

## Mom Tri's Boathouse Writing Contest Shortlisted Entry

### One Left Turn can change your life by Jim Newport, Thailand

In 1988 I came to Thailand for the second time. The first time – two years prior, I had met a woman, Pacharee. Now she was with me – having been courted in London and Los Angeles. We were a couple, and we were exploring her country. We'd been north – to Chiang Mai. We'd seen the Bridge on the River Kwai. Now we were exploring the islands of the south. Koh Samui had been fun (giant Rastafarian discos with upside-down bungy jumps that propelled you skyward and *then* you plunged to your doom.)

We spent the first night in Phuket town – because I was convinced – as a savvy world traveler, that all *night life* would be found in the inland capital – the beach towns would be dead at night.

Boy was I wrong.

Phuket Town proved to be like any other Thai town – noisy, chaotic, a mix of East and West. Seven Elevens and Kodachrome shops next to Chinese gold dealers. Large hotels with dark cavernous nightclubs and massage parlors.

We spent the night at the Pearl Hotel. After a dinner in the Chinese restaurant Peachy (a nickname given to Pacharee in London) went to bed and I explored. I ended up in a basement nightclub, a room that was as dark as a Pennsylvania coal-mine. Not even candles on the tables to give a glow. Hostesses led couples to tables with little penlights, took their drink orders and left them alone in the dark. Peachy later explained to me that these places allowed couples who were not necessarily supposed to be together to go out for an evening, without the scandal of being recognized. I sat in the dark, aware of shapes huddled around me and knew that there must be more to the island than this.

The next day we moved to the beach – almost. We took a *tuk tuk* (Thai for any public vehicle that transports people in an uncomfortable and noisy fashion propelled by a motorcycle engine) to Patong. There before us was the azure Andaman sea. And about two million (give or take a million) sunburnt tourists. They were swimming, jet-skiing, para-sailing, water skiing, wind surfing, snorkeling, scuba diving, speedboat racing, fishing, eating, drinking, playing Frisbee, punching a volleyball – doing everything but relaxing.

Peachy did the bargaining with a modest hotel just off the beach road and secured a Thai rate. This was considerably lower than it would have been had I sauntered in myself. Everything in Thailand then was priced in two tiers – the Thai rate and the *Farang* (Foreigner) rate. In Bangkok, I had become accustomed to hiding in a doorway or behind a phone kiosk while she negotiated a taxi fare (this was before the blessed introduction of metered taxis) and once the deal was made I would slip into the back seat to the noticeable *groan* of the driver.

A walk at night along the beach road, proved how wrong I'd been about the

night life of the island. Everything was oriented to the tourist's inexhaustible pursuit of pleasure. The broken chunks of concrete that served as a sidewalk meandered in front of money changers, seafood buffets, tailor shops, jewelers, pirated cassettes – video and audio, watches, and inevitably a guy in a rubber gorilla mask with a dozen more for sale.

The next morning I sat in a rented beach chair and contemplated a map of the island. A name kept jumping out at me – *Amanpuri*. I had read about this place – one of the most beautiful, if not *the* most beautiful resorts in the world. At that time there were few truly luxurious resorts on the island (I had yet to discover the charm of the Boathouse in Kata. My introduction to the King's Cup Regatta took place in the lovely bar of the Boathouse, but that is another story.) As an artist (a film Production Designer *is* an artist – though too often the *production* side outweighs the *design* side and you wonder why you bothered with art school – business law might have been more appropriate) I *needed* to go to this place. Seemed simple enough – a short ride north of Patong, according to the map.

I'd been seeing everyone whizzing around on their little rented motor bikes, and I was ready for an adventure. Soon we were straddling a 50cc Yamaha and headed north - out of Patong.

As we left the sin-city of Patong a couple of landmarks appeared. On our left was the magnificent restaurant Baan Rim Paa, one of the island's most beautiful buildings – situated on a cliff overlooking the bay with breathtaking views. On the right was a large resort climbing up the hill – the Diamond Cliff resort. After these, things thinned out pretty quickly. A huge banyan tree soon appeared in the middle of the road. Some drivers went to the left of it, some went to the right. Its massive trunk was wrapped with colorful cloth and at its base were dozens of little doll houses (*spirit houses*) along with candles, fruit and various other offerings. It was obvious that these were offerings of tribute to those who had met their demise here. It was obvious why they had met their demise here – *they left a tree in the middle of the freaking road!*

Soon the road was climbing. At its very crest, with a breathtaking panorama of jungle, mountains, valleys and the Andaman Sea below – the road *ended!* It just ended. I hit the brakes and we slid on the loose gravel, dirt and rock.

Behind us was a perfectly smooth two-lane highway. Ahead was a barren twisting, turning nightmare of rocks, and huge ruts. Impassable.

I dug out the map. On the map I now noticed that there were two distinct weights to the lines on this portion of the road. Where we were was where the line suddenly became thinner. It stayed thin all the way down the hill plunging before us, across the valley and up the mountain on the other side. All the way beyond that to an area marked as Kamala Bay. Then it was a thick line again.

Phuket is an island approximately the size of Manhattan. Phuket town is in the south, Patong is in the middle on the west coast. A good road apparently circled the island with the exception of this two mile stretch ahead of us. Apparently the route to the Amanpuri was a fifty mile circle from Patong, proceeding east ten or so miles to the Airport road, then north for twenty miles and finally another ten mile journey east and then five or so miles south – to get to a point that was two or three miles directly ahead of us. It didn't make any sense. But I was new to

Thailand. I soon found that many things don't make sense in Thailand. Or so they seem at first.

Discouraged and disheartened, I was about to turn around, when a Thai boy on the same little bike I was riding, went flying over the top of the hill without a moment's hesitation. He negotiated the twists and turns and rocks and gullies like a motocross biker. He was swiftly followed by two more bikes. Then the ultimate insult – a farang, a large pot-bellied white dude – admittedly going a little slower, but he was doing it nonetheless.

It was not impassable. This was the way. *Just take it slow and easy.* I could do it. I'd ridden a motorcycle for three years – in Brooklyn after college and in Los Angeles when I'd first arrived. I'd taken a 175cc single-stroke Jawa with a girlfriend and a hundred pounds of luggage down the notorious corkscrews of Lombard street in San Francisco. *I could do this.* I told Peachy to hold on tight and shifted into low gear.

About thirty minutes later we had made it to the top of the mountain. The view before us was breathtaking. A horseshoe-shaped bay, white sandy beach, groves of coconut palms, dozens of small homes dotting rice paddies – all of it ringed with majestic verdant jungle hills.

Kamala Bay in 1988 was paradise. An oasis.

We continued the slow and easy approach and descended the other side of the mountain toward the bay. When we finally reached the bottom, the road became a real road again. A highway meandered straight ahead and a smaller road curved around the foothills to the west. I made a decision then that was to change my life. *I turned left.*

Life is opportunities. Missed and taken. Life is chance.

How many times is your fate sealed by an inch? A millimeter?

As a teenager learning to drive, I remember spinning out of control on an ice-slicked back road – my father's beloved jet-black Chrysler Newport (the original Batmobile) spinning round and round – seeming to actually pick up speed with each revolution. Heading closer and closer to the tree that would crush the perfection of its sleek hood and end – no doubt – my future. I prayed as I spun round and round, closer and closer to the beckoning tree trunk. And then the tires hit the snow pack on the edge of the road – and stopped!

I swallowed my heart and opened the door. The point of the Chrysler hood was one inch from the tree.

I drove home a newly (though albeit short-lived) re-born, 16 year-old Christian.

I turned left off the main highway that fateful day on Phuket island because the beach seemed to be that way. Shortly we came to another fork in the road. To the right was the village of Kamala. A little shop stood on the corner. A bridge led over a small stream that emptied into the bay. Long-tailed boats lay on the sand in front of the bridge – apparently awaiting the rising of the tide. All seemed to be beckoning me to turn right and into the town. But something drew me to the road that wound to the left. It looked green and lush. Flowers grew along a low wall and the intriguing spires of a few houses could be seen in the distance rising above the trees. It beckoned to me and we turned left again. As we went up the gentle rise, I was immediately overwhelmed by the sheer beauty all around me.

The sea was to the right, visible through the stately trees that grew along the shore. On the left the hills were covered with coconut palms and thick vegetation. Shortly the wall I had glimpsed began. It ran for a half-mile and was well-constructed with stone columns topped with decorative (but no doubt functional) wrought-iron pikes. Vines of bougainvillea in fuchsia and lavender climbed the stone. The property that rose behind the wall was groomed and green. On our right was a lovely resort with a Thai-style entry (the Kamala Beach Estates.) Its entrance was also decorated with a flowering hillside and the high –peaked roofs of the two-dozen villas and cottages beckoned. I told Peachy that we were in Beverly Hills now.

All of Thailand, Phuket in particular, has a random, scatter-shot look. There is generally no master plan and things merely take their own course – giving rise to ravaged landscapes of concrete construction where the trees have been decimated, followed by vestiges of natural beauty. Here, it seemed, someone had a vision and was maintaining the beauty – complementing it with tasteful, landscaped construction. (Today, twenty years later, this is the beginning of one of the most heavily-developed parts of the island – and is commonly known as “millionaire’s row.”)

The wall soon gave way to a gate and we could see a steep driveway beyond a formidable iron grille. Out of the corner of my eye I registered a small handwritten sign: “*House For Rent.*”

We continued up the gentle road for a short distance before I pulled over. I turned back to Peachy. “Did you see that sign?”

“Yes. Let’s go back.”

I turned the bike around.

The gate was open and we slowly pattered up the steep driveway. We were immediately taken by the sheer natural beauty surrounding us. The trees gave wonderful shade. A couple of playful dogs announced our arrival. The driveway soon leveled off and led to a circle in front of the most beautiful wooden Thai-style house I had ever seen. Its twin peaks rose forty feet above us. A handsome, well-dressed young Thai man came to greet us. “*Sawasdee krap.*” He put his hands together in the polite form of greeting known as a *wai*. Peachy and I returned the greeting with slight bows.

“We saw your sign.” He smiled and replied in English. “One moment please, I’ll get my Papa.” He proceeded up an outside stair case to the second floor. In a few minutes “Papa” appeared. “*Bonjour.*” The man was French, in his late fifties, tanned with a smooth bald head, a wide smile and a twinkle in his eyes.

Monsieur took us onto the balcony of his wonderful home. All polished wood and open space. The balcony faced the sea across the road. All of Kamala Bay was displayed before us. It was a truly magnificent view. The vast green property rose up from the road and directly below the balcony a turquoise swimming pool beckoned to us. We sat on high-backed rattan chairs and gratefully accepted the ice-cold water that the young Thai man, offered us.

“So, you wish to rent a house? Long time or short time?” Monsieur smiled his mischievous smile. “That depends on the price.” I offered. “We’d like to stay a couple of weeks.”

“We have different prices for different houses. Let me show you.”

Directly opposite the entry to the main house was a two storey building – maid’s quarters and a garage on the ground floor, and two apartments on the top floor. “Air-conditioned.” The young Thai proudly pointed out. I liked that. I was, as usual, dripping with sweat.

As we descended the driveway we saw another house that we hadn’t noticed on the way up. It was two stories and had twin peaks, like the main house. It also had a beautiful pool below. “My partner’s house.” Monsieur proudly proclaimed. “She is in France at the moment, but she has the top floor. Downstairs is a two-bedroom house.” When he told us the price we decided we didn’t need to see it.

At the bottom of the driveway was a little cottage. “Madame’s.” Monsieur announced. ‘Madame’ was an elderly lady who would be arriving someday soon. Directly below this house was what looked like a guard house. “*Baan tukkathaan.*” Monsieur proclaimed. He had called it the *dollhouse*. He opened the door to a single room. It was clean and tidy. A bed, a dresser, a desk, a kitchen and a bathroom. It had a covered porch that faced the road and beyond that the sea.

Alas, it did not have air-conditioning. “But you don’t need air-conditioning,” Monsieur counseled. I wasn’t so sure. But Peachy was convinced this was the place, and so we made a deal and the next day a tuk tuk brought us and our bags from Patong to our new home in Kamala Bay.

I had no idea that this would be a place that I would return to time and time again for the next two decades of my life. It was in that little house that I became a writer. It offered more than just the solitude of Kamala in those bygone days - it was where, I was convinced, that my *muse* lived. I would work as a Production Designer in the Hollywood system throughout the year (but rarely *in* Hollywood - usually Vancouver, Toronto, Europe, the Phillipines, Japan, etc.) and then return every winter to the little house by the sea. Along with its gracious hosts (who allowed us to use their pool,) the little house offered all I needed to find what I suspected lurked within me. Words poured forth. I wrote through the long days and into the fold of the tropical nights, listening to the lapping of the surf and the cries of the jungle behind me. I poured my heart onto to the keys of my various laptops. I filled countless notebooks while sitting in the numerous cafes of Kamala. All the while, the muse of Baan Thukkataan stood quietly at my shoulder - encouraging and beckoning me forward.

I now live just across the road from the site of Baan Thukkathaan. I say *site*, as it, as well as the rest of that magnificent estate, has been demolished and a massive construction crew works day and night to develop the site into 30 luxury apartments.

Four published novels later, I feel I can call myself a writer. I owe that wonderful turn of events to my deciding -

One day - long ago -

To turn left.