

Hillary

A Celebrated mountaineer and an overgrown lawn

July 2001

Ophelia and Ben had already been an item for some when Hillary entered their lives. Recently married, they had moved to Jakarta to further the demands of their careers for experience in a developing country. Both nevertheless travelled pretty frequently. Since they met in 1996, Ophelia had often mocked Ben for his unusual middle name. It is Hillary, after his famous great-uncle, who Ophelia described as “likes to climb things, like mountains”. Ben wore it like a man.

Having lived and worked in Amsterdam for three years or so at environmental NGOs, in early 2001 they decamped to Jakarta and rented a house in a gated compound inhabited mostly by well-to-do Indonesians - as opposed to the more elaborate compounds typically occupied by European ex-patriots.

The house was perfectly comfortable and well adapted to the climate so that air-conditioning was not required. It had a luscious garden and came with a housekeeper/gardener called An. It soon also had three kittens, mostly strays that Ben and Ophelia had found in the street, but who did a fine job of keeping the local rat community confined to its quarters, or at least a sociable distance from the house. An hailed from Kalimantan, where he had learned precisely nothing about either housekeeping or gardening. (This can probably be understood in the context of its philosophical framework: in order to address the How of such tasks, he would first have to master the Why, and this is where he seemed to have got stuck.) For the most part, this shortcoming was of little importance to Ophelia and Ben, who had never had the opportunity to develop expectations of household staff.



I had planned a visit to Ophelia in July, which happened to coincide with one of Ben’s frequent trips to Amsterdam for his work. Now it turns out that 2001 was an interesting time in Jakarta. The country was in transition from the long quasi-dictatorship of Suhartu, and political volatility prevailed.

As the tanks were lining up in Merdeka Square and Ophelia was receiving hourly bulletins from the Australian Embassy, Ben and I set off on opposing trajectories. Before leaving, he was anxious about the cats: “I know what your mother is like, and I do not want to come home and find cats in our bed. They are to sleep *outside*, OK? Not in the bed. I know what she’s like, your mother!”

The tanks were still lining up as we drove from the airport. “This is great, I’ve never gone from the airport to the house this quickly before!” She had shrugged off all suggestion that she should head out of Indonesia, and her contacts at the Embassy were still sanguine; we nevertheless decided that it would be prudent to leave Jakarta. To this end she had booked us a week in a posh resort in Lombok.

Lombok is nearly everything Bali used to be able to claim to be, and we had a lovely week there in mostly unspoiled beauty. There was lots to charm us, but we were especially taken with the goats. As goats do, they came in a variety of sizes and colours. The cutest were the ones that looked as if they were a composite of two quite different goats glued together at the waist: the front half of a brown and white bi-colour might be glued to the back end of a black goat; look around at the herd and you'll see another goat comprised of the two missing bits - the front of the black goat and the back of the bi-colour. Even more intriguing were white goats wearing a black belt and black goats wearing a white belt. (I have since seen similar goats in Galicia, but Lombok was where I first encountered them.)

Ophelia thought this might help solve a problem they had with An. The problem related to his gardening technique. An had been told by the letting agent to cut the grass once a week (with shears: to spare the residents the baleful din of two-stroke lawnmowers). But our concept of a week doesn't correspond to anything they understand in Kalimantan. So An cut the grass each day. Soon they were all ankle deep in mud. Ophelia tried to educate him on the meaning of once a week, but without success: An now understood that he was not to cut the grass at all, so before long they were knee deep in grass. She had contemplated a sheep, but that posed obvious problems - they're hard to find in Indonesia. A goat, on the other hand... and a cute goat at that.... We decided that this was the thing to do.

The lady at Garuda Airlines was very obliging: Yes, it would be OK to bring a goat on board the plane to Jakarta. But not in Business Class. Giving up our Business Class places was a sacrifice too far - not least because the other passengers in Economy would have, among other things, goats with them, and probably even chooks. Erk. (Cows we thought unlikely.)

We were still keen on the goat idea though; and once back in Jakarta, we made our way to the local market to buy one. The



goat herders were startled to see us, but within minutes Ophelia had spotted the goat of her dreams. Though lacking the white belt, this kid was the last word in cute. Positively scripted by Disney (she's the little black one in the centre of the photo). The goat herders wanted USD35 for her, and although we knew that this was a special price just for us, we reasoned that there was an outside chance that the money would be put to

good use, so we paid them. They explained that she was really too young to leave her mother, and that we would have to bottle feed her for a few weeks.

As we loaded up on baby-feeding apparatus and formula at the local shop, it became clear to me that my daughter was quite clucky, and that I might expect a two-legged kid in the family before long. At home, we noticed that our new baby liked to climb things and in particular to stand on any raised piece of terrain. We assembled a sort

of platform that she could stand on to feel more comfortable, which she seemed to like, and duly stood on it being cute for us.

“She needs a name”, Ophelia said. “Of course! But what are we going to call her? What do you call a goat?” “Heavens, I don’t know: Gemima is for ducks: a friend of mine called her cat Gemima and she left home. I explained it was because she was indignant at being given a duck’s name, which I still think is the reason. She never came back. I wouldn’t have either”. Ophelia thought this train of thought was not helpful, but she had already arrived at the solution: “Hillary!” “Of course. Obvious!”

Hillary struggled to settle, which served only to push Ophelia’s latent maternal buttons all the more: she was fed and cuddled and fed and cuddled around the clock. She was still being fed and cuddled when it came time for me to take my plane back to Paris.

Ben arrived home a few days later to find, well, no cats in his bed. But there was a goat. A goat named after him - or more precisely after his famous great uncle. Being fed and cuddled. “I don’t know how exactly, but I *do* know your mother had something to do with this. I just *know*.”



Hillary continued not to settle in and was, after a week or so, taken back to the goat herders. They were alarmed to see Ophelia this time, thinking that she would want her \$35 back. Hillary’s mother was, by contrast, delighted to see her. She was now nearly twice the size of her peers - so well had she been fed - and cuddled.

The goat herders are doubtless still telling the story of two scatty white women who came in a taxi to give them an extraordinary sum of money in order to fatten up a kid only to give her back to them a few weeks later. Ophelia and I reassured ourselves that, being a girl, she would probably be put to use to make more goats rather than to make satay kambing. We like to think so, and she probably was.

As you would expect, Hillary ate not a single blade of grass, but supplemented her diet of milk and cuddles with cane furniture, straw hats, the legs of jeans, and anything else hanging within her reach on the clothes line.