

Isan fieldnotes Feb. 20, 2007

I have just been through an incredible learning experience. It involved the theft of my computer, camera and cell phone. How, you might ask, can an experience of theft be a learning experience? Let me explain.

After having many difficulties trying to find a translator, when visiting Bangkok two weeks ago I finally was able to locate a person who would agree to move with me to the village. A young man I met nicknamed "Leg" said he would do any kind of work that I needed, and would accept the salary that I offered. I am often amazed at the nicknames that Thai people choose for themselves. Usually they will have a nickname that has no meaning in English, but sometimes these names are the same as words in English, and can be very funny. I have met people who go by names such as Nope, Golf, Tiny, Gap, and now Leg. How they choose these nicknames I have no idea, but I wish they would consult with an American before choosing an English word.

Leg seemed very flexible in terms of the kinds of work that he would do. He said he likes to cook, clean, and would do any kind of work that I needed. Moreover, Leg is very attractive to me, even though he does not think so because he has dark skin and light skin color is considered attractive in Thailand. I think he is totally gorgeous. Anyway, we met and seemed to get along well. On the third day after I met him I took him out for a dinner with his friends on his birthday. He was very grateful, and seemed happy. We had

a great time, dancing and singing karaoke. That night we became intimate, and it was great.

After a few days, in which he took me around Bangkok and did a fairly good job of translating for me, we made the journey by bus to Maha Sarakham. He and I got along well together, and I was very pleased. We went to the village and the villagers were their typical friendly selves. They seemed to just take Leg into their arms, and welcomed him. Everything seemed to be going well. Leg is a good cook, he did an adequate job as translator, and he seemed to fit into the village life well. He seemed happy.

However, all was not well. It turns out that he does not, in fact, want to do “any kind of work” as he promised. I am finishing the house, and I asked him to help out on that, doing the same kinds of physical labor that I am doing. He objected strenuously when I asked him to help me lift and move the scaffold to another part of the house. It was heavy, but two people could move it easily. I am 58 and he is 23, yet he considered it more strenuous than I did. I value and enjoy physical labor, whereas he clearly does not. He is happy to cook and clean the house, but not to do physical labor.

Leg also does not have much patience. He gets irritated at little things. For example, when I took him around the marketplace, to show him the kinds of vegetables and foods that I like to eat, he thought it was all a waste of time. He told others that I wasted a lot of time doing this. Since he was being paid by the hour for his time, I am not sure why he got so irritated. But this showed me that he has a prickly personality.

Nevertheless, overall I was pleased that finally I had someone to translate for me, and who was reasonably decent to live with. That is, until the third day. About 11am, on Thursday February 15, 2007, after I asked him to help me with cleaning up the yard to make a nice garden, Leg said he wanted to use my phone to call his parents. I went back to working at the new house.

After an hour I wondered what was taking him so long. I had a gut feeling that something was not right. He was not anywhere around the house. So I went back to the house where I am temporarily staying, and to my horror found that Leg had taken his clothes and backpack, as well as my computer, digital camera, and cell phone. I was in shock and disbelief. After recovering myself, I ran over to Bunlut's house and told them what had happened. I said I wanted to go to the police. Bunlut was not there, but his son Puie offered to take me on his motorcycle. I thought he understood the word 'POLICE' since I had seen that spelling stamped on police cars. I kept saying "Pom dongan bai u police" [I want to go to police] But instead, to my increasing dismay, he took me to the ATM at a neighboring village. I can only surmise that he was afraid Leg had taken my ATM card. It was one of those many times when I felt totally helpless in not being more fluent in the language. I try to explain things, and the villagers just do not understand my poor Thai.

I was hoping that there would be a policeman in that village, but there was not. Finally I managed to communicate to Puie that I really wanted to go to the police station,

and he took me to the police station in Kaedam. Though the police did not speak English, at least I was able to describe to them what happened. A couple of police remembered seeing Leg at the bus stop going to Maha Sarakham. I then asked them to alert the police at the city, to look for him at the bus station. The police then went with me to the city, and we searched the bus station in vain. Then they went to some computer stores, and found that someone fitting Leg's description had attempted to sell a notebook computer but no one would buy it. He was obviously trying to get money to escape on the bus.

After this retrace I insisted we go back to the bus station, but the Kaedam police had to leave to go home at the end of their shift. I went to the bus station on my own, and talked to a policeman there. This policeman told me that some people had seen someone matching Leg's description get on a bus to Bangkok, and that the police in Ban Phai had caught him. If I got on the bus leaving right away, they could hold him until I could identify my computer. I had much of my ethnographic work on that computer, as well as all my photos and financial records. But I was especially dismayed because I had the manuscript of my new book in progress, that was on this computer. I had sent backup copies to a friend in America, but that did not include the considerable work that I had done over the past two weeks. I was really pleased with the quality of that writing, and distraught that I might lose it. Not to mention the value of the computer, camera and cell phone themselves.

I had to get this computer back! I jumped on the bus, and rode over an hour to Ban Phai. I was happy to get there, and went immediately to the police station. To my dismay, the police in Ban Phai did NOT have Leg or my computer. They had just missed him. I had been told incorrectly. I felt so frustrated. I explained everything to the police, and they contacted the police in the next town. The bus had just passed there. So they contacted the police in Korat, the next major city after that, to search the buses as they arrived there. Lek had called his brother in law Bunlut, and to my surprise Bunlut came to the police station in Ban Phai. He had called Lek in Bangkok. I should have called Lek earlier, but in my rush to get Leg I had not thought to do that. What a mistake. Lek could have called the police in Maha Sarakham and maybe have caught him faster than I could have done. Boy, I felt stupid about that afterward.

In the midst of all this tension, I had to listen to Lek's admonitions. Lek had not liked Leg from the beginning, and had told me not to trust Leg. Now Lek yelled at me, "Oh I tried to tell you, but you did not listen to me. I told you so...." Over and over again a hundred times. I know that Lek was only expressing his concern for me, but I was not in the mood to listen to his rantings. Lek is so distrustful of everyone, that I never know whether to follow his advice or not. If I distrusted everybody the way that Lek does, I fear that I would never be able to meet anyone.

After waiting for two tense hours, the police in Korat called and said that they had searched the buses from Maha Sarakham and had not been able to find anyone matching

Leg's description on those buses. I felt totally powerless. I came home in Bunlut's truck, feeling defeated and chagrined.

That night I thought to try phoning my phone. To my surprise, when I called, Leg answered. He told me, curtly, that if I paid 30,000 baht (about \$833 USD) that he would return my computer to me. Gone was his usual sweet voice; the voice I heard in the phone was hard and hostile. I was angry, but tried not to show it. He told me he was in Lopburi, a city about two hours north of Bangkok, and if I wanted to see my computer again I should call tomorrow. After settling down, I wrote him a long email. I told him that I did not bear him any animosity, but I just want my computer back. I told him if he would return it, I would be prepared to forget about his theft.

The next day, on Friday, we had a long talk by phone. I think he was so shocked that I was not nasty to him, but that I asked about why he did this thing. He eventually opened up, and told me that he has many financial problems, and owes a lot of money. He said that he owes 20,000 baht just to keep his motorcycle from being repossessed. To my surprise, he said that if I could just send him 20,000 baht (about \$555. USD) that he would accept that, and would return my computer. I figured that if I tried to buy a new computer, it would cost a lot more than \$555 plus it would not have my valuable data on it. I was so worried about losing the manuscript of my new book. So I told him I would pay that amount, but only if I could exchange the cash for the computer right away. He refused, and said that I had to send the money first, to deposit it into his bank account.

He gave me the account number, and told me that if I put the money into that account that he would mail the computer back to me.

I said no, that how could I trust him to return it after what he did. Plus, I said, I was afraid the computer might be damaged in the mail. Then he said, OK, if you do not do it this way I will sell the computer and you will never see it again.

I was distraught, but tried not to show it.

I then caught a ride on a motorcycle and went back to the police in Kaedam, and asked them if they could call the bank and get the id number. The police officer called the bank, and they refused to give the information. But afterward the policeman said he would give me a letter, and I should take it directly to the bank and see if I could convince them. I decided that was my only hope. By this time the bank was closed, so I had to wait until the next day.

On Saturday morning I caught a ride into Maha Sarakham to go to that bank. I had been told that the bank would be open on Saturday. However, after a tense ride that was delayed because the person giving me the ride wanted to watch a cockfight first, and then he had to eat and take a shower, etc etc. I waited with increasing impatience. But what could I do, since there was no other way to get to the bank. Finally we got to the bank, and to my dismay the bank was closed on Saturday.

I had once again received information that turned out not to be accurate. I hate that when someone tells me something with certainty, and since I do not know all these details myself, I am completely dependent on them. That is the nature of being an outsider in a foreign country, but it requires a special personality type who can adapt to living in a situation where you do not know a lot of basic things about how the local society works. I had to keep reminding myself that this is what happens in ethnographic fieldwork, and to settle down. But time was of the essence.

After having these approaches fail, Leg called me again. He asked why I had not sent the money into his bank account. I said I did not even know if he had the computer, and to prove that he had it, he should take the computer to an internet shop and send me my book manuscript. Then, I said, I would know for sure that he really does have the computer. I figured that, even if I did not get my computer back, at least I would have my book manuscript. He said he would do that. I thought at least this gives me more time to think of something else.

Right after hanging up the phone, Lek called from Bangkok to say that the Thai Immigration Office called to say that they were mailing me the authorization paper for me to get a Thai driver license. I had been waiting for that form for a long time. They mailed the form to Lek's salon address in Bangkok. I thought about this, about how much I would like to have a driver license in case I need to drive somewhere, and I thought maybe in Bangkok I would be able to meet Leg and negotiate the return of my

computer. So, on the spur of the moment, I jumped on a bus to take the six hour ride to Bangkok. Lek met me at the bus station.

Lek was very upset about me losing the computer, even more upset than I was. Lek started crying, saying how awful it was for someone I trusted to steal from me like that. Lek said it is important to catch him, and make sure he goes to jail. For a Buddhist, Lek seemed particularly vengeful. The villagers are very honest, and they consider stealing to be an extremely serious crime. They are proud that there is no crime in their village, and they are not tolerant in the least about stealing. Poverty or financial need is, to them, no excuse.

I called the Maha Sarakham police to tell them that I was in Bangkok, trying to find my computer. They promised me that they could get the name on the bank account from the bank on Monday. I waited tensely through the rest of Sunday. I avoided calling Leg and he did not call me. I was increasingly nervous that I would never see my computer again. On Monday morning I called the police. Not yet, they said. By the afternoon. Then at 2pm I called again. Within an hour, they promised. An hour later I called again. Not yet. They would call me, they promised, within thirty minutes. Two hours later, the police called and said they had not heard anything back from the bank, but they should know for sure by tomorrow morning.

Not wanting to waste more time with the police, I called Leg. I told him that I had taken the bus to Bangkok, because I wanted to see him and get the computer. I said I had

the money, but I wanted to get the computer at the same time. Again he said no. I told him I do not hate him, and though he did a bad thing I understood the pressures he is under. I only want my computer back. How, he asked, could he be sure I was not trying to catch him for the police? I said if he would give me back my computer, camera and phone that I would consider the affair over, and I had no interest in seeing him in jail.

I said, truthfully, that I was giving Buddhist prayers for his well-being and happiness, and that I only had good wishes for him in the future. This shocked him, and I could hear his sobs as he began crying on the phone. He said he realized what he did was very wrong, but he was under such pressure that he saw no other way to get the money to pay his bills. I told him if he had just talked with me, I would have tried to help. I asked him if we could meet to get my computer. He finally agreed.

On Monday afternoon I received the letter from the Immigration Office, so on Tuesday morning Lek and Lek's boyfriend Jing took me to the Driver License office. I needed to have Lek's car to take the driving test. The whole time, Lek was very abusive to me. "Here you are a doctor, you are a lot more educated than me, yet you let this little criminal trick you. You are so stupid." I did feel stupid. But nothing in my Ph.D. education prepared me for dealing with criminals. In all my travels all over the world I have been lucky and have never had this kind of major theft before. I have lived in crime-ridden Los Angeles for a quarter of a century, and never once had a break-in to my house. Yet, ironically, in this village where no crime had taken place in many years, I had suffered the worst loss I have had in my life, and from a person I trusted.

Lek berated me that I trust people too much, and I have to be more suspicious of people. I agree I am very trusting, but I have found that with that attitude I generally look for the best in people, and they usually give me their best. I do not want to have such a negative attitude about people that I become jaded and filled with negativity. But in this case, Lek was obviously right. So I sat in silence as he continued to criticize me for my stupidity.

I waited tensely at the driver license office. Leg called and asked when I was coming. I said I did not know how long it would take, but I would come as soon as I was finished. He made me promise that I would come alone. I promised. Lek said not to trust him, that he might have someone else there to beat me up, take my money, or even kill me. Lek's sister called from the village. They are all very worried about me. She said she had heard on television about how some Thai people had lured a foreigner into a trap and taken his money and killed him. They all want me to have the police catch him and then get the computer back.

I did not know what to do. Leg assured me he did not want to trick me, that the computer was at a pawn shop on Silom Road in downtown Bangkok. I asked the name of the shop and he said something like "Javanese." I asked the address and he said he does not know, but said it is one block from the sky train Saladang exit. He said it was a shop on the major street of Silom. I said OK I would meet him there. After that, at the Driver License Office, my name was called. I passed the eye test, then took the reaction test on

a machine designed to see how fast a driver can react. Repeatedly, the Thai applicants before me failed the test. When my turn came, I reacted very fast, and was better than any of the Thai drivers. They all looked at me in amazement, at how fast I reacted. I passed that test so well, that the official said I would not have to take the driving test. I got my picture taken, and was relieved to be finished soon.

I phoned the police in Maha Sarakham again, trying to find the name on the bank account. At least I wanted to be armed with that information. The police now told me that they could not get it from the bank, but that I would have to go to that bank and try to get it myself. After wasting all this time dealing with the police, I was frustrated. So on leaving the driver license office I had Lek and Jing drive me to that bank. The manager spoke English, and I explained the situation. She looked up that account number and said it is registered in the name of a woman. It was not a man's name at all. Beyond that, she could not tell me anything. I realized then that all this effort to find the bank account was for naught, and all my ways of finding out the true name of this person nicknamed Leg had failed. To say I felt frustrated is an understatement.

Lek wanted to go with me to make sure I was alright, but Leg had met Lek and Leg had insisted I come alone. Lek had a good idea to go to his sister's house in Bangkok and ask her husband to go with us, and he could follow me anonymously to make sure I was safe. Leg would not recognize him. Lek tried to call his sister, but there was no answer. When we finally got to their house, the man was very busy with his work and he could not leave. I asked Jing and Lek if Jing could follow me, and call the police if I looked to

be in danger. They said OK. I told Lek to follow from a distance, but to keep out of sight. So we left Lek's car there, and took a taxi into Silom.

The taxi drove up and down the street, but we could not find any pawn shop. I asked several people and no one knew where this pawn shop was. Lek, increasingly angry, cursed me for even believing Leg. Lek was sure that Leg was just trying to set me up, and that he wanted to take me somewhere and hurt me. Lek angrily said he would not go with me. So then I asked Jing to follow me. At this point both Lek and Jing said that Leg might remember seeing pictures of Jing, and if he saw Jing following he would panic. I said that they had agreed to this plan, and why did they wait till the last minute to tell me this. Jing refused to go. I said I wanted Jing to go anyway, and wear sunglasses.

Lek angrily yelled at me to be brave, and get out of the taxi. I did so very reluctantly, but I asked Lek to call me periodically and if I said some obvious untruth like "Bunlut is coming to Bangkok" that he would know this is the code for Lek to call the police. I said this over and over again, to make sure Lek understood. Lek agreed. With that small assurance, I got out of the taxi and went by myself into the busy street of Silom.

After getting to the Saladang exit of the sky train, I called Leg. I said I was there and would wait for him there at the KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant, an American chain that is in Thailand). He said it would take him 20 minutes to get there by taxi. I waited nervously. I tried to call Lek, but for some reason the mobile phone I had borrowed stopped working. The phone would ring if someone called, but I could not get

the damned thing to answer. It would go to the message center. Why, at all possible times, did the phone choose to stop working now? I was in increasing panic.

Finally I managed to reply to Leg, and he angrily asked why I had not responded to his calls. I told him about the phone, but I do not think he believed me. He told me he would be there soon, and to get into the taxi with him. Now I really was in a panic. I said no, that I wanted him to come into the KFC and meet me. He got angry, but at last said OK. I had the fear that he would give the taxi driver some instructions in Thai that I did not understand, take me to an isolated place where his friends would attack me. I was sweating.

Finally I got the phone to work, and called Lek. I told him to bring the police right away, that I was scared to go with Leg. Lek said he was at the police station in Silom, and the police said they could do nothing. I was completely on my own.

Right after this Leg arrived. To my surprise, he was dressed like a girl! He was wearing a hair weave that made his hair even longer than his real shoulder-length hair. I had never known that Leg did drag, but I have to admit he looked very attractive. A thousand thoughts went through my mind: did he come like this as a disguise, to prevent police from following him if he needed to escape, or was he planning something to catch me? Or, was he trying to impress me? I did not know. But the spike high heels he was wearing would have made it hard for him to run away. So I was at least reassured by that.

He sat down, and immediately gave me my camera and mobile phone. I was pleased by that. But then he said that I had to go with him in a taxi. I said, "Wait, you told me for sure that my computer was in a pawn shop one block from the Saladang sky train exit. I am afraid you are trying to trick me." He said not to worry, that if I only believe him one time, I should believe him this time. I said I was too nervous to get in a taxi with him. He looked really pissed at me. At this point I really thought he had some nefarious plan to take me to some isolated area, take my money, credit card, and maybe beat me up. I could even be killed. I tried not to show my nervousness. I figured the computer and book manuscript were not worth risking my life.

At this point the phone rang. Thankfully, it was Lek. I answered, trying to be calm, and said the code words we had agreed upon before, to tell Lek to get the police there immediately. I told him I was at the KFC on Silom Road next to the Saladang sky train exit, and then said "Oh, Bunlut has decided to come to Bangkok." Then Lek replied, "Why are you talking about Bunlut when I need to know if you are OK?" I repeated "Bunlut is coming to Bangkok" but Lek still did not understand. I could not say more, in fear of alerting Leg that I was calling the police. This kind of misunderstanding happens often with Lek, and even when I repeat something several times I am never sure when Lek understands me or not. What a time for this to happen. Lek starts yelling at me to stop saying nonsense about Bunlut and tell him what to do. Then he hangs up the phone angrily.

There I was completely alone, without any backup. This was exactly the situation I wanted to avoid being in, and now here I was. My mind was racing. What to do? Then Leg said, “OK if you do not want to go by taxi, then we can take a bus.” I asked where the computer is, and he said at a pawn shop near Central Department Store, about a twenty minute bus ride away. I told him I thought that was really bad that he promised me the computer was one block from the sky train, when in fact it was somewhere else. He said nothing. I was very nervous, but I thought that on a crowded bus I would be safe, and there would be plenty of people around at a big department store. So with no backup, and all my plans voided, I decided to take the chance. Then Lek called again. I said I was leaving KFC and going to Central Department Store. I repeated this several times, trying to get Lek to bring the police to Central Department Store.

I followed Leg to the bus stop. Leg is my height, and with his high heels he was over six feet tall. As he walked along he looked like a giant beside the average Thai who is much shorter. He stood out sharply in the crowd, and would be easy to describe. I was reassured by that. Thais are very accepting of transgender people, and as we walked along a couple of men looked at me with this obvious male in drag, and said “oh, very good!” with a smile. I had to laugh, despite my nervousness.

Once we got on the bus, I started talking seriously with Leg. I said even though he had done something wrong, I was ready to forgive him if I get my computer back. I told him I had shown my sincerity at coming there by myself (which, without my backup plan, was literally true) and so I hoped he would be sincere in taking me to the computer.

He promised that he was, and that if I paid the 20,000 baht I would get the computer for sure. I then asked him about his financial problems. He said he could not talk about it. He only told me that he put my computer in a pawn shop so it would not be lost forever to me, and so he could get the 20,000 baht he needed immediately to prevent his motorcycle being repossessed. I asked if this paid off his motorcycle completely, and he said it did. I said, ok, at least I am glad that he used the money for some constructive purpose instead of wasting it on liquor and partying. I told him to think about me every time he rides on that motorcycle, and know that he owns that motorcycle because of me. He looked at me strangely, and then promised he would do that.

I then told him, truthfully, that I had been giving Buddhist prayers for his happiness. I repeated the mantra Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo, and told him to say this whenever he is feeling bad or in trouble, and that it will help him find a good way out of his predicament. I told him I wanted him and me to go to a wat, and get some Buddhist prayers to start the future in a more positive way. I told him that, even though what he did was wrong, that I know he has the capability within himself to become a good person. I said that I really believe that every person has the potential for Buddhahood within him, and that this is what he should strive to accomplish in his life.

I told him I had seen many, many people destroy their life at a young age because they only thought about their immediate selfish gain, and that if he wanted to have a long and happy life he must act unselfishly. I asked him if he would promise to try to be good, and not to ever do this kind of bad thing to anyone else in the future. He looked at me with

tears in his eyes, and said yes he would promise. He said that I was a good person, and I had treated him nicely, and that he knew if he stayed with me that it would be good for him. But, he said, he did not think that he would be good for me. I said I was confident that, if he tried, he really could become a good person, and always treat others with kindness and compassion and honesty.

By this time he was crying openly, even though some other people on the bus were watching. I held his hand, and stroked his arm, to show my support. I lost all my anger for the troubles and expense he had cost me, and my heart went out to him in sympathy.

We reached the place where Leg said it was time to get off the bus. We walked along a busy street for two blocks, and then he showed me the door to the pawnshop. It did not look like a pawnshop in America, and no items were on display, so I did not know what was going on. There was only a counter, with officials behind a steel grate like in a bank. But at least it was a legitimate business on a major street. Leg assured me this was where I could get the computer if I paid the money.

I said OK, and Leg took me to an ATM nearby where I took out 20,000 baht. We then went back to the business and Leg took out a ticket receipt and a photocopy of a Thai ID card. I asked why he did not have the original ID and he said that he had lost it. He then talked to the shop employee in Thai, and asked me for the 20,000 baht. I said I was not going to give the money until I saw the computer, and make sure it is really my computer and that it is OK. Leg now got really mad, and said I have to give the money first.

Now all my fears returned. I did not understand what he was saying in Thai, and I thought maybe this was not a pawnshop at all, but only some kind of loan center. Maybe he was just going to pay his debt with my money, and then disappear, leaving me there 20,000 baht poorer.

I asked if there was any person there who spoke English. No one spoke up. So I said I needed to see the computer first. I was insistent. Finally, a bald man walked in, and spoke to me in English. He said he is the manager. I said my computer was taken from me, and I need to see that it is in fact my computer before I could give the money. The man said that they never show the item until the money is given. I showed him the 20,000 baht, and said I am ready to give it as soon as I see that my computer is not damaged. I told him, as sincerely as I could, that this was very important that that computer was not damaged.

At last he relented, and told his employee to go get the computer. They brought it out, I opened it to make sure my data was there, and everything was OK. Then I paid the 20,000 baht. I asked for a receipt, and to my shock he said his business does not give receipts. I then asked for his card, and he said he does not have a card either. Seeing that he was not going to do any more, I had no choice but to leave.

I was angry about not getting a receipt, but at least I had my computer back. I then asked Leg to take me to an internet shop so I could immediately send my book

manuscript to the publisher. He was impatient to be off, but he said he would do that. He hailed a taxi, and again I was nervous that he might take me to a dark alley and try something bad. But I got into the taxi anyway, figuring that he had honestly done everything fairly to me up to now.

As the taxi pulled into the entry of the Central Department Store, I knew at last that I was safe, and that he was in fact taking me to an internet shop. As we looked for the internet shop, I told him that he had made some very bad karma for himself by stealing, but by honestly helping me get them back, that this was good karma which would help balance out the bad that he had done.

I told him that as far as I was concerned, this was the end of it, and I had no resentments against him. I said I only wished that he would be able to deal with his problems, and that he could go forth in his life as a good person, so that he could have a happy and fulfilled life in the future.

Again, I saw tears in his eyes.

When we arrived at the internet shop, I was trying to communicate with the shop owner to explain how I wanted to hook up my computer to the internet. I wanted to get my manuscript securely off to the publisher, without any more delay. That was my top priority. Then I turned around to say something to Leg, and realized he was gone. I ran out and looked everywhere, but Leg had disappeared. He was nowhere to be seen.

Then the phone rang, and it was Lek. He was very mad that I had not called, and said that he was worried sick about me. He said that he was in Silom with the police, and they wanted to try to arrest Leg. He took the police to the KFC, but even though I had told him repeatedly that I was leaving KFC Lek had not understood this. I gave the phone to the internet shop owner, who explained to Lek where I was. I told him Leg had disappeared. He was very mad that I had let Leg get away, but I said I was happy that I had gotten my computer, camera, and phone back, and I was alive and well. No one had gotten hurt.

As I went back to my computer, I sent the manuscript and emails to my family and friends to let them know right away that I was alright. Then after that was done, a wave of emotions engulfed me. Leg had caused me many, many problems, and I had wasted a lot of time and money because of him. This made me want to be angry at him. On the other hand, my heart went out to him because of all the problems he was suffering under. I realized that I could have been in a very dangerous position if Leg had intended me harm. His lies to me only made my nervousness worse. But, at the end, he had shown his sincerity by actually taking me to the place where the computer was located. He had put himself at great risk of being captured by the police, in order to make sure my property was returned to me. For that, I am grateful to him.

Knowing that he has now disappeared from my life, and I will never hear from him again, I am filled with regrets. What if he had stayed in the village with me, and had not done this theft? Would he and I have been able to be happy together, as it looked like we

were at the beginning? Or, was Leg right when he said he had so many problems that he realized he would not be good for me? Should I be grateful that he is gone? I will never know, but still the lost opportunity makes me sad. I don't even have a picture of him to remember him, since upon looking at my camera I am not surprised to see that he wiped out the pictures that were on the camera.

On the other hand, I am happy because I have my computer, camera and phone back undamaged. Lek cannot understand how I can be happy having lost 20,000 baht, but I said my safety and being unhurt is more important to me than the money. I realize \$550 is a lot of money, but to the average Thai person that amount is comparable to two or three months' salary. I am conscious of how lucky I am to have the kind of good job that gives me enough salary that a loss of this amount does not represent a financial disaster to me.

I am also conscious of the economic disparities in the world, where even a middle-class person from a developed country like America has so much, much more wealth than the average Thai could ever hope to make. Knowing these disparities, it is not surprising that a Thai in a desperate situation would think of stealing property from a Westerner. Of course, Leg did not think about how much trouble he caused me in the loss of my manuscript and my photographs and field notes. He only thought that I would be able to replace these items with no great damage.

I have to learn from this experience to back up my writing even more often than I did before, and I am going to buy a lock for my computer so that this sort of theft cannot happen again in the future. Lek tells me I have to be less trustful of people, and not leave myself open to exploitation like this. Of course Lek is correct. Yet, at the same time, I do not want to become so negative about people that I lose the opportunity to experience the goodness in people. Despite this bad experience, I still feel that most people are basically good, and I want to live my life with this assumption.

Perhaps it is for the best that Leg has disappeared from my life. But I will always remember him, and wonder about what might have been. This is just one more of the many regrets and questions that one accumulates as the years go by. But, as I write these words, I am alive, healthy, unhurt, and can begin work again on my manuscript. For these reasons I am happy. That is how I see these events as a learning experience.

Now I am ready to go forward, to greet the new day with positivity and goodness, and to look forward to the future. As Scarlett O'Hara said in the movie "Gone With the Wind," "Tomorrow is another day." Indeed.