's boyfriend! Worst of all, Thuy stayed with us in the apartment overnight. I could not tell him to leave because it seemed Sergey





was enamored by our newfound Thai boy. On the other hand, I wanted to portray an image that I was okay with the whole fucking thing. That I was cool with this arrangement as this was all part of our open relationship.

The next morning, I left my apartment to head to the location of my internship. Thuy stayed with Sergey the whole day and the only thing I could think of was, *what were they doing*, and *how many times did they have sex*.

It was just so miserable for me. When I returned to the apartment that night, I gave Sergey and Thuy the silent treatment. Eventually, Thuy got the hint, so he finally went home. Afterwards, Sergey suggested we check-out some more gay bars in Bangkok and so that was what we did. It seemed that was all we did, anyway. Go to bars. Find a potential hookup. Occasionally get some drinks. I went along with it. But once we were left on our own, Sergey and I did not even have sex together, with just the two of us anyway. I started to think again that maybe he was not into me anymore. I only had a hunch before, but this time it seemed it was the case.

When Sergey returned to the US, I reflected on what had happened. I thought about breaking up with him but once again, I decided to stay in the relationship. However, even though I stayed with him, *my emotions were not there anymore*. There was just a lot of resentment inside me towards Sergey. I was not sure why I could not let him go. Perhaps, the underlying reason was because *I was afraid of being lonely*. I justified that maybe what we were going through was just part of a transition period while I was still finishing my MBA.



Once I returned to New Jersey after graduation, then we would be back together again.

After my internship in Thailand, I stayed with Sergey in Secaucus for a week before heading back to North Carolina to continue my second year at UNC. He and his friends had made plans that week to drive all the way to Montreal to take part in the Gay Pride festivities. They invited me to come along, so I said yes.

It was late summer when we left New Jersey to drive to Montreal. There were seven or eight of us in the group, although we were travelling in three separate cars. It took us about six or seven hours until we reached our destination. I had never been to Canada before, so I was excited to see the tourist attractions. At first glance, Montreal looked like a bustling smaller North American city, but with a nice European architecture. This made sense because of the city's history with France, which dates back all the way in the 1600s at the beginning of the early European settlement. A few of the buildings from the 17<sup>th</sup> century were still standing, including the Sulpician Seminary that was adjacent to the Notre Dame Basilica and the Chateau Ramezay, which was built in 1705. However, there were a lot of modern structures too, like the Olympic Stadium, which was only built in the 1970s. The city was a juxtaposition between the old and the new architectural styles, part of Montreal's overall charm. But that day, regardless of whether the building was old or new, one thing that was consistent was the presence of rainbow flags that were on display in celebration of Gay Pride.



Later that night, we all decided to head to a gay bar. I can't remember the name of the place but there were several hot go-go boys dancing on the tables, some were dancing on the stage, too. If you slipped some cash underneath these go-go boys' briefs, they could give you a private lap dance somewhere else in the bar, although I never did so. Instead, I found myself flirting with one of the bartenders. Sergey was in the bar too, flirting with some other dudes, or whatever.

After some time, I decided to head back to the hotel room Sergey and I were sharing. Once inside the room, I picked up a condom from my bag, tore it out of its packaging and then rinsed it slightly in the bathroom until finally throwing the wet condom in the trash, ensuring it was visible from the top. I left the condom wrapper on the floor right next to our bed. I did that on purpose so that Sergey could see it. *I wanted Sergey to see it.* My whole plan was for him to see this fucking condom wrapper on the floor and the actual condom in the trash. I wanted him to think that I had sex with someone else.

However, it was all fake. Bogus sex with an imaginary person in Montreal. I orchestrated this fake sex because I wanted Sergey to be jealous. But I also wanted to show him that *I could play the game too.* That I could have sex with anybody I wanted and Sergey could just go to fucking hell. I had done a lot of crazy things in my life, but this one was probably top of the list. It was fucking crazy. I never thought I could do such a thing. After planting my condom wrapper evidence, I took a quick shower and then went to sleep.



The next morning, I woke up and found out that Sergey was not in the room. He had decided to stay at one of the other rooms with his buddies. When he finally entered our hotel room, he asked me, “Did you have sex last night?”

I responded with, “What is it to you?”

“Are you kidding me?” was his reply. He sounded pissed. Although I was glad to know that my antics were provoking a response, I could not understand his rationale. It seemed like a double standard to me as it was okay for him to have sex with anybody, but if it was me doing that, then it sounded like it was a big deal.

“If you really want to know, then yes, I had sex,” I said, almost nonchalantly.

“With whom?” Sergey asked.

“With the bartender from last night,” I said.

Sergey made a heavy sigh and then shook his head. He looked disappointed, and even more pissed than before.

“Well, if you can do it and have sex with anybody, so can I,” I added.

Sergey did not argue any further. He just left the room. Afterwards, I put on some clothes and went to check the other rooms where his buddies were staying. I knocked on one of the doors and found Sergey talking to one of his closest friends, a guy named Marat.



Sergey was crying. It turned out that he was hurt by what I did. Soon, we found ourselves discussing our relationship in front of Marat who was acting somewhat as a mediator.

“I don’t think I can do this anymore,” I told Sergey. I suddenly felt like I was ready to break-up with him. It sounded mean, but I wanted to hurt him. And when I knew that I did hurt him, I felt like I was ready to move on.

Sergey was sniffing.

“Are you okay?” I asked him.

“If that is what you want, then sure,” Sergey replied. “I’ll be okay, it’s just that in Russia, breaking up is like letting go of one of your possessions.”

“Okay,” I said. Although in my mind, I was shocked that he thought of me as one of his possessions. Like, what the fuck? I wondered if that was how some guys think in general? I had no clue. I left Marat’s room and spent the rest of my day walking around to see what else Montreal had to offer.

After the Gay Pride event, we all drove back to New Jersey. I then flew back to North Carolina to start the second year of my MBA.

When I finally found the time to reflect on what happened, I realized that it was time for me to let go of Sergey. I had not been ready to break up with him last Christmas when I found out that he was cheating on me, but after trying the whole open relationship arrangement, I found out that it was not for me. And he was treating me like I was one of his possessions? Fuck that!

It was over for us. We had finally broken up, it seemed.



Our open relationship arrangement only benefited him because he was relieved of the accountability. He could do whatever he pleases and not have any consequences while I was subjecting myself to so much hurt and even humiliation after acting as a third wheel to our embarrassing threesome in Thailand.

It was not a good idea, the open relationship. It was like swimming in open water, fully exposed in the open like the fucking Atlantic Ocean. You know what you would see in those open bodies of water? Sharks. Lots of them! And they will eat you. Alive. First, they will spot you. Then, they will track you down, and then stalk you. And afterwards, they will go for the kill. Like when that fucking Eastern European dude spotted me first at G-A-Y bar in London, tracking me down, until finally going for the kill.

Some sharks will strike quickly. Others, like Sergey, will take their time. They will circle around their prey, bumping the soon-to-be victims until finally taking that first bite. The first crunchy bite that stings like hell. And before you know it, you have become the predator's snack for the day. Your body is then snapped in half and blood is oozing all over.

You see, that does not look pretty. I don't want to swim with sharks.

I don't want to swim in fucking open water anymore.

---

This is an excerpt from *Kiss My Mike*, a memoir about navigating the complex world of being a gay Asian in America.



## BIOGRAPHY

**Mike Talplacido** is the author of *Kiss My Mike*, a memoir about navigating sexuality and finding one's identity, interwoven with the pursuit of the American dream, the pressures of a religious Catholic family, and the ultimate quest for love. Originally from the Philippines, Mike is based in North Carolina where he enjoys cooking, gardening, hanging out with his two Basset Hounds, raising backyard chickens, and of course, Pop Culture! You can find out more info about Mike by visiting [www.kissmymike.com](http://www.kissmymike.com) or by following him on Twitter @miketal20.