



BY MATTHEW POWER



**AFTER THE FLOOD:** A decorative maiden, her hands folded in the traditional Thai greeting of *wai*, keeps a lonely vigil among the ruins of Khao Lak, Thailand, on December 28, 2004.

## Diary of a Tsunami Volunteer

**AFTER THE DECEMBER 26 DISASTER, MANY FOREIGNERS FLED THE ADVENTURE HUBS OF COASTAL THAILAND, BUT A DEDICATED CORPS OF TRAVELERS ARRIVED TO HELP**

### JANUARY 2: KHAO LAK

Nearly a mile from the high-tide line, a 70-foot Thai navy vessel is moored neatly at the edge of a tropical forest. Someone with a keen sense of the absurd has tossed a hawser around a palm tree, as if to keep the enormous ship from drifting off. To the left, and as far as I can see, hotels, bungalows, shops, cars, trucks, mud-caked motorcycles, and fishing boats have been crushed flat or lifted up, spun, and set down in a heap. But it is difficult to conjure up the raging sea, now tranquil and barely visible through a distant line of coconut palms that left this mess in its wake.

One week after the waves of December 26, I've arrived in what remains standing of the southern Thai resort town of Khao Lak, 400 miles southwest of Bangkok in the Phangnga province on Thailand's Andaman coast. In the midday tropical heat, I walk through the remains of the Khao Lak Emerald Beach Resort & Spa. It is quiet except for the buzz of insects and the rustling of palms overhead. It smells of mildew, of broken sewer pipes, and of the decaying bodies still trapped under the wreckage. The few buildings still standing near the water are gutted and provide sad still life images: mattresses sucked

into doorways by the retreating water; a ceiling fan, 12 feet up, its blades tied up like a pretzel; swimsuits and other beach clothes twisted around splintered two-by-fours. A record of the arbitrary power of the torrent is visible everywhere, an indecipherable puzzle of the tricks of hydrodynamics or blind luck that resulted in destruction or salvation. In the space of two hours or less on the morning of December 26, Khao Lak went from a tourist-flush population of approximately 5,000 to a ghost town.

Picking through the foundation of one of the bungalows nearest the beach, I meet a bearded man in shorts and a tank top. Stu Breisch, 53, an ER doctor at Jordan Valley Hospital in Salt Lake City, had come to Khao Lak for the Christmas holidays with his then fiancée (now wife), Sally Nelson, his son, Jai, 16, and his two daughters: Shonti, 18, and Kali, 15. In one of the million happenstances that separated the doomed from the saved during the tsunami, Breisch had woken up early on the morning of the 26th to go with his family out on a dive boat. Shonti and Sally joined him, but Jai and Kali chose to sleep instead. Woken by Kali's screams, Jai looked down and saw water coming in the front door. When he got up to

check it out, a 20-foot wave swept into the room. He was torn away from his sister by a current, an experience he later described as "like being in a washing machine with bricks, pool balls, glass, and razor blades."

"He must be the luckiest kid in the world," says Breisch, sitting on the trunk of a felled coconut palm. "He was swept up there, through all those buildings, almost a full mile inland." He gestures toward the outer limits of the ruins, past the collapsed shells of dozens of concrete buildings and swimming pools filled with stagnant water. "Can you imagine anyone surviving being dragged through that?" Jai was found on a road and taken to a hospital. He had a separated shoulder and his knee was gashed open to the joint. Breisch spent three nightmarish days thinking Jai and Kali had been killed before Sally found Jai in a Bangkok hospital. But Kali, the youngest, had vanished.

Breisch recalls how awful it was returning back to shore on the dive boat, the enormity of what had happened sinking in as they came across floating corpses that had been dragged off the coast by the receding water. Picking up a few survivors, they made their way to shore, trying not





**LOST AND FOUND:** Thai soldiers carry a body through the dry ice vapor; the dry ice was used to delay putrefaction. Left: A Buddhist monk leads a prayer for the King of Thailand's grandson, Khun Poom Jensen, one of the victims of the tsunami.

to get hysterical. By the time he reached the bungalows, there was no one around. He scoured the ruins for days in an agonizing, desperate search with no real leads. As we talk, he points out Kali's bathing suit top, wedged into a crack in a snapped column of reinforced concrete that once supported the bungalow. He followed a trail of clues, scraps of clothing, Kali's shoes, hundreds of yards inland from the bungalow. "I was alone for days just looking for her, and nobody was here, no rescue workers or anything," he says.

A few miles farther along the coast, I come upon a large tent set up by the roadside. The canvas outer wall is festooned with posters of the missing that flutter in the breeze. In Thailand, more than anywhere else, the disaster has been international in scope, and the faces on the posters reflect this: There are Germans, Irish, Swiss, Chileans, Israelis, Nigerians, Dutch, British, South Africans. Whole families of Swedes. Entire villages of Thais and migrant Burmese laborers were washed away, but there are very few posters for them. For locals, the search for the missing is just as frantic, but this is their home territory, and word of mouth works better than posters.

The faces of the missing remind me of the posters that papered subway walls, fences, and construction site scaffolding in my neighborhood in New York City after September 11, and they call out with some of the same futile gestures of desperate hope: emergency e-mail contacts, lists of distinguishing marks, notices of rewards of one million baht (U.S. \$26,000) for any information. One poster is from a Czech family who hired "psychotronic specialists" to sketch out a crude picture of the cave where the missing person, pinned under a rock and badly injured, awaits rescue. Online, dozens of similar galleries of the missing cropped up this week. Sites run by Lonely Planet's Thorn Tree or British-owned Dive Aid have served as virtual meeting points for the far-flung traveling community, with a few happy reunions, but many more unanswered

pleas. These sites have also become recruitment centers for volunteers.

In the aftermath of the tsunami, many tourists fled, and more than 40 percent of airline reservations to Southern Thailand were canceled. But some travelers, such as dive masters, army medics, and vacationing doctors, with the most rudimentary first-responder skills improvised triage clinics as intense as those on any battlefield. And while many foreigners streamed to the airports, a small but significant number of people from the adventure travel community—backpackers and wanderers, rock climbers and surfers (the gypsy underclass of global tourism)—came to the region to work hand in hand with the great outpouring of Thai officials and volunteers. No one wants to look too hard for a silver lining, but it's heartening to see.

## JANUARY 2: WAT YAN YAO

Outside the tent, a pickup truck pulls to a stop, and three heavy white body bags are lowered down by a group of Thai boys wearing rubber gloves. The bodies have just been uncovered from the ruins of a hotel down by the beach. They unzip each bag. The smell is overwhelming, a rotten sweetness that clings to the throat. Seven days on and putrefaction is advanced, the skin blackened, the hair nearly gone, the abdomens blown up like a pregnancy. Looking in the first bag, the boys get excited, chattering in Thai. One calls for water, and they pour it on the shoulder of a girl lying there and wipe off the mud and writhing maggots. A tattoo appears, perfectly preserved: a rose blooming, its thorny vine wrapped around a dagger. It's difficult, in this moment, to be one of the only

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people possessing this clue to her identity and not know who to tell. I wonder if she ever thought that her tattoo might one day help her family to know her fate.

A Thai taxi driver who tells me his little sister was killed in the tsunami drives me about ten miles north of Khao Lak to Wat Yan Yao. The Buddhist temple, a large complex with open plazas shaded by banyans, has temporarily become the busiest morgue in the world. Forensic teams from 30

countries are being coordinated by the Thai government's Central Institute of Forensic Science. A tinny loudspeaker mounted on a pole squawks, and a woman's voice, in heavily accented English, announces "Attention, please! We need volunteers to help carry bodies. Please come to the yellow tent."

At the yellow tent inside the temple's front gate, I meet several volunteers. One is Carl Johnston, an intense 38-year-old EMT from Canmore, Alberta. His main job back home is driving an ambulance for the roughnecks in Alberta's remote oil fields. He was in his hotel when the waves hit, even though he had planned to be out on the water that morning.

"Luckily we were staying in the cheaper rooms, farther away from the beach. We could see that first big wave hit, but we had no idea of what was going on elsewhere on the coast." After administering first aid to the wounded and helping with the clean-up effort for the first few days, he had found himself volunteering at the morgue to try and help however he could. "I've never been in a war zone," he tells me. "But at least in a war, people have time to prepare."

As she briefs a new group of volunteers, Teresa Sewalelot, 30, a Thai American from



**DRAINED AND CONFUSED:** Waves deposited this Royal Thai Navy vessel nearly a mile inland from shore.

Seattle living in Bangkok, asks me if I want to help out. Sewalelot and her friends, Greg, Carol, Chris, and Shannon, rushed down from Bangkok and have been here since the first days after the tsunami, serving as translators, ad hoc bereavement counselors, and liaisons in a situation none of them could ever have imagined.

“Are you ready?” Sewalelot asks again. “They need help behind the white line.”

The white line is a row of disinfecting tubs at the entrance to the back of the temple where the bodies are stored, the barrier between the world of the living and the world of the dead. The Thai authorities have set up a rudimentary bioprotection system for those who handle the hundreds of bodies that are pouring into the temple. They need help sorting and identifying the dead.

Under a tent, I first put on latex gloves, then heavy rubber boots. I zip a white Tyvek bodysuit over my clothes, then heavy rubber dishwashing gloves. The gap between the gloves and the suit is sealed with packing tape. I am helped out by Justin F. Winchell, 25, a diver from New Orleans who has been traveling the world for six months. As he tapes me up, I ask him what he’s doing here.

“I’m here because, well, how could I not be?” he says. “Traveling doesn’t end because something like this happens. We’re needed.” It is a sentiment that is echoed by all of the volunteers I speak to, a given.

After the gloves, Winchell helps me put on a ventilator and, absurdly, a Hello Kitty shower cap. “This is heavily improvised, as you can tell. Breathe through your mouth,” he says. My heart races, and it’s difficult to draw a full breath through the mask. The humid air is thick with the smell of the dead, rotting, and I am afraid of how I’ll react. There is no way to prepare oneself for such a grim task, but the volunteers I meet are remarkably resilient. Unable to imagine a horror like this, they’ve discovered exactly—profoundly—what they were capable of. Now, already soaked through with sweat beneath layers and layers of plastic and latex, it’s my turn.

## DECEMBER 26: KO PHI PHI DON

On their last day on the stunningly beautiful Ko Phi Phi Don (Phi Phi Don Island), Mark and Jennifer Hewlette, a couple in their 30s from San Francisco, awoke early. They’d picked up a tip that a troop of monkeys frequented a hidden beach and would even take a banana from a visitor. The two paddled their rented kayaks toward the beach beyond the short end of the barbell-shaped island, which lies two miles north of Ko Phi Phi Le, where the movie *The Beach* was filmed. But, as they pulled their kayaks onto the white sand, it appeared they were out of luck.

“The monkeys didn’t show,” Mark tells me, waiting for a flight back to the states at the Bangkok International Airport. “We spent a little while on the beach, wandering around. There were about 20 of us there. The water drained out of the bay and exposed the coral beds. I walked out, there were stranded fish everywhere, an eel squirming around in a hole, a puffer fish. Totally fascinating. It’s weird, but I wasn’t really thinking that something was wrong.”

A Finnish woman with three children on the beach started screaming, pointing at the water, and trying to gather up her children. At the edge of the small bay, the water was gathering in a white froth and rushing back in. Everyone started running for the jungle-covered hills that rose directly from the beach. “I picked up one of the kids, and the rest were running, scrambling up into the vegetation, getting scratched up. The water was coming up fast; it sounded like a jet taking off. I lifted the Finnish woman’s daughter up above my head into the branches of a tree. She was so calm, I couldn’t believe it. The water came up around my waist, and as I pushed her into the tree, I felt it close over my head.”

Somehow, Mark scrambled out of the water into the trees and then gained higher ground. The Finnish girl survived as well. Unbeknownst to them, however, on the far side of the headland, the entire palm-fringed strand of Phi Phi Don Island, where the majority of people were,

## HELP REBUILD

Since larger aid organizations, including Oxfam International and the American Red Cross, don’t send volunteers abroad without extensive (more than two years) disaster relief training, those eager to contribute immediately to the rebuilding efforts in Southeast Asia should approach smaller agencies (listed below). For those who want to help but aren’t able to volunteer, regional governments and tour agencies stress that tourist dollars can be just as helpful as man-hours. “Supporting the local economy through travel is perhaps the best way to empower people to get back on their feet,” says Debbie Jacobs, owner of Vermont-based Explorations in Travel. Before traveling to the region (tourist visas take anywhere from three days to two weeks to process depending on your destination), get on-the-ground updates from [www.tsunamihelp.blogspot.com](http://www.tsunamihelp.blogspot.com) and consult Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)) for a thorough list of required inoculations. Allow four to six weeks for full immunization.

**Global Crossroad** ([www.globalcrossroad.com](http://www.globalcrossroad.com)) connects volunteer teams with local relief efforts in Sri Lanka for two-week stints reconstructing schools and sanitation centers. According to program manager Dana Oliver, the only requirements are that volunteers be physically fit and “emotionally prepared to walk into a disaster area.”

**Phuket Project** ([www.phuketproject.org](http://www.phuketproject.org)) was founded by Mach Arom, a Thai American whose family still lives in Phuket. As media coverage dwindles, Arom hopes to continue the flow of aid and volunteers for as long as help is needed. Projects include rebuilding the Kamala Child Development Center, a preschool that was due to open the day the tsunami struck.

**Responsible Travel** ([www.responsibletravel.com](http://www.responsibletravel.com)) maintains a Web site listing Southeast Asian tour operators that funnel tourist dollars back into regional economies. By staying in locally owned accommodations, hiring a native guide, and dining at local restaurants, travelers can make sure their money is invested directly into the areas that need it most.

—Jeff Gangemi





had been annihilated by the wall of water. As many as 1,500 were killed, and many others were injured, stranded, and in desperate need of help.

Eventually, a Thai man in a 40-foot tour boat picked up the monkey beach gang and took them back around the headland. “The devastation was overwhelming. The debris pile was 30 feet high in places,” says Mark. There were severely injured people everywhere, dead bodies wedged under fallen houses, people with deep cuts from the sheets of glass and metal that had churned through the rushing water like sharks’ teeth. Diving boats, under which the tsunami had passed as an unremarkable two-foot swell on the open water, came back piled high with bodies that had been swept out to sea. It was chaos, and there was no authority, no rescue agency, no civil structure to deal with a catastrophe of this scope. In the immediate aftermath of the worst natural disaster in living memory, the island of Phi Phi Don, about 25 miles from shore, was totally cut off from the outside world.

According to the Hewlettes, a former officer in the Swedish special forces who they knew only as Erik, took charge of the situation. He set up a triage station, instructed people to gather all the medical supplies, flashlights, and any useful materials they could scavenge from the wreckage, and organized people into teams for tending to the wounded, searching for survivors, and moving the dead. Stretchers to ferry the injured were improvised out of doors, bamboo, and tarps. By late afternoon, when the first Thai military helicopter arrived to evacuate the most severely injured, they had established a helipad on the island’s tennis courts. Fearful of aftershocks that might cause another series of waves, many



**TRAVELERS UNITE:** The volunteers at Yan Yao Temple included (from left) Carol and Greg Eickmeyer, Teresa Sewalelot, and Sarah Brown. Bottom: Carl Johnston, from Canmore, Alberta, also helped out at Yan Yao and now aspires to join Doctors Without Borders.

of the island’s survivors spent the first night at a lookout point on a hill high above the town.

Working with two Thai locals, Kia and Sangi, Mark conducted search and rescue in the wreckage. Hours after the waves hit, they heard a voice calling faintly from beneath a two-story heap of rubble. They clambered over the pile, moving debris carefully to avoid a further collapse. “The guys wanted to pull out this TV set wedged under the pile, and I was like, ‘I think that’s holding everything up,’” says Mark. As they worked down through the pile, Mark talked to the trapped man, a 28-year-old from Vienna named Roman Kiritis. They scavenged a handsaw and started working on the pile, cutting away beams and logs that were piled like pick-up sticks. “We finally got to the last wooden beam pinning his leg, about 12 hours after we’d found him. We worked through the night, and I spent the last 45

minutes right next to him, talking to him as we hoisted this huge piece of wood to get his leg out.”

They spent two days on the island before a boat finally came that had room to ferry them off. The group had worked remarkably well, especially, the Hewlettes said, with the leadership of Erik. Not everyone was heroic. One panicked man kept demanding to be put on the next rescue helicopter, even though it was prioritized for only the most severely wounded. “But I’ve never seen people come together so well in such a desperate situation,” says Jennifer. “It just made me realize what goes into making something work: dividing up tasks, keeping your head, being fit enough to carry someone who’s hurt.”

The Hewlettes are most haunted by memories of a Christmas Eve party they’d been to a couple of days before the waves came. There was a big feast at one of the hotels and everyone was dressed up. Dozens of Swedish families with their children had been milling around, singing karaoke and celebrating. “We never saw any of them again,” says Jennifer.

### JANUARY 3: WAT YAN YAO

In the rear of Wat Yan Yao, on the sandy ground under spreading banyan trees or fully exposed in the tropical sun, there are neat rows of hundreds of bodies. Their terrified postures—hands clenched, arms up, blocking something—calls to mind the human forms molded in ash after the destruction of Pompeii. After more than a week, many are barely identifiable, not by race or in many cases even gender. Everyone is equal in death: Some faces are mere skulls, the sutures visible, already bleached.

Like the day before, I fall into a line of Thai soldiers, just teenagers in white bio-suits, really, and we walk to the back of a trailer loaded with dry ice and form a human chain. A cascade of fog pours out of the trailer from the several tons of dry-ice blocks inside, forming a thick blanket on the ground. Two boys with shovels wedge the blocks off and slide them to us. We pass them down the chain, building a wall of around a hundred bodies laid in rows. The minus-109-degree, 30-pound blocks burn me through the rubber gloves, and I think we might be the first people ever to get frostbite in the tropics.

We pass hundreds of blocks. The dry ice sublimates, passes directly from a solid to a gas, and it is beautiful and eerie, this solid vanishing slowly in the air. It makes me think of the transmigration of souls. The Thai boy next to me smiles over his mask. Even without common language, we seem to understand each other. There is something in the Thai character that seeks to make the best of any situation, no matter how dire. There is a Buddhist stoicism in the Thai response to the catastrophe that suggests that calmness is preferable to anger and guilt. The expression in Thai for this attitude, *jai yen*, translates to “cool heart.” It

would be hard to conjure up a scene more grim, with temple dogs and chickens pecking around the bodies, and a fog of dry ice hovering like an angel of death. Buddhist monks stand silently in saffron robes and rubber boots watching.

After we unload the ice, another truck of bodies arrives, and we heave the body bags onto stretchers and carry them into the temple for the first stage of processing. I haul a stretcher with an Australian named Steve. (Soon it is all just first names. There is little time for formal introduction.) The wooden rail of the stretcher snaps, and the bag falls to the ground. It is exhausting work, physically, emotionally. We are boatmen of the River Styx. Handling the bodies of children is the most difficult, and nobody carries them indifferently. White-suited volunteers walk by cradling the tiny blue-shrouded bundles and lay them in rows in whatever shade is available. It seems impossible to make a connection between the smiling faces on the posters and the macabre reality at the temple grounds. The stifling, heavy lifting is in some way a relief, a physical release that distracts from the psychological nightmare of considering how each person died.

There is a Western need for closure at work here, and there's considerable tension between the Thai and Western ways of dealing with death. Because of the political pressures to identify the Westerners, or *Farang* in Thai, those that look like they might be foreigners get packed into refrigerator units first. But the number of dead are quickly overwhelming the refrigerated units, leading to frustration, mix-ups, and accusations of disrespect. Still, guests are sacred in Thai culture, and the preferential treatment of the deceased from abroad is partly a reflection of how sorry Thais are that this disaster befell their visitors. It is better, I decide, to do the heavy work in the back and stay out of the political disputes.

Yves Adaan, a Belgian physician who volunteers at an AIDS hospice in Lopburi, has come down to help out. He works his way down the line of the deceased with a photographer and an assistant with a clipboard, ID-ing the bodies by noting tattoos, scars, piercings, scraps of clothing. He rolls the bodies, which have passed through rigor mortis to an almost lifelike flexibility, and lifts the limbs to inspect them carefully, as if they were still alive. The dry ice has made a ground fog around the bodies so thick that he can't see the faces of the deceased, so I wave a piece of cardboard to try and displace the fog. He calls out the identifiers: "Thai woman; flowered shirt." With a gloved

finger he counts the molars aloud in French. A full set of teeth." He estimates she was over 25. I think of the first body I saw, pulled from the house at Khao Lak, with the tattoo of the rose and dagger. All of us here are adjusting to our sudden, unsettling intimacy with the dead: We knew none of them in life, but work to find any detail that might connect them to the living.

Dehydrated from many hours sweating in the suit, I go out for water. Winchell, still at the white line, cuts my suit off with scissors, and a worker

coast, looking for his 26-year-old wife. "He had her picture," she says. "She was beautiful. He told me 'You must think I'm crazy to still be looking after all these days.'" The utter, leaden sadness of the situation is taking its toll on her. "I just want them all to wake up."

It's all starting to get to Johnston, too, although he is at pains not to show it. Johnston tells me that on the first day, he had to practice battlefield medicine on a 25-year-old British girl, Edith Macgill. She was kayaking with her sister, mother, and boyfriend when the tsunami hit and both had been swept by the wave. She had held on to her mother's body in a tree while trying to give her mouth-to-mouth, before she was torn away by the water. Her boyfriend and sister had been dragged off. She was thrown, naked and slashed with bone-deep lacerations, against a rocky headland and had been carried inland six miles when Johnston found her. He had stayed with her for hours. "She was so brave, had such a sense of humor about everything. We got her evacuated to a hospital." Johnston keeps choking up as he tells me the story, but he needs to finish it.

"I was so sure she was going to make it. But I saw her name on a list of the dead at one of the hospitals. It's been so crazy here I haven't even been able to find out if [the identification] was some mistake." (Johnston later learned Macgill and her boyfriend had survived; her mother and sister, however, were presumed dead.)

"It was real finger of God stuff," Johnston says to me. "You live. You die." It seems for a moment that Johnston's 12-hour days are a sort of brutal atonement for being alive, survivor guilt dedicated to those he can still help. "I try not to think about it too much," he says.

Just outside the gate at Wat Yan Yao, they are serving juice and ice cream. There is a Thai word, *sanuk*, that loosely translated means "fun." Every task, no matter how arduous, must have some element of *sanuk*. Hence, in the work of identifying thousands of dead bodies, there must be ice cream. By the food tent, a stack of empty coffins has become a lunch counter with a sign scrawled in Sharpie: The Happy Coffin Café. It is not irreverent, just the need of the living, in so desperate a situation, to keep a sense of humor. Beneath a white bio-protection suit, a cell phone plays "Jingle Bells."

Sitting in the volunteer tent, Teresa tells me that Stu Breisch had come to the temple hoping to find his daughter (Continued on page 92)



**THE SEA WITHIN:** After several days of work at a makeshift morgue, Jeremie Whittle, 32, contemplates the ocean at Ko Phi Phi Le, the setting for the movie *The Beach*.

sprays me with disinfectant. Under the latex gloves my hands are shriveled and clammy, disturbingly like the hands of the dead. The smell clings to me for hours afterward. I meet Johnston again outside, both of us drenched in sweat. After a week, he prefers the physical labor in the back of the temple. "I'd rather be in the back than dealing with the families in the front," he says.

Adaan has been here a week. I ask him what he thinks of all these people coming to help, putting their lives on hold to undertake the horrific cleanup of the disaster. With the gallows humor of a *M\*A\*S\*H* veteran, Adaan laughs through his mask and says, "Haven't you heard? It's the latest thing. Sex tourism is over in Thailand. Now it's all about humanitarian tourism."

#### **JANUARY 4: WAT YAN YAO**

On my third day at Wat Yan Yao, I find Teresa Sewalelot sitting on an empty coffin, her head in her hands. Volunteering at the front of the temple, Teresa has taken up the harrowing duty of talking to families still searching for their loved ones. She tells me about a Chilean man who had traveled to every temple and hospital along the

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Kali's body. An American TV crew was filming them at the moment Breisch's daughter Shonti had spotted her sister's photograph on a bulletin board of the confirmed dead; their family's unutterably painful discovery and loss was broadcast to the entire world. Breisch knows for sure now that Kali is dead, but there's been a mix-up with the body. He, Sally, and Shonti had made a visit to another temple earlier, and there was a positive match, a number tag connecting her to a bag in one of the refrigerated units. The body was brought out, and they had looked, but it was the wrong one. It wasn't Kali. In the chaos, the body had been put in the wrong bag.

"He wasn't angry, just so gracious," says Teresa. "He said, 'she's here somewhere, but she's missing,' and I couldn't do anything to help." After ten days of fruitless searching, Breisch had given up and was going home to Utah. "He told me he has two other children," Teresa tells me. "And he has to take care of them."

### JANUARY 6: KOPHI PHI DON

A couple of days later I get a ride out to Phi Phi Don Island on a Thai customs boat. It is unsettling to land in a place where I've never been, yet already feel haunted by; to be visiting the location of the Hewlettes's harrowing ordeal. In desperation to get the tourism industry back running, heavy machinery has already been brought in, and bulldozers are pushing into the rubble even as a group of locals are busily hammering up the wooden frame of a shop, just like the dozens that once dotted the beachfront and are now a 20-foot pile of matchwood at the eastern side of the island. The fragments of a bustling tourist trap are scattered about, now sea wrack that marks the edge of devastation: clumps of postcards swollen from the water, piles of waterlogged clothing, lone flip flops, torn sheet metal, fliers for a New Year's Eve party that never occurred. Mannequins that once modeled Phi Phi T-shirts jut eerily from the ruin like unrecovered bodies. The jumble below the high watermark is juxtaposed above by a ghost island, frozen in time. At a bar on the hillside, a few steps above a boat wedged into the crotch of a tree, a cocktail glass sits on a table not far from the now placid waters of the bay. Its wedge of lime is desiccated and the drink evaporated, leaving the tiny body of a lizard that had climbed in and drowned.

None of the workers spend the night out on the island. In traditional Thai culture, the souls of those ripped violently from life are lost,

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trapped between this life and the next, unable to be reincarnated because they never had the opportunity to say goodbye. The ornate "spirit houses," which had stood in front of every Thai household for good luck, have been smashed as surely as the humans' houses. The white line of the wave seems to have torn the curtain between the physical world and the spiritual world. The driver of a *tuk-tuk*, one of the two-stroke engine minicabs that swarm Phuket,

claims he picked up a group of Westerners who vanished before they reached their destination. At a Chinese shrine, a teenage boy goes into a trance each night, serving as a medium for the lost dead to speak with their families. He remembers nothing the next day. A prominent monk sent by the king to survey the damage said, after driving through at night, that he saw hundreds of spirits come out of the forest at Khao Lak and stand by the roadside, trying to find their way home.

Around the base of a massive banyan a few steps from the edge of the lapping sea (trees survived the calamity far better than human structures), a shrine has been built with offerings of oranges, candy bars, and the drifting ash of burnt incense lit by the work crews. I meet a pair of South African volunteers, Dylan and Steve, who were traveling in Thailand when the waves struck and came down with a group of Thais to do whatever they could. They have come out to the island every day for the past week, at first helping locals with the recovery of bodies and today working with the Bangkok humane society, chasing the terrified, yowling cats of Phi Phi Don Island through mountains of debris to bring them to the mainland.

Every bit as gorgeous as one is led to believe, Phi Phi Don Island's towering jungle-clad cliffs have been heavily impacted by overdevelopment ever since the late nineties. Even though it is technically protected as a national park, there are dozens of hotels and bungalows line the narrow strand. And now there are fears that the debris dragged out by the wave will smother the coral reef behind the island. Already divers are out there, evaluating the damage.

One assessment is clear: Because of tourist resorts, the coast of Thailand has been shorn of much of its protective band of mangrove swamps, an ecosystem that creates a coastal buffer between the sea and shore and can mitigate the effects of flooding. The mangroves have largely been (Continued on page 94)

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replaced with bungalows and swimming pools, as well as many commercial shrimp farms. The question of whether the disaster will be seen as a chance to step back, to make smart and sustainable development choices, seems to be answered, eleven days after the waves hit, by the shriek and whine of bulldozers already clearing land for rebuilding.

### JANUARY 7: BAN NAM KHEM

The fishing village of Ban Nam Khem, 18 miles north of Khao Lak, has been flattened, and even as reconstruction efforts at the posh resorts are under way, survivors are still scavenging through the rubble of their homes, wrenching what few salvageable possessions remain: a rice cooker, a tangled fishing net. A clock hangs on the only remaining wall of a house, stopped forever at 10:49 a.m. At one house, a family has moved back into the wreckage, entering through the front door out of habit even though the walls are gone. In a sort of spiritual clean-up to compliment the physical one, they brought in a group of buddhist monks who conducted a ceremony to ward off spirits.

Foreigners, for all their horrific losses, have the privilege of returning home. Thais, many of whom live on a razor-thin economic margin to begin with, have had their livelihoods and their homes destroyed along with their families. Some 200,000 workers in Southern Thailand employed by the tourism industry are now at risk of losing their jobs, and many are turning to salvaging scrap from the debris fields for income.

I visit the vast refugee camp where about 4,000 people, mostly from Ban Nam Khem, are living in government-issue tents. An army of volunteers are already busily hammering up temporary housing. John White, an Irishman from County Wexford, and the owner of a guest house on nearby Patong Beach, carries a sack of pineapples and hands them out to families sitting by their tents. Each day he has been handing out 2,000 baht (U.S. \$52) directly to the hardest hit families. "Sometimes you just have to cut out the middleman," he says, smiling. White's guesthouse was damaged in the wave, but he's cleaning up. This is his home now, he insists, and he has no intention of cutting out.

A little while later, I sit on the beach at Ban Nam Khem with my back to the ruins, looking out to sea. I half expect the ocean to frighten me, but it doesn't. The water's flat to the horizon, calm beneath a red setting sun. You cannot say "traitorous" or "cruel" to speak of it; the ocean offers no reply for all the loss. The only redemptive meaning I've been able to wrest from the tsunami lies instead in the actions of the people, Thai and *Farang* alike, who ran in when the water ran out. ▲