

## HARRY & SUKANYA

From: Harry Newguist <HarryNewguist1960@gmail.com>

To: Sweet Thai Lady <Kamchamongkhon78Sukanya@yahoo.com>

Sent: 28 September, 2015, 20:20

Subject: Autumn, divorce

Darling Sukanya

It's a trap maybe, I'm too old to really learn, but I'm going to improve my Thai while I'm in limbo here in Milton Keynes. I've found just the right little book and audio CD already. Yes, that means another book, and you don't understand why I like books so much. They scare you and you don't even like the way the paper smells. But think of O'Toole's apartment. Don't you like that big bookshelf along his living room wall, from a purely decorative point of view? I think it's a great room with the books there to relieve all that regulation white paint Thai apartments have. What I want for an apartment is a gentleman's tropical library, but there'd be no joy in that gentleman's tropical library without you in the picture, laid across a sofa, texting on your mobile phone. Would it interest you to furnish an apartment with me? We could run down to that place on Pattaya Nua, that open warehouse of Thai furniture where they lay out carved work and huge pots along two hundred metres of the highway pavement. Women have such fun designing their interiors in England. Let's see if you enjoy it.

So, early retirement from the tax office. I have my son on alternative weekends (he's miserable, he doesn't understand why his mother and I had to divorce). I have a ground-floor rented flat, the living room is damp and the furniture seems to have belonged to a Polish émigré who brought it across from Warsaw: heavy dark-wood pieces. Outside, a sodden untended lawn and a magpie stealing about under a bare apple tree. I can tell you my heart lifts just to think of Thailand: the fretwork teak wall hangings, the layered gilded temple rooftops, the silks. We can have it all, Sukanya: no more bare hotel rooms or bare apartments. But we mustn't go mad. I'm thinking of John's apartment we both laughed at:

regulation concrete walls outside, inside some fantasy of an aristocrats' nineteenth century opium den. By the way, O'Toole and your cousin Noi had a big fight, did you hear?

You know, O'Toole and I used to spend all our holidays travelling, when we were both young, and before we each married, and Thailand was our favourite destination where our rigorous field trips ended in relaxation in Pattaya. We both loved to throw off our tax office jobs, travel seriously, make a start at learning Thai, learning the culture. We were serious scholars of a sort. We got to know Pira Sudham, the Thai writer. Then I married Pat in England, became the regular guy, and O'Toole moved to Pattaya permanently and married your cousin.

O'Toole will laugh at me now, divorced. I told you so,' he is going to say, 'you should have married a Thai like me.

I've hurt Pat. I've hurt my son. I've not been able to fit the mould. Let me say it like this: the tax office and a regulation middle-class life were just too much, one on top of the other. What a mess!

Will you sit down and improve your English writing while I study Thai? You speak so well. I know your education finished early, you haven't been near a classroom for years and you plead stupidity. I'm simple, you say. I don't know anything. Don't ask me about Thaksin or Abhisit. All I know is Thaksin good for people. Then you disappear behind the bar counter to avoid further conversation in that vein. Well, as I always tell you, you are very smart. By the way, I know you won't have patience as a Thai teacher. I shall have to find some old lady to help me. And I will always sound like a simpleton in Thai, however long I study.

I'm reading a book called 'Bangkok: The Story of a City' with great enthusiasm. Did you ever go to Ayutthaya, the kingdom's old capital? Let me guess, you went on a school trip and you remember a wearisome number of old stones. Promise me you'll come to the ruins of Ayutthaya with me. It is in my imagination now. Listen to this account by a visiting French prelate in 1730 named the Abbé de Choisy:

"Directors of The East India Company compare Ayutthaya to London. I stood in admiration of a great strong city seated on an island around which flowed a river three times the size of the Seine. There were moored ships from France, England, Holland, China and Japan, and barges rowed by sixty men, and elephants in gold slippers onshore. The court life, the decorative art, is unrivalled

in Europe. The atmosphere of pomp is such as the Pharaohs once enjoyed, and we find too the essentially frivolous gaiety that distinguishes the Thais from other races. Some of the men at court have gold bells implanted inside their testicles, while a mania for double-jointedness tortures their women.”

How proud you Thais must be of your Ayutthaya. And then Bangkok itself. I’m reading that it started very beautifully. After the Burmese sacked Ayutthaya many stones were saved and brought down the river. They reproduced the same canals and temples and royal palaces. The City of Angels was born. But Bangkok today? It’s a bad joke to call it the Venice of the Orient, considering all those stinking black canals full of rubbish and the slum housing along the banks.

Well, let us take a Venetian gondolier upriver from Bangkok to Ayutthaya, or whatever modern craft we can find – a longboat with a propeller whizzing at the end of a shaft.

Is this letter very dull? You must be thinking, What is this Englishman talking about? So email me back, when you have time. Nothing long. One sentence of yours is worth ten of mine.

Am I too old for you? I am 55, you are 27. Yes, I must be.

Love Harry

From: Sweet Thai Lady <Kamchamongkhon78Sukanya@yahoo.com>

To: Harry Newguist <HarryNewguist1960@gmail.com>

Sent: 29 September, 2015, 04.13

Subject: Re: Autumn, divorce

Hello Harry

I never go Ayutthaya. My mother father go before. You learn Thai ok but I know I not patient sorry, you right. I miss you too much. No need keep talk your age you ok not too old. When you come, what day? Yes, I know Noi and O’Toole fight. Every time same fight. O’Toole not want go home Noi in Khon Kaen. He want stay Pattaya. Noi angry, say he party too much, not understand he must take care family she. Noi go home alone now. Beckham is golden balls. Please put gold

bell in ball before come, good idea. I never hear that. I think you all day and night.  
Miss you too much, so sad wait for you.

Love  
Sukanya

**Six weeks later . . .**

From: Harry Newguist <HarryNewguist1960@gmail.com>  
To: Sweet Thai Lady <Kamchamongkhon78Sukanya@yahoo.com>  
Sent: 14 November, 2015, 10.45  
Subject: Bali

Dear Sukanya,

So, a long-planned holiday in Bali finally took place, for my son and I, and I have this diary for you. As I mentioned before my son's name is Joe and he's eleven. I have to praise Pam for the job she is doing on his upbringing. He is growing into a polite and charming boy.

Day 1: we check the tourist books as we want to take a day-trip, and decide to go to Ubud and see the temple in the jungle with the monkeys. Joe asks why every word in Bali starts with a U: Ubud, Udeng, Uluwatu. We think of U words in English and agree we don't like them: Urine, Utensil, Useless.

The temple grounds are extensive and divided by a gulch. There are many huge trees wrapped in creepers. There are old stone carvings which the jungle has grown over. And the monkeys are everywhere, jumping on tourists' heads and grabbing bananas out of people's pockets – to nervous laughter.

Joe: Who's in charge here, the monkeys or the humans?

Me: The humans, of course.

Joe: I doubt the monkeys see it that way.

Me: I see what you mean. With your mother I used to consider myself the man of the house. But she was really in charge.

Joe: Is that why you divorced?

Me: You can say it was one reason. Not that I am calling your mother a monkey. (We snicker.)

Joe: In a war, we could machine-gun the monkeys with AK47s. Until then I think they are in charge.

Day 2: At breakfast in the morning in our hotel, in the garden enclosed by accommodation wings, we see many kites high in the sky. We noticed them yesterday too. They go sky high. And they are big. Lovely, we both think. Then, in the streets, national flags are everywhere, very large ones flying in the breeze. A national holiday is coming up we are told. Odd fact: The national flags of Singapore, Poland and Indonesia are the same: a panel of red, a panel of white. We see so many temples and stone carvings about town. I can't think of anywhere with a closer daily relationship to its arts and crafts than Bali.

Day 5: My son has taken three surfing lessons now. I sit on the beach under a tree, reading a guide-book, occasionally looking up and narrowing my eyes in the sunlight. Joe says the waves are eating him but he is going to keep trying. He loves his instructor. We like Balinese men. We saw a dance on a cliff top. All the dancers were men. Their skin colour is Polynesian. They have strong upper bodies and tattoos but they move gently. This surf instructor my son loves has a glow like the island itself.

Day 7: A galling holiday experience arrives.

11am: We change money

2pm: I pay the hotel bill and realise I'm short. We remember the money changer, a teenage boy, counting out all the notes in front of us on a desk hardly more than a piece of flotsam from the beach (an unlicensed business in an alley). Fourteen piles of twenty that he put in front of me to check myself and recount. But somehow I've ended up short. So many notes because the rupiah is a weak currency.

4pm: After a nap I check my money again and am sure I am short. We go to the hotel reception desk and tell our story, asking for the address of the local police station. They tell us they will send two members of staff with us to the money changer to get the rest of our money. It seems every young money-changer in Bali knows a clever sleight of hand to cheat customers. Joe and I take our motorbike, the bell boy and the security chief followed us in another. We know and like the bell boy. He is a tall broad-shouldered young man and the hotel uniform suits him, particularly his raffish *udeng* bandanna. These *udeng* are Hindu head-ware but all the hotels borrow them for their uniforms, along with batik panel shirts and white trousers. At the money changers the boy's cheeks flare up with embarrassment. He surmises the situation with amazing rapidity. His one-eyed companion slinks away. I say I am missing three million rupiah. He counts out three new piles and hands them over. Joe seizes them with a grin.

5pm: I insist on going to make a report with the tourist police. We switch to a hotel car. The traffic is terrible and the tourist police station is far out of town. Why put a tourist police station where no one can get to it? We try to chat with the bell boy but he is constrained, his English not so good. Obviously he feels we are guests and he is the bell boy. At the tourist police building we find three policemen in uniform behind the desk. The one who speaks English is particularly dark-skinned and his eyes are not friendly.

Policeman: Don't worry, sir, our undercover agents are investigating the unlicensed currency-exchange shop right now.

Me: How do you know which one it is, there are hundreds?

Policeman: Our agents are very skilled.

Me: My son took a photo. Look, it's in the alley next to Surfer Bill's.

Policeman (looking briefly at the picture Joe took): Thank you. Now, if you want an investigation, the three million rupiah is needed for evidence.

Me: Evidence?

Policeman: Yes, evidence. That is the law of our country. If you would like to give me the money, you can contact your consulate when you return to your homeland and after the proceedings are finished arrangements can be made about its return.

Me: So you want me to give you my money?

Policeman: Yes, sir.

Me: (taking the three million out of my pocket and waving it angrily at him)  
There! You've seen it. Write your own affidavit and give that to the judge.

Policeman (unperturbed): I'm sorry, the law of every country must be specific. The law of our country says the evidence must be deposited with the court before the investigation can start.

Me (essaying calm now): I don't think we can agree about the meaning of the word evidence. It's money in my pocket, hardly evidence – circumstantial evidence of a sort perhaps, but I hardly see why I should surrender it.

Policeman: I know sir, not every country agrees about the meaning of the word evidence. In our country we have our meaning.

Me: Come on, Joe, let's get out of here and continue our holiday. We are done here.

7pm: We get back to the hotel and hand out tips to the hotel staff and a double tip to the bell boy and the security chief, which gives us some pleasure before we go wearily up to our room to refresh ourselves before supper.

Day 8: Joe is not talking to me. He is missing his mother.

Day 9: Joe is still not talking to me. While he goes surfing (he's safe with the instructor), I go inland to the émigré art town, Ubud, where old goats from Europe came in the fifties to paint Cubism and Gauguin primitivism, and take the local women as their mistresses.

Day 10: On the beach Joe is triumphant. He is riding the surf, gliding along like a dolphin, no longer being pulverised in a tumble-dryer. We stay all day, knowing we are at the bitter end of the holiday. We feel nostalgic for the sand under our feet. At twilight we hear shouting and see a crowd drawn to the water's edge. Something is going on. Joe wants to investigate but I decide it's time for us to go back to the hotel. Later we learn a man has been beaten to death, a newcomer from inland, a wanderer. He picked up someone's belongings and a deck-chair woman saw him do it. He swam out to sea to avoid her. The vigilantes gathered and waited patiently and when he was exhausted and came ashore they beat him to death. They are all Hindu here, so perhaps it was his low caste that did for him.

Day 11. We fly home.

Love Harry

From: Sweet Thai Lady <Kamchamongkhon78Sukanya@yahoo.com>  
To: Harry Newguist <HarryNewguist1960@gmail.com>  
Sent: 14 November, 2015, 08:20  
Subject: Re: Bali

Hello Harry.

In my bar I hear so many story holiday. Why foreigner always have holiday too much?

I see my son, Raki, everyday. With my son I never go holiday, only go sometime Big Buddha in Pattaya on the hill. We both light incense, kneel down, made a wai to the Buddha and talk to him. I don't know what my son say, but I ask Buddha keep my family safe and give many good luck my family.

When you come Thailand now? I very busy Christmas. Don't come before Happy New Year or you not like it I know.

Big kiss for you son Mr Joe.

Love Sukanya.

**Another six weeks on . . .**

From: Harry Newguist <HarryNewguist1960@gmail.com>  
To: Sweet Thai Lady <Kamchamongkhon78Sukanya@yahoo.com>  
Sent: 24 December, 2015, 22.00  
Subject: North East Thailand. I'm here!



Dearest Sukanya,

I don't know what I am doing in Thailand. I am alone, a ridiculous old fool. You told me you were not free at Christmas but I told you a Milton Keynes Christmas without you would be unbearable, so I would come anyway and make a visit to your Isaan province in the North East, to Buriram, where I would knock on the door and pay homage to my long-time correspondent and friend, that modest little writer (as he calls himself), Pira Sudham. When I got to Buriram, I took a room at the Peprachorn Hotel and the next day hired a driver. We took the long drive to Napo in a flat-bed truck, on straight, slightly raised roads, across the Plain of Buriram, which we found drying out at the end of the wet season. A motionless elephant under a tree. Eucalyptus plantations. Dry rice fields in the care of a few philosophical buffalo. Pira Sudham has made it all beautiful in his sharply-drawn and poetic prose. I've been known to grow jealous of the deprivations of life here, reading from a comfortable chair in anaesthetised England. But even ten years ago Napo was not what was written, no longer Pira's village of the plain, with forests to be foraged for mushrooms, and frogs to be hunted in the mud cracks after rain. The village has disappeared into a town and the centre of gravity has moved from the temple to the Tesco Lotus. I suppose every village in Isaan has been visited by the same accretions. Pira's wooden house has not altered though, in its dirt lane. His elderly mother – she has not changed, aged but seemingly ageing no further – met me at the door. Pira was in England, she said, stuck there fighting the Immigration authorities. So that was it. He was not there and you were not by my side. The driver took me back. I was despondent and beginning to feel unwell.

The next morning I engaged the same driver, a young man who seems to have no worry in the world, and we pushed on to visit Phanon Rung, a Khmer ruins that I think you know. You always tell me your first language is Khmer not Thai and I say the strength of you Isaan girls is traceable directly back to that old Khmer civilisation slap bang in North East Thailand, when the boundary line between Thailand and Cambodia did not exist. So I picked my way around the old stones, but I did not feel well. I looked out at the horizon and reminded myself that Ankor Wat, the greatest Khmer ruins of them all, was only fifty kilometres of

jungle away. But no, the visit was not a success: there were no guides; the site was not well-kept. There were some noisy people from Bangkok taking photographs. There were places where people were eating and drinking in the shade. Toothless old ladies lay under trees selling fruit. I was dizzy and out of sorts.

The next day I couldn't leave my hotel bed. I was feverish. I lay there sweating and moaning. It occurred to me I might die. I did not answer the door and when the chambermaid came in to clean I reared out of bed scaring her away. Many old foreigners die alone in hotel rooms in Thailand.

Two days disappeared. Medics must have come and stretchered me out. I found myself in a clean hospital room. Lovely nurses in crisp uniforms bustled around me. I felt better and the doctor, a young Thai who had studied in Birmingham, told me I was out of danger. A bug and an ambush from the heat, he said tactfully. General decrepitude, he may have been thinking. In a few days I had got to know the corridors. It was a new, out-of-town private hospital, staff well outnumbering patients. What a young economy yours is, I reflected. Still a tiger economy. And air conditioning has largely solved the heat, at least where indoor work is concerned. Gregorian BC and AD were never the right markers for Asia. You know my joke, there are two eras here, before air conditioning and after air conditioning.

Back in health, my crisis of the heart seemed to have passed. I found I was no longer angry with you, Sukanya, and I am not angry with you now. I am simply grateful to be inside this beautiful province of yours.

I convalesced at my hotel and took short walks around the town, a little further each day. What sort of town it is? I don't know. A provincial capital. A quiet town with wide streets, rickshaws for hire at street corners, long black ditches of rubbish, sinuous tropical trees that fling out canopies of greenery. And at noon the place is a furnace. I found the quarter where foreigners come at dusk to uncap bottles of beer in bamboo bars. I found the town's red-light district, which neither troubled nor frightened me: the lovelies said *hello, where you go?* and I replied, *I go eat* and forgot them at the next corner. I found the full-windowed restaurants whose relation to American fast-food chains is unmistakable despite local Thai signage, where the young people congregate in the evenings, leaving a dense thicket of parked mopeds outside. And, best of all, I found a monument at a road junction, a marvellous full-sized bronze of a fighting

elephant in full charge, carrying ten soldiers on its basket armed with spears and bows. This public monument, towering over the traffic on a plinth, arrested me. It showed me Buriram connected to its Khmer past. It was dusk so I sat on a stone wall, deeply impressed by that magnificent elephant. Yes, my little idea is not so far fetched. You Khmers were in dominion over every creature from the South China Sea to the Andaman Sea, and now darling, it is the turn of us foreigners to be enslaved, surrendering everything to love. I'm afraid a tear escaped me, a silly old fool in love with a place (because it is your home-town, Sukanya), an old fool of one ruined empire looking on the monument to another.

So now I will wait for you optimistically. How wonderful it will be to see you.

Love Harry

WhatsApp Message System.

25<sup>th</sup> December 2015

Sukanya Kamchamongkhon 0.43 am

Happy Christmas, Harry. I drunk. Where you now?

I read you email. I understand little, but thank you you write me. I in Bangkok now Harry. Get drunk with friend in Sevvia Hotel Bar. What you do?

Maybe you asleep already. Did you really go Buriram, my home? You crazy, darling. Nothing for foreigner there. Only buffalo. People buffalo. Me buffalo. That what Bangkok people call Buriram people. Buffalo.

Sukanya Kamchamongkhon 2.33 am

Now we Patpong, French Kiss Bar. Harry, I not understand everything you email, but I know you serious. Thank you so serious. I only want one man in my life, he take care me, I take care he.

Are you sleeping, Harry? I drunk, Harry, and so sad now and angry about many thing in my life. I know you tell me what you feel. Foreigner life so strange. You want me tell you how I feel? I know you say before you want to know. Ok. I tell you now.

I have two son, Harry, not one. I never tell you before. That why I stay Bangkok now, see my son who live in Austria. His father Mike. We marry before then we separate. He take my son Austria. Good for him he say, good school in Austria, grow up in Europe not Thailand. It make me sad but I say ok. Now my son he seven, handsome boy too much, very shy me. He not comfortable have mother who not speak English good I think and he no like speak Thai any more. Mike so serious. Big job. Already marry again. They don't want laugh, enjoy, play game, like me. But my son I know he love me. But he don't know what to think him mum look like nightclub singer, sleep late, party every night. I sad now, Harry. I think I stupid buffalo. They all fly Samui Island tomorrow with other friend. I invite but I don't know if go.

I never hear Napo before, Harry, or Pira Sudham. My village call Rothong. My mama papa there. You want go there with me? I don't know if you like. It one hour from Buriram. Before we have three pig and pond with catfish and four rice field. Now I send money they not use land, keep only pig and chicken. I always happy there. Raki stay there now, not with me.

Long time ago, my first husband, Raki father, is Thai man but he leave me. I have to take care Raki alone. I have to leave Isaan, go work in Bangkok. I work long time Thai Massage but money no good. Work there many year and my son stay long-time mama papa not with me. You only foreigner understand, Harry. You right. Khmer lady very strong. Thai man no good. I know you no like I say that. You say it impossible all Thai man bad. But it true.

Mike the Austrian, he change, he not so serious before. You want know why we divorce? Ok, I tell you. This funny. Because we live in big house Pattaya and he drink every day and when he drink he go upstairs and come back dress in my clothes. He take my lipstick. He act like ladyboy. He love walk in high heels,

shake his arse. Sometime funny for me, but sometime not funny. I don't want husband same like that. Now this week he not drink and you never guess he secret ladyboy. It funny you see him in lobby big hotel in good clothes and cannot believe he drunk ladyboy before in Pattaya.

I look side of my face at our son see if he ladyboy. I think no. I don't care if he ladyboy, only want to know.

We go to eat now, Harry. Something crazy spicy.

Sukanya Kamchamongkhon 5.05 am

Before I not drunk. I think I drunk but I not drunk. Now I drunk. We in basement nightclub, Nana Hotel. We all wear Santa hat. My friend so funny. I understand she all, we same, easy come, easy go. We like spend money, party. Forget everything, have good time. If want eat steak, eat steak. If want eat oyster, eat oyster. It so funny now and we meet funny foreigner. They all so crazy. They want us go back their hotel room, but I not go. Harry, I wait you answer. If you want, I come Buriram tomorrow. You want, Harry? I take care for you, Mr Harry from England. I want we go temple, I want see mama, papa and Raki.

Sukanya Kamchamongkhon 7.05 am

Time to sleep. Good night Harry. It hot sunny day already but where I stay now everybody start to sleep, everybody party before. We all sleep on floor with curtain closed in room with fan. My friend Ann already roll over and put face she in my chest. Her breath sweet. She take drug and drink too much.

Harold Newguist 7.14 am

Sukanya, don't sleep. Sawadee-cap! I'm awake. Let me put on my glasses and quickly read your messages.

Harold Newguist 7.24 am

I believe you are already fast asleep.

Yes. Please take domestic flight to Buriram when you wake up. I will be at the airport waiting for you.

### Four months on . . .

From: Harry Newguist <HarryNewguist1960@gmail.com>

To: Joe Newguist <Joe\_NewguistNewguist@gmail.com>

Sent: 24 April, 2016, 09.15

Subject: ☺

My darling Joe,

I want you to know I miss you and think of you every day. Divorce is a terrible thing, worse than death someone said. I know you are cross with me for going to live in Thailand where I cannot use the visitation allowance the courts allocated, those weekends you could come to Milton Keynes. But we were neither of us happy on those weekends were we? For self-preservation I had to kick over the traces and try something new.

So, Brian, this guy your mother has started seeing, is ok is he? And he has two children of his own, who are both older than you. Well, let's be positive about that. You mum's happiness means something to both of us, right? You might get a second dad out of this and that's got to have its advantages, hasn't it? Your mum loves you and that won't change, you'll always be the most important thing to her, and I hope I'll always be Dad No 1, right? Let's look forward to our next holiday. Bali was great. Now come and try surfing on the West coast here, at Krabi or Phuket, and polish your tricks. I told Raki about your surfing and he wants to

learn from you. He is shy and curious to meet you. And Sukanya says there's a king-size bed with Thai silk sheets just waiting for you.

You liked my spaghetti in Milton Keynes but here I can't get near the kitchen. Sukanya's cousin, Tik, has the rule of it. He's a quiet old guy with a deep old tan and loose clothes. The cupboards and the fridge are full of stuff you wouldn't believe, no end of strange smells, things dug up in the country or fermented in the market. We eat a lot of rice and addictively hot Thai dishes. A great deal of the chatter in the household is about food.

Well, that's the kitchen. The house we're renting is in a secure village outside Pattaya, across from the railway tracks and the expressway. This area has schools, golf courses, missionary establishments, car mechanics, and all the usual detritus of the Asian roadside. Raki picks up the school bus every morning in his smart little uniform and brings his homework home every afternoon. We have a pool and some land of sharp grass and it's my job to teach everybody to swim. Sukanya's parents are here too, they occupy the second bedroom. I'm not sure of their future intentions because they sold their three pigs and brought their chickens with them, which are now in the yard. It's something to watch Tik catch one and wring its neck. Every morning the parents go to Tesco Lotus in their pickup. Well, I bought it for them, as *sinsod*, the necessary gift to the parents of the bride. Where foreigners are concerned, *sinsod* is always a truck. They must have had a truck before from Sukanya's earlier marriage. Perhaps they drove that one into a ditch. This one has TOYOTA in big letters across the tail and Sukanya's dad is almost too small to see over the steering wheel, but they drive to the Tesco every morning and hang out there. Then there are two more of Sukanya's cousins living with us, who are less to my liking, overweight layabouts up from Buriram who are supposed to be getting jobs in Pattaya, but who watch television all day, turn up my AC up and drink my beer. I shall have to have a word with Sukanya about them. I had dreams of the particular way I would live in Thailand. My study lined with bookcases. Sukanya and I picking up bric-à-brac in the markets. It hasn't quite worked out like that.

Luckily I have somewhere to let off steam. O'Toole runs a small tax office on Beach Road. Next-door is a bar where his friends collect in the evening. They all say it. You must be prepared to adjust to succeed here. So I'm trying.

I didn't tell you much about the wedding. You were sorely missed. O'Toole came up, otherwise it was an all-Thai affair. Old women began cooking at dawn outside Sukanya's shack home, using hired equipment to make cauldrons of rice and curry, and the men crept in from every direction to get started on the wedding beer and whisky. Sukanya came out in her white wedding dress. I watched her negotiate the four uneven steps – as a kid I suppose she jumped them whole – and my heart turned over: she looked lovely. We walked as a party to the Buddhist temple for the ceremony. Afterwards, the whole village stayed for music and games. It was quite a day. I'll send you a CD of their Isaan *molam* music. I've grown to like it. Electric guitars and hand-held organs (very ugly things sprouting black pipes), a five-note scale, weird quarter tones, drums, singing . . .

Then I took Sukanya for a quiet weekend in Pattaya. We chose this house and moved in. And Joe, Sukanya's pregnant now. You're going to have a new brother or sister in six months' time, a brother or sister who will be half Thai, half British. I hope you are pleased. Am I ready to be a father again? Yes, but only because there are so many helping hands around.

Let me tell you seriously, Joe, these new arrangements link you to Thailand and, looked at the right way, can be a blessing. You and Raki should become friends. He already speaks English better than his mum. Don't underestimate Thailand. We are proud to be British but here they are equally proud to be Thai. If we assume that Thai history is not a patch on ours it's only because we know nothing of the Rama kings, or the Khmer empire, common currency among schoolchildren here. If you hear negative things about Thailand from your mother – she might say all sorts of things, particularly about Pattaya – just remember she doesn't mince her words and has a lot of hurt to get out. Really, Joe, this is a wonderful country for all its faults. Thais have a way of enjoying themselves and who can say that is a bad thing? Sukanya and I are laying out a future intended partly for you. I am your father and always will be. Allow a tiny idea plant itself inside your head, of living here. But mum's the word on that for now as Pat would oppose it furiously.

We must all count our blessings. In Milton Keynes I was finished, I felt like one of the apples rotting under the tree. Now my bones are revitalised. For you, Joe, I'll always be the same old dad, don't worry about that, but there's something good here, believe me – stop your ears to anything said contrary. You'll see for



yourself. Let's count the days until our next holiday, and in the meantime I hug and kiss you every day.

Do your schoolwork, son, and be good to your mother,

Love Dad