

ISAN FIELDNOTES 2008-2    February 10, 2008

### LEK'S LIFE HISTORY

I had an interesting conversation with Lek. Even though I have known Lek for fourteen years, I continue to learn more about him every day. He explained a situation in his family that before now I only superficially understood. When he was born his parents were successful farmers, and had managed to save enough money to buy three other plots of land besides the house that Lek's mother had inherited from her parents. Isan culture is traditionally matrilocal, so that a son will leave when he marries, to live with his new wife's parents. A daughter, on the other hand, will traditionally stay close to her parents. When she marries it is expected that her new husband will move into her house and help to support her family.. Accordingly, Lek's three older brothers moved to other locations to live in their new wife's house, and when Lek's two older sisters married the parents gave each of them a plot of land.

In exchange for this homesite provided by the wife's family, the new husband is expected to provide a substantial cash payment to be given to his bride's parents. Back then this payment was only a few thousand baht, but today it is typically 150,000 to 300,000 baht (\$4,167 to \$8,333 USD). That is a substantial sum for Thai young men, and is the reason many of them cannot afford to marry until they are in their late twenties. I think that is one reason why so many Thai young men are open to sexual flings with another male (either a ladyboy or a gay man) because they do not have to pay money as they would if they had a fiancé. Indeed, the more handsome of them are able to expect regular payments from their ladyboy or gay partner, just as a pretty young woman can expect payments from her boyfriend. Good looks in Thailand translates into a bankable resource, for both females and males.

Lek was born in 1961. When he was only two years old his mother died, most likely from having been weakened by giving birth to eight children in that many years. Lek's father turned over his house to his third daughter, and went into a long depression. Lek does not remember his mother at all, and his childhood memories of his father are not happy ones. The youngest daughter, a sister named Boo who is only a few years older than Lek, was raised by her older sisters. Lek was raised mainly by a neighbor who had no children of her own, and who took him in as a child. To this day, Lek calls her "mai" (mother) and feels extremely close to her. She is a wonderful person, and it is easy to see that Lek got his sparkling personality from her.

I knew that he feels estranged from Boo and has not spoken to her for years. I never understood why, until this conversation. What he told me made me realize Isan families have their own dramas, just as American families do. The first issue between them occurred when Lek was still young. Boo persuaded her father to put the major tract of his farmland into her name, saying that she wanted to immigrate to America to get money to support him. She told him she needed to have title to land to show to the American embassy. The United States Department of State is more likely to grant a tourist visa to a person who owns property, reasoning that they would less likely overstay their visa if they have property to take care of in their home country. But after Boo got the land into her name, instead of immigrating to America she farmed the land and accumulated a

considerable amount of money. She selfishly hoarded all this money, not sharing with her father. She resented him because he had been so emotionally withdrawn during her childhood. Lek's father had been planning on depending on the income from this farm to support himself, and as a result of his daughter's selfishness he had no source of income. He was completely dependent upon his children. According to Lek, this increased his feelings of depression.

Faced with this family situation, Lek decided to drop out of school and make his fortune in Bangkok. Like thousands of other poor Isan youngsters, he left the village and went to the big city. Unlike most, though, who end up as common laborers, Lek had a skill. He had always been feminine as a child, and enjoyed sewing and doing women's cloth weaving work. His adoptive "Mai" taught him how to make clothing. When he went to the capital city he got a job as a seamstress, making and repairing clothing in one of Bangkok's sweatshop factories. Though the work paid little, Lek was such a hard worker that he was able to save money. He had a flair for glamour, and always wanted to work in a hair salon. He used his savings to put himself through beautician school. Soon Lek was working at a hair salon, and eventually saved enough money to open his own salon. Lek was making enough money in the salon that he began sending funds regularly to support his father. Lek told me that though his father had never showed him much attention or kindness as a child, after he started sending money regularly his father became very grateful to him. As Lek became an adult, he gradually took on more and more feminine characteristics. Both his father and his siblings accepted his feminine nature without controversy. In Bangkok, Lek began to participate in the city's large gay subculture, and eventually he met a nice ethnic Chinese masculine man and they began a relationship. However, after they had been together for three years Lek's partner's family pressured him to get married to a woman. Chinese families put great pressure on sons, even gay ones, to get heterosexually married and produce sons. The Chinese man was forced to say goodbye to Lek. Lek was crushed by this sudden end to what he thought would be a permanent relationship. So, in 1989, when he was 27 years old, Lek decided to start a new life. He knew from his salon work that much of the glamorous life was in Los Angeles, and he also knew that LA is the center of a large clothing manufacturing industry. Lek decided to throw his future in a new direction by immigrating to America.

No one from this village has ever taken such a big step as Lek did. To this date he is the only person from this village who has left Thailand, and he is the only one who speaks English. Though he and his siblings were resentful of their sister Boo, he managed to persuade Boo to give him a loan of 100,000 baht so that he could make the journey and establish himself in America. Lek has become such a persuasive huckster out of necessity of survival, and he is a master at learning how to work a system. He learned from some gay friends that if he had at least 100,000 baht in his bank account the United States embassy would accept that as evidence that he had sufficient resources to support himself. He claimed that he wanted to go to America to conduct his international trade in clothing, and received a U.S. visa for visiting businesspersons. His clothing company was, in fact, nothing more than a name. It is amazing that he was successful in getting a visa. But that was before 2001, when U.S. Customs became impossibly stringent.

Once he received the visa, Lek gave some of the money to his father, and paid for his airfare. He was determined to use only a small part of the remainder to support himself in America until he got a job. That was nice of his sister to loan him the money, but she insisted on 100% interest payment. That is, Lek had to repay her 200,000 baht (\$5,555 USD) in one year after he arrived in Los Angeles. Lek's entire family was scandalized by Boo's exploitation of her brother, but Lek decided to accept her conditions because it was the only way he could get to America.

When Lek got on the plane to Los Angeles he knew only two words in English. The first word was "yes," which even now, after thousands of corrections by me, he still mispronounces as "yet". The second word was "coke". Not being familiar with the Roman alphabet, he could not even read a street sign. So the only way he could survive was by working with Thai people. Lek is "a good talker," with a good sense of humor. He meets and makes friends easily. On the flight from Bangkok to Los Angeles he used the time industriously until he connected with some Thai people who were familiar with the city. After the plane landed at LAX, they kindly gave him a ride to Thai Town in Hollywood. Before nightfall he had located a job working in a Thai-owned clothing manufacturing factory. Being a skilled and experienced seamstress with easy familiarity working a large sewing machine made finding a job easy for him. He took the job on condition that he could sleep at the factory at night. The owner hired him as seamstress in the daytime and security guard at night. For these services Lek was paid by the piece, and by working very hard, for an average of fifteen hours per day, seven days a week, Lek was able to earn about \$9,000 that first year. That was much less than minimum wage, and is typical of the way immigrants are exploited by their more experienced countrymen in the sweatshops of Los Angeles' garment district. After Lek and I met, he took me to that factory to show me where he worked and lived. He slept on the floor, with only a simple reed mat as bedding. He ate little more than rice, cabbage, and peanuts that first year. He was determined to repay his sister as promised, and to send some money to his father as well. Actually, he did much better than he expected, and he was proud to have repaid his sister and had money left over.

In the next three years Lek worked at various clothing factories, moving around as the wage offers ebbed and flowed. Since he was mainly around other Thai people, his knowledge of English remained quite limited. He determined to learn English by watching LA television stations during every free moment, and even while sewing. His one social outlet was with some other Thai gay friends, who took him to an Asian gay bar in Hollywood. It was on this occasion, in mid-1994, that I met Lek. Though I seldom go to gay bars, I saw an ad for an Asian cabaret show that night, so I went to enjoy Asian music.

## MY LIFE OF LOVING RELATIONSHIPS AND FRIENDSHIPS

The circumstances of our meeting require a bit of background about my own previous relationships. In the 1970s I had three serious relationships in Ohio, when I was a professor at the University of Cincinnati. The first one, with a young man named Daryl, ended tragically when Daryl was killed in an automobile accident. I will never forget the

feeling I had when I entered the church for his funeral. Though only three days earlier I had seen him so cheerful and full of life, his body lay there so lifeless that I almost did not recognize him. As my eyes focused on the low light of the church interior, I felt as if a sudden gust of wind was pushing me forcefully backward. I almost fell over from the shock. Daryl was the first of many gay friends whose funerals I would later attend, though the majority of those later deaths was due to the AIDS pandemic that so devastated my generation.

My second serious relationship, with Steve, was more long-term. Overall, my years with Steve were one of the most important relationships of my life. Though I did not like that Steve was a smoker, the thing that eventually killed my sexual attraction was Steve's bodily change. For some reason, which I do not rationally understand, a hairy chest is a total turnoff to me, and I had been attracted to Steve's totally smooth chest. When he developed a lot of furry chest hair in his mid-twenties, I was shocked at this rather sudden change. Steve liked his new macho look, however, and so asking him to shave was out of the question. Steve had gone with me the first time I went to California, and I immediately fell in love with the place. Steve, however, did not adapt well to LA, and he missed his friends and family in Cincinnati. When I received my first job offer from UCLA, Steve wanted to stay in Ohio, so that was the main factor in our parting. Ironically, several years later, Steve grew as disgusted with Cincinnati conservatism as I had been, and he eventually settled in Long Beach. He also stopped smoking. Though we have not been in a relationship in decades, I still consider Steve to be one of the great relationships of my life. I am proud to say that Steve and I are still friends after all these years.

After being a visiting fellow at the UCLA American Indian Studies Center for a year of sabbatical, when I came back to Ohio I met a Swedish man named Larz. He was one of the most intensely sexual persons I have ever met. His sexual frequency averaged three times a day, though I can remember being repeatedly exhausted after five times a day with him. Though his family had left Stockholm when he was age ten, Larz really fulfilled the stereotype of the sexual Swede. Sex with him was fantastic. He used to say that, in Sweden, the definition of a virgin was an ugly seven year old! Larz was into anything and everything, and ready to have sex in any position at any possible location. I cannot even say some of the scandalous places we did it! I offer as excuse, though I really need none, that it was the sexy '70s, when the sexual liberationist ideology of the late 1960s really permeated American culture. Larz and I were right in the middle of all that, and I look back on those wild days with a wistful smile. Larz and I also got along quite well. He was a psychologist, and always had a ready listening ear for me to unload my stresses and strains of the day. Of course, once he had his fill of my bellyaching, he usually shut me up by starting something sexual. Sex was always his great hobby, and I learned a lot from his free and open Scandinavian attitude. The problem is that, though I loved Larz, I hated living in Ohio. I hated the cold winters, and the equally cold conservative Cincinnati political scene. Though I had a great job at the University of Cincinnati, and feel very fortunate to have worked there in the 1970s, my eye was always open toward a job in a warmer climate. When UCLA, and later USC, made me job offers,

I was anxious to leave frigid Ohio. I asked Larz to come with me. He considered my offer seriously, but at last he decided that he could not leave his parents and siblings.

In the early 1980s, when I first moved to Los Angeles, I had a Chinese boyfriend, and I liked the fact that, though he was older, I would never have to worry about him suddenly developing a furry chest. I also found that I admired Chinese industriousness, family closeness, and even Chinese cooking! But in 1984 I met a Latino named Jose, and we began what I also consider one of the most important relationships of my life. Jose was a florist, with a talent for making even the simplest flower arrangement into something dramatic and beautiful. He was also an excellent cook. Many a night I came home from a long tiring day at work, only to be rejuvenated by a beautiful candlelight dinner waiting for me along with Jose's broad sexy smile. I consider myself so lucky to have those treasured years living with Jose.

In 1987 my life took another of several completely unexpected turns when I received a Fulbright Scholar Award. I was sent to live in Indonesia for a year, where I was Fulbright Research Professor at Gadjah Mada University. I really resonated to the calm and sedate Indonesian approach to life. When I came back from Indonesia I wanted to get back together with Jose, but upon our first meeting I was shocked when Jose rejected my embrace. It was only years later that Jose admitted to me that his reason for not resuming our relationship was because, during the year I was gone, he had engaged in unsafe intercourse with a man he had met at a gay bar, and had gotten infected with HIV. He told me that he loved me so much that he did not want to take a chance on infecting me. In a way that was quite articulate for an uneducated immigrant, Jose said that the work I was doing, in investigating and writing about the world's cultures that are accepting of homosexuality, was too important for my work to be cut short by AIDS. He was ready to sacrifice his relationship with me, to preserve my life work. When he told me that, several years later, we both cried at the lost opportunities this horrible pandemic has caused for us as well as so many others. Fortunately, Jose has remained healthy, and he is now happily partnered with a kind man who has given Jose a good life. Though I myself feel quite fortunate to be HIV-negative after all these years, my life still has been terribly impacted by AIDS. From the friends I have buried, to the unfulfilled accomplishments our society has lost due to the millions of lives cut short, none of us who lived through that time can say we were not affected.

After being rejected by my love Jose, through the Buddhist group I attended I met a very attractive Filipino young man. We both fell head over heels in love with each other, and he soon moved from his parents' house into my house. Though I was totally crazy over his good looks, within a year I was very put off by his financially irresponsible behavior. He was heavily in debt when we met, and had a history of flitting from one waiter job to another. He kept getting fired because of getting into arguments with his supervisors. When I convinced him to keep his mouth shut whenever a supervisor said something he did not like, he managed to hold onto a job longer than ever before. Each month I grabbed his paycheck as soon as he received it, made him endorse it, then I deposited it into a bank account we had set up in his name but for which I did not give him any checks or ATM card. I used the entire amount of money in that bank account to write

checks paying down his credit card principal balances. His tips money that he kept he consistently squandered on stupid things: more expensive colognes, clothes, and shoes than he could ever use in a lifetime (typically wearing once and then throwing in the closet), lots of wall posters, musical records, and assorted tacky trinkets that no self-respecting queer would ever be caught dead with. While giving him an accounting to the penny, after a year I was able finally to pay off all his credit card bills. In exchange for his promise not to charge anything by credit card again, I paid off his last credit card from my own money. I was so proud of him for being debt-free, and he promised to control his spending after that. But then I had to leave California for two months in 1989 to do a research project among Yupik Native Alaskans, and when I returned I was aghast that he had managed to run up a large credit card debt once again, despite the fact that he was living rent-free at my house.

I had never dealt with someone like this person. He seemed to have a compulsion to buy anything and everything, whether he needed it or not. I really think he had a classic case of affluenza, and that his impulse to go into debt was an illness. That is the only way I can explain it. After still more psychotic spending, I finally made him move back to his parents' house. I still loved him, and thought that my ultimatum would shock him into getting his act together. But he just continued doing the same thing with his parents that he did while living with me. His mother often called me to beg me to take him back. But then he met another man, a rich business owner, who gave him unlimited credit card usage. My ex came to visit me, flashing expensive rings and leather jackets at me that his new flame had given him. Unfortunately, that man also gave him HIV. They were, though, very devoted to each other, and I have to admire the way my ex-boyfriend took care of that man until he died of AIDS a few years later. The last time I saw my ex, he was again broke and asked me for a loan, which I perhaps unwisely gave him. I never saw or heard from him after that. Sigh, what a lost soul.

After that disaster of a relationship, I met another Filipino who was just the opposite. I was not very physically attracted to him, but after the last beautiful boy had been such a clutz I greatly appreciated the fact that this new man was a responsible professional, with a master's degree in accounting. Now the situation was reversed, and he was the one totally crazy over me. Though I appreciated his good job as an accountant for the Ritz-Carleton Hotel, and his finances were even more orderly than mine, he was the most totally boring person I have ever tried to live with. Though he had plenty of money, he did not want to spend anything! Talk about be careful what you wish for! I could take my previous boyfriends to a USC faculty gathering, and though none of them had any education they each could be the life of the party within a short while. This new person, though he shared the higher education level of professors, would sit there at a party saying nothing. He seemed to have no interest in anything other than numbers. He certainly fulfilled the stereotype of the boring accountant. Though he was terribly hurt when I told him I wanted to end our relationship, after only a year together, I felt I had gone from one opposite extreme to another.

Shortly after ending that second of two unsuccessful relationships, I met 33 year old Lek when I went to that gay Asian cabaret show in 1994. We talked a bit, and though I could

hardly understand his halting English, I liked the fact that he had a steady job and a good personality. Plus, he was very attractive to me. I had decided that I did need to have the physical attraction for a relationship to work, and that someone having a good job was not enough for me. One thing that I admired about Lek, and that I continue to admire about him, is his industriousness and his creativity. He is a talented hairdresser, and he can rapidly transform an ugly hairdo into a stylish cut. Moreover, he makes beautiful clothes for both men and women. I have benefited from his free haircuts and clothes that he has made for me. He is always busy, doing some kind of project to make money. Nobody, though, is perfect, and Lek certainly has his faults. Considering how pretty he can make people, it is amazing to me that Lek has absolutely no sense of interior décor. If he can place something in a way that is the ugliest possible, that is consistently the way he will do it. These days, when he throws an old towel over a beautiful plant in my garden, all I have to say is “Now, Lek, does that really look good to you?” and he will move it elsewhere. But to get him to this point has been a real struggle.

After our talk at the gay bar, I gave Lek my phone number and he called me a few days later. We went out to a Thai restaurant, and I was captivated when he insisted on paying for the meal for both of us rather than just assuming I would pay. He then took me to his home, an apartment in a house that he shared with a woman whom he introduced as “my mother” and her daughter who I met as Lek’s sister. She had a vivacious 7 year old son. I soon was involved in outing activities with the four of them. It was only months later that I found out these people were not relatives at all, but simply friends who shared an apartment together. Thus I had a lesson in anthropological principles of fictive kinship, which Isan culture shares with many cultures of the world.

The first time Lek came to visit my house, I asked if he might be interested in moving to live there with me if our relationship blossomed. He was very cautious, and so I continued to go to his apartment instead. I felt like I was becoming part of their family, rather than just having a one-on-one relationship. I went to the LA Public Library and borrowed some English-language learning videotapes. I remember it was a major effort to get Lek to say “nice” as opposed to “ni” as in “nice to meet you”. I helped the young boy with his schoolwork, and Lek plus the two women with papers and forms that none of them could read.

Once Lek had paid back his sister Boo, she immigrated to Los Angeles herself. Lek was regularly sending money back to his father, paying a considerable sum to have the house modernized, with a new kitchen and bathroom, and nice tile flooring. But Boo never sent a cent to help. At one point she became quite ill, and Lek brought her to stay at my house. If I had known then what I know now, I doubt I would have welcomed her into the house. Later, when Lek was undergoing some financial problems, she did not help him at all, even after he had helped her during her illness. When she continued to resist returning the land to her father, against the wishes of everyone in the family, Lek and his siblings considered that the last straw. Lek believes that the stress over this land issue helped to lead to his father’s death. Lek and his siblings refuse to talk with her any more.

When Lek's father's health began to decline in 1998, he decided to return to Thailand to be with his father before he died. I took him to the airport, not knowing if we would ever see each other again. Lek opened a hair salon in Bangkok, and continued visiting the village and providing money to help his father. After his father died in 2001, Lek decided to return to America. He purchased the air ticket through a dual flight via Honolulu, and I went to LAX to be there at the time of his arrival. I waited and waited, but he did not come out. Finally, I went to the airlines desk and asked about his presence. He was not even listed as a passenger. After leaving the airport in worry, I found out the next day that Lek had been detained by U.S. Customs officials when he attempted to enter the United States at the Honolulu airport. They caught him for overstaying his previous visa, and forced him to take a return flight to Bangkok, for which he was charged extra even though he did not use the flight from Honolulu to Los Angeles. That was my first direct experience with the new strictness in U.S. Customs after September 11, 2001. Our lives were changed dramatically as a result of those Arab terrorists.

Though we both were sad that Lek could not come back in to the United States, eventually we adapted to the situation, and each of us started new relationships. But Lek kept encouraging me to come out to visit his village. In 2003 I came to this village for the first time, and I soon fell in love with the local people here. After additional visits I decided to build this house here. Though Lek and I are no longer in a relationship, we both are extremely close in our friendship.

Lek is glad that he moved here from Bangkok, and he enjoys being close to his relatives. But he is worried because the financial opportunities are not enough for him to pay for his living costs here. That is why he has started doing sewing as well as haircutting, and he also has started selling a special blend of coffee that is popular here. In addition to that, Lek recently began selling lottery tickets. I initially worried that he would lose any potential profits due to his own gambling proclivities, but he assures me that he is not investing any money of his own. I hope I can trust him on this. I thought that if he did not have to pay rent, but only utilities, that he would be able to afford to make his payments each month. But Lek cannot afford to pay for the car payments of 5,600 baht per month (\$165 USD). I make those payments when I am here, in exchange for the use of Lek's car, but there is a problem for Lek to make the payments when I am not resident.

Partly as a result of these financial problems, Lek and his sisters have started legal proceedings to get their father's farmland out of Boo's name. Lek's idea was to divide this land equally with his other sisters. But I pointed out that each of those sisters benefited from their parents' land donations, while Lek received nothing. Lek contributed much money to improving the house that his father lived in, and his third sister's family now lives in, and helping his other siblings but they have never done anything to help him financially. He is worried who will take care of him when he gets too old to work, and is not sure if he can depend upon his nieces and nephews. I said that I thought a fair solution is for Lek to receive the entire farmland plot, and that Lek could have use of it for the rest of his life, but after his death it should go to his sisters' children. Lek thinks the best use is to pay someone to farm it for him, but I suggested planting trees on the land, and then after waiting six years for the trees to grow big enough to



harvest, cutting one sixth of the trees each year, so that he could get an annual payment each year for the rest of his life. Since Lek has no children, he has no need for it after he dies, and so it makes sense to me for that land to go to his nieces and nephews. I am pleased that Lek's sisters agree with me that this is a fair solution, especially the two oldest sisters who already have considerable land. Lek has nothing except for the small land plot on which I built the house last year. Though I spent more in building the house than Lek spent in purchasing the land, I think it is a fair arrangement that both Lek and I will have use of the house until we die, but after my death Lek can use or sell the house as he needs for his support in his old age.

This incident with Boo demonstrates that Isan people are not always fair with each other, even with relatives.

. Wow, what a difference a week can make. This week proves once again how completely unpredictable life is, and how it can change in a moment's notice. Though my computer was stolen a year ago by an outsider I had hired as my translator, I have only had fair and honest dealings with the villagers themselves. That is, until this week.

#### INTRIGUE IN AN ISAN VILLAGE

A good friend, who I have known for three years, came to visit and asked me for 500 baht (\$14.70 USD) to pay for some medicine for his elderly father. I have learned in Thailand not to just give money outright, because that only results in further requests. So I said I would be happy for him to do some work with repotting some plants in my garden, and I will pay him the 500 baht for that work. Since people commonly work for a full eight-hour day for 100 to 200 baht, I knew that my offer to do the gardening work (that would take no more than four or five hours) was generous. He said he needs the money right now to get the medicine, so could he please have the payment as an advance. I agreed, and gave him the money. He was extremely grateful and friendly, assuring me that he will soon come to do the work, but that he had no time today.

About an hour after he had left, I started looking for my mobile phone to make a phone call. It was not in the usual place I keep it, nor in my briefcase or my pocket. After looking all over the house for it, Lek called the number from his phone. To our surprise an unfamiliar child's voice answered the phone, and then it was summarily hung up. Lek called again, but the phone was turned off. He tried several times, and finally that evening he got someone to talk to him. Lek said that a male voice told him he just bought this phone for 2,000 baht (\$59 USD). Lek told me that this person was from the nearby town, and that when Lek asked who he purchased the phone from he said he bought it from my friend who had just visited. I wondered how my friend had gotten to that town and sold it so fast, but I was really angry at this betrayal by a close friend. How could he steal my phone when I had just been kind enough to advance him money even before he did any work for me? Lek started a series of phone calls to try to get my phone back. Lek told me he offered 1,000 baht, but he said that the guy insisted on 2,000 baht or he would not return it. I told Lek to offer 1,500 baht, and he did so. He went there,

and came back with my phone. He said the guy again insisted on 2,000 baht, but Lek called his bluff and said that if he did not return it for 1,500 baht, then Lek would go to the police. The guy said “no, no, no, don’t do that” and turned over the phone for 1,500 baht. Lek and I had agreed ahead of time that if we could get it back for no more than 1,500 baht we would not go to the police. Lek was worried that if we did, and the police put him in jail for a time, that then after he got out he might come to the house and throw a rock through the window or damage the car. Lek said things like that have happened to people here. I was relieved to get my phone back, with no further complications, but very depressed at this betrayal by a close friend. It is this kind of behavior, when one is betrayed by a trusted friend, that leads me to feel much more negative about people than if it were a stranger who robbed me. I was sad for the next two days. When my friend called I did not answer the phone.

Finally, on the fourth day I went to his house. When he saw me he smiled in his usual way. But then he saw that I was serious and he became serious. I saw several nice potted plants in his yard, so I calmly said that instead of him doing work for me in my garden (since I certainly did not want a thief at my house) I had another idea. I told him that I would just take some of his plants in payment. I picked out five plants, which would probably have cost me about 400 baht at a nursery, and he agreed that was alright with him for me to take them in payment for the money I had given him earlier. I loaded the potted plants onto a cart and brought them home. He clearly was not happy about this, and I could tell that he realized something was wrong though I avoided all emotion and kept a strictly business-like manner.

The next day he phoned me and asked me to come over to his house. I went, and he asked me why I was so curt with him the day before. This time I opened up, and told him that I had been very sad to discover that he stole my phone. He looked completely puzzled. His elderly father was there, and when he asked me what was wrong I told him his son had stolen my phone and had sold it to someone else in the nearby town. The father looked surprised. He said that neither he nor his son had left the village for the last two weeks, and that he knew his son had been around the house the whole time after he came home from my house on that day my phone disappeared. I asked him to swear on the Buddha that he was telling the truth. He took my hand and looked me straight in the eye and said he was telling the truth. My friend, meanwhile, recovered from his shock at what I had just said, and likewise swore that he never stole my phone. He said that he would deserve to die if he had stolen something from someone who has been as nice and kind to him as I have always been. He likewise swore on the Buddha that he did not steal my phone or anything else from me.

Now I really did not know what to think. He has always been a good friend, and I have never had cause to suspect him of stealing anything over the last three years. Moreover, just a few days before, he had helped save me some money in a purchase of a local handicraft with his cousin. If he just wanted to exploit me financially, he would never have intervened with his cousin to save me money. It really would have been incredibly short-sighted and stupid of him to steal from me, because he has benefited from my

hospitality and help in the past, and as long as we have good relations he knows that he would be able to call upon me in the time of need in the future.

I came home not knowing what to think. When Lek found out I had gone to the thief's house, Lek was upset and said I should never talk to that person again. Lek said the way to deal with thieves is to cut them out of your life completely. He told me that, when I was back in America, a young man who had befriended him and had visited over a dozen times, broke into the house by climbing over the cement wall and stole Lek's gold necklace and nearly 2,000 baht in cash. Lek said he went to that person's house and threatened to go to the police if he did not return the stolen items. The young man tearfully gave him back the necklace, and the parents gave him 1,600 baht, which is all the money they said they had, and severely chastised their son in Lek's presence. Lek said the young man came later with another 200 baht and begged Lek's forgiveness, but Lek angrily told him to leave and that he never wanted to see his face again.

Lek says that when he was young his father severely drummed into him that he should never steal from others, especially a trusted friend. In the entire fourteen years that I have known Lek he has never stolen anything from me. He has done a few questionable things that made me mad at him. For example, two years ago I loaned Lek 20,000 baht (\$588 USD) to help him purchase a salon in the Thai resort city of Pattaya. I specified that the money was to be used solely for the purchase of the business, and nothing else, and that if for any reason the deal was not finalized he should return the money to me right away. He promised to do so, and furthermore he promised that within 90 days after he had opened the new salon he would start to repay my loan at the rate of 3,000 baht per month. As it happened, though, the business deal did not go through. Lek returned 5,000 baht to me right away, but when I asked for the remainder of the money he said it would take him a little while to get the money together. After I waited impatiently for a week, he admitted that he had already used my money (along with his own money he had saved for the salon) as a down payment on a used automobile. I was angry at this unauthorized use of my money, and I stopped talking to him for a couple of months. But then later, as his way of making up to me, he offered me the use of the car anytime I needed it. As it turned out, we have made several trips in the car with Lek or his boyfriend driving for me. I got my Thai drivers license last year, and now am even driving the car myself. So, in the long run, we worked it out so that I benefited from the use of the car. Though it was not my original plan, I have to admit that it is definitely an advantage having a car here whenever I need to get to the city to use the internet and do shopping. It is a nice car, and has been a dependable transport.

So, though he has made some irresponsible decisions, Lek has never actually stolen from me. I do not think he would do so, even if he had a chance. I trust him. But I am not 100% certain that Lek is telling the complete truth about this person who I assumed stole my telephone. Lek clearly does not like this person. Shortly after I returned to this village a month ago, the two of them exchanged some harsh words. Lek said that 100 baht was missing from his salon when that person was there, and that person denied taking the money. Still, Lek did not want him to be at the house. When the person came to visit the other day, Lek was clearly displeased when I welcomed him into the house.

Lek told me that this person has a reputation for stealing things. He told me that he had heard from a woman neighbor that this person had stolen a beautiful silk scarf from her. I went to her house and asked her, and she confirmed this story. Two other neighbors who overheard our conversation chimed in and said that this young man was not to be trusted. So, I can only conclude that, even if he did not steal my telephone, I should not trust him in my house in the future. But, in the interest of justice, I do not like to accuse someone of doing something that they might not in fact have done.

I saw this person again today, and once again he assured me of his strong respect for me and that he would never steal anything from me. He said he would not feel comfortable coming to my house again, knowing that I would be suspicious of him, but told me that he wants me to always feel welcome to visit him at his house. Both he and Lek seem completely sincere in their expressions, yet one of them has to be lying. If Lek made up the whole scenario, and staged the missing phone to get me to stop seeing this friend, and pocketed my 1,500 baht, then his actions would be even more despicable than someone stealing. The only thing worse than a thief is someone who unjustly accuses another person of being a thief. I am inclined at this point to believe Lek, especially since the other neighbors told me this person has stolen from others in the past. But this is a conundrum that I may never know for complete certainty who stole my phone.

What I have to learn from this situation is to be vigilant in locking up all my things. After the theft of my computer last year, I purchased a combination cable lock for it, and always keep it locked up when it is at home. Now I have a lockable cabinet where I keep my valuables stored when I am not using them. It is a hassle having to lock and unlock every time I take anything out to use, and I have already missed a few phone calls because I could not get the cabinet unlocked fast enough, but that is just part of what I realize I have to do unless I want to isolate myself from the local people. My interactions with them are so positive that I do not want to let these few bad experiences spoil my attitude toward everyone here. So, I continue to enjoy my life here, even with these uncertainties. I am grateful that the most I have to worry about is petty theft, and since personal violence is extremely rare in these villages I really feel much safer than I do when living in Los Angeles.

#### A GROWING HOUSEHOLD

Another unexpected turn of events is due to the sudden doubling of our household size. Lek's two nephews asked to move in with us. Wow, I never know what to expect next. Lek is favorable to their request. What will happen about this matter I will have to reserve for the future.