

As I prepare to leave this Isan village in northeastern Thailand where I have been living this year, I am so touched by the reactions of people about my departure. Today I found out that there was a meeting of people about my leaving, and that some people were crying. Despite my assurances that I will return in late December, they are concerned that I will not come back again. I feel totally accepted here. This is what life is like in a non-homophobic society. Today a neighbor came to my house and asked me to come with her. I went to her house and was introduced to several people who were visiting her from the city. There was no particular reason why she asked me to meet them. She just wanted them to meet her farang [Westerner] neighbor. They asked me if I have a Thai girlfriend. When I said that I was gay, without blinking an eye they asked me if I would like them to introduce me to some of their gay friends. Isan heterosexuals, who are completely comfortable having close friends who are gay or transgender, often point out a potential boyfriend for me. Heterosexual males who give massages are not hesitant in the least to give me a full body massage. I have had heterosexual males sit next to me and drape their leg across my lap, or hold my hand in theirs. They are attracted to females, and are not interested in sex with me, but they have no hesitation showing physical affection toward me or any other male friend. Parents will approach me, saying things like, "I have a son who is gay. He needs a good boyfriend. Would you like to meet him? He is very handsome." When I point out that I already have a boyfriend, they will say "That's OK, he can be your second boyfriend."

Speaking of boyfriends, I have not seen my boyfriend Lon in two months, since he is now living in another city taking care of his sister's children. He calls me every few days, telling me how much he misses me. When I was visiting his parents the other day, Lon's father suggested that Lon could take a bus to come to Bangkok and meet me before I leave Thailand. I said that I was thinking about going to the beach before I leave, because my continuing heat rash might be cured by the salt water. My mother emailed me that my niece in North Carolina, who suffers from heat rashes, has had good results for her rash by soaking in the ocean salt water. Lon's mother's face lit up like a billboard, saying that Lon has never seen the ocean so she would like him to go with me. I called Lon to tell him the news, and he was very happy. However, the next day he was practically crying on the phone as he told me that his parents had changed their mind, because they did not feel they could afford Lon's bus fare to come to Bangkok. They are poor, and even the bus fare would be problematic for them to pay. After hearing this, I visited the parents again and told them that I had been planning to pay for his bus fare and all his expenses. After I said that, his parents were happy to agree for him to join me for a few days at the beach. It was nice of them not to assume that I would pay for his expenses, but considering how poor they are I am happy to pay for that, as well as to give Lon some money before I leave. He sends all of his earnings to his mother, so I know they will appreciate it.

I also want to take Lon to an outstanding ultramodern aquarium I visited last year in Bangkok, since he so enjoyed a small aquarium that I took him to see in Roi-et several months ago. If we have time in Bangkok I would also like to take him to the National

Palace and Wat Phra Kow, which is one of the most beautiful and spectacular architectural sights I have ever seen anywhere in the world. I want to take him to the top of a tall skyscraper so he can see a view of a city as he has never seen before. And I want to take him to the National Museum. I want him to be proud of his country, this land that I have grown to love so much.

THAI NATIONAL ANTHEM

Recently I sent an email to the Prime Minister of Thailand, thanking him for his inspiring speech that he gave (in flawless English) at the 4th International Buddhist Conference that I attended, and for his strong support of planting trees to counter the bad environmental effects of deforestation. I told him that I was inspired by my love of Thailand to write English lyrics for the Thai National Anthem. Every morning at 8:00am, I hear that song broadcast on the radio and television. I have seen English translations of the words in Pasa Thai, but I did an internet search and have not found any lyrics in English that are set to sing to the tune of the music.

. I offered the lyrics I wrote, without charge, as my gift to His Majesty the King and to the Thai people, for any and all uses that the Thai government decides. Though I took many of my words from the anthem in Pasa Thai, I pointed out, these lyrics are not just a literal translation. Instead, I wrote words that Thai people ought to think about as they sing the national anthem every day. Here are my lyrics:

Thailand has always been for freedom,
love and peacefulness.
Respecting rights of all.
We will pledge our lives to keep it free.
And to preserve the great environment.

Thailand is a place
that brings happiness.
Thai hearts strive forever for all people's joy.
Thailand can be a paradise on earth,
if we protect the land and make a better world.

I chose these words to emphasize three themes based in the past, present and future:

1. To represent the past, I emphasize Thailand's longstanding commitment to peace, freedom and respecting the rights of all (all human beings, but also all other sentient beings as well). Living peacefully by showing love and compassion for others is part of Thailand's historic Buddhist heritage. In this song I wanted to include ideas from the Buddha's wise teachings emphasizing happiness, love and peacefulness, and respecting the rights of all.

2. To represent the present, my words focus on Thailand's role as an international tourist destination: Thai people are most gracious in welcoming tourists from all over the world, and I have seen how much they strive to bring happiness and joy for all people while visitors are here. This attitude is a reflection of Buddhist ideals showing kindness to others.

3. To represent the future, I emphasize environmental concerns: I am inspired by His Majesty the King's strong commitment to protecting the environment. Since over 80% of Thailand's forests have been cut down in the last thirty years, and other forms of pollution are engulfing Thailand, I think Thai people need to be encouraged to think about environmental issues as they sing the National Anthem daily. The Buddha was the first environmentalist, when he stressed the need to show compassion for every living thing in the earth. Each of us should commit ourselves to become a Bodhisattva of the earth.

All of these emphases (Thailand's heritage of freedom and Buddhism, Thailand's present role in welcoming people, and Thailand's future of environmentalism) are the components that can make a better world. Thailand can be a model for the rest of the world, in how to live in freedom and peacefulness, respecting rights of all by treating everyone with love and compassion, bringing joy (sanook) to life, and protecting the environment. This will make Thailand into a literal paradise on earth.

These were the thoughts that inspired me to write these lyrics. I offered them as my humble way of thanks for the many Thai people who have been so kind to me while I have been here.

I have no idea if the Thai government will be interested in these lyrics, but I wanted to send them to the Prime Minister even if nothing happens. Thai people who understand English really like my words, so I will wait and see if anything results.

Nothing is perfect, and neither is Thailand. The biggest problem I have had while living here has been to get a good translator. I tried and tried to find a professional experienced translator, but no one wants to live in an isolated village like this one. The only hope of finding someone who would want to live here with me was to appeal to someone who was attracted to me. When I went to Bangkok in February I thought I found such a person, but he turned out to be a thief. He stole my computer, digital camera and mobile phone. Though he eventually felt so guilty about what he did that he returned all of them to me, it cost me a lot of lost time and expense going to Bangkok to meet with him and get my stolen goods back.

Next I vowed only to use professional translators, and I was able to get a person with a Master's degree in English from Maha Sarakham University. He did great translating for me, and we worked well together. But after working for me for a few weeks he begged me for an advance on his salary to pay his bills. Unwisely, I felt sorry for him and gave him an advance. A few days after that his sister called him and said that she needed him immediately to come to Bangkok to help her in her company. He said he had no choice

but to go, but he promised that he would pay back the money I advanced to him. Several times in the months since then I emailed him, asking him to follow through with his promise. He always replied with great sincerity, saying he would pay me back, and insisting that he wanted to pay me some interest as well. He sounded so sincere I believed him, but he has never sent me one baht in payment.

Finally, giving up on getting repayment, I sent him a report I had written for the mayor of this village, asking him to translate it into Pasa Thai and to email it to me. He promised to have it ready for me within two days. That was a week ago. Three days ago I called him and he said his translation is almost finished. I said to send it as it is, right away, because I need it to give to the mayor before I leave. Yesterday I checked my email and there was nothing, so I sent him an email, saying I really needed to get this translation to the mayor before I leave, and to call me immediately. No response. He never has sent me the translation. Though he is well educated and his English is excellent, he is not dependable.

After that, I tried and tried to locate another translator, but without success. Finally, when I was in Bangkok to attend the 4th International Buddhist Conference, I met a man named Yeck who was attracted to me. Since he spoke fairly good English, I told him of my problems finding a translator and that I was still looking for someone. He volunteered to come to live with me for the two months and to translate for me. Swallowing my fears due to my last bad experience, I asked him to check with his job and make sure he could return there after I returned to America in two months. I hired him for the two months, paying him nearly twice what he was making in his job at an internet shop in Bangkok. He asked for an advance on his salary to get his telephone out of a pawnshop, so after extracting many promises from him that he would in fact go with me to the village, I paid the forty dollars to the pawnshop get it back for him.

When he arrived at this village, he was very happy living in my house with me. He told neighbors that I was going to take him to America with me when I left, and he surprised me by telling me that he loved me. I had told him about my relationship with Lon, but he did not care. He said he wanted us to be together for a long time. He had a sweet side to his personality, and he definitely had his good points. He tried to be cooperative. He did a good job keeping the house clean and doing the laundry. He was not such a good cook, and wasted a lot of food by overcooking or cooking much more than we could eat. I asked him repeatedly not to cook so much, but he still kept doing it.

Yeck's translating was not very good, and he often misunderstood my questions when I was interviewing someone. Beyond that, he would say often one word when he meant another. It was very hard to understand his meaning. But even worse was his extremely negative attitude toward people. He always interpreted someone's actions in the most negative way possible. For example, when the mayor did not return my phone call for several days, Yeck said it was because the mayor did not like me and was trying to avoid me. I believed him, and felt bad as a result. A few days later, however, the mayor showed up at my house and expressed his apology at not getting back to me because he

was so busy. He liked my ideas, and Yeck's negative assessment was shown not to be correct.

Yeck was also very lazy. He would usually sleep until 8:30, then he had to make coffee and sit for a long time drinking it before he could do anything. Then he had to make a meal for himself. After that he had to rest for about a half hour because, as he said, he was tired from cooking. Quite often it was after 10:00am before he was ready to do any work. In the middle of the day he had to take a nap. Then he was too tired to do anything much in the evenings. Neighbors noticed how lazy he was, and asked me why I didn't make him do more work. This was made worse by the fact that he told some people I was paying him five thousand baht more than I really was paying him, making an outlandishly high salary. People thought I was a fool to be paying him so much. He also told people (and me, until later he admitted that it was all a lie) that he owned a big house worth 3 million baht. When I confronted him about these lies, he said he did not want people to think that he was in a low financial condition.

He promised to stop telling lies, but he continued to do so. Neighbors told me that he was commonly saying I had bought nice clothes for him (he had some nice clothes, but I did not buy them) and that I bought a television for him (he wanted a television, so I took him to a store to help him pick out one, but the money to pay for it came from his salary).

I had to put up with these limitations because I had not found anyone else who would agree to live here and translate for me. He did sleep a lot, and watched a lot of TV, but he was available on demand if someone came to visit and I needed a translation. I did get a lot of good interviews, even though they were hard to do because I had to ask a question several times before Yeck understood what I was asking. Then I had to get him to repeat the answer to the interviewee to make sure he had translated the statement accurately. He would sometimes get impatient (even though he had nothing pressing to do) or go into a negative mood, usually by misinterpreting something I had said in a negative way that I did not mean. But when he was in a good mood he was pleasant to live with. So I had to put up with his limitations. However, as time went on he became more and more attached to me. He asked me if I could continue to pay his salary when I was in America, so he would not have to have a job. When I said no, he started crying. Later, he told me the villagers here are all stupid, and that I would be much happier living with him in his village where his mother lives. I replied that I had spent much money to build my house here, and I really like it here, so I really am not interested in moving to his village.

Later, he said that I would never be happy in my life unless I committed to a relationship with him. I replied that in fact I was already very happy with my life, in the past and also I predict in the future, and I do not think I need to commit to him to have happiness. Yeck told me that Lon only wanted me for my money (keep in mind that Yeck never talked with Lon, so how would he know this?), and that only he Yeck truly cared for me. This was getting in deeper than I ever intended to go, but again I put up with it because I needed a translator. Finally, a couple days ago, Yeck gave me an ultimatum. He said I had to choose between him and Lon. I said, truthfully, that if I had to choose I would

choose Lon. I had told him about Lon from the beginning, and I knew Lon for a much longer time than I had known Yeck. Lon's biggest disadvantage is that he does not speak English, but in all other ways I prefer Lon.

This was bad news for Yeck, and he became very unhappy when he saw that he could not persuade me to live with him at his mother's village. I told him that it was only a few more days before I would be leaving, but if he was so unhappy perhaps it would be best for him to leave right away. I told him he was making himself miserable needlessly, and that he knew when I hired him that it was only for two months. He later came back and said he realized I was right, and that he should not be unhappy. So he seemed to accept this situation. The next morning he was pleasant, and I helped him pack up his things. Just as we had loaded everything into the car, for me to drive him to the bus station in the city, Lek rushed in to say that his mobile phone was missing. Lek had never liked Yeck from the beginning, and did not trust Yeck. Lek demanded that Yeck unpack everything for an inspection. Yeck agreed to do this, and went to the car to get his bags. As he unpacked his backpack, I was shocked to see my own mobile phone inside a plastic bag. When I demanded to know what my phone was doing in his backpack, Yeck said he had put it in there by mistake because he was in a rush. I said I did not believe him, both because he had carefully wrapped it inside a plastic bag, and also because he had also packed my charger for the phone. Under intense pressuring, he finally admitted that he did steal my phone and acknowledged that it was wrong. He apologized and said he was very bad to do that after I had always treated him nicely. But he insisted that he did not steal Lek's phone, and that he had no idea where that phone was. We looked everywhere and could not find it. At last, Lek gave up and told me to go ahead and drive Yeck to the bus station. Lek just wanted to get Yeck out of the house, which I agreed was best since I could not tolerate a thief in the house.

On the drive to the bus station, Yeck continued to insist that he did not take Lek's phone, and said that Lek was very bad to accuse him. I replied that I would have believed him except for the fact that he stole my phone. Even if he was telling the truth, I said, no one would believe him since my phone was found in his backpack. He was quite contrite about stealing my phone, so I accepted his apology. Then we went to the bank for me to get some money to pay him for the part of the month that he had worked since his last paycheck. I figured out the exact amount owed to him, and paid him. Then he asked me if I would give him a bonus! I was shocked beyond words, but recovered and told him any chance he would have had for a bonus was gone due to his trying to steal my telephone. I said he needed to learn a lesson not to steal from people, and so he would have to accept the consequences of his bad action. He nodded that he understood, and was pleasant after that. When we got to the bus station, I made sure his television and other things were carefully packed in the storage compartment of the bus. He blew me a kiss as he waved goodbye.

Later, when I came home, Lek reported that he found his phone. It was turned off, and thrown into a plastic trashbag that was right next to the car where Yeck had been standing when he went to get his bags for inspection. No one else had been in the house, or in the carport, that morning after Lek had used his phone. Yeck must have thrown the phone

into the trashbag then. It was very obvious that Yeck was not only trying to steal my phone, but Lek's as well. I told Lek I was very grateful that he had discovered his phone gone before we left, or both our phones would have been stolen.

Incredibly, the next day Yeck called me to ask if there was any chance that I would want him to be my translator when I come back in December. I said curtly that I cannot tolerate a thief, and then I told him about finding Lek's phone. Yeck continued to deny stealing Lek's phone and said that Lek probably put the phone there himself to frame Yeck. I said, "Who am I going to believe? Lek, who has been my trusted friend for fifteen years, and who I know looks out for my best interests, or you, who I have known for less than two months, and who tried to steal my phone?" Yeck replied that I was very stupid to believe Lek, and that I would only be happy if I was with Yeck. He said this village is very bad, and the people here are all stupid. By this time I was getting angry at his continued denials and his insulting statements about Lek and the other people of the village, so I told him that my life was happy and I did not need him to make me happy. On the contrary, I said, it was he himself who had made me unhappy. And if he wanted to see stupidity, I said, he should look in the mirror. With that, I told him I hope he has good luck, but that I feared his future would not be good if he continues to lie and steal like he had done here.

With this final controversy behind me, I now have to get ready to leave. The villagers are all glad to see Yeck gone. They admire me because they see that I am a hard worker, and they did not like it when they would see Yeck standing aside and doing nothing while I always pitch in to help when something needs to be done. Like me, they also do not like a liar and a thief. I apologized for again bringing someone into the village who was not trustworthy. At least I am thankful that neither of these two translators stole anything from the villagers themselves. But there is always that potential that I have to be aware of. I do not wish to bring any more controversial persons into the village, but even though my Thai is gradually improving for day to day living, I still need a translator for interviewing people. The language situation is so difficult for me here not only because Thai has so many different sounds from Indo-European languages, and is a hard language to learn, but also because the back-and-forth speaking in both Thai and Lao makes it even harder to follow conversation. I wish I could find a local person who speaks English to serve as my translator, but Lek is the only person in this village who speaks enough English to carry on a conversation. And Lek's English is not good enough to be a translator. When I would ask a question of a person and Lek would listen to their answer in Thai or Lao, for example, Lek will often say "I don't know how to say in English what they just said." What this example shows is the importance of an ethnographer having a good translator, or being so expert in the language that one does not need a translator.

The next day I finished packing and got ready to travel by bus to Bangkok to meet Lon. Several times during the day Lon called, impatiently telling me to "lol, lol" [hurry up]. Our plan that Lek had translated was that Lon would travel by bus from Kanchanaburi, where he was living with his brother and two sisters, and meet me at the bus station in Bangkok. After a nice trip my bus arrived in Bangkok. Sure enough, when I arrived Lon was right there as promised. However, instead of coming on the bus as he said he was going to do, eight of his relatives came with him. Thai people never do anything by themselves. They had

driven the 3 hour trip from their home in Kanchanaburi in their pickup truck. They wanted me to come to visit their hometown. So all my plans to go to the beach evaporated. I tried to phone Lek several times but as often happens the phones did not work. After they had driven all that way, I could see the disappointment in their eyes when I asked if Lon could come with me to the beach. They said they would take me to the beach in Kanchanaburi. Since I knew from looking at the map that Kanchanaburi is nowhere near the ocean, I finally figured out what they meant when they said "beach" was any place that one can swim. I could not find anyone that spoke English, so with the trusting attitude that the universe will take care of me I jumped into the back of the pickup and they put my luggage inside. I had no idea where we were going, but everyone was very friendly to me. If I had not known Lon and his family so long I would not have done this.

After a three hour trip that was quite pleasant because I could lie down and look up at the beautiful stars in the sky, Lek called. He was alarmed when I told him what happened. Lek, like Yeck, is always distrustful of people. Even though he knows Lon's family, he said I should never have done this. What if they wanted to take me somewhere and steal all my money and things, and kill me? I said I trusted Lon, so I was not worried. But Lek was still upset with Lon because Lon had definitely told him he would be coming on the bus to meet me so that he and I could go by ourselves to the beach. There was no misunderstanding, Lek said, and it was definite that Lon agreed that he would go to the beach with me. So Lek was leary of this unannounced change of plans. I agreed with Lek that it was not a good sign, but by this time the truck had arrived in Kanchanaburi. They pulled into the entry to a hotel, and with great smiles and friendliness they deposited me and Lon at the hotel. We checked in, found not a very nice room but had a wonderful evening reunion after not seeing each other for the past two months.

The next morning the phone rang promptly at 7am, and it was "lol, lol" [hurry up, we have to go]. I quickly ate my cereal and took a shower, not having any idea where we were going. Lon was not clear at all about where we were going other than to say "ban pisouw" [my sister's house]. But I dressed nicely just in case. The pickup arrived and they put me in the front seat with Lon and Lon's older brother driving. We headed out of the city and before long started entering a mountainous area. The mountains got bigger and bigger, even bigger than what I had seen in Chiang Rai. I had no idea Thailand had such big mountains. The scenery was beautiful. As we went higher and higher, with the truck shifting into low gear, they told me they were taking me to "beach." Where we ended up was Erawan National Park. We started walking and went along a trail until we came to a beautiful waterfall. They lit up their faces and said "beach teenee" [here is the beach]. People were swimming at the base of the waterfall. But after a short stop they wanted to continue farther up the trail. We kept walking further upstream and passed another waterfall even more beautiful. Then we walked further and came to a waterfall that was so spectacular that I don't think I have ever seen a waterfall so beautiful. It was not nearly as big as Niagara Falls, but even though small it was like a scene from a movie.

They stripped and jumped into the water, swimming happily. I had not prepared for this at all, but at least I was wearing boxer underwear that looked pretty much like shorts instead of underwear. So I stripped to my underwear and jumped in. After living for a year in furiously hot Thailand, I was not prepared for the water to be so cold. I never expected that, and a shock of coldness which I have not felt in a year engulfed my whole body. But as I swam around my body adjusted, and soon it felt great. We all swam under the waterfall and rested on some rocks while watching the water cascade before us. It was incredibly beautiful. I had a wonderful time.

We swam for a long time. Then they said they wanted to walk upstream to another waterfall that they said was even more spectacular. We were walking up, when it suddenly started pouring down rain. It was a real drencher. I was already wet, so getting soaked did not matter. But the rain made the path into a slippery muddy way, and we were not able to continue. With disappointment we turned back. I was very worried about slipping and falling in the slippery mud, and re-damaging my knee after having recently recovered from knee surgery, so I insisted we go

slow. I am glad that I did, because each of them fell at least once. They bounced back up with a laugh, but if I had slipped and fallen it could have been a disaster.

Tomorrow they told me, they would take me to another place. I had absolutely no idea what it was, but they say it would be even better than what we did today. So I put my trust into adventure, and looked forward to tomorrow.

On the next day, Lon's brother and sister and all their relatives came bright and early again in the pickup truck. They put me in the front cab with Lon and his brother so that I could stay out of the sun. I tried to figure out where we were going, but all Lon would do is put his palm out flat and put a finger on top and then move the palm horizontally. I had no idea what it was. I asked if we were going swimming again and he said no. But, learning from yesterday I packed a swimsuit just in case. He did tell me we would be staying overnight wherever we were going, and I asked how much all of this was going to cost. He said it would be 1,000 baht for my and his accommodations. I asked if he was sure, and he said yes. The hotel in the city of Kanchanaburi was only 300 baht per night, so I thought 1,000 baht would be the high end of a cost. Still, to be sure, I put 2,000 baht in my wallet before leaving the hotel. I also took my credit card and ATM card, and volunteered to buy gas with my credit card to fill up the truck when we left.

We drove and drove a long way, up into the mountains. The scenery was even more spectacular than yesterday. I had no idea Thailand had such high mountains with such craggy topography. Then we stopped and started walking up some steep steps into the jungle. After all the long walking yesterday I wondered if my knee would hold out, but I kept walking. Then we arrived at a large waterfall that is again among the most beautiful I have ever seen in the whole world. As soon as we got there everybody jumped into the water and started swimming in the large pool at the base of the waterfall. I asked Lon why he had told me we were not going to be swimming, so I could have worn my bathing suit, but he had no response. This kind of thing happens often with Thai people, and is one thing I still do not understand about them at all. Did he not know this is where we were going, or was there a change of plans at the last moment, or something else? After a full year of living in Thailand, this kind of thing is still a mystery to me, but it happens a lot.

There was no private place to change clothes, so I had to walk all the way back to the roadside to a restroom to change into my bathing suit. By the time I came back Lon (who went into the water with all his clothes on) and the others were happily playing in the pool. I joined them and soon forgot my pique at having to walk back for the bathing suit change. I kept saying to myself "mai ben lai" [it is not worth getting upset about] and had a great time. Then after too short a time in the water for me, they said they were ready to go, and we all walked back and piled back into the truck for another unknown destination. After driving a long time we came to the entrance of Soi Yok National Park. The entry fee was 40 baht (\$1.14 USD) per Thai person, but it was 400 baht (\$11.40 USD) for foreigners. Lon's brother said this was too expensive, and he pled with the park ranger to let me in for the Thai rate. Normally I would have happily paid that fee, because I think the Thai government is right to charge a higher rate for tourists. Income from tourism is a substantial part of Thailand's economy, and I do not begrudge this form of wealth transfer from First World people to Third World people. But since I only had 2,000 baht with me, I was worried I might not have enough money for the day and night.

Then, as Lon's brother was pleading with the park ranger, I had an idea. I said, speaking in perfect Thai, that I lived in Maha Sarakham and I was a resident of Thailand. I pulled out my Thai driver license, and my Thai healthcare I.D. card that I had been given at the hospital. The ranger heard me speaking Thai, and after looking at the I.D. cards, said in Thai "You are not a foreigner, you are a Thai." He then patted me on the back and charged me 40 baht just like the others. I was so proud of myself, and my increasing ability to communicate in Thai, and not to be considered a farang, that I paid the 400 baht for all ten of us. I still had 1,600 baht for the rest of the trip.

Then a woman and a boy pulled up on a motorcycle and talked with Lon's brother. They haggled awhile and I could understand they were discussing the price for something. With a smile they agreed, and we followed them in the truck down the road and turned off onto a dirt road. We then parked next to a river and I saw at the base a large riverboat. Now I finally understood what Lon was trying to tell me when he put his palm out and a finger on top, and moved his hand horizontally. He was trying to describe traveling down a river. But Thai gestures and Western gestures are so different that I was not able to pick up the meaning.

We got onto the boat and they started collecting money to pay for the riverboat. Mine and Lon's share, they told me, was 1,700 baht. I looked at Lon with a question, because now I only had 1,600 baht left. They said, with a smile, not to worry, that if I paid 1,600 they would cover the rest. I was embarrassed by this lack of money, but I had thought I brought plenty considering what Lon had told me. But I was nervous about being in a strange location without even one baht, so I gave them 1,500 and wanted to keep 100 baht as emergency for myself. At this point Lon insisted that I should give the entire amount. I got upset at Lon because he had told me all I would need was 1000 baht. He then apologized and said he was sorry he did not know it was going to cost so much. I said, fine, but he should not have told me a set amount if he did not know, and then I could have brought more money along with me.

These kind of things happen often with Thai people. They are so close to family and friends that if they end up somewhere with no money they do not feel insecure because they have others they know they can depend on. I don't think they liked the fact that I did not share their total trust. After that, even though he had apologized Lon seemed a bit standoffish toward me. This is the difference between a Western individualized approach toward finances and a Thai communal approach. The other thing that I noticed was that Lon's watch (that I had given him several months ago) had stopped working. He had neglected to take it off when he went swimming and when it got wet it stopped working.

Then I noticed that Lon was not wearing the necklace I had given him last night. It had evidently fallen off when he was swimming in the waterfall. Fortunately it was not expensive, but I was reminded of how careless Lon can be with things. Earlier on the trip I was looking at the map I had bought. It was a folding map that I had used a lot on my trips during the year, and when Lon asked to see it I told him to be careful so it did not tear. He was careful with it, but the next time he opened it to look at the map he did it in his regular rough way of handling things, and the map tore completely in two.

This carelessness is a characteristic of Isan people in general, I have to admit. Later that day Lon's brother sat on his pair of designer sunglasses, breaking them. He just laughed when he saw they were broken. The good side of this trait is that Isan people do not let things bother them. The bad side is this careless attitude about everything. The reaction is always "mai ben lai." Well, this is where the American side of my personality comes out. There ARE some things that are in fact worth getting upset about, and resulting in greater care and attention to details. I try to tell this to Lon, to make him more aware about details and taking care not to break things, but I don't think my words really sink in.

We floated down the river in the riverboat, past beautiful scenery. Both Lon and I forgot about our little pique and we had a good time during the day. I noticed two things about his interactions with his family. First, he is very circumspect. He does not show me any

physical affection other than holding hands, even though they all know and accept our relationship. When I asked Lon if his family likes me, he said they like me a lot. So I know it is not a lack of their acceptance. It is instead his shyness. When we arrived at another beautiful waterfall, all the males immediately took off their shirts and stripped to their underwear to go swimming. Lon, like the females in his family, demurely kept his shirt and long pants on as he went into the water. I asked him repeatedly to take off his shirt so I could enjoy looking at him, but he consistently refused. Even in the hotel room when we are alone, Lon is shy about showing his body. This reminds me that Lon identifies more closely as a woman than as a man. When he answers the phone he says “ka” which is the woman’s greeting instead of “kop” which men use. The second thing I noticed is how much work he does to help his family. When we were on the riverboat, Lon spent more time cooking the food for our meals, and washing the dishes afterward, than he did lazing in the water. In all ways he is like a young woman, and his family totally accepts his femininity. He is extremely happy with his relatives, and loves them greatly. This shows that, with family acceptance, transgender people can fit right in to a family-based society. Those ignorant people who claim that homosexuality and transgenderism are “anti-family” are merely showing their lack of education at the way much of the world works. In Thailand, as in most traditional societies, transgender people fit right in. This fact needs to be more publicized among intolerant Americans.