

playing with fire

by

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Parts of this story are as close to true as I'm able to get them. Parts of it are pure fiction. The two are marked with different type faces, for the most part. Please read with care and abandon.

Prometheus is really Santa Claus

As soon as we were old enough to hold a match between our fingers, Mom and Dad would let us light the fire when we were having a fire in the fireplace. It was probably more of a strategy to keep us from playing with matches than anything, but we considered it a grand honor. My sister or I would crawl up onto the hearth to where Daddy had laid the fire. Until we were able to strike a match, he'd strike one for us and hand it to whichever of us was going to light the fire. He'd point out the places where the crumpled newspaper reached out from under the pile of

wood and we figured out pretty quick how to hold the match just under the paper so that the body of the flame could envelop the edge of it. Then the flame would grow and you could see that the paper was burning and you could move the match to another spot, if you had time.

If you got the fire lit on one side but you didn't move quickly enough to the other side, the flames from the first side would rise up and lick out at your arm, or your face. And if the little flame on the match had crawled down to your fingers already, you'd have to draw back and blow it out or you'd get burned. And if that happened before you lit the other side, the fire would get underway lopsided, enthusiastically growing on one half, and just smoking on the other. There would be a few minutes of anxiety, but the fire knew what to do and where to go. Eventually it always turned out fine.

Mom and Dad's fire strategy worked so well, I can't think of a single time I played with matches or burned anything I wasn't supposed to, until I set fire to a gas station a couple of decades later.

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RE: Archives request No. 3973930-29347M

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 an investigation into the deaths of ten foreign nationals in a terrorist bombing at the Satori discotheque in Kuta, Bali, April 7, 2008. (Mr. Tye was believed to have been one of these ten.) The messages are published here with the permission of Mr.

Samson.

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Wednesday, March 7

This is it, my friend. I'm done. What you have before you is the first installment of the last dispatch from your loyal correspondent. The Pact is over. Long live the Pact.

I'll explain why a little later, but let me just say right here that in accordance with the Full Disclosure clause, everything that has transpired since I last posted will be elegantly set down in words and beamed through the ether to you. Just be patient. It's going to take me a few days -- and probably a few big bottles of beer -- to cough it all up.

What the hell happened to me over the past fourteen days? Well I did that "adventure trek" I wrote about in the last post. And the crux of the biscuit is, twelve of us went out, but only eleven of us came back. I'm ensconced in Bangkok now, and until the "authorities" sort it all out, none of us from the trek is allowed to leave the country. I suppose I could sneak out of the city if I decided to, but I can't possibly leave Thailand. They have my passport.

I can't tell how much trouble I'm in. It could be nothing. It could be huge. All I really know is that I'm not allowed to leave Bangkok. I'd like to think they're just following procedures and all will be well. But I can't help but worry that they're going to find cause to lock me away forever.

I don't know what I should be preparing my head for, really, a free flight out of the country this afternoon, or a lifetime rotting in a steamy Thai prison with a bowl of rice and a raw egg to eat once a day, lying awake at night hoping to catch and feast upon one of the rats that scamper across my emaciated body, always keeping one eye on my cellmate, the cranked-up Viet Cong drug trafficker who doesn't know the war is over.

It's a stunning thought. I can tell I'm not thinking entirely clearly. I can't even trust my own recollections.

Nothing changes the background music like a little bit of real, live death. It casts

a light that turns everything a different color. Parts of the trek call out now like scenes in a film, running themselves over and over in my head. You'd think the movie is over, because I know how it ends, but that's not true. It changes every time I play it.

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They especially liked Q and W

Let's start on the front porch of a bamboo house in a village about a five-mile hike up a trail from another village at the end of an impassable road a day's ride into the mountains west and maybe north of Chiang Mai. There are two dogs around, keeping their distance, and a rooster that crows every five minutes. They tell me this is a village of the Lisu tribe.

No one seems to know why we have soldiers. I have to tell you, it was highly disconcerting when we pulled up at a crossroads this morning and they climbed into the back of the truck with us, but all three of them are perfectly nice and polite, and ever since we realized we weren't being kidnapped or truck-jacked or terrorized or anything, it's been fine.

I don't know anything about the Lisu people. I've never heard of dangerous tribes in Thailand, but I would be delighted if the Lisu really did carry spears and really did happen to have a cast iron pot big enough to boil a couple of us in.¹

¹ I visited Thailand several times in the late eighties, then once in the mid nineties, and once again in the mid o's. Some things in Thailand have changed a lot since 1987, when I first went there, but the parts I mention here are pretty much as they still are now.

The German guy Detlev² and one of the Canadian guys, Jeff, light cigarettes. One of the soldiers' guns falls over onto the ground. The guys pass around a joint and I have a hit.

Eventually we get tired of waiting for Charlie to come back and tell us what's up. We start looking around the little village, trying not to be too ugly or foreign. I eventually sit down in front of one of the homes in the village and start writing in my journal.

Some little kids gather around watching me write. They look at my pale hairy legs and touch them, timidly at first, and then feel them. They make their little comments to each other and it makes me wish I could understand what they're saying, to be able to hang out with them and play.

I hold the pen and the book out to them, but they don't take them. They seem almost afraid of them. So I tear out a sheet of paper and make them an alphabet and I read the letters out one by one and they repeat them after me. I try to give them the alphabet I wrote, but they don't want to take it from me. It's not just that they won't accept anything from us whites, because they each have an orange that Tom gave them. There's something special about the paper and the writing that they're shy of.

Then one of the little girls comes up and takes the

² The German guy's name wasn't Detlev. These are real people and it's not fair to drag them out in public, so except for Charlie, which I don't believe is his real name anyway, I've changed everyone's names for even the non-fiction version here.

the contempt, the face to display when someone we don't know is staring at us in the diner or the laundromat. There she is, so uncomfortable in front of these pink strangers who just hiked in from nowhere. And she has no way of making us stop staring, no defense, except to give us a hint -- not a tease, just a hint, because too much would actually be flirting -- that we are making her uncomfortable.

My first impulse is to take a picture, but already we've figured out that the people here don't like being photographed. Even most of the children are camera shy. Hell, a picture of her would never do her justice. She's not like a cover girl. I'm sure I'd be looking at the picture right now and saying, "Ah, she's not that hot." But I'd be wrong. I mean, this isn't just a specimen of beauty, this is a goddess; a breathing, thinking, moving, washing deity. I swear. I could watch all day, but it would be cruel, not to mention rude. I just need to walk away and leave her in peace. Perhaps for my own peace of mind as much as for hers. Eventually the others do as well.

Detlev and the Canadian dudes are hopped up to smoke opium, so they put pressure on Tip and Sanguan. Sanguan says that the Lisu tribe do use opium and he'll see if he can get us some. Thai is a common language between the tribes, no matter what native languages they have individually, so Thai speakers do just fine. English speakers, of course, are in the dark.

Where is Charlie? No one knows. I picture him over in the chief elder's hut, drinking treebark tea or whatnot and explaining why he's brought a gaggle of white devils into the village. That would be a fair question, as a matter of fact. Why are we here? Rest and relaxation? Of course not. This is wild adventure. Hey, look at the soldiers.

Jeff the Canadian goes off to pinch a loaf and he comes back in twenty minutes or so and starts going on about pigs. He says the pigs followed him all the way out into the woods so they could eat his poop. Then Mike, the friendly Canadian one says, "Yeah dude! I know. They totally stalk you down for your shit!" Then Jeff says, "It freaked me out. They just ate it up." The two of them go on like that for about five minutes but no one buys it.

Eventually Tip and Sanguan come over and tell us to put our stuff in a certain hut

because we'll probably stay there for the night. When he hears this, Steve, the biggest and most macho of the Canadian guys, gets his panties all in a wad. He's strutting around, making noise like this is a cake walk and we've hardly gone five miles and we should keep going and this is a pussies' trek.

Shit man, here we are in this nice little village. Obviously tourists don't come trekking through here every day. Chill out, dude. You wanna hike some more in the wet woods for no reason? Go ahead. Scout out the trail in three directions. Knock yourself out.

When the time comes, we go to the stream to clean up for dinner, but the most beautiful woman in the universe is not there. In fact I'll tell you right now, I never get to see her again.

I'm washing up next to Pascal and he nudges me and I look up at him and he's squinting with one eye, making a crazy face. What? I don't know what the hell he's winking at, but it's a really intense wink. And then he holds his hand out in front of me and there's something in it that he's washing. What is it? Oh, it's an eyeball. Not exactly an eyeball, just like part of a glass eye or something. Holy shit.

I must have recoiled like I'd seen a snake or something. I felt like a fool. But then, that's why he does that. He probably does that every chance he gets.

He's a good guy, though. Just a little random.

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Forward

As soon as I turned sixteen I started driving my sister and myself to school in our Buick Estate Wagon or the VW Beetle, whichever was available that day. If my sister didn't need a ride back after school, I took a new route home and explored around a bit. Brigham City isn't very big, so it's not far from the center of town to where dirt roads take off across the valley floor towards the

bird refuge, or beyond, to the mud flats on the edges of the Great Salt Lake. Or on the other side of town, there are roads that spin off through the wastelands near the gravel pits and eventually head up on traverses across the Wasatch Front. If I was feeling particularly restless, I might take off on one of the four highways out of town.

I wasn't looking for anything in particular. Suddenly I had wheels. Suddenly my world was a whole lot bigger and I needed to check it out.

I got my license in December or January, and it was a snowy year that year. More times than not, I'd keep going and going until I got so stuck I couldn't go any further. It's amazing how stuck I would get myself and still manage to get unstuck. Out of at least twenty times when any reasonable person would have given up, only twice did I ultimately have to leave the car and walk to a house where I could phone for help.

One of those two times I had driven the Buick up Box Elder Canyon, through the Mantua campgrounds and into the foothills on the back side of the front. There was something like a foot of fresh snow, and I slid all the way off the road into the ditch. I did everything I could, but one rear wheel was just spinning free. I walked to the house of some folks who ran the youth program at our church and phoned home. Dad drove up in the VW with carpets and a shovel and with some muscle we got the Buick back on the road within an hour.

The only other time I needed help getting unstuck, I can't really chalk up to pure curiosity. I was out on a road I'd been on before and I wasn't alone.

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Sukhumvit and the Western Hippo

So I'm staying at The Miami, it's kind of a third-rate traveler's hotel. The brochures here say they have the first hotel pool in Bangkok, and I don't doubt it. I'm at the pool now. Charming old relic, but they don't keep it full. The water line is a good two feet low, which I suspect is because of a leak somewhere. 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 wall in front of you, rising up, higher than you can reach.

Ever since you've been a kid, there's been something there at the edge when you're worn out or you've got water down the wrong pipe and you're starting to panic. But here at the Miami, you get to what should be the edge but there's nothing; just slick tile in every direction. It's like something out of a sixties TV psycho thriller.

Funny thing is, when that happens, it rocks your five-year-old world, not your grown-up world. That panicked kid deep in your past comes right back, even if you don't really need something to grab ahold of. You woke him up.

Little things like this happen every day here, Will. I spend half of my time feeling like a five-year-old, one way or another. I suppose that's alright. Unless that five-year-old ends up in jail.

Anyway, it's not a bad hotel, considering. It's cheap enough I could stay here forever. The atmosphere is good. The lobby cats treat the front desk like it's their sofa. The pool never closes, and you can get fresh towels if you ask for them.

There seems to be a militant anti-sleaze policy at this hotel, and that's the word they use, "sleaze." There's a sign out front bigger than the hotel sign itself that says, "SEX TOURISTS NOT WELCOME."

I'm not sure what got up the manager's ass, but it's kinda funny. There are signs about it everywhere, not just on the front of the hotel. I think the current manager

grew up here, watching the shenanigans that went on during the Vietnam War and he decided he wanted to transcend the hanky-panky.

I'm fine with the anti-exploitation thing, but how does the front desk decide who's a ho and who ain't? Sure, sometimes it's obvious. But what if you have a nice Thai female friend? A friend friend. Will they kick you out for having her over for dinner? What if she's wearing a cute dress? Nope? The rule is totally race-based. If you were a white hooker in Bangkok you could really make a killing at the "nice" hotels.

The anti-sleaze policy makes more sense in the context of the neighborhood. My hotel happens to be in a part of Bangkok called *Sukhumvit*, which is home to some sort of tourists district. There's a cheap carnival atmosphere at night that I like. You've got booths up and down the sidewalks selling T-shirts and shorts and lighters and glasses and panties and bootleg DVDs, plus 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 tarps.

They've got some space-age fruit here. 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 on the inside and not even juicy. Then of course there's papayas and mangos and watermelon and all the usual suspects.³

³ The Thai word for guava is *farang*, which they pronounce "fa-long" around here. I only know this word because that's also what they call foreigners. I'm not sure anyone knows why they call foreigners guavas.

Things get strange when everything, especially labor, is so cheap. For example, you pass a plate glass storefront and you see a handful of white men or women inside splayed out on recliners being groomed by much smaller 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 nature 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 down the sidewalk in Sukhumvit, enjoying the local flavor, and you pass one of these places lit up like a car dealership. Hey, I didn't need to see that. It's like stumbling into the wrong bathroom.

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Made of bamboo and rhymes with *gong*

After dinner an older man from the tribe and a boy who looks like he's probably his son come into the house where we're staying. They bring out an oil lamp and a bunch of little pans and little tools and things and set to work. It's really an involved process and it's about a half hour before they're ready to load the first pipe.

Of course the Canadian guys go first.

Detlev just loves that. He says something like, "It's nice of them to let us come on their trek."

"It could be worse," I say, "They could be Americans."

Detlev gets a kick out of this one.

Opium isn't like pot, you don't just have a toke or two and then pass it around. They load up the pipe for you, a bamboo water pipe about as big around as a clarinet, and then reload it for you over and over until you've had enough. Most of us have four or five bowls, so it's about a hour and a half before we all get our turn.

Watching the others toke up gives you a chance to see it from a lizard-on-the-wall perspective. A perspective from, say ten thousand years ago, with the glow of a lamp or a small fire accenting the faces. Others sitting quietly in the shadows, watching, waiting for their turn at the pipe. That primeval aspect of it is intoxicating itself.

Detlev takes his turn after the Canadians and I take mine after him. The first thing I do is hold the pipe upright, like a bong, which makes the water run up into the bowl and washes the little wad of opium and wood shavings out. They take the pipe back, get me all set again, and I make sure to hold the pipe at the angle they hand it to me.

And then when they bring the burning splinter of wood to the bowl it kicks me into one of those encapsulated moments of perspective, the type when it feels like you're looking at the highlight reel of your life. I see the scene, and at the same time, I see myself start to inhale the smoke and the pipe is gurgling, and I can feel the gurgling in my throat from the smoke bubbling up through the water and it's rich but not hot and not burning, just warm and thick and a little sticky.

I hold it in, and I exhale.

And I smile a little.

And they start to load the next bowl for me.

All of us getting high together like this feels regular. It feels like a completely normal thing. Like having dinner. There's a quality of eating dinner that's kind of ritual and it's more powerful than the moment, but this is beyond that. This has a lurking intensity to it that's frightening, if you notice it. Like a big jungle cat, watching from the shadows.

After me is Pascal, and then Bengt, the middle Swede. By this time Jeff has gone out and puked and I think someone else went out to puke but eventually didn't have to. Apparently it's normal to get sick and puke.

I feel warm and queasy and relaxed. A little bit goofy, and surprisingly -- a little bit sad. I expected opium to be euphoric. At least a little.

I want to go out and walk around by myself, but it's raining a bit and I also just feel like lying down. It's pretty dark in the house, but that makes the place where the fire is even more cozy. The light of the lamp on the faces of the guys working is gorgeous and golden against the shadows around them. I could watch them all night.

When I close my eyes, I dream about the women of the village. I don't sleep, but it's like a dream. Three or four of them are out with me and we're on a trek of our own. We build a hut together and they pick luscious fruits for me and fan me with banana leaves and sleep next to me.

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The Sirens of Lalaguna

My first Christmas after moving to Japan I went in

with some friends on a package vacation in the Philippines. I'd never been to a tropical paradise before. And I'd never been to what we called a *third-world* country. I'd been to Hong Kong, which was wild and woolly compared to Tokyo, but not third world at all.

The Philippines was more like it. Within twenty-four hours of landing in Manila, I'm on some island on a perfect beach called Little Lalaguna, standing next to the carcass of a pig lashed to a pole. I spend most of the day napping and drinking Philippine beer with the people I came out with, including an easy-going Canadian fellow by the name of Robert with whom I'm sharing a bungalow.

Other than a pig-roasting, there's not much nightlife at Little Lalaguna, so that evening Robert and I and a few others hire a teenage kid named Tino to take us in his boat around the point to the next village over, Lalaguna (the main one).

We pop into the first place we come to, a cinderblock building, with a concrete floor and the ambiance of an unfinished basement. There's a bar made of plywood in one corner and a few square kitchen tables and chairs set up. There's a huge spiral painted on one wall in front of which is a raised stage of sorts about a foot high. On this stage is a young Philippina woman, probably a teen-ager, wearing a bikini and vaguely moving around in a nod to go-go dancing. Cheesy disco music is playing, and every once in a while someone opens the door and tosses in a huge firecracker or two, which has a percussive effect in that bare concrete space that makes you wonder whether your inner ear might be sustaining damage.

I do my best to participate in a civil conversation with my friends at the table, but I'm so distracted by the

noise and the girl on the stage, I'm not much use. What's really distracting is that the girl will occasionally lower her top and move around for a while with her boobs out. She doesn't do it with a *look at me* kind of expression on her face. But it's such a *look at me* kind of thing to do, I'm captivated. It only makes it more captivating that she can do it with such insouciance.

Of course, there were women in bikinis on the beach all afternoon long, but that's different. That was in context. It was entirely proper. I wasn't even really supposed to watch, certainly not to stare. This display in the bar however is out of context; improper, naughty. And I'm expected to watch.

Now, I'm away from Japan for the first time in six months. Every day I've been shoulder-to-shoulder, tush-to-tush with what are considered the *cutest* girls on the planet. And I use the term *cute* with somber intent. In the adolescent, alluring, but not at all available sense. There was nothing the least bit seductive about these girls. Teasing, yes. Coquettish, yes. But they might as well have been on the moon.

The Japanese girl was more than an enigma for me. She wasn't even a message to decode. In English class I had prompted her for sentences and teased her for more participation. I had gone for walks with her in the park and commented expectantly on the significance of the cranes. I had sat in movie theaters breathing the lingering scent of shampoo and soap and wishing I'd been there outside her bathroom, just an hour before, patiently waiting and holding her towel. But the Japanese girl had not yet invited me into her world, or into her boudoir, and certainly not into her bath.

Now here I am in paradise and this little cutie is most purposefully flashing her boobies at me. And of course, the fact that I can barely take my eyes off of her isn't much appreciated by the women in our group. To be fair, they are gracious enough, considering the circumstances. They participate fully in the conversations we're having, but just a touch more politely than you'd expect. They treat the behavior of us men, and of the girl on stage, to be *most amusing* in a Jane Austen kind of way. In a confidently superior kind of way, albeit a slightly wounded kind of way.

What really sets me off is when the first girl leaves the stage and another one takes her place. The new girl is taller, darker and a bit older, maybe nineteen or twenty and not as attractive. She doesn't hint at dancing, she doesn't even try to match the music. She dances to some other tune in her head, or to no tune at all. But most importantly, she periodically hooks her thumbs under the strap of her bikini bottoms and flips them down below her hips.