

The following e-mail messages from Jackson Tye to his friend Will Samson were turned over to Indonesian officials by internet service provider Walrus.com in cooperation with the investigation into the deaths of ten foreign nationals in a terrorist bombing at the Satori discotheque in Kuta, Bali, April 7, 2007. (Mr. Tye was one of these ten.) The messages are published here with the permission of Mr. Samson.

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Wednesday, March 7, 2007

Just got back from the Embassy.

That was a lot of fun.

I can't tell how much trouble I'm in. It could be nothing. It could be huge. Nobody says anything of substance. All I really know is that I'm not allowed to leave Bangkok.

I can't possibly leave Thailand anyway, they have my fucking passport.

I know I've kept you waiting a couple of weeks without any reports whatsoever, but don't worry, the pact lives. You know it lives. You can rest assured that full disclosure is coming. I'm just a bit fucky wucky, that's all.

The elevator version is that I did that "adventure trek" I wrote to you about two weeks ago. Twelve of us

went out and only eleven of us came back, and like I said, until the "authorities" sort it all out, none of any of us is allowed to leave the country. We're allowed to move about in Bangkok as long as we don't see each other, which is just fine. I guarantee you every last one of us is fine with that rule.

I haven't read all of your emails yet. I'm going to read them one at a time. They're more precious than heroin, but they have the reverse effect. Life here is narcotic and strange, and your words bring me back to the real world. I can't tell you how fucked up I'd be now if I didn't have that connection. I swear. I never expected to ever find myself so strung out on a line, bobbing in a sea of flotsam. Especially when I'm actually supposed to be here for you.

I'll get to the story, but first things first. I got a room at this traveler's hotel called The Miami. The brochures say they have the first hotel pool in Bangkok. I don't doubt it. I'm at the pool now. Charming old relic, but they don't keep it full. The water line's a good two feet low. It's weird, you swim for a while, then you want to stop to catch your breath, but there's nothing to grab ahold of. Just a tile wall in front of you. Ever since you've been a kid, there's been something to grab when you're worn out or you've got water down the wrong pipe and you're starting to panic. It's weird to get to the edge and there's just a slick tile wall, reaching up and out in

all directions in front of you. Funny thing is, when that happens, it rocks your five-year-old world, not your twenty-two-year-old world. That panicked kid comes right back, even if you don't really need something to grab ahold of.

Little things like this happen every day here. I spend half of my time feeling like a five-year-old, one way or another.

Anyway, it's not a bad hotel, considering. It's cheap enough I could stay here forever. There are cats in the lobby, and you can get fresh towels if you ask for them. I'm not ready to talk to anyone yet, but it's comforting to know there are people around.

At this moment there are two tall blondes on the other side of the pool, one in a black bikini and one in a light blue one. Cute. Definitely fuckable, both of them. There are two guys with them, both on one side of them, and I assumed they were two couples, but a shorter, more spunky woman just showed up, so until further notice, they're all back in play. The new one's cute enough, too. But she has one of those white bill-only tennis kind of caps. That will definitely have to come off.

Sure, I digress.

You bet your ass I digress.

It's not like I've got a demanding schedule here. I might as well fucking digress.

Bleahhhhhhhhh.

Let me start in Chiang Mai, up north, sort of in the mountains. I signed on to a super-duper eight-day adventure trek. It took me a couple of days to sift through all the half-assed tour companies and their lame elephant rides and two-day walks in the woods, but I found something that looked like it was a notch or two beyond the touristic, one that lasted twice as long as the longest "trek" anywhere else. One where they weren't sure exactly what was up there. One, incidentally, with no women allowed.

Two days later I show up at the meeting point, and I'm assigned two blankets and a machete and loaded into the back of a cattle truck with everyone else.

Everyone else is three Canadians, three Swedes, one Dutch guy, one German, plus me (the only Yank) and three Thai guides - one who says his name is Charlie, the leader and owner of the tour company, plus Tip and Sanguan, his assistants and porters.

There's a bunch of commercial crap all around Chiang Mai, just like there is around Bangkok, but once you're past that, it's not too bad. At first there are low hills and flat plains, sometimes rice paddies and water buffalo pulling plows and the unbelievable luminescent baby green fields of young rice shoots. Sometimes decorated with big white birds.

We stop for dinner in a town called "Hot," which is surprisingly hot, and then we drive a bit more in the dark

and just go off some side road and sleep with blankets on the ground.

But hey, before I really get into this, how are you doing scumbag? Are you walking yet? Did you finally see the light that Reverend Bigbucks was preaching about? Have you cast aside Satan's wheeled chair? Have you repented your sins?

You know that's what's keeping you from walking, don't you? That dark legacy of evil. Every time you didn't do all your homework. Every time you looked at the girl next door's underpants. Every time that you thought to yourself, "My second grade teacher is a merciless cunt." They're all on Jesus's tally. Just fuel for the fire my friend. The fire that burns and will never go out.

And all you have to do is confess your sins today.
And don't forget to mail that check.

Ah. I'm feeling better already. It's good to write.

OK, the next morning it's cloudy. We climb back in the truck without saying much and ride somewhere and pick up a few soldiers.

No one explains anything, we just pull up at a crossroads and three soldiers in camo fatigues with rifles get out of a jeep and climb in with us.

It's a bit disconcerting, but the soldiers are really nice, and after we realize we aren't being kidnapped or truck-jacked or terrorized or anything, we all go back to squinting and bouncing along and hoping the ride will be

over before our asses are pounded into hamburger by the floor of the truck bed.

For a couple of hours things get more mountainous and forested and eventually the road gets worse and worse and the woods get thicker and thicker and then a very light rain starts. After about an hour more of lurching along like a drunken cow, we all just pile out and start walking along with the truck and then the truck stops and we keep on and that's it. We're on a "trek."

We hike in silence in the drizzle for about an hour to a village of bamboo huts. There aren't many people around, I assume because of the rain. I'm sure they're all peering out at us through the grass walls.

We sit under the eaves of the biggest hut while Charlie goes and talks to the village leader or somebody.

There are two dogs around, keeping their distance, and a rooster that crows every five minutes. There's a smell of wet hay. Tip says it's a Lahu village, but he doesn't elaborate.

Of course, I don't know anything about the people here. I've never heard of dangerous tribes in Thailand, but I don't want to find out about them the hard way. I would be delighted, however, if they really did carry spears and really did happen to have a cast iron pot big enough to boil a couple of us in.

It feels good to be somewhere finally, other than in a city or in a truck. There's something very peaceful about thatch roofs in the rain. Rain on thatch is a soft sound. You can barely hear it, just a smooth background tone.

The German guy Detlev and one of the Canadian guys, Jeff, light cigarettes. One of the army guys' gun falls over onto the ground. The guys pass around a spliff the size of a cigar and I have a hit. Even though we're not moving right now, it feels good to have actually started hiking. We've settled down some and the sound of the rain is really nice. All these houses around and so little going on, it can't help but mellow you out.

Detlev comes over and sits next to me, "Well, we have one good Canadian brain on this trek," he says. "Too bad there are three people sharing it."

It's funny, actually. The Canadians kind of are a pain in the ass. Not so much because they're in a perpetual frat-boy who's-the-coolest competition, but because they're a brotherhood of three and they don't really care about the rest of us.

I ask Detlev what he was doing back in Germany before this.

"Well, I've completed a project on wrecking small businesses," he says. "First I wrecked one of my own, then I wrecked a couple that my friends had started. Now I'm thinking of taking it to the next level and becoming a consultant."

"What kind of businesses?"

"Well my business was underground comics. I ran that into the ground all by myself. Then together my friends and I bankrupted a perfectly good bookstore by opening a café on the ground floor. It would have been OK if we

hadn't allowed people to smoke pot in there. We just had to pay too many fucking fines.

"Then I worked in my friend's T-shirt shop in Berlin, but no one wanted to buy the shirts I ordered."

"What kind of shirts?"

"Dead American Indians."

"Why did you think people would want to wear dead American Indians?"

"I thought they were beautiful."

Eventually we get into a discussion of making money in general and how you don't have to do it when you're on vacation, and what else are we really getting away from, besides our jobs?

Well, Civilization maybe. Whatever that is.

Just a minute, light blue bikini took off with one of the guys and the spunky one has finished with the sunning herself and has started backstroking around in the pool. The other guy over there seems to belong to the black bikini one, but he can't keep his eyes off the spunky one in the pool. I'm hoping black bikini will feel she has to outperform somehow. I gotta say, though, I think spunky one is going to win that contest.

So we're just staring around watching the rain, and it's really nice, actually, then after about three quarters of an hour Charlie comes back, alone, and says something vague about a guide and takes off down the trail out of the village into the woods. We get up and follow.

It's a clear trail, and fairly wide, too. It looks like it may have been a logging road or something a decade ago. I wonder how long it takes the jungle to reclaim a road here. Maybe it wasn't a decade ago. Maybe it was last week.

We stick together pretty close and then about a half mile along, Charlie steps to the side and lets the Canadians take the lead.

Charlie's not exactly the image of the man you expect to be leading a trek. But once you think about it, you realize this is exactly what you should expect. He's short, wiry and fit. Not uptight, not laid back, but he can act like either. He uses the ol' fake Asian smile to hide behind sometimes, but he doesn't use it too much.

One cocky touch that may or may not be intentional; he hikes in rubber flip-flops. I'm not sure if he's doing this to bring himself one notch above us, making us look like pansies for needing shoes, or if it's just his normal thing. Probably both.

Charlie carries a kind of self-assuredness and control that lets him make a wry joke every once in a while, but doesn't let him laugh when anyone else makes one. The idea that Charlie grew up in a place where people don't wear shoes makes him seem more tough and it's part of what seems to be intimidating everyone. No one is even suggesting that Charlie ought to be telling us what is going on or maybe telling us why the fuck we have three militia men with us.

Per, Bengt and Nils, the Swedes, have strength in numbers like the Canadians do. They already have friends on the trek and they don't necessarily need any more. And they have that European attitude that says, "I'm patient and considerate, certainly more patient and considerate than you Americans." They're not jerks, really. Just not exactly friendly. They usually hike in the middle of the group.

The soldiers are happy to lag towards the back of the group, so it's not that easy to keep them in front of me. Their guns aren't always pointed forward, but I like to be able to keep my eye on them. It's an added bonus that I don't have to be up front to do this.

I'm still not sure what the point is of having armed soldiers. One of the Swedish guys says it has something to do with food, but it seems a hell of a lot more likely to me that Charlie is nervous about Karen rebels or Burmese military or something, since we're so close to Burma. Hell, maybe we're in Burma.

Mike, one of the Canadians, says Sanguan told him the soldiers are to guard against wild elephants. I'm psyched we have soldiers along, but really, what the hell is a gun going to do to a charging elephant? It doesn't seem to me like it's going to help me a hell of a lot, especially if the gun isn't mine, and when the guy with the gun is hiking in the back. Not that I'm hiking in fear or anything, but you know, I have no idea how rare or not rare it is to be stomped on by an elephant around here.

It's not the hack-your-way-through kind of jungle here. Much more like a forest than you'd think. A tropical forest. A lot of the trees look completely normal, then there are these really exotic kind with the fins coming out at the bottom, like organic rocket ships ready to launch. And in places it's hard to tell the vines from the trees, they've so taken over. The fucking vines, you can't tell where they're going up and where they're going down. I'll bet sometimes even they get confused.

And there's a surprising amount of houseplants here. There's that viney kind with the heart-shaped leaves that everyone has in a hanging pot, and there are a lot of those that have the big green leaves with the random rips in them. I swear, the first one of these I saw, I thought for a brief second, "Wow, why would someone plant one of those here?"

Detlev says that quite some time ago, a cadre of rogue houseplants outside of London cut themselves loose from their hooks one night, fled the suburbs and started an underground network of emancipated decorative vegetation. These are apparently part of that movement.

I have vowed to support my green brothers and sisters in their ongoing struggle for freedom from the pot, the saucer and the macramé hanger. Perhaps, my friend, you will find it in your heart to join fight.

A kilometer or two down the trail a short guy pulls up from a side path. He looks like he could be Thai, could be Aztec, for all I know, probably some hill tribe or other,

but not one with fancy outfits. He's wearing a T-shirt that says "Biblioteque de Saint Genvieve," shorts, and black leather street shoes. I mean street shoes like what you wear to church, the kind you put shoe polish on; and no socks.

He talks to Charlie for about a minute and then he takes off. I'm first in line right behind him so I match his pace, which is really fast, especially for such a short guy. About a half mile down the trail he peels off to the left and in five minutes we're stomping through this nasty waist-high grass, the toughest stuff I've ever seen. It's thicker than hair on a Turkish twat. It's probably what they make baskets out of. He's wearing shorts but he's just tearing through this stuff. I don't know how he can do it, I'm just hoping it's not going to cut through my pants.

We go like this for a long ways. Maybe a couple of miles, who knows? It's sort of a long river of grass flowing through the jungle. It gets about a hundred yards wide at times, only ten yards wide sometimes. I can't see where the hell I'm putting my foot down.

In all of our hiking together, you and I have seen probably thousands of miles of wild land, with everything from black bear to ring-tailed cat to white pine snipe. We know what might be hanging around at the stream and what might be sunning on the trail. We know what to expect -- in the U.S.

Here, it's different. I'm not actually terrified that some mongoose thing is going to take a piece out of my leg,

but it's weird to have no clue what might be lurking. Pythons? Tigers? Venomous spiders? No fucking idea.

And let me tell you, no fucking idea is even worse than the certainty of any of the above.

Probably there's nothing in the grass. The guide guy is forging through it with all the confidence in the world. But then maybe that's just the attitude you need if you have to go through the grass. If he were hiking in the desert or something, maybe he'd be as afraid as I am now, not knowing whether he'd be trampled by a bison or stung by a scorpion.

So I'm just following along as fast as I can, hoping if I'm close enough to the guide guy, whatever's in a bitey mood will bite him because he got there first.

Then suddenly the guy loses about a foot in height and I hear splashing. There's nothing I can do but follow right along.

Great. Now I can add a whole new menagerie to the list of beasts waiting to chomp on me. I could try and wander off through the grass onto dry land and step on a tiger or I can slosh along behind the guide with the leaches and parasites and baby crocodiles.

This kind of thing continues on for an hour or two, I can't remember.

At least the rain has stopped.

All right. I'm back. I know you can't tell I was away, but I was, and I feel it, so I'm saying it. I went

out for a walk and while I was out there I had some papaya from a street vendor.

So, where are we? You had enough of the jungle? How about city? I can do city for a while. I was a fucking zombie last night from not sleeping so well on the train back to Bangkok the night before, but I went to sleep too early and then woke up at 8:30 PM so I went out and wandered.

The Miami happens to be close to some sort of foreigners' hub. There's a cheap carnival atmosphere at night. You've got booths up and down the sidewalks selling T-shirts and shorts and lighters and glasses and panties and bootleg DVDs and all the usual souvenir junk. Then there are cut fruit sellers and their carts and bells and the whole-fruit sellers with all their alien-looking produce lined up on the ground.

They've got some space-age fruit here, man. Things shaped in a star, crazy big thorny things the size of your head that look like medieval weapons, luscious red things called dragon fruit that look like the most outrageous lizard eggs but they're just plain black and white inside and not even juicy. Then of course there's papayas and mangos and watermelon and all the usual suspects.

It's different when everything, especially labor, is so cheap. For example, you pass a plate glass store front and you see maybe a half dozen white men and/or women splayed out on recliners inside being groomed by little brown Thai women. You got some big guy, maybe three hundred pounds, could be British, could be German, could be

American. One girl is giving him a facial and one is giving him a manicure and one's working on one foot and another on the other. It's like those National Geographic shows where there's a huge alligator or a whale or something lying in the sun with a bunch of white birds eating all the bugs off of it and cleaning the junk out of its teeth. You're just walking by and the place is lit up like a car dealership. It's like inadvertently looking into the wrong bathroom.

So I'm walking like a zombie past a group of three of these massage and manicure places, and I'd just blow right by but there are three girls out front and one of them looks at me and smiles and it's like a damn China doll has come to life.

I don't know what she says to me, but the next thing I know I'm up in a chair getting a haircut. Not even from her. That's how good she is.

Turns out it's even better to be getting it from someone else, because she's more free to talk with me then. Her name is something I can't pronounce, but it's close to "Dakota" so that's what I'll call her. She knows how gorgeous she is, but it's not a pain in the ass, it just makes her kind of caustic. She's not flirting with me, but she definitely is playing with me. It's as though she doesn't want me to get any ideas, but she can't help but play around.

I ask her if she's really Thai, and she says, "One half Thai, one half...I forgot." She's studying for a

business degree and she eventually wants to open her own style shop, but to locate in a more normal part of town.

I can't even tell you what we fucking talked about for half an hour. It was just nice, that's all. Sure, I've been in the wilderness for a while, and I could probably talk for an hour with anything that's willing to talk back, but I swear this is one fine specimen. It's not like Dakota is the first female I saw when I stumbled out of the jungle.

There are hookers lined up outside, any one of which could be sitting on my face within ten minutes, but I guess there's something in me that was more up for a little conversation, a little verbal grab-ass. And no, none of the hookers are anywhere near as hot as Dakota.

She makes me tea after I'm done and I'd stay forever, but they start closing up and I have to leave. I want to say to her, "I know you think I just want to get you naked and fuck you until your screams of ecstasy wake the King -- and I'm not saying I don't -- but what I'd like to propose is you take me into your cute little bedroom, wherever it is, and let me give you a bath. I promise I won't try anything nasty. I'll even let you wash the naughty bits yourself."

But for some reason I don't say that. Go ahead, call me chicken.

Shit man, I feel like hell when I leave there. You'd think I'd feel great to have had that connection -- but no.

It was like a cat playing with a damn mouse and I'm the mouse. I'm a mouse all alone in Bangkok.

There is a special kind of loneliness here. So many people want so much from you, you're never alone unless you really want to be. But, hang with your friends? Forget it. Not possible. Real friends, I mean, not just some backpackers on their way to Cambodia that you met in the lobby last night. You want someone who knows you and knows what you look like when you've just had the shit scared out of you or knows how bad you hate spiders. I tell you, it's an empty, dry hollow feeling when you realize all you want is a good friend and you know there isn't one around. My man, I'd give a thousand bucks of our "prize money" to just sit and have a beer with you right now. I'd even pay for the beer.

All right. Sorry about that. I'm going to knock off for today. Tomorrow there will be no moping.