

First Prize Mom Tri's Boathouse Writing Contest

Responsibilities by Alex Mellor, Thailand

Nick knew about wind heat, he knew what the signs were when his body was telling him that it would be a good idea to cool down; dry nostrils, eyes going slightly out of focus and, worst of all, a mild sense of vertigo, not recommended when going at any speed on two wheels. These physical indicators had happened before, and been a source of alarm, but after 8 years of living and riding a bike in Thailand, he knew what was happening and felt no sense of concern, awareness yes, concern no, not today, at least not for the time being.

Nick was going to work, a journey of about 20k. He taught English to students at a Rajaphat, a Thai vocational college for the Airline, Hotel, Local Government and Tourism staff of tomorrow. He loved both these aspects of his life, the Rajaphat he had been part of for 8 years and motoring through Thailand on the bike he called Jezebel.

Today though, wasn't about teaching, it was the middle of the summer break and there were no students to teach. Today, he was going in to work to see Jiraporn, a Thai lecturer he worked with. She had phoned and asked if he would help her with some English translation for the new training restaurant. Nick had no problems with this, a 40k ride through wonderful countryside, interrupted only by a meeting with a very attractive woman, wasn't his idea of a hard time. Okay, it was hot, very hot, but he loved the ride and he knew what he was doing, most of the time.

Nick was practical, but the daily routine he went through with Jezebel may have appeared to the unaware that he was slightly deranged. To Nick it was all about being a responsible biker. As well as the usual oil and brake fluid checks, he broke off a small twig from a nearby bush and lifted the chain, if it gave too much, then he would get it tightened. Then he would rub his palm over the tyres, this was simply to make sure that no stones had lodged in the tread and at the same time he could check the dust caps on the valves. Should they come off, any small stone could get in and possibly wedge itself, causing a slow loss of air and ultimately real difficulty steering. The final part of the routine was Nick standing astride the bike, engaging the front brake lever while pushing all his weight forward on the handle bars. If the front brake had a problem, it would move, if it hadn't, it wouldn't. As always, it didn't and having completed this performance he pushed the electric start. Jezebel responded with her usual muffled growl. She was as ready as he was.

This trip into work held no surprises. He had made it over a thousand times and knew it so well he could probably do a fair part of it with his eyes closed, but he didn't. The journey started with a 3k ride out of town, then up a steep climb, culminating in a sharp 'S' bend which left him on the plateau between the mountain range bordering Myanmar and the Gulf of Thailand. Here Nick always said hello to Buddha. It had become a ritual he performed at his oasis of sanity in a desert of mayhem. There was a collection of spirit houses that overlooked the sea where nearly all Thai drivers sounded their horns. Nick didn't, but he did have two small mantras he spoke, 'Hi Buddha, Hi Boys, have a good one!' on the way into work

and 'Hi Buddha, Hi Boys, thanks for that, it's been a good one, long may it continue and improve, for everyone, including me!' on the way home. He was not deeply religious, not in the generally accepted way. Nick believed in God, but he felt that religions were man made and more often than not led to conflict of some kind or other. His belief was that God, or Buddha, or Jesus, or Mohammed was in everyone, and that we should all be responsible for the actions we had any control over, leaving the 'higher beings' time to work out the problems that no individual could alter. He also felt that to remind us of their power, serenity and grace, God, Buddha etc. had put on Earth animals reflecting this. Whales in the sea, Swans in the sky and in Thailand they had given us Elephants. These were the boys that Nick spoke to, along with Buddha, twice a day. Once on the plateau it was about another 5k of country roads, along these he rarely went above 60kph, and often a lot less, but after turning left on to the main road, he could up it to 70 or 80. Another 3k brought him to the lights at the junction of the dual carriageway that bypassed the coastal resorts. By this time he knew he only had about 6 or 7 minutes, travelling at 90kph, before he reached the Rajaphat. The ride was a joy.

Jiraporn was getting out of her Toyota as Nick approached the car park. She smiled as he guided the bike next to her car. They knew each other well, they had both started their jobs there at the same time and, apart from a couple of years when Jiraporn had studied for her Masters at Chiang Mai University, they had worked hand in glove since. She was a very beautiful woman and at 33, could easily be mistaken for being 10 years younger, unlike Nick, who at 47, often felt 10 years older.

They exchanged pleasantries as they strolled along the tree lined path by the side of the lake. The Rajaphat had decided to refurbish the old boathouse, asking Jiraporn to take responsibility for the opening a new training restaurant and it was here that the pair got down to working on menus and signs for the project. After Jiraporn had unlocked the new doors to get in, they went to the reception area where they worked, the only people in the place. Someone had left a box of cruets, salt, pepper, wooden toothpicks, that sort of thing, on the reception desk. Nick picked it up with the intention of putting it into the storeroom, but promptly dropped it when he saw a scorpion crawl out. Jiraporn laughed, and then helped him as he put the spilled contents back in, very carefully. After that moment of excitement, Nick went out for a cigarette while Jiraporn went back to her car to get her phone, which she had left there. After fifteen minutes, Jiraporn said they had completed all that she had wanted to do, which didn't surprise Nick too much, she often thought work would take longer than it did, so they locked up and returned to the car park.

Having said their farewells, Nick was back on the dual carriageway, hot air blowing under his sunglasses and down the sides of his helmet. He knew it was a scorcher of a day, and even now could feel his nostrils were dry, but he was okay, he was aware of the signs. If the truth be known, his mind was on Jiraporn. He didn't really know what to make of his thoughts about her, let alone begin to imagine what hers were about him.

In their second year at the Rajaphat, they had become very close, so close that, after a couple of months, Jiraporn had moved into Nick's house. It was wild, magnificent and a complete secret. They had told no one at work, and that had proved to be a very wise move. They had done everything together, including

travelling around on Jezebel; he had even asked her if she wanted to learn to ride. She had politely declined, but still enjoyed watching him going through his routine and the way he took care of her. After 3 weeks, Nick realised that as much as he wanted this woman, loved her, adored her, it was never going to work. He had been living for more than 12 years as a single man, and he had gotten used to it. Having anyone around, for more than a couple of days, became intolerable for him. There had been many tears, but Jiraporn accepted Nick's explanation as the truth it was. They had carried on working together for a couple of months, until she went to Chiang Mai for her Masters. They didn't see each other or make contact for over two years and when she returned, their working lives resumed and nothing was ever said about the past. Nick however, knew he had made a mistake. He was always thinking about her, rarely having a day when he didn't inwardly kick himself. If real happiness was achieved by two people being together, then he knew he had destroyed that option with Jiraporn, forever. Today was becoming another 'kick yourself' day.

The spirit houses were coming up, about a kilometre away and Nick was straining his eyes to make them out. He was as hot as he had ever been and thought he should slow down a little, so he did, a little. He was sure his balance was okay, but also thought that's just when your balance probably isn't. He checked the speedometer, 40kph, just about right for the 'S' bends.

'Hi Buddha, Hi Boys' he said as he approached the familiar spot.

'Thanks for that, it's been a good one', he banked slightly to the right going into the first of the turns.

'Long may it continue and improve', Nick straightened up for the left-hander.

'For everyone, inclu..... what the hell'

Everything happened so fast, he had banked left, but the back end of the bike didn't respond. Instead, the machine just seemed to want to carry on into the ground. With adrenalin fuelled strength he pulled up on the handlebars, while throwing his weight through his hips and knees against the inclination that Jezebel was determined to take him. Both he and the bike went off the side of the road, onto a pile of boulders four metres below. Nick and Jezebel parted company, Nick hitting a rock the size of a car, he was crumpled and broken. Jezebel bounced off the next rock, hit a tree and fell back, coming to rest about a metre from Nick, her engine screamed for a few seconds, then went silent, the fractured fuel line unable to provide for the carburettor.

Nick didn't feel any hurt, he didn't feel anything. He was aware of silence and of Jezebel, her back wheel slowly turning. He thought he heard a sound, the magnificent trumpeting of elephants, wading through a lake, cascading water everywhere and loving life. The wheel had stopped and he could see that the valve cap wasn't there. Instead he saw a small piece of wood, the broken end of a toothpick that had been wedged there.

The majesty of the elephants continued as they made their way through the lake, turning to Nick, calling him to join them. Their procession, their regatta, their journey was his for the taking. He once more saw the sliver of wood and his eyes closed.

Jiraporn pulled up outside her home, thinking of Nick of course, but now more concerned with what her mother had to say as she approached her. 'She's been at it again,' said the older woman, 'she just won't stop riding that bike on the main road. When are you going to tell her that it is dangerous at this time of day? It's too hot.'

'I think she knows', Jiraporn replied, while thinking that her daughter had learnt nearly everything a 5 year old could learn about bikes. Jiraporn smiled, she was going to teach her little girl all about being responsible.