

Trusting Bamboo Bridges
by
Katherine Johnson

*For
all those fleeing difficult situations*

*For
all those who aid those fleeing*

*and, of course, for
Peter
the rock upon which all my wobbly ambitions find support*

1. Kelley: Vancouver, May 1998

A child's cry washes in with the swell of wind through the window. It's not a demanding cry, not one asking to be fed or changed, but a whiny, sickly mew. The air smells of magnolias and freshly cut grass, but I can't relax and enjoy it—that fretful crying continues. I open my eyes and immediately shut them against the light searing the curtains. Can no one hear it but me? Why won't someone help that poor child? Opening my eyes properly, I find myself nose to nose with Coconut, my mother's terrier. The dog gives me a sniff, yaps his sharp little bark and runs off.

The wailing has mercifully stopped.

"Are you up darling?" my mother stage-whispers, popping her head around the door.

"What time is it?" I ask, rising onto an elbow and rubbing the crust from my eye.

"It's nine o'clock, sleepy-head. You've had a good long sleep." She perches on the edge of the bed and brushes the hair from my forehead. "You must have needed it, poor thing, but you have to get up now. You've got your interview today, and they want you early for hair and makeup."

"Why can't they just accept me as I am?" I mutter.

"Now, Kelley, I know you're jet lagged but, there's no excuse for snarkiness." Snapping open the curtains, she says, "You've got half an hour."

I fall back onto the pillow, relishing its soft warmth. The unhampered sun spotlights the bookcase adorned with souvenirs from my tours in Africa: a woven basket, a soapstone carving, reminders of past triumphs. Deep in shadow, abandoned on the floor, is my backpack, a reference book, a stack of Geoff's photographs and a child's bed sheet spilling out—things I can't yet address. I turn away, bury my head in the blanket, and drift around the edges of sleep once more.

The child, again, begins to moan.

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We are hustled from the impersonal, glassed-in reception area, past the studio and into the makeup room. Seated in front of a huge mirror, bright lights all around, my face looks pasty and tired. The makeup artist glides in, immediately terrifying me. She's wearing tight leather pants, and a zip-up sweater that barely contains her cleavage. Her hair is bright orange, with a yellow streak through the front, and pancake makeup so thick I can't make out the original texture of her skin.

"Hi," she says cheerily. "My name is Shirley. How are we all today?"

"Good morning," I say politely, placing my hands together below my chin and giving a subtle bow. I hadn't intended to wai, it's just become habit. Shirley gives me a quizzical look.

"She's just gotten back from working with refugees in Thailand, so she's a little tired," chirps my mother, puffed with pride. "Can you do something about the circles under her eyes? Unfortunately, we couldn't get her into the hairdresser this morning. What do you think? Perhaps a little back-combing to hide the split ends?"

"Mom, stop clucking, my hair is fine in a braid. I don't want anything fussy." Why doesn't she go find her seat in the audience?

"Tell you what," says Shirley. "We'll leave it pulled back, but clean it up a bit." She leans across me to reach for a brush and begins taming my unruly hair. Cigarette smoke lingers on her sweater, and I take a deep breath, holding it in my lungs. The smell awakens a soft memory, calming me down.

The floor director comes in as Shirley is engulfing me in a cloud of sticky, acrid hair spray. "Hello Kelley. So glad you could join us on the show today. You'll have six minutes between the makeover queen and the a cappella group. I'll come and get you from the green room in the commercial break. How long, Shirley?"

"I'll need another ten or so. We'll have to do something about the scar, so I'll be a few minutes longer than normal."

I don't want her to cover my scar. The short, livid mark on my cheekbone is a badge of honour to me, a source of inner strength. "Can you keep the makeup light, kind of natural looking? I'm not used to wearing it." And don't want to look like Cleopatra is what I want to add, but swallow it. Shirley has smoky grey eye shadow from lash to brow, and thick, black, cat-like eyeliner.

"I'm sure Shirley will make you look beautiful," my mother scolds lightly.

Why do I need to look beautiful? I want to go out there, and tell the bored housewives watching this show what the real world is like. I want to talk politics and medicine, war and the plight of good people. This is not the first interview I've done, I know that this is not what people want to hear, but it's important. Sadly, the over-processed hosts are likely to gloss over that part, and concentrate on trekking in the exotic jungle, foreign food, and what I missed the most from home. Somewhere along the line, I'm sure, I will be likened to Florence Nightingale, and one of them is sure to proclaim, "You are so amazing!"

I don't feel particularly amazing. In fact, I'm feeling like quite the fraud. I don't want to do this interview any-more. I don't want to talk about Thailand, about the camps, about "how it feels to be home." I want to curl up under my blankets, and make this whole stupid world go away.

2. GEOFF: Bangkok, March 1998

The aircraft doors crack open somewhere well in front of me, and a heady mix of exhaust, spices, and flowers wafts in. As I reach for my carry-on bag, I let the thick humid air engulf me, and breathe in the fragrance of this sweaty, friendly, beautiful country. It's good to finally be back in the magic kingdom of Thailand.

It's been too long since my last holiday here. I miss the warm sand, and soft sunsets. Like so many at the luggage carousel now, I needed only a small suitcase—just big enough to carry a bathing suit and snorkelling gear. In my linen trousers, pressed white shirt, and tie, I'm one of the cleanest-cut backpackers the customs official has seen today. This time my big, traveller's backpack is full of proper clothes, and am carrying my notebook and camera gear. There's not a flip-flop in sight. This time I'm headed to the northern jungle to see Kelley.

The official waves me through with a smile, and I step to the taxi stand, where I give a driver my best “Sawat dii krup.” He returns the greeting and asks in English where I wish to go. I'll be taking the bus north but have missed the last one today, so ask him to take me to the Lotus Hotel on Sukhumvit Road. Normally such a place would be too expensive for my budget, but I'm in Bangkok, the perfect place for a fantastic splurge and a bit of fun. The lobby greets me with soft music, sweet flowers, glass, marble, and sparkle. A group of powerful looking men in tailored suits are conspiring in serious tones, while very young looking girls, in too much makeup, hover nearby. The check-in clerk gives me a haughty look; I am slightly under-dressed for this venue, but I suspect she's seen plenty of farang men come and go, and we arrive in all manner of attire.

After throwing my stuff into my room, changing into a clean shirt, and giving my face a wash, I head out onto the street. Airplane food has never been enough to fill me up, and I am hungry. Twilight is descending, and the heat may be off the day, but sweat immediately starts to form at my temples and trickle down my back. I catch myself bustling along at Hong Kong speed, while everyone along my path is moving in relatively slow motion, so I purposely slow my steps to become one with the river of humanity. The flow meanders past souvenir stalls, antiques shops, and tables of sarongs, knock-off Gucci shoes, and T-shirt seconds. We pedestrians may be moving in slow motion, but we are outdistancing the vehicle traffic with no effort whatsoever. Buses and cars, motorcycles and tuk-tuks are at a standstill, belching acrid fumes, and sending up a cacophony of sound. Rumbles, honks, revs and of course that classic tuk tuk sound that gives the little moto-taxis their name.

I veer into a small side lane and am greeted by absurdly loud Thai pop music, and the throat tickle of frying chilies. Restaurants and clubs line the soi, and street vendors occupy every inch of blank wall. A young woman is chopping juicy pineapple on a small table, and sectioning it into plastic bags, while a grandma next to her gives me a toothless grin from behind a huge vat of bubbling oil—now there's an accident just waiting to happen. I ignore the western fast food chains and their copycats; “The Colonel” has competition here from “Kentucky Cluck”, and pause in front of a large display of fish, a young man touting its freshness in his very best English. His restaurant is half full, and is done up in festive reds and golds, with Christmas lights surrounding the open windows. The cooking smells so good that I go in and order one of the fish

grilled whole with chilies, a plate of chicken with cashew nuts, some fried morning glory greens, and a double portion of rice. To drink, I go native and order a Singha beer. I love that they come very cold and in very large bottles. Given the heat, I'll need the volume just to stay hydrated.

My drink comes, and it hits the spot perfectly.

My food comes, and it dances on my taste buds.

I am one full and happy man.

The air is getting a bit cooler so I decide to take a walk before heading back to the hotel. The street is alive with thumping music spilling out of clubs, and smiling, laughing people. It's only eight p.m., but drunken foreigners are already being dragged down the street by their far from sober buddies. Older men with barrel bellies, and equally thick German accents, are chatting up the bar girls. The call of a whiskey has become too strong to resist, so I choose a happening looking club, and perch myself on an empty bar stool. The lights are low, but the place is alive with chatter and music. On a spot-lit stage is a steady parade of young girls. Some look bored, others nervous, all are dressed in negligees with small numbered disks pinned at their hips. My Catholic upbringing dictates that I should be disgusted, but some of these girls are kinda cute, and I can't help but wonder what it would be like to actually pick one. My Hong Kong girlfriend, Mimi, would be disgusted if she knew I was in a place like this. Horrified might describe it better. I try to shake off the idea. Stuff Mimi and her priggish attitudes, I'll do what I like, thank you very much. Right now, I am in lovely, exotic, mai pen rai, no-worries la-la land and I should take advantage of it. Besides, I am a free man now, too bad for Mimi—she was only interested in having a white boyfriend and if I didn't measure up to her ideals, then that's her loss. Taking a slug of whiskey, I look around. Other guys in the club have girls bouncing on their laps, why not me? I've never done anything like this before, but what's stopping me? I'm not dangerous or anything; I wouldn't do anything to these ladies that they didn't want. It's not like anyone here knows me, right?

No. I'm a good-looking guy; I don't need to pay a woman to be with me. I finish my drink and order another. Like smoke under a closed door, the idea of taking one of these girls home keeps seeping into my brain. I am in the sex capital of Asia, after all.

Someone must have noticed the wavering in my eyes, as I feel a hand gently caress my shoulder. "Hallo mister, what's your name? You looking for date?" I turn into a pair of deep, dark brown eyes, and long flowing hair. She's petite, delicate, honey-coloured, surprisingly well built for a Thai chick, and her leather mini skirt has a disk with #23 on it. That dangerous idea smoke continues to dance and swirl around my ears. Why the hell not, my brain urges.

"Um, Hi ... Geoff ... would you like a drink?" I ask.

Smooth.

"You drink whiskey soda? I drink whiskey soda."

I order her a glass while she settles herself between my knees.

"Misser Geoff, where you from?" The usual questions I presume.

"Canada."

"Ohhh ... my cousin lives in Canada. Ed-mon-ton."

What? Really?

"Wow, a little colder there than here ... heh heh." Okay, lame. But she is running her hand up and down my thigh, and I am developing a raging hard-on. She looks me in the eye, giggles and takes a long, sensuous sip of her cocktail. Oh shit. I am desperately searching for something to say that won't make me sound like a moron. Having decided to let down my moral guard, I'm as jumpy as a schoolboy.

"You have nice eyes," she purrs at me. "Grey, like my pussy ... cat."

I have no words.

"You like show?" she asks.

"What?" I lean in as the music cranks up. She smells of jasmine.

"Show," she yells, pointing towards the stage. She turns and backs herself into me, grinding to the music. I can resist no longer, and put my hands on her hips. The deal is done. I wonder how expensive she is, and who I talk to about taking #23 home with me. The hotel won't give me trouble. This is normal here, right? There is nothing going to stop me now!

And then the show starts.

The magic spell pops; the smoke clears. All fantasy is dashed, and I need to get out of here. The stage lights have come up to reveal a naked couple. She is on her knees, worn out looking, with lanky hair and swinging breasts. He, although undeniably well hung, is skinny and sporting a full back tattoo. Sliding across his shoulders is a large brown snake, which he proceeds to introduce to the woman's genitals. They may as well have turned the house lights on full, and called my mother; reality is back and my skin is crawling. I can't believe what I am seeing. My enthusiasm to be wild is gone, and my moral shield slams back into place; #23 suddenly feels a little sticky to the touch. I down the last of my whiskey, hurriedly tuck a twenty-dollar bill into my little dancer's waistband and excuse myself.

Dejected, I wander back to the hotel. So much for my dalliance into Bangkok's nightlife. Why didn't I choose a different club? I can't stand snakes.

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Biiiiig stretch, the best way to start the day.

Last night's adventure was a little much for this thirty-five-year-old. My eyes are looking a little bloodshot and I swear the crinkles at their corners are deeper than ever. I really have to stop drinking, or at least slow down. Or perhaps just try to avoid Mekong whiskey. Anyway, today's a new day.

I slide on a fresh shirt, and some clean, pressed khaki shorts. Running my hand across my chin, I assess whether a shave is necessary. I think I can get away without one this morning. My room overlooks Sukhumvit Road and I realize that, although my bus north doesn't leave for another two and a half hours, I may need all of it just to get to the station, the traffic looks horrendous. On the advice of the desk clerk I ignore the taxi stand, and rush to the corner of the street, where three motorcycle taxi drivers sit gossiping. I approach the one with the largest looking bike and say, "sathanikhonsong, V.I.P." I try not to make it sound like a question. In Thai, that can change the meaning from "VIP bus station?" to something like "what colour are your curtains?" Luckily the guy understands farang Thai and motions me towards his bike.

"Bus station. Fifty baht," he demands.

"Fifty baht? No, thirty baht, I was told thirty." I love this game and try not to grin.

"Okay, you give me forty baht."

Fair enough, at today's exchange rate that's about two US dollars, give or take.

I firmly strap my backpack on. Not just over my shoulders but clip the waistband as well. My computer bag is across my chest and I squeeze the proffered helmet onto my head. My driver jumps aboard and motions for me to get on. With less than what you would call grace, I swing my leg over the back end of the bike, and plop onto the seat. The combined weight of two people, and all my gear, strains the shock absorbers, but they haven't bottomed out. My driver turns and asks if I am ready.

“Krup.” As ready as I’ll ever be. We shoot into traffic, weaving in, out and around slow-moving vehicles, and somehow manage to be first off the block at every green light. Sudden tail lights require the odd slam-on-the-breaks stop, but luckily we are back heavy and don’t pitch forward. This has to be stupidly dangerous, but it is thrilling, like skiing out of bounds. I am at nose level to the bus exhaust pipes, but so what? I am a fraction of an inch from being whacked by side mirrors, but so what? Go driver Go!

All of the buses heading into northern Thailand leave from the VIP station, so there are a wide variety of people in the crowded waiting room when I arrive. Backpackers, with their dreadlocks and hippie bracelets. Schoolchildren in pressed white blouses and pleated navy blue skirts. There's a lady sitting on a large foam cooler gurgling with live fish, and a man standing alongside her holding a chicken. It's a microcosm of what I love about Asia.

The VIP bus pulls up with a contented sigh. Regular long-distance buses in Thailand can be anything from converted school buses to your standard, although stripped-bare, traveller type. The VIP buses are different animals all together. The moment I step on board this double-decked monster, I enter another world. Music is playing gently as a stewardess greets me and guides me to my extra wide seat. There is just one on either side of the aisle, shaded by a sealed and tinted window. The seats sport doilies on the headrests, while the windows are decorated with lacy curtains. I stow my computer bag beneath the seat in front of me, and, ignoring the safety belt, stretch out my legs. Everyone seems to be aboard so our driver closes the door and pulls away, directly into gridlock—this could be a longer trip than anticipated, but I'm not too concerned about it. Our lovely stewardess is working her way down the aisle, passing out blankets and lunchboxes, complete with tiny sandwiches and desserts. I initially wonder about the blankets as it’s hot as Hades outside, but the air-co has kicked in and goose flesh appears on my skin. Why is it that our bus driver thinks we all want the air-co on full-blast? Is there only one setting? Never mind, I won’t complain. The regular buses may cost a quarter of what this does, but I’d rather this than chicken crap on my leg.

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The first half an hour of this trip has been spent staring mindlessly at the gnarled traffic and nibbling on a disturbingly pink piece of cake, but we are finally starting to pick up some momentum and are well and truly heading out of the city. It's surprising how short a period of time it takes to go from dirty, grey cinder-block buildings to lush, wet paddy fields. The city just ends.

A screen comes down at the front of the bus, and a movie begins to play. This would be a great excuse to avoid the background reading I was planning to do, but I'm seriously disappointed when *Forrest Gump* begins. There’s nothing particularly wrong with this movie, it's just that it's been following me around. On planes, waiting rooms, hotels, restaurants, you name it. It's got to be noted though, of the twelve times I've seen it, never before has it been dubbed into Thai. Obviously the universe is trying to tell me to get to work so I reach for my computer, power her up and hunt for the file named “Kelley.”

Kelley is my only female friend. Well, okay, truth be told, she's my ex-girlfriend. We met in university and had an on-again, off-again relationship for years, until she eventually decided that the off-again times were the better ones. Thus the 'ex' designation. She has spent the past number of years working for a French aid agency in Africa, making no money; a move I don't

understand. With her medical background she could be living someplace glamorous, lucrative, and tax-free like the Middle East, so why does she need to live like a pauper, and work for nothing? I mean, what is she really accomplishing, anyway? She's been writing to me since arriving in Thailand, and I have the impression that she's not adjusting to Asia very well. I tease Kelley about her saviour complex, but for all her abilities, sometimes I think she needs some shoring up, so I managed to convince my editor that I'm due some holiday time. Being so close is the perfect excuse, and I think we could both use some beach-therapy, and perhaps a bit of "on-again" if I'm lucky.

Anyway, about six months ago Kelley began emailing me about this new project she was heading to. I scroll down the list of emails and click the very first one dated 15 September 1997.

Dear G

Well here I am, finally getting to your zone of operation. It's going to be so great to finally be out of East Africa. Five years of blatant corruption and constant tug-of-war has just about worn me out. Right now I run the risk of slapping someone so it's obviously time to go. Although it's a pleasant fantasy, NGOs have a hard time convincing donors and governments of their peace-loving neutrality when their staff is out smacking people around. Ha Ha. Although I haven't had a proper break, a change of scenery will do me good and if Thailand is as great as you keep telling me, this should be a breath of fresh air.

I will be in a place called Mae Sod. It's in the north by the Burmese border. Apparently there are a large number of refugees coming across into Thailand and we will be setting up a camp.

Where there is malaria, there I must go!!

Write you more once I'm in place (sometime next week)

All my love,

K

This is not the email that got me to Thailand. Some of the things she said in her very last correspondence, a fax from December, got me here.

...The camp is swelling with new people straggling in, each one in worse shape than the last. The shit they've gone through I don't even want to imagine. God I hate the Burmese army! My staff is driving me crazy - some days it's a miracle I don't strangle them.

...How can they expect me to work like this? We're underfunded, under-supplied and working in a mud-hole.

... I really really wanted to be home for Christmas this year. I miss the snow in the mountains. I miss the lights. I even miss the stupid Christmas carols playing in the shops. Why did I ever agree to this?

I thought she'd get over it—just a bad patch you know, but after trying for weeks to get a response to my emails and hearing nothing, I decided that it was time to investigate for myself.