How the Eagle & the Elephant Became Friends

By Janice Santikarn
Illustrated by Prateep Paisarnnan
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“C’mon Ben, finish your breakfast. I need to leave early this morning.”
“What’s the rush, dad?”
“I have a meeting at the State Department. Mr. Davis asked to see me.”
“Uh oh, hauled in by the boss, huh? Hope you don’t get detention!”
“Ha, ha. That’s very funny. OK, wise guy, grab your bag. I’ll drop you at school on my way.”

“Good morning, sir.”
“Hi Tom, thanks for coming in. Please, sit down. Let me get right to the point. It seems our new President is very impressed with your work; so impressed that he would like to offer you a promotion. How does the position of U.S. Ambassador...”

“Wow!” At the mention of the word ‘Ambassador’, Tom stopped listening and his mind began swirling with images ... where would he be located?
“...to Thailand, sound?” the chief was asking. “It’s a long way from the United States of America, but our two countries have had a close relationship for a long time, dating all the way back to 1833 when the USA and Thailand signed the Treaty of Amity and Commerce. That makes Thailand the oldest non-European ally the U.S. has.”

“Anyway,” Mr. Davis continued, “you’ll find much more information in the file we have prepared. Good luck, Tom! I’m sure you’ll do a great job!”

At dinner that night Tom Roberts looked across the table at his son Ben and his wife Carol and coughed to get their attention. “Ahem! I have some important news to share. Guess what? I have just been appointed U.S. Ambassador to Thailand,” he announced, grinning proudly. Ben’s eyes widened. “Wow, cool, dad, congratulations! But wait a minute, where exactly is Thailand... and when are we going...and what can I take with me?”

Mr. Roberts held up his hand. “Whoa, Ben,” he chuckled. “Finish your dinner first. I’ll answer all your questions later.”

After dinner, Ben’s father pointed to a map on the computer screen. “Thailand is in Southeast Asia. It is the only Southeast Asian country never to have been colonized by a European power and has always been independent. Some people say the country is shaped like an axe or perhaps an elephant’s head and trunk. You can see that it shares borders with Laos to the north, Cambodia to the east, Myanmar to the west and Malaysia in the south.”
"Thailand and the USA have been friends for almost 200 years. Back then, it was called Siam - you’ve probably heard of Siamese cats and Siamese twins - but Siam was the name foreigners gave to the country. The Thai people call it Thailand, which means ‘the land of the free’, and since 1939 it has been known as the Kingdom of Thailand. Do you have any questions?"

Before Ben could answer, his mom spoke up. “What about Ben? Are there good schools in Thailand?” “Sure,” said Ben’s dad. They have great schools. However, most of them teach in the Thai language, which is rather complicated for non-Thai speakers to pick up quickly. English has only one tone and 26 letters, whereas Thai has five tones and 44 letters, plus another 32 vowels! But don’t worry, there are also several very good international schools that teach in English - and some of those follow the American education system. So he’ll be fine.”

Just then Ben cut in. “Dad, I just remembered! What about Sammy, our pet eagle, can he come with us?” “Don’t worry, I’ve already spoken to Mr. Davis about that,” his father said. He told me that the economic, trade and friendship treaties between the USA and Thailand have often been called the Eagle-Elephant agreements, so he thinks Sammy would be a great symbol of the relationship between our two countries. As long as we get the proper paperwork done there shouldn’t be a problem.”
As the plane descended, Ben Roberts peered out the window for his first look at Bangkok. He had learned from a magazine on board that the Thai people gave the city another name*, which was actually the longest name of any capital city in the world. However, this was much too long to use every day so most Thais just shortened it to ‘Krung Thep’, which meant the ‘City of Angels’.

Ben knew that Thailand was divided into four regions, with Bangkok located in the Central and Eastern section. Through this area ran the Chao Phraya River, which he could now clearly see snaking its way through the huge sprawling city below. There were about 68 million people in Thailand and around 10 - 12 million lived in Bangkok. Leaning closer, Ben noted several clusters of modern office towers and high-rise apartments in the city center gradually giving way to thousands of smaller houses on the outskirts. Beyond that, were acres and acres of green fields where farmers grew rice and cultivated crops in the fertile flatlands around the river.

Once they cleared customs, Ambassador Roberts, his wife, and Ben were quickly whisked away to their new home located in the city center.

*Krung Thep Mahanakhon Amon Rattanakosin Mahinthara Ayuthaya Mahadilok Phop Noppharat Ratchathani Burirom Udomratanchaniwet Mahasathan Amon Piman Awatan Sathit Sakkathattiya Witsanukam Prasit
The rest of the weekend Ben mostly slept, jetlagged after the 24-hour trip from Washington, D.C. to Bangkok. However, by late Monday morning he managed to drag himself downstairs in time to hear his parents discussing the day’s plans.

“I need to be at the Palace by 11 a.m.,” his dad was saying.

Ben was suddenly wide-awake.

“Whoa, dad, the Palace?”

“Well, Ben, my job as Ambassador means that here in Thailand I represent the President of the United States. So the first thing I need to do is meet with the Thai Head of State and present my credentials to him.”

“But that’s the Prime Minister, right? Why do you need to go to the Palace?”

“Actually, no. Back home the President is the Head of Government as well as the Head of State, but here in Thailand the roles are divided. Since 1932 Thailand has had a constitutional monarchy, which means that the King of Thailand is the Head of State while the Prime Minister, appointed from among Members of Parliament chosen at the general election, is the Head of Government.”

Ambassador Roberts looked at his watch. “Hmm, I need to get moving. What are your plans today, Ben? School doesn’t start for a few days yet.”

“Oh, I might just hang out here...maybe take a swim later.”

Up in his room, Ben chatted online with some friends back home, but although it was only 11 a.m. in Bangkok it was 11 p.m. in D.C., and on a Sunday night most of his friends were already asleep. After the earlier conversation with his father, Ben was curious about the Thai King, so now he decided to search the ‘net’ for more information.
The first thing he learned surprised him. King Bhumibol Adulyadej wasn’t born in Thailand. He was actually born in the USA on the 5th of December 1927 in Cambridge, Massachusetts... and he had reigned since 1946! “Wheeeww”, whistled Ben, “that’s a whole lot longer than the four-year terms of American Presidents! The people must like him a lot.” As he read more, Ben realized this was true. The King really was greatly loved by his people, for right from day one he had worked hard to improve their wellbeing and develop the nation.

Before he shut down his laptop, one more item caught Ben’s eye: pictures of the King playing saxophone with the great American jazz musicians Benny Goodman, Stan Getz and Lionel Hampton. Apparently the King of Thailand not only played saxophone, but also piano, trumpet and cornet. What’s more, he composed jazz music, painted, and was an author and photographer too. “Wow!”

Grabbing a towel, Ben headed outdoors in search of the pool. It was not even lunchtime yet and the temperature had already hit the 90’s. Following a path toward the rear of the large compound, he came upon a small wooden house with its window shutters propped open to let in the breeze.
Peering inside, he was surprised by the face of a Thai boy who suddenly popped up in front of him.
“Who are you?” the stranger asked.
“Er, who are you?”
“I asked first!”
“I'm Ben, I've just moved in.”
“Oh, you must be the new Ambassador's son. I'm Jai.
My dad's the gardener.
What are you doing?”
“I was looking for the pool,
but I guess I took the wrong path.”
“Wait there,” said Jai. “I'll show you where it is.”

The pool was on the other side of the grounds and as the boys passed by the main house, Jai stopped and pointed to a birdcage on the verandah.

“Wow! What is that? I've never seen a bird like that before.” Ben brought Jai closer. “This is Sammy. See, his name is on the metal tag attached to his leg. He is an American Bald Eagle, the National Emblem of the USA. Not so long ago it was an endangered species, but thanks to breeding programs the numbers are much greater nowadays. Even so, we still had to get special permission to bring him with us.”

From there, Jai pointed Ben in the direction of the pool.
“Follow that path and you can't miss it. Listen, tomorrow's my little sister's birthday. Would you like to come by our house in the morning and join in the celebrations?”
“Thanks, that would be great. I'll see you then,” said Ben.
The next morning Ben returned to the small house at the foot of the garden. Upon meeting Jai's mother and father, he made sure to 'wai' them, putting his hands together and bringing them up to his chin. His mom had told him how important this was and made sure he knew how to do it properly. For Thais, it was not only like shaking hands, it was also a way to show respect, by bowing the head lower when greeting people of older age or of a higher position.

"You're just in time," said Jai. We're about to start. My sister Joop is going to release some birds. Like most Thais, we are Buddhists, and we believe that if you do good things in your life, you will receive good things in return - it's called 'making merit'. So on special occasions like this, we do a good deed like releasing trapped birds or fish."

"Now, come and meet my sister. Joop, where are you? The birds are here. Jooop! Jooop! Hmmm, where is she?"
At last a small Thai girl came running toward them from the Ambassador's house. "Where've you been?" asked Jai.
"We're waiting for you to open the cages." Jai's little sister looked confused.
"Open the cages? What do you mean? I've already released the bird."
Now it was Jai who looked confused. "But the birds are still here."
"No, not those," Joop explained. "The strange looking bird over there. I set it free."
Ben and Jai looked at each other in horror before racing toward Sammy’s cage. But it was too late. The door was open and he was gone. Frantically they began to search. Jai scoured the nearby bushes and trees calling Sammy’s name, while Ben looked up into the bright light, scanning the blue skies.

Precious seconds ticked by before Ben suddenly pointed upward. “There he is! I can see the sunlight reflecting off his nametag.” He called out. “Sammy, Sammy, come down!” But the eagle didn’t obey. He continued flying in slow wide circles until one powerful flap of his wings sent him soaring over the fence.

Rushing to the front gate, the boys yanked it open and were met by a blaring mass of cars, trucks, buses and motorbikes. To the left and right, sidewalks bustled with office workers, tourists and vendors, while above them smoke from chicken pieces roasting on coal-fired grills rose into the air. Peering through the spiraling gray plumes, Ben and Jai once again spotted the flash of light.
“He’s getting away,” yelled Jai. “Quick, come with me.” Following him to the roadside, Ben watched as the Thai boy held out an arm, gently waved his hand up and down and stopped an approaching vehicle. After exchanging a few words with the driver, Jai turned to Ben. “Cmon, jump in.” As the little 3-wheeled vehicle sped away from the curb, Ben looked puzzled. “Don’t worry,” said Jai. “It may not look like it, but this is a taxi - we call it a ‘tuk-tuk’.

I asked the driver to follow the bird. Let’s keep an eye out for Sammy and point the way.”

The eagle took them on a meandering tour of the city before finally leading them to the river. The Chao Phraya played an important part in the lives of the Thai people. Most of the population was engaged in agriculture and industry, and the river and its waterways were used to ship products such as rice and teak wood from upcountry down to Bangkok for export. In addition, the river’s smaller system of canals, or ‘klongs’, were vital for transportation, washing and fishing, as well as playing a large role in the drainage of floodwaters out to sea during the rainy season.

Without warning, the eagle suddenly swooped down to settle amongst the pointed golden pagodas of a nearby complex. Following closely, the boys leapt from the tuk-tuk and rushed through a gateway in the white fortress-like walls.
Inside, Ben stopped in his tracks and let out a whistle.
“Phhheeew! Where are we?”
“This is the Grand Palace,” answered Jai.
“Oh, this must be where my dad came to meet with the King,” said Ben.
“No,” laughed Jai, shaking his head.
“King Bhumibol lives somewhere else; this is the home of the past Kings of Thailand.”

While searching among the buildings, temples, and shrines, Jai explained further. “You know, Bangkok wasn’t always the capital of Thailand. The first was in Sukhothai, in the lower northern region of Thailand, in 1238. But over the years, constant wars with our neighbors forced the capital to keep moving further south: first to Ayutthaya in the upper central region, and then to Thonburi, just across the river from Bangkok. Eventually, in 1782, Bangkok became the capital of Thailand and the new King, Rama I, was the first to live in this palace. But in the 1900’s, more modern palaces were constructed elsewhere and the royal family has not lived here since 1925. Our current King Bhumibol, Rama IX, lives in Chitralada Villa. Nowadays, the Grand Palace is still used for royal ceremonies but it’s also open as a museum and a tourist attraction.”
Just then Ben shouted, "Look, there he is!" The eagle was perched atop a plump white pagoda, one of many scattered throughout the grounds. Carefully they crept toward him, calling softly, "Saaammyyyy! Saaammmmyyyy!" At the foot of the pagoda Ben stretched high up on his tiptoes, whispering, "That's a boy, Sammy, come here, now." But as Ben reached out to grab him, a loud ringing of temple bells sent him flapping wildly into the sky.

Rushing back outside the two boys set off on the chase once more. Now Sammy was rapidly flying northward and soon the city's cars and buildings gave way to small square fields of green in which farmers wearing traditional bamboo hats were bent down low harvesting rice.

An hour later the sun was sinking low in the sky and without the glint of metal to guide them, the boys were finding it hard to keep track of the bird. By the time they entered the city of Ayutthaya Sammy was nowhere to be seen. Needing to return to Bangkok, the tuk-tuk driver set the boys down in the center of the city where they stood wondering what to do next.
After a few minutes silence, Jai had an idea. “Let’s go see my aunt. She lives nearby.”

A short walk brought them to a traditional Thai teak house with a small garden in front. Jai knocked on the door and shortly a slim middle-aged woman appeared, greeting them with a warm smile.

“Sawasdee krub, Aunt Kanda,” said Jai, saying hello and waiting deeply at the same time.


Once inside the boys quickly explained why they were there. “Hmm, the first thing I need to do is call your mother, Jai, and let her know you are both here,” Aunt Kanda said. “You’ll stay the night with me and in the morning we’ll figure out what to do next. Now, you two wash up while I prepare dinner.”

A short while later the boys were eyeing a feast of Thai dishes laid out on the dining table—‘tom yam kung’, a hot and spicy prawn soup; ‘gaeng kieo waan neua’, a mild green curry with beef, and ‘pak boong fai daeng’, a stir-fried, green vegetable.
Gazing down at the empty plate before him, with a fork and spoon laying on top, Ben wasn’t sure what to do. Noting his baffled look, Jai’s aunt explained. “All of the food is for sharing, Ben. It’s communal style. We do not have appetizers or entrees; Thai food is all served at once. I’ll dish up some rice then please use the serving spoon and help yourself to the food on the table. You won’t need a knife. Just follow Jai and you’ll see what to do. But remember to save room for mango and sticky rice afterwards.”

Just as she said, Ben quickly learned to use the fork and spoon, eagerly helping himself to each dish. “Mmmm,” he had never tasted anything like it. During the meal, he learned that Thai food is among the five most popular in the world and that the special taste came from a balance of four flavors: salty, sweet, sour and spicy. Tonight he enjoyed them all - but he was glad Jai’s aunt did not add too many chilies!

Afterward the three of them lingered at the table chatting and Ben took the opportunity to ask Aunt Kanda something about Thai culture. “I know that the word ‘Sawasdee’ means hello and that it can also mean goodbye,” he said, “but when you and Jai greeted each other earlier, I noticed that he said ‘Sawasdee krub’, while you said ‘Sawasdee ka’. Why is that?” “You are very observant, Ben,” Aunt Kanda praised him. “The reason is that when a woman speaks, she says the word ‘ka’ at the end as a way to show respect and be polite to the person she is talking to. In the same way, when a man speaks, he adds the word ‘krub’.
Jai, who had been quiet during his aunt’s conversation with Ben, now spoke up and changed the subject. “Aunt Kanda, I’ve just realized I haven’t seen cousin Teera tonight. Where is he?” Jai’s aunt looked surprised. “Oh, I forgot to mention he is living at the temple next door. He has decided to become a monk for one month.” Looking at Ben she said, “We are talking about my son. I’m not sure if you know this, but most young Thai men and boys become monks for some part of their lives. In the past, this was usually for a period of three months, but nowadays it can be as little as a few days or weeks. They do this in appreciation for everything their families have given to them, and in doing so their parents receive merit.”

“Would you boys like to visit him?” Aunt Kanda asked. “I can arrange for you to stay the night in the temple if you want.” Escorting them next door she explained to Ben a little more about temple life.

“Almost every city and village in Thailand has a Buddhist temple, or what we call a ‘wat’. They are not only places where monks live and study; they also receive donations so they can help their local communities. In the past they served as a place of accommodation, the local hospital, the school, and also as a place for the community to celebrate festivals. Nowadays some temples still offer schooling for local children and if you need a place to stay, you are always welcome there too.”
Once inside the temple Aunt Kanda said goodnight and left them, for only men were allowed into the monk’s dormitory. Monk Teera was glad to see Jai after such a long time and was also very interested to meet Ben. The three of them talked at length until at last Monk Teera stretched and yawned, telling them he needed to be up early to accompany the other monks on their morning rounds.

At 5 o’clock a loud “Booonnggg!!” jolted the boys awake, a signal for the monks to ready themselves for prayers. Afterwards, Jai and Ben joined the line of orange-robed monks carrying their black bowls out onto the streets to collect donations of food from the local people. In this way, the villagers made merit for their act of giving.

Jai and Ben accompanied Monk Teera along the sidewalks and through narrow streets as one by one people greeted him with a wai before dropping a little bag of food into his bowl. Each time it was the same routine, until they entered a small laneway (a ‘soi’) and were met by several household members waving their arms and chattering excitedly. “We’ve just heard news from a cousin in Surin. The villagers there have spotted a big bird in the sky with a large beak and a huge wingspan. It’s unlike anything they’ve ever seen.”
The boys knew it must be Sammy. They had to get to Surin. Bidding goodbye to Monk Teera, they rushed back to Aunt Kanda’s house where she quickly put plans into place. “I’ll take you to the elephant stables. I know people there who are travelling to Surin for the elephant festival. They might take you along.”

Jai’s aunt led them on a rambling course through modern streets and alleyways until they suddenly emerged into an open landscape littered with broken brick walls and temples. These were the remains of the once glorious capital city destroyed by the Burmese around 250 years ago. Further on they came to a large wooden enclosure holding dozens of magnificent elephants adorned with bright saddlecloths.

Aunt Kanda scanned the herd of animals and then, finding what she was looking for, waved out to an elephant handler (a ‘mahout’) atop one of the large animals. “Sawasdee ka,” she called. “Sawasdee krub, ben yang rai? (Hello, how are you?)” he called back. “This is my nephew Jai and his friend Ben,” said Aunt Kanda. “They need to get to Surin.” She then went on to explain their situation. It turned out Mr. Danai was making plans to travel there that same afternoon and he would be glad to take the boys if they didn’t mind riding in an old truck with his elephants: Ying and her baby, Mali.
Along the way Dao explained to Ben how important the elephant (or ‘chang’) was to the Thai people. “It is Thailand’s most well-known National Symbol. Elephants have been a part of our history since the early days when they were used to carry Kings into battle. Ben, you might be interested to know that one of Thailand’s most famous rulers, King Mongkut, King Rama IV, once offered some elephants to U.S. President James Buchanan, praising their usefulness for heavy work. However, President Abraham Lincoln, who became President when the king’s letter arrived, declined the offer.”

She added, “In more modern times the animals have been used in the timber industry to haul heavy teak logs through mountainous areas unreachable by trucks.”
“However, due to recent efforts to conserve our native teak forests, the amount of logging in Thailand has decreased. As a result, many mahouts and their elephants have joined ‘elephant training centers’ where tourists can see the elephants showing off their work skills, such as pulling and pushing logs and using their tusks to stack them into a neat pile. These activities usually take place in the morning, while in the afternoon the animals can rest and relax in a natural environment. The festival we are going to in Surin is a three-day celebration showcasing the strength of the Thai elephant and honoring its role in protecting our country and developing our economy.”

With the constant droning of the truck engine, Dao and Jai gradually nodded off and Ben found himself staring out the window at the passing scenery. He noticed that I-san was dryer than the Central regions of Bangkok and Ayutthaya, and though famous for its green fields of jasmine rice, right now the land seemed in great need of water.

As the truck rolled onward Ben also fell asleep, till the loud blurring of the horn warned him they were arriving in Surin. While Mr. Danai and his staff set up camp at the Elephant Stadium, Jai and Ben headed out to search for Sammy; but none of the nearby trees or neighboring streets yielded any sign of the pet bird.
Early next morning the boys joined Mr. Danai and Dao in the opening procession of the festival where hundreds of elephants and their mahouts, dancers, and musicians paraded through the streets.

Nearing the center of town, the procession was stopped by a series of long wooden tables spread across the road, each one piled with a breakfast buffet of bananas, watermelons, and a large assortment of vegetables prepared especially for the elephants. Sniffing food in the air, the large animals lumbered toward the tables, ravenously devouring the feast till barely a scrap remained.

Afterward, it was time for the mahouts to eat, and Mr. Danai treated the children to a typical I-san lunch of 'som tam' (green papaya salad), 'gai yang' (barbecued chicken) and sticky rice. Eagerly biting into the som tam, Ben quickly discovered something new about Thai food: even the salads had chilies in them - and though it was spicier than any Thai food he had tried so far, he enjoyed it just the same!
Arriving at the stadium early on the second day of the festival, Ben, Jai and Dao grabbed front row seats for the show. At that time, the arena was almost empty except for a huge red, white and blue flag fluttering in the light breeze. While waiting for the show to start, Jai explained its significance to Ben.

“It has been the Thai flag (or ‘Trirong’) since 1917. You can see it has five horizontal bands of red, white, and blue, the same colors as your American flag. The outer bands of red represent the nation, built and maintained by the blood of our Thai ancestors; the two inner bands of white symbolize the purity of religion, while the center blue band represents the monarchy.”

Startled by music booming from the loudspeakers, the children quickly looked up to find Dao’s father and Ying amongst two armies of elephants and their mahouts parading into the arena in ancient military dress. Once the armies had assembled on opposite sides of the field, war cries screamed from the riders, who charged their elephants toward each other, re-enacting a battle of old Ayutthaya days.

While the sounds of fighting raged in the stadium behind her, baby Mali roamed her enclosure in search of food. Finding little to eat, the elephant raised her long trunk, catching the fragrant aroma of ripe bananas coming from the forest nearby. With her tummy growling in hunger, she squeezed her plump little body through a small gap in the fence and trotted off to find them.
Before long Mali came across a small banana plantation. Rushing toward the sweet fruit in front of her, she tripped on a fallen branch and tumbled into a deep hole. Over and over she tried to get out but her body was tightly jammed. At last, she trumpeted for help instead, “Brrrrrt! Brrrrrt!” Almost at once a huge shadow whooshed past her ears and peering up into the strong sun she spied a giant bird. “Brrrrt!” she cried again and the large bird screeched back before flying over the treetops and out of Mali’s sight.

Returning to camp after the show, the children quickly discovered the empty enclosure and realized Mali was gone. But before they had time to act, a shrill squawking overhead made the children look up.

“It’s Sammy!” Ben shouted. “Sammy, come down!” But the bird was behaving strangely—screeching, squawking and circling the camp before flying away over the trees nearby. Then just when they thought he had vanished, the pet eagle returned and repeated the whole routine.

At last understanding that Sammy wanted them to follow, the children threaded their way through the forest till finally they came upon the hole where baby Mali lay. As Jai and Dao ran to her aid, Ben called up to Sammy again, “Sammy, please come down!” but once he had seen that Mali was safe, the eagle squawked a brief farewell then flew away once again.
As the festival drew to a close, Ben’s pet eagle was still nowhere to be seen, so Mr. Danai arranged for the boys to return home while he and Dao continued on to Chiang Mai to celebrate the Thai New Year. But as they gathered to say their goodbyes, the mahout received a last-minute call, and his typical Thai cry of delight, “Oooh-hooooo!” signaled Sammy had been sighted again - this time, in Chiang Mai!

Quickly changing their plans, the boys climbed back into the truck and the travelers and their elephants set out on the 400-mile trip north. Along the way, Mr. Danai described where they were going. “The northern region of Thailand is a mountainous area, making it the origin of many rivers and streams that flow throughout the country. The people there are known to be warm and friendly, including the various hill-tribe villagers who provide the area with a rich mixture of cultural traditions - the New Year celebration in Chiang Mai is particularly well known.”

Jai and Dao explained further. “In Thailand, the new year officially begins on January 1. However we also celebrate the traditional New Year (‘Songkran’) with a national holiday from April 13 to April 15. During this time young people pay respect to their elders by pouring water on their hands and in return the elders say a blessing to the younger ones. In olden times we believed that water was a pure thing; that it could wash away evil and bring good luck and happiness with it. Nowadays, we also like to have fun by throwing bowls of water over our neighbors and friends.”

Mr. Danai added, “Many cities hold a parade through their streets as well. The one in Chiang Mai is famous with almost a million tourists from all over the world attending it each year. You are lucky to be going there to see it for yourselves.”
It was late when the truck rolled into Chiang Mai and even later by the time Mr. Danai had settled the animals safely in their stall for the night. Remembering Mali’s daring escape in Surin, this time the mahout took special care to place the two elephants in a sturdy enclosure with a secure latch on the door.

Rising early next morning, Dao busily set about preparing Ying for the big parade. Leading the large elephant out of the enclosure, the young girl gently shut the gate behind her, leaving baby Mali inside to finish her breakfast. Using a brush, Dao skillfully decorated Ying’s body with glittering paints then draped her with silk cloths before summoning her dad to check on the results. Delighted at his daughter’s handiwork, the mahout instructed Ying to kneel down then clambered upon her back and gently guided her out into the long procession.

Watching amongst the excited crowd, Dao, Jai and Ben stared as young men skillfully twirled sharp swords while others banged out rhythms on traditional wooden drums. Floats adorned with colorful flowers rolled by, ‘Miss Songkran’ contestants waved to the crowd, and Thai dancers swayed past, gliding their long golden fingernails gracefully through the air. Spotting Mr. Danai and Ying in the midst of the procession, the children clapped and cheered, and when bronze Buddha statues rumbled through the street the noise grew wild, with jubilant spectators tossing petals and showering them with water.
As the parade passed by on the neighboring street, baby Mali was in her stall, plotting her next escape. Each time Mr. Danai and Dao had closed the gate of the stall, Mali had watched carefully how it was done and now, just as carefully, she hoisted her trunk over that gate and easily slid back the lock. Feeling pleased at her cleverness, Mali proudly ventured into the forest to explore her new surroundings.

Within the jungle, the little elephant was enjoying the peaceful early morning sounds of woodpeckers tapping on trees and playful gibbons whooping high in the branches above. Then somewhere out of the deep shadows, the roar of a hungry tiger and the piercing screech of a terrified eagle sent a shiver through Mali’s spine. Crashing through the thick brush she quickly discovered Sammy, with one crooked wing hanging limply at his side and a snarling tiger creeping slowly toward him. Without thinking, Mali fearlessly rushed at the drooling beast, which saw the elephant bearing down and turned and ran for its life.

Placing the eagle upon her back, Mali emerged from the jungle and immediately bellowed for help. Hearing the little elephant’s anxious cry, the three children pushed their way through the crowd and raced toward Mali’s stall. Arriving first, Ben gently lifted Sammy from Mali’s back and embraced the elephant in a warm hug of thanks before calling for the vet.
To mark the boys’ homecoming, Jai’s father treated them to a Thai boxing (‘Muay Thai’) show. As Ben and his family watched, Jai’s dad explained the sport to them. “This world famous martial art was thought to have originated many years ago when Siamese soldiers who had lost their weapons in battle engaged in unarmed combat. Tonight you will see that it is very different from the style of boxing in America. The fighters not only use their fists but other parts of the body as well, especially the elbows, arms, feet, and knees.”
When saying goodnight to Ben later, his dad couldn't resist asking: “Son, you travelled all over Thailand; to the northeast, to the north, and back here to Bangkok in central Thailand. Are you glad to be home at last?” “Yeah, it sure is great to be back,” replied Ben. “But, you’re wrong, you know, dad,” he said cheekily. “I haven’t been all over Thailand - I didn’t go to the south!”

Grinning, his dad said, “Well then, maybe we can do something about that during the school vacation. I’ve heard it is beautiful there - it’s a long narrow peninsula with high mountainous areas of natural forests situated between the Andaman Sea on one side and the Gulf of Thailand on the other. Your mom would love to lie on one of the long sandy beaches and we could all take a trip out to one of the islands and go snorkeling. Anyway, the last few days have been tiring and you start school tomorrow, so you had better get some sleep. “Goodnight, Ben.” “G’night, dad.”

Sitting in class on the first morning at his American school in Bangkok, Ben heard the teacher say, “Welcome back, everyone. It’s good to see all the old smiling faces again, and some new ones. Would anyone like to tell us something special they did during the long break?” Like a flash Ben’s hand shot into the air.
American-Thai Sister School Program
The Kingdom of Thailand is a country of 68 million people and is the second largest economy in Southeast Asia. Thailand is the United States' oldest treaty ally in Asia. The U.S. - Thai relations date back to 1833 when the two countries signed the Treaty of Amity and Commerce. Almost 180 years later, the relations between the two nations have expanded and deepened in all areas of cooperation.

For more information, please visit the Royal Thai Embassy's website at www.thaiembdc.org

About the American-Thai Sister School Program

Recognizing the role that the young generation can play in promoting ties of friendship between countries and peoples, the Royal Thai Embassy in Washington, D.C. initiated the American-Thai Sister School Program in 2010. The objective is to foster global citizenship, mutual learning, and goodwill among Thai and American students in Grades 4 - 8, using interactive social media, cultural and educational activities as means to build a human bridge.

Since 2010, 27 American schools and 29 Thai schools have participated in this program. More than half of them have paired-up and started their sister school partnership. We welcome American and Thai schools to join this endeavor to promote lasting friendships among students of the two countries and prepare our future generations to be citizens of the increasingly interconnected world with an awareness of the diverse cultures and surroundings.

For more information, please visit our website at www.americanthaisisterschool.org
MEET THE AUTHOR

I am Australian and have lived in Thailand for over 20 years. I am married to a Thai and we have 3 children. I enjoy visiting schools around the region doing storytelling, making presentations and conducting workshops. In my spare time I love travelling to interesting places and learning new things. This is one of many books I've written about Thailand - I hope you enjoy it.

OTHER BOOKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR

For more details about Janice and her books visit www.janicesantikarn.com
When Ben’s father is posted to Thailand as the new U.S. Ambassador, the family takes along its pet eagle, Sammy. After Sammy is accidentally released from his cage, Ben and his Thai friend Jai embark on a chase throughout Thailand to get him back.

Along the way they ride in a three-wheeled taxi, tour a glittering golden palace, and visit the ancient city of Ayutthaya where they stay overnight with monks in a Buddhist temple. Joining up with an elephant handler, his elephant and her baby, Mali, they travel hundreds of miles through the northern regions of Thailand, taking part in the annual Elephant Fair and Thai New Year celebrations.

Throughout the journey, Sammy the eagle and Mali the elephant meet and land in trouble, but through their heroic deeds they become new and lasting friends.

This book celebrates the enduring close relationship enjoyed by Thailand and the United States of America since 1833.