

Mem Cries

The background of the cover is a vibrant sunset over a beach. The sun is a bright, glowing orb in the upper right, casting a warm orange and yellow light across the sky and the water. The beach in the foreground is composed of light-colored sand and pebbles. A pair of yellow-tinted sunglasses lies on the sand. The reflection in the lenses shows a silhouette of a person standing on a beach, with a large tree to the left. A piece of driftwood is visible on the right side of the beach.

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1st edition ebook 2010

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ISBN 978-974-16-8567-7

eISBN 978-616-7270-78-4

Published by



Internet: www.bangkokbooks.com

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by

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PREFACE

September 2007

Gazing out across the turquoise blue waters of the Andaman Sea, digesting an extremely spicy portion of *Lab Gai* and attacking the next of a long line of Singha beers, I again contemplated the bizarre events of the last three years.

The numerous tabloids, the magazines that I perused whilst awaiting my dental appointment and many a book covered the topic of ‘mid-life crises’, but never had their content come close to the truth of what I was now experiencing. How long would my crisis last? For me, there had so far been countless weeks of mild frustration and utter confusion.

It was only yesterday that I had felt inexplicably low. It had been a totally unwarranted emotion considering the events of the preceding day. Whilst travelling back from Ao Chalong in a tropical storm on my motorbike, I had stopped for shelter and respite at a Tesco near Katu. I had been fortunate in spending most of the last fifteen months of my life living on the idyllic island of Phuket. Before entering

the store, I withdrew from the plastic blue condom-like rain jacket, which had offered me surprisingly efficient protection from the rain and attempted to refresh my disheveled form. The air conditioning in the store was needlessly cool as the rain had fallen for three or four days and the outside air temperature had dropped to around a comfortable twenty five degrees. People were gathered around a central point in the huge hall, eagerly looking at relatively small TV screen. My limited knowledge of the Thai language and the images that appeared on the TV screen left me in no doubt that there had been an incident at Phuket International Airport. It transpired that One Two Go flight OG269 had whilst attempting to land at the height of the storm, tragically skidded from the runway shuddering to a halt against a boundary wall, whereupon it broke into two pieces and burst into flames. On watching the next day, the computer simulated graphics of what they thought may have happened my blood ran cold.

Two days prior to the fateful day, I had returned from Bangkok perhaps not on the same plane, but certainly at the same flight time in exactly the same extreme conditions. It had originally been my intention to return on the Sunday but for some unknown reason I had returned on the Friday. The realization of just how fragile the balance of my life was helped to galvanize me into action. I had before attempted to record the amazing events of the last two years of my life. There was no way that I may have foreseen whilst in my forties, the way my life was mysteriously panning out in my fifties. I was now spurred on to complete this work. Even if in the end no one else ever read my story, at least I would have the satisfaction of knowing that I had succeeded

in completing the work. My failure to do so thus far was perhaps partially a result of the confusion that suffused my head. Somehow the events of the last few days, gave me the necessary jolt to at least finish compiling my story. It was perhaps in some ways my story, but in reality it was possibly more a collection of the stories of others. Initially, I had not set out to write such a tome but when attempting to write about my own escapades, I inadvertently felt that the stories of others would potentially be of considerably greater interest and substance to the reader.

Almost three years earlier, I had taken a nine and a half week holiday and had travelled to see a small part of this vast world and had towards the end of my adventure found myself in Thailand. The opportunity for me to undertake such a venture had come as a complete surprise and whilst certain other significant people in my life at that time rather wished that I had not gone away, I somehow knew that in a strange way this door on my existence just needed to be opened. I had to open the door and look inside and then strangely, several months later I would surprisingly walk through that door again and would further explore the world therein.

Whilst recovering from a minor operation on both feet, I spent several days incapacitated, lounging around at home confined to my bed. Unable to do a great deal apart from hobbling the mercifully short distance to the bathroom, I started to write about this eventful holiday. Most of my scribbling was done in a rough long hand, but now I sat with my laptop punching the keys, clarifying my thoughts and recording succinctly the fantastic and at times fanciful happenings of this exciting, yet short period of my life. As

I sat and stabbed at the black box, the telephone rang. On answering, I immediately recognized the voice I had known fleetingly for around twenty years. The caller inquired as to my health and my work activities of the last few months. She then completely ‘out of the blue’ and apparently having had no knowledge of my previous short visit to Thailand, asked me if I would consider travelling with her to set up a small school in this beguiling land. While the idea had certain enticing merits, I at first turned down this extraordinary offer. Having had in the previous week, my ‘meaningful long-term relationship’ unexpectedly terminated, I urgently needed to move forwards and yet, felt that if I were able to resurrect anything from this crumbling relationship, I would do so. It was not possible to do so and after enduring the excruciatingly painful Christmas period alone and after constant phone calls where I was repeatedly offered the new opportunity in Thailand, I decided that I needed to have some direction in life and that this would solve the dilemma of what to do next.

Four days later, we flew out of Manchester to Bangkok, and on to Phuket, arriving jet-lagged and tired after twenty-six hours on the road. We talked animatedly throughout the flights and in an alcoholic haze hatched a further idea: to build a small complex of around six, two bedroom bungalows around a swimming pool and having a small ‘bar-cum-restaurant’, on the same site. There would also be a small bungalow in which would reside a Thai family who would be responsible for the maintenance, security and running of the complex. They and their extended family would help service the needs of the residents. They would take care of things such as laundry, taxi services and any other

requirements that may be needed. I had to admit that I had a far greater appetite for the building project, than I had for the school. Whilst not completely ruling out the idea of a school I felt more at ease with the notion of being project manager for our latest hair-brained idea.

My companion, the ‘governess’, as she will be referred to throughout this tale, had unknown to me, spent the greater part of the last four years of her life in this stunningly beautiful land. In recent years I have been mercilessly ribbed for the repeated use of the words, ‘stunningly beautiful’, but I stand by their use, as for the past eighteen months I have been fortunate enough to see before me, on an almost daily basis, the most glorious images ranging from perfect sunsets, vividly coloured flowers, to the constantly smiling faces of many of the inhabitants of this exotic island. I have witnessed and attempted to capture some of these scenes and used them to build up a photographic website, which I hoped would eventually grow and perhaps provide me with a small extra income. These photographs have given me the ‘raison d’etre’, when at times I felt particularly low. I was unluckily not of a disposition where I was able to just relax and enjoy my life. There was within me a need to excel at something before my life was curtailed either through illness, old age or premature death. My former life as a teacher I now recognized as being completely over, but I knew not, nor had any cognizance of what the next few years would offer. I held expectations that retirement would consist of tending a small garden and enjoying the love and comfort of a good woman, whatever that meant. It appeared that life was not going to turn out like I had previously envisaged, at least not just yet.

I was to all intents and purposes now retired, but was still motivated to either succeed with my website, to project manage this complex, or to successfully write a book. There would perhaps naturally be other madcap ideas that I or my associates would dream up over the next few months.

PART I: NINE-AND-A-HALF WEEKS

February 2004

Joanna drove me to Manchester Airport, resigned to the distinct possibility that the relationship was over. This upset me, but there was not much that I could do about it. I had totally mixed up feelings, nothing new there. I had waited years for this opportunity to fulfill a childhood dream and to travel and see at least part of this vast world. I tried to put myself in Joanna's place and tried to imagine how she may feel, but my excitement over-ruled any real remorse that I had about leaving her behind.

I boarded the Malaysian Airways Jumbo jet for the twelve hour flight to Kuala Lumpur at half past ten on the morning of the 1st February 2004. I arrived in Adelaide almost two days later after an eight hour stop-over. I decided that I required a few days break on my own rather than immediately contacting my Uncle Ian, whom I had not seen since 1972. Ian had returned briefly to the UK around the time of my twenty first birthday, having emigrated on the 'Ten pound Pomme tickets' in the sixties. I felt that I ought to at least partially release the coiled spring that had