CHAPTER 5

From Collapse to Clarity: The Path that Found Me

(1974-1979)

5.1 A Year of Work and Having Fun

My plan to return to Thailand involved earning and saving money while staying in St. Michael, along with an unconventional funding strategy for when my initial savings ran out—something I'll explain further later in this chapter. With $400 in my pocket from my discharge, I needed to find work to save enough for a ticket back to Thailand, and then enough to live there for at least three-four months before my funding plan could kick in. Upon returning home, I at once began searching for local jobs that would allow me to save. Living with my family again was fortunate. I felt optimistic about returning to Thailand within a year.

There was a notable change in the bar scene while I was away. A 1973 law reduced the legal drinking age in Minnesota from 21 to 18. This transformed the clientele at St. Michael's four bars. Shortly after my return, I landed a part-time bartending job at Big Tom's, where the owner had converted the

Dancehall into a supper club with a bar in the front. He also upgraded the 3.2 liquor license to a full on-site alcohol license, allowing for all types of alcohol to be served. I also got a second bartending job at the Blue Moon, which had previously been known as Eddie's Bar.

Working at these places introduced me to a wild crowd of younger people—recent graduates who hadn't yet settled down with families, unlike many of my high school friends. New friends like Denny Steffens, Mike Auger, and Steve Eull, all younger than me, quickly became my regular party buddies. Denny lived in an apartment above the Blue Moon, and that spot soon became a go-to hangout for gatherings that involved both drinking and smoking pot.

Pot had become much more prevalent since my high school days, although it was considerably less potent than what I had experienced in Thailand. I would share stories of my Buddha weed and Thai adventures with the guys, captivated by my tales of the culture and the availability of cheap, potent cannabis. Among this new crew, Mike Auger quickly became my closest friend. My buddies were not only intrigued by my stories of Thailand but also nodded eagerly when I talked about returning to Thailand.

Mike was a couple of years younger than me and had joined the Army right out of high school. Tragically, he was diagnosed with terminal leukemia just a few months into his service. There was no cure for it back then, and he was medically discharged, receiving a disability settlement along with regular monthly stipends. His settlement allowed him to have access to military installations for his medical care, which offered some relief during such a challenging time, although Mike seemed to be in denial about his illness and never wanted to talk about his prognosis, preferring to party hard instead. It was almost as if he'd made up his mind to live his life to the fullest while he still could.

Mike initially bought a yellow Plymouth van with sliding side doors with his settlement but later traded it for a fully customized jet-black van. This

van featured wall-to-wall carpeting, a spacious back area without back seats, and a raised level at the far end in the back for stretching and sleeping. That van became the epicenter of many late-night adventures, including one memorable occasion when the van played a central role in a ridiculous stunt.

It was winter, two or three months after my return. Snow still covered the ground. One night, a group of us was hanging out at Big Tom's on a packed weekend evening. The facility had a front bar section separated by a wall, and a doorway near the far end that led to a large dining area, previously a dance floor but recently converted. To enter Big Tom's, you'd go through the bar area first using one of two separate doors facing Central Avenue.

After downing quite a few shots of tequila and becoming rather inebriated, the conversation turned to streaking. One dare led to another, and I boasted that I'd streak the bar for $100. Jimmy Dick challenged me, and I flippantly accepted. Mike drove me to my place, where the adrenaline started pumping. I stripped down, wrapped a scarf around my neck, and pulled a knit cap snugly over my head. Then, I put on my long Air Force trench coat and grabbed a change of clothes for later. I hopped back into Mike's van, and we headed back to the bar, but not the front entrance.

I instructed Mike to drive the van to the kitchen entrance on the side of the building, then circle around to the front and park near the nearest front door for a quick getaway. The guys in the bar expected me to enter from the front, milling around, hoping to catch and embarrass me. Little did they know, I had devised an alternative plan knowing that they were waiting to pounce on me had I entered through one of the front doors.

I walked into the kitchen, dropped the trench coat to the floor, and flashed a grin at one of the servers as I pushed open the swinging doors to the dining room. I sprinted past tables of diners, until I reached the doorway that separated the dining room from the bar section. As I rounded the corner into the bar area, I started yelling, letting everyone know I was there.

I expertly weaved around people in the bar area, managing to reach the front door without anyone catching a glimpse of my front side; they were all focused on the two entrances where they were expecting my arrival. With my heart racing, I pushed the front door open and dashed outside to the waiting van with the sliding door swung wide open. I leaped inside, breathless and exhilarated. I had just successfully streaked Big Tom's!

There are two footnotes to the story: first, the guys never coughed up the $100, claiming I had streaked the wrong way. Secondly, later that night, after I got home, I waited for Mom to return from work. When she walked in, I sat her down and said, "Mom, I need to tell you something before you hear it from someone else." As I shared my escapade, her expression shifted to one of astonishment, likely wondering what had happened to her eldest son. She didn't say another word about it, and I don't think she ever told Dad. Hopefully, she didn't catch too much heat from the town rumor mill.

It was quite a summer—one of those periods that feels like a wild time of youthful energy and reckless abandon. There was a party nearly every weekend, each one a little more ridiculous than the last, with a tight-knit group of friends who shared a love for smoking, drinking, and pushing the limits of what seemed possible. The camaraderie we had was genuine, and together, we reveled in those carefree days.

The beauty of it all was the sheer freedom we felt. We were young, unburdened by responsibility, and capable of acting in the most absurd ways. It wasn't uncommon for someone to get drunk and do something crazy for no reason, or for a group of us to get together and make impulsive, often misguided decisions, just because we could. At the time, nothing seemed off-limits. We'd end up at somebody's place at 2 a.m. or drive around in a haze of cigarette and pot smoke, blasting music and laughing at nothing. We didn't have to worry about the consequences, at least not in the moment, and that sense of boundless freedom was intoxicating.

However, there was one terrible incident that certainly marred our fun at a party that took place at the park across the bridge from the Millside, the same place where the annual Trap Shoot took place every August. A group of us was drinking and smoking when Tony Eull and Dave Harold got into an argument over whose car was faster. Tony had a Dodge Barracuda, and Dave drove a Plymouth Duster. They decided to race. After turning around further down the road, they took off racing neck and neck, using both lanes of the two-lane road. As they sped down the steep hill, we noticed a motorcycle approaching from the opposite direction. The steep banks on either side of the road left no room for anyone to take evasive action to avoid the motorcycle.

Dave's car collided head-on with the motorcycle, and we watched in horror as the rider's body was hurled 20 to 30 feet through the air, landing in a swamp on the other side of the road. It was instant death for the rider, despite wearing a helmet, because he landed in a way that broke his spine near his neck. It was truly horrific to witness. From that day forward, I vowed never to ride a motorcycle, and guess what, I never have.

I wouldn't have been surprised if I told Mom about the accident when I saw her. One thing I can say for sure is that Mom was always someone I could talk to and confide in, knowing she would listen without getting upset. We often had late-night chats, and I deeply appreciated her understanding and her ability to listen without being judgmental. Perhaps she knew that objecting to something wouldn't make me change, but regardless, it was always easy for me to be open with her.

On one occasion, I needed someone to talk to, and she was there for me. Not long after leaving Thailand, I received a letter from Yupin. It was clearly written by someone else, as her English wasn't strong enough. In the letter, she said she was pregnant and that the baby was mine. I spoke to Mom about it, and she was sympathetic. It was also the first time I let her know I was planning to return to Thailand and that my intention was to provide support for the child.

I stuffed cash into an envelope along with a letter saying I would be returning and then sent it to the address on the envelope. That was the last I heard about the baby until I returned to Thailand, when Boontod informed me that Yupin had had an abortion. In Thailand, this was quite common and didn't carry the same stigma it did in the U.S. It also lifted a significant weight off my shoulders, as I had every intention of supporting the child had it been born. In all fairness to Yupin, though, I'm sure the promise of "I'll return" was something often said but rarely fulfilled.

Since my part-time bartending shifts were at night, I was able to find a daytime job with my Uncle Kenny Eull, Zita's husband from the same Eull family I had spent so much time with growing up. Uncle Kenny, his dad Art, and his brother Rollie had started a small sewer ring manufacturing business next to their homes on Country Road 35. Each day, I worked five or six hours making circular rings for sewer drains—mixing concrete and shoveling it into molds to create the durable rings. Whether in the chill of winter or the warming breeze of spring, I found satisfaction in the work. More importantly, living at home gave me the opportunity to save for my big trip, which fueled my dreams of the adventure that lay ahead.

Interestingly, my cousin Jerry Heuring, Uncle Leander's second son, joined me for a short time making rings as he was due to join the Air Force, where he would train as a navigator on F-4 phantom jets. Unlike me when I enlisted four years earlier, he had a college degree, so he'd be commissioned as an officer. I still remember talking to him about my time in the Air Force. Six months later, fate would bring us together again at an airfield in northern Thailand where he was stationed. But that's a story for a bit later in this chapter.

Once summer arrived, the older Eull boys were home from school, so they took over the daily task of ring-making, allowing me to seek out another opportunity. I landed a job with a neighbor, Paul Peloquin—Dorothy's dad—who ran a driveway blacktopping business in Coon Rapids. During those hot summer days, I found myself shoveling and raking asphalt,

shaping smooth driveways under the bright sun. I genuinely enjoyed the manual work, perhaps because the physicality of hard labor resonated with my youthful energy and healthy spirit. More importantly, I was steadily adding to my trip fund, feeling a growing sense of optimism about returning to my dream destination. Each day spent in the heat was a step closer to the adventure I envisioned, fueling my excitement and determination.

The blacktopping business typically wrapped up in the fall when the cooler weather arrived, so I was able to return to Eull's Manufacturing, as the Eull boys were back in school. I resumed making rings and this time also added the job of hauling truckloads of rings to road construction sites in the Twin Cities area. The flatbed truck, piled high with pellets of sewer rings, was equipped with a boom for raising and lowering the heavy loads to the ground. Learning to use the boom wasn't too difficult, but the real challenge was navigating the cities to deliver the rings.

Back then, without the convenience of GPS, I had to rely on city street maps to find my way. I'll admit that I might have indulged in a bit of pot smoking during some of these trips, as there were times when I took far too long to reach the designated drop-off points. I also seemed to have a knack for burning out the clutch in that truck—twice, in fact—during my deliveries. Uncle Kenny wasn't too pleased the second time it happened and wondered if I was riding the clutch too much. I actually think it was because those loads were too heavy for the truck, but since it seemed to happen only to me, I guess Kenny was right!

The year I spent working to save money to return to Thailand was marked by carefree and wild partying with a group of like-minded buddies who shared my passion for pot smoking. In one memorable instance, our love for marijuana led Mike and me on a trip to the southern border with Mexico. My neighbor and childhood friend, Tom Bruner, returned from his Army service in late spring. Back in high school, we used to take his dad's canoe to the creek in Dehmer's woods and paddle a couple of miles to the Crow River, so we decided to rekindle that experience and headed out with Tom's

brother, John.

That spring, the rivers were high due to the earlier winter's heavy snowfall. As we navigated the creek, the current was so strong that we didn't need to paddle. At one point, the creek had widened leaving a tree standing in our way. Unfortunately, we steered the canoe toward the narrow side of the tree, causing it to wedge into the bank and swing across the creek, dumping us out as it formed a dam. Initially, we found it funny, but then the force of the water started bending the canoe into an "L" shape, threatening to release it from its position. Before we knew it, the canoe lurched forward and headed down the creek in the direction of the Crow River. I believe Tom and his girlfriend Becky eventually managed to retrieve it downstream, despite its L-shaped wreckage.

Tom's dad, Erv, wasn't happy about the incident, so I came up with a plan that seemed both crazy and profitable: we'd drive to El Paso, Texas, in Mike's van, where one of my U-Tapao smoking buddies was stationed. There we'd score a couple of pounds of pot from across the border in Juárez, where high-quality marijuana was cheap and easily procured. Then we'd bring it back to sell to our pothead friends scattered around St. Michael and the surrounding area.

Mike, Denny, and I set off on what would become a fun-filled road trip, taking a roundabout scenic route through Colorado rather than the most direct path. This gave me my second journey through the gorgeous Rocky Mountains, and I was just as awestruck as the first time as we made our way through Colorado and into New Mexico. It was certainly one of the more carefree experiences of that time, back when gas was still cheap, the highways felt endless, and three young guys could disappear into the American landscape for days. Mike and Denny were the kind of friends who would agree to a half-baked scheme like this without hesitation.

Eventually, we made it to El Paso, picked up our stash from my Air Force buddy (who was more than happy to make some extra cash), and then drove

straight back to Minnesota with barely any stops. We sold the pot within days of our return, moving it quickly through our network of friends and acquaintances who were always looking for a good deal on quality weed. We made enough money not only to cover our gas and expenses but also to buy Tom's dad a brand-new aluminum canoe to replace the one we'd damaged. Had he known where the money came from, he would've had a fit. Erv would have been mortified to learn that his replacement canoe was funded by drug money. But we got away with it, just like so many (but not all) other half-baked escapades in my life.

During that year at home, I was able to use one of Dad's two cars—a Ford Galaxie—to get around and commute to work. A few years earlier, Sheila had smashed up one of his cars, so I guess it was my turn to add to the collection of Dad's car insurance claims. The first incident happened after a blind date with a girl from New Brighton. After saying goodbye late at night, I jumped into the car and started driving down Interstate 694 when, out of nowhere, a deer darted in front of me. I hit it, and it landed on my windshield. The front end of the car was completely mangled, but the engine still ran, and the wheels were intact, so I stuffed the deer in the trunk and drove home.

Dad left for work the next morning, completely unaware that the deer was still in the trunk of the car, parked in its designated spot to the left of the garage. Later, when I woke up, I told Mom about the accident and the deer. She insisted I let Dad know. She probably knew already that I had screwed up. Stupidly, I hadn't realized that you have to gut a deer soon after it's killed. By the time I dragged it out of the car and into the garage, it was bloating badly, and the stench was horrific.

When Dad came home and saw the deer on the floor, he looked at me like I was the dumbest person before telling me to figure out what to do myself. At my age, he just left the problem for me to solve. So, I went to the garden in the backyard, dug the deepest hole I could, and dumped the deer in it. I like to think that spot must have been the most fertile area of the garden in

the years that followed. Seriously, though, talk about naïve! I thought that if I brought the deer home and got it butchered at Dehmer's meat market, I'd be in Dad's good graces. Yeah, right!

A second car incident was potentially more serious and life threatening. This one involved my brother Randy and Julie Holthaus, the daughter of the Holthaus' we'd get together with on the Fourth of July each year. Julie was a couple of years younger than me but already out of school and working. When we got together for the annual 4th of July gathering, I discovered that Julie indulged in pot as well. Later that day, Julie, Randy, and I took Dad's red Ford LTD for a joy ride to get high together.

We were cruising along a country road outside of Buffalo, going about 50 or 60 MPH, when we approached an intersecting road. We had the right of way as there were stop signs for cars approaching from either side. Just as we were about to reach the intersection, I realized there was a car coming at high speed on the passenger's side. The driver, a woman, hadn't seen her stop sign and was barreling straight at us. In that split second, I had to decide whether to brake or hit the accelerator. I chose the latter, flooring it and feeling us lurch forward thinking, or maybe hoping, we'd be able to get past that oncoming car. We still got hit—toward the back of the car on Randy's side—and headed straight for the culver on the left side of the road.

Even at that speed, I was able to steer away from the culver, but the car was fishtailing big time as we veered into the ditch. Luckily, the car didn't roll as we continued to fishtail before finally coming to a stop. Upon looking at the damage to the car, I realized that if I had braked, the oncoming car would have smashed broadside into Julie's door, which most certainly would have caused the car to roll any number of times in that ditch. Naturally, not wearing seat belts would have made the crash even more deadly.

I can assure you that the effects of the pot wore off at once as we were stunned and dazed as we grasped at just how close to a tragic accident we had come. We walked to a nearby farm to get help because the car was totaled. Dad was

surprisingly calm about it, seemingly relieved that no one was injured. As for Julie, I did manage to meet up with her another time a few weeks later, but I wasn't looking for a long-term relationship. Had I not had plans to return to Thailand and since I liked Julie, I'm pretty sure I would have dated her. As it was, I don't believe I've seen her since then.

While I was hanging out and partying with my buddies during this time, I don't imagine I was a very good role model for my younger siblings. Frankly, I don't have many memories of doing much of anything with them since I was rarely home. Mom and Dad had work schedules that differed from my routine, making it unusual for me to see them as well. Dad left for work early every morning while I was still sleeping downstairs, and he'd be snoring in the living room when I'd come home late at night. I was more likely to run into Mom than Dad, since she'd come home from her job at the Monte Club—Wednesdays, Fridays, Saturdays, and every other Sunday. By then, Sheila was married to Randy Vollbrecht from Hanover, breaking the family taboo of marrying a non-Catholic. Linda was out of school and working, I believe at the Hamel Bank, and she had this cool white Mercury Cougar that dad found for her.

Of all my siblings, Randy—who was a senior in high school at the time—was the most influenced by my example. He got into some trouble unrelated to me with his best friend, Jerry Zachman. Jerry's dad, Lowell, was the Wright County Commissioner, and he managed to help them avoid a few run-ins with the county sheriff. I'll let Randy tell those stories himself, but I take full responsibility for leading him down the pot path—through both my bad influence and my at times reckless actions. I mean, how could he not follow my lead? I had pot plants growing above the shelves of canned pickles in the basement. The downstairs living room had pretty much become a hangout spot for getting high.

To give you a sense of how carefree we were back then, here's one story from the summer of 1974. It was evening, and I was driving my dad's Ford Galaxie—it had this massive, long hood—and we were heading to the Cities

on the then-new I-94. As we approached the 169 exit, we were all pretty stoned—me, Randy, and maybe Jerry or brother-in-law Randy. When it came time to take the off-ramp, I reacted too slowly. By the time I tried to veer right, it was too late. We clipped a traffic sign at the front end of the median beside the ramp. The bumper struck it on the left side, and the sign flew up and glanced off the roof, leaving a small dent. The left front wheel even went over the median, lifting the car briefly before it came back down. We were so high, we just laughed it off and kept going—probably headed to buy more weed from a guy who kept aquariums all over his place. I glanced in the rear view mirror and saw the sign lying in the road behind us. Later, we joked that we should've gone back and grabbed it as a souvenir.

I had also developed a passion for high-quality stereo equipment, complete with a powerful amplifier, an expensive turntable for playing albums, and massive Akai orange-paneled speakers that blasted hardcore rock and roll music—Bachman-Turner Overdrive, The Doors, and Pink Floyd leading the charge. In the summer, I'd set up the system in the backyard, filling the neighborhood with sound and turning my home into an impromptu concert venue.

There is no doubt these purchases delayed my savings for the Thailand trip. All the drinking and partying drained away a part of the savings as well. I really enjoyed the technology though, as it was incredibly fun! The excitement of owning the latest music equipment was a far cry from the little transistor radio I received as a kid at Christmas. Each time I turned up the volume, it was a testament to my ability to afford the newest techno gadgets, a privilege few others could claim.

As for the rest of my siblings, Minky was an incredible tennis player that year I lived at home, and Dad couldn't stop raving about her. I may have felt a hint of jealousy, as I had always thought of myself as Dad's favorite when it came to sports. I remember watching her play at the tennis court on the grade school grounds, and I must admit, she was really talented. Cindy, Fuff,

Jody, and Bunny were either in early adolescence or approaching it, so they were still too young for me to fully grasp who they were becoming. Suffice to say, I was wrapped up in my own world, only half-interested in what my younger siblings were up to.

After a year of working, I had saved enough to buy my airline ticket, and my plan was coming together. I'd gotten my first passport and secured a three-month visa from the Thai consulate. I then bought an $800 one-way ticket to Bangkok. Why a one-way instead of a round-trip? By then, I had saved around $2,000, so I figured I'd only need enough for the flight to Thailand because I had claimed unemployment, with Eull's willing to confirm that they'd laid me off, making it possible to receive bi-weekly checks. Randy would forge my signature to cash them and then send me a personal check to cash in Thailand. This meant I'd have six months of unemployment benefits while living it up in Thailand.

During those six months, I planned to hatch my harebrained idea. And what was that plan? I intended to smuggle that potent strain of Thai pot back to my buddies in St. Michael, convinced I had devised a foolproof scheme to make a small fortune. In my mind, it seemed like the perfect way to fund a longer stay in Thailand. I'd leave $800 intended for the return trip portion of a round-trip ticket in the bank as an emergency fund. With all that arranged, everything was falling in place just over a year after I had left Thailand.

I stayed home during the holidays, and on January 24, 1975, there I was—passport in hand, four crisp $100 bills tucked in my pants, long, flowing hair cascading down my shoulders, and a full beard framing my face. With my suitcase packed and excitement bubbling in my chest, I boarded the plane in Minneapolis, ready to embark on an adventure that would change my life forever. Little did I know how the journey ahead would unfold in ways I could never have expected, altering the course of my life in ways I couldn't yet imagine.

5.2 The Big Blur and Hitting Rock Bottom

The first part of the title of this section—*The Big Blur*—reflects the challenge of reconstructing the events after returning to Thailand due to a rather hazy memory, a consequence of the substantial amount of pot I was smoking at the time and the carefree life I was having. While I remember experiences from the first 18 months, the timeline has become lost in a blur. However, one memory stands out clearly: landing at Don Muang Airport in Bangkok and being at once enveloped by the intoxicating scent of the tropics as I stepped off the plane. It felt incredible to be back!

My first stop was Ban Chang, near U-Tapao, where I went to visit Boontod and his family. That's when I learned that Yupin had decided to get an abortion. I suppose she didn't believe I would return, which, looking back, isn't all that surprising. She was living at home in Phimai, in northeastern Thailand—a six-hour bus ride from Ban Chang. So, with her address in hand, I set off to see how she was doing. When I arrived, she seemed fine, although it was clear that life had moved on for both of us in the time I'd been away. We spent a week together as I enjoyed visiting her hometown since it had ruins from the period when Cambodia ruled the area. In the end, I said my goodbyes and left, feeling a sense of relief as I moved on to the exciting life that awaited me. I haven't seen her since, and while I sometimes wonder how things might have turned out under different circumstances, I knew it was time to enjoy the path ahead.

Back then, I relied on the public bus system to get around the country—no air conditioning, cramped seats, and frequent stops. It was a dirt-cheap way to travel, and I was often the only foreigner on those buses, drawing curious stares from locals, who seemed fascinated by my height. My spoken Thai improved quickly, as I had to use it constantly to navigate daily interactions. Food was affordable, and since I didn't have to pay for housing and ate at local shops and street vendors, my funds went a long way. Randy was cashing my unemployment checks and sending the proceeds to a friend's address at U-Tapao via the military postal system. With money flowing in and little

concern for the passing of time, I was cruising through life, embracing the freedom and excitement of each day, unburdened by anything except the joy of being fully immersed in the moment.

Since Randy sent money to U-Tapao, I spent most of my time in the Ban Chang area, quickly slipping back into my old habits—partying nonstop with the guys living off base. It felt just like before, only now it was all day, every day. Mornings kicked off with three quick bong hits of Thai stick before I brushed my teeth, sending me straight into La-La Land. The routine never changed: periodic bong hits throughout the day to keep me floating, followed by nights out at local bars for more drinks and revelry. It was a relentless cycle that went on for months, crashing at someone's bungalow each night, rarely in the same place twice. I have a hazy memory of sneaking out of a ground-level bungalow one morning after a girl's boyfriend unexpectedly came home.

However, one significant challenge I faced as a foreigner living in Thailand was keeping my legal status, an ongoing concern throughout my first two years there. Renewing a visa after the first three-month period was not easy. For those aiming to stay long-term, leaving the country monthly and re-entering with a new arrival visa was always necessary. This process was straightforward when the Cambodian border was open, allowing for quick day trips. However, in April 1975, after the fall of Saigon and the rise of communist governments in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, Thailand closed its land borders with these countries.

Speaking of the war's end, I saw an incredible sight near U-Tapao one morning in April. The sky was filled with Vietnamese pilots fleeing in military planes as the communists took over Saigon. It was a surreal and haunting experience, one that felt like the culmination of years of conflict. I remember standing there, looking up, as the planes flying were everywhere, waiting for permission to land at U-Tapao. It seemed to mark the end of an era. These were pilots, who had spent years fighting for a cause that was rapidly slipping away and now in a desperate scramble, were making their

way to safety, abandoning their country to its fate. I knew in that moment that this was the beginning of something much larger—the collapse of an old-world order and the start of a new, uncertain one in this part of the world. The sight of those planes, fleeing in panic, felt like a visual representation of everything that had led to the end of the war. The Vietnam War was over, and things would change in ways no one could fully grasp at that moment.

One immediate change for me was the closure of nearby borders, which meant that the only viable option for a "visa run" was a long trip to the Malaysian border, located 600 miles to the south. It was a significant trek, requiring two days by train or bus. The bus ride was especially risky due to gangs of thieves who would hold up the buses, stealing any valuables passengers had. So, when I, and later Randy, had to make the trip, we always opted for the train. While still a long and uncomfortable trip, it felt like the safer choice.

When I first returned to Thailand, I wasn't aware of the complexities of the visa system. So, I turned to Boontod for advice. He didn't have the answers either but suggested I speak with a good friend of his in Bangkok. This led me to Anun, whom I called Pee Nun out of respect for his age, as he was older than me. I visited him at his home in Wat Nah Glang, a district named after the nearby temple, just across the river from Bangkok in a city called Thonburi. The river separates the two cities. Later, I would find myself crossing that river on a ferry every day for a couple of years.

As a foreigner, I had to leave Thailand every 30 days for what we referred to as a "visa run." Pee Nun, who worked undercover for the Thai equivalent of the FBI, had a connection with an immigration officer. After discussing my situation with him, he came up with a way to reduce the frequency of my visa run trips. Pee Nun's twin brother, Pee Yai, worked at the local district office and was able to fabricate a document that allowed me to qualify for a less restrictive visa. The arrangement was simple: I would visit the immigration officer and pay off Pee Nun's friend, usually around 200 Baht ($8), and in return, he'd extend my stay for another month.

The process was straightforward: I'd hand over my passport with two red 100 Baht notes ($8) tucked inside. He'd discreetly leave the drawer ajar, open my passport, drop the bills inside, and then stamp my passport with a one-month extension. This local extension could be done up to three times before I'd have to travel to Haadyai for a quick border run at the Thai-Malay border. My first trip was in mid-1975, and the process continued for nearly two years.

This arrangement allowed me to stay in Thailand legally without the monthly hassle of leaving the country. While I was grateful for the arrangement, it did feel a little strange to go through the motions of getting exit and entry stamps at both borders, not to mention the lengthy trip down south and back. But there was no other way to stay legal if I wanted to still be in the country.

Pee Nun, a widower with a five-year-old daughter named Mortdang, became my host every month when I needed to visit Bangkok for either the local extension or to renew my visa by making the trip to the Malaysian border. This arrangement gave me a second opportunity, alongside Boontod's, to experience Thai family life up close. Since no one in the house spoke English, I continued to learn colloquial Thai, immersing myself in the local culture and everyday conversations.

Living in the house with Pee Nun, his close friend Pee Tian, and his younger brother Chartchai, I had countless memorable experiences and gained valuable insights into Thai culture from a male perspective. Every evening, we'd gather on the living room floor in a circle, drinking beer and sharing delicious Thai dishes, some prepared by Pee Nun, while others came from local vendors. Our conversations were always lively, ranging from the everyday to deeper reflections on culture.

We also spent time visiting temples to make merit, exploring bustling late-night food markets, and venturing into the seedy red-light districts frequented by Thai men. One night, I distinctly remember drinking a beer

mixed with a raw egg—said to be good for stamina—at one of these spots. It was an adventurous experience and just one of many opportunities that gave me a deeper understanding of Thailand's vibrant and diverse culture.

At home, I'd often chat with little Mortdang, who, being so young, didn't notice my language mistakes as she eagerly engaged with me. She was a talkative, curious child, and her energy added to the warmth of the household. This Thai family setting truly immersed me in Thai society, and I cherished every moment. We'd sit together in the evenings, wearing only a simple wrap-around garment called a pahkama, drinking Singha beer, savoring spicy Thai dishes, and conversing in Thai. My language skills improved noticeably with each conversation, and I'm sure I learned more Thai in those drinking circles than anywhere else.

Although Pee Nun told me he was assigned to embassies, I never fully understood his work as a Thai undercover officer during his all-night assignments. However, during the day I'd go with him to the passport section at the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where he ran an unofficial service to help wealthy Thais navigate the bureaucratic hurdles of obtaining a passport. He had connections within the ministry. Once he navigated the passport process, he would charge a commission for the expedited service. It was a classic example of the way things got done in Thailand when you could afford it.

For me, it was a firsthand experience of the small-scale corruption that existed in the country. On occasion, someone would need both a passport and a U.S. visa, and Pee Nun would refer them to me for the visa, as though I were part of his operation. In reality, I wasn't much help—I couldn't facilitate anything, since there was no room for corruption in American government services. Instead, I would explain the process and direct them to the U.S. Embassy to handle the visa on their own.

Back in Ban Chang near U-Tapao, I had become good friends with a guy named Paul Soderquist. He rented a spacious bungalow with extra bedrooms,

so I often crashed there for free—stoned all of the time, of course. One night, we went to visit his Thai girlfriend at her place nearby. From the moment we arrived, something felt off. She was acting strangely and soon began yelling and screaming at no one in particular. Then, she began jumping up and down in the bedroom with such strength that she was hitting her head on the ceiling. Now, Thai house ceilings aren't very high, but she was leaping higher than I thought was humanly possible. I had never seen anything like it. Her family was convinced she was possessed by an evil spirit, so they called a local exorcist to drive it out.

That evening, Paul and I watched the entire process from the opposite side of the room. A local holy man entered, carrying a basin of water. The girl backed into a corner as if she knew he was there for her, shaking uncontrollably and waving her arms wildly. I remember her eyes bulging and her arms flailing, as though she were trying to claw at him from a distance. The holy man chanted a hymn in Thai, splashing holy water at her. As he drew closer, she seemed to calm down, and when he finally stood directly in front of her, she collapsed to the floor, slipping into a deep slumber or maybe a coma. Who knows? She slept soundly the entire night, and we were told later she woke up in the morning acting normally.

We left shortly after the exorcism, heading back to Paul's place, exchanging shocked looks before agreeing never to speak of what had just happened—it was too surreal, and we honestly had no idea what we had just seen. Interestingly, after seeing where his girlfriend lived, I realized that her large house would be the perfect place to prepare the pot containers for my smuggling plan. The house was tucked away down a gravel road, far from the rest of the town, and surrounded by rice fields. It was a two-story building, and I had the entire top floor to myself, so I quickly set to work preparing my stash.

I believe the idea to smuggle pot came from Sergeant Godfrey, who had successfully brought Turkish hash back in his household shipment. I planned to do something similar but use the military postal system instead.

My harebrained scheme was to grind up the pot, encase it in plastic, and compress it into a square block the size and shape of a chessboard. To mask the smell and keep the pot disguised, I planned to cover the exterior with wood-colored wallpaper, making it look like a real chessboard, and then seal the whole thing with a laminating substance. Confident in my idea, I bought a large quantity of Thai stick and set to work.

However, it soon became clear that the chessboard wouldn't hold its shape. I had hoped that by tightly compressing the sticky pot, it would somehow stay solid, but the structure was too unstable. In the end, while my creation resembled a chessboard at first glance, it lacked the durability I had envisioned. It simply wasn't going to work if someone decided to examine it more closely. With the chessboard idea on hold, I came up with a smaller-scale backup plan: sending the pot in letter-sized envelopes. If this worked, I could ship it regularly to my buddies back in Minnesota and make some money along the way. In the meantime, I figured I could explore ways to eventually make the chessboard method workable.

For the envelope method, I started by grinding the pot finely and spreading it evenly on cellophane, shaping it to resemble folded paper, the size of an envelope. I then sealed the cellophane-wrapped pot between two sticky plastic strips and laminated the whole thing to give it the appearance of flat, folded piece of paper. Once I had three separate packets ready, I placed each one inside a letter-sized envelope and addressed them to Denny Steffens, Mike Auger, and Kenny Kasper. For the return address, I used a fake military address and asked Paul to drop them into the military postal system on the base.

Unfortunately, while the military excels at getting mail to the States, once it arrives in the U.S., it's handed over to the Postal Service for domestic delivery, where it becomes subject to customs inspections and other checks. One of the envelopes—addressed to Denny Steffens—may not have been sealed properly, because the contents leaked, possibly due to a poor seal or pressure changes at high altitudes.

As luck would have it, Denny went to the St. Michael post office and pulled the greenish, soiled envelope from his mailbox. In a hurry, he handed it off to his younger brother, Boopsie, for safekeeping. Conveniently, Boopsie decided to leave through a side entrance that led directly to Blom's supermarket, while Denny exited out the front door. Within minutes, Denny was pulled over by federal agents. Thankfully, he had nothing on him, and Boopsie was safely heading in the opposite direction with the letter. Talk about karma!

Around the same time, things also got hairy for me, too. I'm not sure how it happened, but I suspect someone may have reported seeing a long-haired hippie foreigner at a remote house. Out of nowhere, the Thai police raided the place where I was staying. Fortunately, the house was isolated from the rest of the village, with plenty of open space around it. When I happened to look out the window, I saw a line of officers coming down the road towards the house. In a panic, and just in time, I grabbed the chessboard made of pot and quickly tossed it out the back window of the second floor, hoping it would disappear. It landed far away in a rice paddy.

The police conducted a thorough search of the house, but luckily, they hadn't seen me toss the chessboard out the window, and they found nothing else. This close call was a stark reminder of the risks I was taking. It felt like another twist of fate, or perhaps karma, at work. The whole experience left me shaken but also grateful for the luck that spared me from serious consequences. Afterward, I went back to the rice paddy and retrieved the chessboard. The pot inside had stayed dry, thanks to my less-than-genius idea of encasing it in laminated wallpaper. Eventually, I gave up on the chessboard plan altogether and just smoked the contents.

I didn't find out what happened to the letter I sent to Denny until six weeks later in May, when Mike Auger hopped on a military aircraft—something he could do with his military ID card due to his disability—and flew to U-Tapao to join me. When he told me what had happened to one of the envelopes, I was naturally shocked to realize how close I had come to landing one of my best friends in federal prison. That was obviously the last time I

ever sent any pot through the mail.

Even though that was the end of my smuggling plans—and my scheme to fund a long-term stay in Thailand, I didn't consider my situation or reconsider my direction. Maybe it was the influence of the pot, or perhaps I was naïve enough to think karma would somehow resolve my looming financial dilemma. Instead of reevaluating my choices, I found myself caught up in the thrill of the moment, oblivious to the inevitable consequences that loomed ahead.

By then, I also had a new running buddy in Mike Auger, who had his own money and so did I—at least for another two months of weekly unemployment payments, so the fun kept going. Mike and I partied like a couple of wild, ridiculous guys, fully embracing the adventurous side of life in Thailand. Mike was a whirlwind, always on the lookout for the next thrill, as we jumped from one wild experience to another.

At one point, Mike and I took a trip to Udorn in the northeast of Thailand located just across the border from Laos. Jerry Heuring, who was stationed there with the Air Force, obtained base passes and gave us a tour, posing with his plane and showing us around the tarmac area. With the war winding down, he shared a story about dropping bombs on bulldozers. It was great to reconnect and see him in that environment, but after saying our goodbyes, things took a turn for the worse, and we ended up regretting our trip to Udorn.

We had been staying at the house of some American airmen we'd met at a bar when the Thai police raided the place and found a brick of Thai sticks under the stairs, right next to where I'd crashed the night before. Since Mike and I were the only ones in the house during the day, we got arrested—even though the stash wasn't ours. So much for karma! After spending two days and a night in the local jail, we were taken to see a judge at the courthouse.

Before that, a Thai prisoner in our cell had recommended that we plead guilty, telling us it would get us out of confinement sooner. He even taught us the Thai word for "guilty," so when the judge asked for our plea, that's exactly what we said. The judge fined us 100 Baht ($4) each, which we paid immediately, feeling like we'd gotten off easily. But then, we were told we wouldn't be released until the next day and that we'd have to spend the night in the Udorn prison. That place was a shocking contrast to the local jail we'd been in the night before.

Once inside the prison, we were stunned by the sight of over a hundred or more prisoners sitting on the concrete floor of a large, rectangular-shaped room. It was so overcrowded that there was literally no space to move. Not only was the noise deafening, but I soon found out I was surrounded by murderers, rapists, and who knows who else. To make matters worse, as the newest arrivals, we were seated right next to the open trough urinals, which reeked horribly.

When food arrived in the evening, it was a gooey, red rice slop scooped from large pails into small metal bowls. We had to eat with our fingers. It was scary and getting scarier. Neither Mike nor I slept a wink that night on the cold, hard floor, both of us terrified we might get jumped. We were both incredibly relieved when we were released the next day. I'm convinced the judge sentenced us to stay there overnight just to scare the hell out of us. And if that was his goal, he certainly succeeded.

We left at once after our release and caught a bus back to Bangkok, where we stayed at Pee Nun's place. Before our trip to Udorn, I had told Pee Nun about Mike's terminal leukemia, and when we returned, he insisted we visit an herbal doctor he claimed could cure anything. With nothing to lose, we agreed. The journey took us an hour by boat, deep into the jungle outside Bangkok, to a place accessible only by waterway. The old doctor examined both sides of Mike's hands before confidently proclaiming he had a cure. For 75 Baht ($3), he gave us three tin teapots filled with a greenish, chalk-like soft rock and three bottles of what he called special water. His instructions

were simple: pour a bottle of water into a teapot, bring it to a boil, and drink a cup each morning. Each teapot was to last a week, completing a three-week treatment.

Initially, Mike followed the regimen, and after a week of treatment, he went to the U.S. military hospital in Bangkok for blood work. To everyone's surprise, his white blood cell count had dropped to 11,000. Considering normal levels range from 8,000 to 10,000, and Mike's count had been around 150,000, it seemed like something was working. But true to form, Mike stopped drinking the concoction, claiming it was too bitter. Weeks later, he flew back to the U.S. When Randy came to see me, I learned Mike had passed away from his illness. We'll never know if the concoction had any real effect because he stopped using it, but I can't shake the feeling that something unusual was happening with that treatment.

In late December 1975, my brother Randy flew to Thailand following his high school graduation and after recovering from a factory accident. He used his settlement money to buy a round-trip ticket and join me to experience the lifestyle I had been living. Over the next six-eight months, we spent our time in a haze, something that makes it difficult for either of us to remember places and dates. Since my unemployment payments had ended and I had no other source of income, I had Randy bring the remaining $800 I had saved, which was meant to cover my return trip. It was certainly shortsighted not to realize that once that $800 was gone, I'd be left with no way to get back home.

About three months later, we made a visa run down to Haadyai, as Randy had a three-month entry visa that allowed for two trips. After six months, though, he had to make the long journey to Malaysia every month, since Pee Nun couldn't arrange the longer stays for Randy the way he had done for me. Randy became a regular at Pee Nun's place whenever we were in Bangkok, but at other times, we'd hang out at the entertainment spots around U-Tapao. While it was fun sharing this lifestyle with him, we were both blind to the long-term consequences, letting time slip by without

giving much thought to what was ahead. At least Randy still had the return leg of his round-trip ticket, while I was unknowingly heading toward a dead end.

I had become good friends with Paul Soderquist, and we often crashed in one of his spare bedrooms. The villa was owned by a Thai man nicknamed Bingo, who had two enormous Dobermans you didn't want to mess with—especially when they were roaming freely at night in Bingo's gated compound, where three large villas were located. Bingo used the dogs to keep thieves out. It was a bit ironic to see those massive dogs next to Bingo, who was the complete opposite—small in stature. Like us, Bingo had a big love for the bong, and we spent countless days and evenings smoking pot in Paul's place or with Bingo in his tiny shed at the entrance of his compound.

My relationship with Paul started to unravel months later when he began using heroin and stole my envelope smuggling idea, repurposing it to send heroin back to the States. His demeanor had changed, and things escalated when he upset his landlord, Bingo, who then informed the police of Paul's drug use. Paul was arrested for possession of heroin, a charge that would have resulted in a lengthy prison sentence. Paul managed to get in touch with me, desperately asking if I could get Pee Nun to help him. I did so and when Pee Nun arrived, he took action, visiting the Ban Chang police station and striking a deal with the local police chief to secure Paul's release. It cost Paul 10,000 Baht ($400) in a classic Thai corruption deal, but it saved him from spending years behind bars in a Thai prison. After that, Paul and I went our separate ways.

I have an interesting story about how my heavy pot smoking helped me quit cigarettes. I had been smoking a pack a day since high school, which added up to about five years of nicotine addiction. However, as I started smoking pot more regularly, my preferences began to shift. Smoking pot was so enjoyable that, before long, it completely overshadowed my craving for cigarettes. I found myself naturally reaching for the bong instead, and without even realizing it, I unknowingly kicked the nicotine habit. Smoking

had transformed for me—cannabis replaced the cigarettes. It was a curious twist of fate that ended my smoking habit, although I would start smoking again 20 years later.

One evening in mid-1976—the exact date is lost in the haze—Randy and I made our way to a small entertainment spot called Kilosip, just a few miles from U-Tapao. We headed to Ann's Company, a popular hangout for stoners, known for its chill music and relaxed vibe. After a couple of hours, we decided to leave and wandered down the main street looking for a street vendor to get something to eat. That's when two girls, one named Miam and the other Hippie, approached us. They were dressed in '60s-style clothes, with braids and beads, clearly ready to have a good time. Their outfits said it all—they were on the same wavelength as us, eager to get high. Not surprisingly, Randy and I, with our long hair and beards, fit the hippie mold in their eyes.

From the moment we started talking, Miam was the more talkative one, telling us she worked as a waitress at the restaurant across the street. Hippie, on the other hand, barely spoke and seemed spaced out, clearly high—something that made more sense later. They invited us to their place, which wasn't unusual, so we went along. Once we arrived, we shared a bong or two, but something felt off right away. I ended up falling asleep soon after, and it wasn't until the next morning that I realized the bong had been used for both heroin and pot. It became clear that Hippie was a hardcore addict, especially when I saw how frail she looked. Miam, while not as deeply immersed, was still using, though it seemed more recent and perhaps less habitual than Hippie's addiction. Either way, being around that environment wasn't healthy, so we left early that morning without bothering to say goodbye.

It's helpful to understand the context of drug use in Thailand during that time. Thai marijuana was potent, but it didn't typically lead to physical dependency, although it could create psychological cravings. Due to Thailand's proximity to the Golden Triangle, heroin was both abundant and incredibly potent, about 95% pure—far stronger than the heavily cut version in the U.S., which rarely exceeded 5% purity and needed intravenous use. In

Thailand, the high purity of heroin meant it could be smoked in cigarettes, joints, or bongs. Despite the method of consumption, heroin was still highly addictive. I consciously avoided it, having seen the destructive impact it had on people I knew, particularly at parties where stoners smoked it. Engaging in conversation with those under its influence was nearly impossible—they were deeply spaced out. From my first days in the U-Tapao dorms, when I met these users, I made a firm decision to stay away from heroin.

A couple of days later, Miam visited us, as her bungalow was close to where we were staying at Paul's place. During our conversation, she told us she wasn't into hard drugs, wanted to hang out with us, and would quit heroin cold turkey to prove it. She also mentioned she was seeing someone else but still enjoyed spending time with Randy and me. The next time we saw her, she assured us she was clean, and after that, she started joining us on our adventures, even coming along on trips to Bangkok to stay with Pee Nun. We were usually high on pot, lost in our own world and oblivious to anything else that might've mattered. She eventually moved out of the bungalow she had shared with Hippie and came to stay with us at Paul's place.

We traveled from place to place on "Big Red," the nickname we gave to the public bus service that ran throughout Thailand. It was a simple, yet reliable way to get around, and we made the most of it, as we roamed the country. A couple months later, we began staying full-time at Pee Nun's place. He gave Miam and me one of the bedrooms upstairs for free, even though he usually rented it out to students from a nearby university. At the very least, it was a temporary haven, but reality was starting to creep in. The carefree days were slipping away, and our financial situation was looking increasingly bleak. We were running low on cash, and the weight of our predicament began to sink in. Up until then, we'd been living in a kind of blissful denial. One evening, Pee Nun had to leave for an assignment, and with him gone, no dinner was prepared. That night, we found ourselves completely broke—no money for food and nothing to eat. The full gravity of our situation hit us hard.

During our time in Thailand, Randy and I had developed a routine of buying Newsweek weekly to stay informed about the U.S., resulting in a stack of old issues. So, we gathered them up and sold them to a local shop, as the glossy covers were useful for making small paper bags. We got around 25 Baht ($1) for the entire stack. With that money, we went to a nearby restaurant and ordered three plates of plain white rice and a single plate of scrambled eggs to share, adding free nampla (fish and peppers sauce) for flavor. That was all we could afford. We had hit rock bottom, with no money and limited options. Randy could fly back to the States using his return ticket, but I was stuck. Miam found herself caught in the middle of our growing struggles, becoming more of a concerned bystander as the weight of our situation became clearer. We had hit rock bottom—no money, no real prospects, and the carefree adventure we once shared now overshadowed by the harsh reality of our lives.

5.3 Luck to the Rescue and a New Direction

The next day, Randy and I went to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to see if Pee Nun had received a commission (kickback) for helping someone obtain a passport. He was always willing to buy food for the household, and we figured he might be able to treat us. But when we arrived, Pee Nun still hadn't returned from his overnight assignment. So, we turned around and started back to his place, which was just across the river. For some unknown reason, we decided to cross the river at a different pier than the usual closest one. This new route led us behind the Ministry, and as we exited the gates, we walked into a large garden area. There, we saw a sign in front of a two-story building advertising teaching positions at a place called Dr. Chalao's Language Center. The sign specifically said that they wanted teachers with native English-speaking abilities.

We approached the outside counter to inquire about the job, and despite not having university degrees, the person there encouraged us to apply. We filled out an application, and to our surprise, we were hired on the spot. As it

turned out, the position wasn't a traditional classroom teaching role, but more importantly, it paid 100 Baht ($4) per hour. Our main task was to provide one-on-one conversation tutorials to wealthy Thais looking to improve their English. In other words, we had to present ourselves as teachers and serve as native speaker models for our students. While it wasn't a long-term solution, it was an immediate stopgap that could provide enough income to cover our food and basic needs. Over time, we were also assigned to teach students in the center's classrooms.

What we didn't realize at the time was that this fortunate stopgap would eventually evolve into a profitable career. Whether it was pure luck or something more, stumbling upon that sign when we were flat broke proved to be a turning point—a pivotal moment that would ultimately shape the course of our lives.

One thing I had always appreciated while staying at Pee Nun's place was the fun and revelry we shared. However, once we had moved in permanently because of our dwindling finances, I began to sense a shift in the relationship. It could have been due to our increasing reliance on him for support, my growing bond with Miam replacing the carefree party days we once shared, or simply the fact that the three of us were occupying bedrooms and space rent-free in his small two-story house.

Whatever the reason, one evening, shortly after we landed the teaching jobs, tensions boiled over. A heated argument erupted between Pee Nun and me. It started over something as trivial as a TV show, though, in hindsight, it could have been about anything. Regardless of the trigger, we quickly found ourselves shouting at each other. The atmosphere became so charged that I knew it was time to leave. We went upstairs to pack our things, and as we did, one of the girls renting a room next to ours mentioned another place where we could stay. With barely any money and just a bag of personal belongings, we left, making our way to a new place—only about 15 minutes down the road from Pee Nun's.

The house at the address the girl had given us turned out to be like Pee Nun's, offering inexpensive rooms to low-income boarders. That first night, we found ourselves sleeping on the floor of a small room, maybe 10 by 10 feet, on the second floor. The house belonged to a friendly middle-aged Thai woman named Pee Jit, who was single but had a relationship with a man named Pee Rod renting a room on the ground floor. We soon learned that she had a five-year-old son, suggesting she had been married before. She charged 300 Baht ($12) a month for the room.

We lived in that house for a year before moving on. It was a lively place, filled with house parties, friends in other rented rooms, and neighbors from the area. Our living expenses were minimal, and the teaching income from the Dr. Chalao's job was enough to cover rent, food and alcohol. Just like life at Pee Nun's place, there were regular social gatherings. Most nights, we'd be at Pee Rod's room on the ground floor or on a small balcony in the front of his place. We'd enjoy various Thai dishes and beer. Miam settled into the scene easily and we all became quite comfortable with the living situation. More importantly, we had jobs and a reliable income, a welcome change from the uncertainty at Pee Nun's place. Despite the difficult parting with Pee Nun, there were eventually no hard feelings. Twenty years later, Miam and I went to see him, and we spent a delightful evening at his place and then at a restaurant, eating, drinking, and reminiscing about the past.

The only truly negative experience I remember about Pee Jit's place was getting sick with dengue fever—a virus transmitted by mosquitoes that can be life-threatening. I was very ill and at one point feared I might not survive, but I pulled through. There was also one other aspect I didn't particularly like about the room we had. Located on the ground floor, that part of the house stood on short stilts over a small klong (stream) running beneath it. Since there were cracks in the floor, I would occasionally feel rats scurrying over the blanket covering my legs. Despite that bothersome inconvenience, the affordable living situation at Pee Jit's made it possible to begin rebuilding our lives after hitting rock bottom. We were surrounded by friendly people, living in a fun place, and immersing ourselves in a Thai cultural experience.

Later that year, I saw a tragic event known as the October 1976 incident at Thammasat University, which occurred near Dr. Chalao's school, where I was teaching that day. The event was marked by brutal violence against pro-democracy protesters. Tensions had been escalating between the government and student activists who opposed the return of the military junta, exiled in 1973. Thousands of demonstrators had gathered at the university to protest. Initially, law enforcement intervened, but as the situation grew more intense, local right-wing gangs clashed with the students, resulting in a horrific and tragic outcome.

I had just finished teaching my class when I heard shouting and what I initially thought was the sound of fireworks. As I approached the scene on my way back home, I saw dead bodies hanging from trees. A disturbing smell filled the air when I walked towards an intersection where I then spotted a pile of burning bodies. Realizing the severity of the situation, I quickly changed direction and made my way back to Pee Jit's place, where I shared what I had seen with Randy and the others in the house. This incident is remembered as a significant chapter in Thai history and a pivotal moment in the struggle for democracy. For me, though, it is still a bad memory—something I witnessed firsthand and something I will never be able to forget.

By early 1977, Randy needed to use the return leg of his round-trip ticket before it expired, so he flew back to Minnesota with plans to return later that year. Meanwhile, Miam and I continued living at Pee Jit's place. One day, during a teaching break at Dr. Chalao's, I casually mentioned needing to make a visa run to another teacher. He suggested I contact Colonel Winai at the Thai Army Academy, Thailand's equivalent of West Point, as they were looking for native-speaking teachers. To my delight, they had openings and offered me a teaching position soon after. Not only had I landed a job, but the position came with a major perk: a one-year visa extension.

I was thrilled to finally put an end to those exhausting visa-run trips. The new job required just two hours of teaching in the afternoons during the

Thai academic year (June to February), and with a second paying job and a long-stay visa, things were looking up. Two-three months later, another break came when I learned about the AUA bi-national language center and applied for a teaching position. To my delight, I was hired to teach four evening classes, which provided added income that covered more than just our immediate needs. With this extra money, we were finally able to rent a larger place, one that would also accommodate Randy's expected return.

Our living situation changed significantly when Miam and I moved into a shophouse not far from the AUA center. A shophouse in Thailand is a traditional, multi-purpose building that typically combines commercial and residential space. It's often a narrow, two- or three-story structure with a shop or business on the ground floor and living quarters above. The layout is compact, maximizing the use of limited space, and they are often built in rows along streets or alleys. The one we rented had four floors, providing enough space for us to set up the kitchen and living room on the second floor, while the upper two floors became bedrooms. Many Thais have small food shops or sell other products on the ground floor. I decided to set up a small classroom in ours, with five desks, a whiteboard, and instructional posters on the walls. We used this home-based classroom for private tutorials when we weren't teaching at the schools.

I have to say that Miam was an exceptional homemaker, taking great pride in preparing authentic Thai meals and maintaining our new home with care and attention to detail. Her commitment to cleanliness bordered on obsession—everything had to be spotless. With this opportunity, she wanted to make things better not only for herself but also for me. At the time, I didn't fully understand the depth of her determination, but in hindsight, it was clear that her drive stemmed from an early life of hardship and struggle.

Miam was born in the province of Chaiyapoom in northeastern Thailand, but the actual date is unknown because no birth was recorded at the local district office. While still a young child, Miam's parents divorced, resulting in a separation from her mother and siblings. She was estranged from her

birth mother for nearly 40 years, and even after their eventual reunion, their relationship lacked warmth—perhaps a lingering consequence of separation from her birth mother and siblings that she had experienced as a child. After the divorce, she lived with her father, marking the beginning of years of instability. A rice paddy laborer, her father moved often across northeastern Thailand, settling in remote villages as he struggled to make ends meet. These constant relocations, along with his financial challenges, made for a difficult and uncertain early childhood.

Miam's earliest memory was her first day of school, when she realized her tattered clothes and bare feet set her apart from the other children. For the first time, she became aware of her circumstances. Her father's frequent moves forced her to repeat first grade multiple times, and ultimately, she received only two years of formal education. From an early age, Miam's life was marked by hardship and inequality.

In time, her father remarried and settled in Ban Kruat, a district in Buriram Province located in the northeastern part of the country and known for its rural areas and local agricultural activities. While this move should have provided a semblance of stability for Miam, it was short-lived. Before long, she was sent to Bangkok to work as a server in a Chinese restaurant. Though she received food and board, the job was grueling—long hours, no pay, and little appreciation. She spent her days carrying heavy trays, serving customers who barely acknowledged her presence. Evidently, someone from her stepfamily in Ban Kruat had arranged for her to work there, likely in exchange for financial compensation.

Eventually, Miam had enough of this exploited existence and left the restaurant—or as she put it, "escaped"—setting out on her own. As a teenager, these next years were an endless struggle. With no family support, she had only her own resourcefulness and determination to rely on. Life on the streets of Bangkok meant learning to navigate their dangers. Every day was a battle—not just for survival, but an ongoing search for something better. At some point, that "something better" led her back to northeastern

Thailand where she had lived as a child. She made her way to the city of Korat because she had heard about the American Air Force bases.

Driven by a need for a better life, she soon found her way to an entertainment district near the Korat AFB base. By then, she had become wiser having learned from others in similar circumstances how to make enough money to live modestly and independently. Later, she moved to Ban Chang near U-Tapao, where she met Randy and me. It was there that a new chapter of her life began. Though her youth had been one of hardship, she was determined to build a better future.

Once we were in a relationship, Miam and I developed what I would call a co-dependent bond. We contributed to each other's lives in meaningful ways—she always supported me on the home front, while I provided her with stability as we both adjusted to our new life together. Every improvement in our lives was a shared experience, shaped by occasional struggles but with a realization that things were getting better.

During those early days of improved circumstances in our new home, my daily teaching routine was demanding and exhausting, but financially, it was a step forward. Each morning, I started with two or three tutorials at Dr. Chalao's before taking a city bus across town to teach two afternoon classes at the Thai Army Academy. From there, I'd catch another bus to AUA, where I taught four evening classes, finally returning home after 9 p.m. For my efforts, I earned 100 Baht ($4) per hour at Dr. Chalao's and AUA, and 50 Baht ($2) per hour at the Army Academy, bringing in around $30 per day. While it might not seem like much, it was significant to finally be earning enough to support Miam and me. Despite the relentless schedule, I felt a sense of steady progress in my life.

I'd like to add some color to those city bus rides because they were quite an adventure! With open windows and doors, the rides were breezy but often unbearably hot. The old, creaky buses spewing diesel fuel exhaust were always completely packed, with every seat taken and passengers crammed

along the center aisle. Randy and I liked to cling to a bar next to the door, standing with just one foot on the bottom step of the bus, literally hanging on for dear life. As the bus approached our stop, we'd leap off while it was still moving, using the momentum to propel ourselves forward. A couple of times, the bus hadn't slowed down enough, and my legs couldn't run fast enough, causing me to tumble to the hard pavement, resulting in some nasty scratches and bruises on my hands and knees. It became a challenge to see how well we could stay upright each time we jumped off. The amused looks from Thais watching us leap from the bus only added to the spectacle! Regardless of the crazy way we did it, when you're on a tight budget, the best part of these trips was the bus fare—just 5 Baht, less than 2 cents a ride.

During my first-year teaching at the Thai Army Academy, I heard about an opportunity for native-speaking teachers at the Pre-Cadet Preparatory School. This high school prepared juniors and seniors for entry into one of the four military academies of the Thai Armed Forces. After getting hired at the prep school, I taught morning classes there, which meant I would no longer be able to work at Dr. Chalao's, so I quit that job. Since my long-term visa was provided by the Thai Army Academy, I continued to work there in the afternoons. I wrapped up the daily teaching routine with four evening classes at AUA. When Randy returned in late 1977, we were able to get him teaching positions at the same three institutions. Things were certainly looking up from a financial perspective, especially when you consider that what had initially been a stopgap solution to a dire situation (Dr. Chalao's) had now evolved into teaching gigs that were steady and profitable.

Besides increased income, teaching at AUA provided significant benefit: it was a bi-national language center supported by the United States Information Agency (USIA). This now-defunct government agency was dedicated to promoting American values and culture worldwide, with one of its key initiatives being the establishment of English language programs abroad that incorporated elements of American culture. The center's director at the time, Julia Burkes, was a foreign service officer with access to agency funding and influential connections, enabling her to bring top-tier language learning

consultants to Thailand to develop curricula and conduct teacher training sessions. Before long, I was receiving training in the latest English language teaching methodologies and working with modern instructional materials.

For me—and later for Randy, after he returned to Thailand—this teaching opportunity was more than just a job; it introduced us to a potential career in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Despite not having college degrees, we had access to an extensive range of teaching resources. The center was well-equipped with modern tools, including video and audio materials that enriched the learning experience. The curriculum was built on cutting-edge teaching methodologies and best practices. At the time, TESOL was still a relatively new and largely unfamiliar profession, with universities only beginning to offer degrees in the field. However, it quickly became clear to us that this path was not only a way to make money, but it also offered a way to live overseas as expatriates. Having experienced life in Thailand, I guess you could say I was intrigued by the possibility of living and working in other foreign countries.

Another advantage of working at AUA was the opportunity to collaborate with talented educators who had college degrees and more teaching experience than we did. We were especially fortunate to have a supervisor, James "Skip" Ward, who took a keen interest in our development, dedicating considerable time and effort to honing our classroom teaching skills. As a mentor, Skip not only guided our professional growth but also served as a model for how we could build a sustainable career overseas. He emphasized the importance of further credentials—ideally a master's degree—for expanding our opportunities and earning a solid income. Eventually, Skip moved on to Indonesia, where he secured a lucrative consulting and training position with an oil company, reinforcing our belief that TESOL could be a viable long-term profession.

Around the time Randy returned to Thailand, my sister Linda let us know she wanted to come to Thailand. With our improved living and work situation, the timing for having Linda join us felt like a perfect fit. On

March 8, 1978, she arrived and became a part of the adventure we were experiencing in Bangkok. The idea of the three siblings living and working together created an excitement. It was fun explaining work and Thai culture to her. Linda and Miam also got along well, which made our shared living experience all the more pleasant.

The three of us made quite the team with decent-paying teaching jobs at military schools and AUA, all while holding one-year visas. In hindsight, I have to say it was quite a remarkable situation. At the Pre-Cadet School, the principal, Colonel Sinuan, was thrilled when I informed her of my younger brother's availability to teach and my sister's availability. She was eager to have all three of us on the teaching staff, as we were the only foreigners. In addition, having a female native speaker was a rarity back then and considered a major asset for an all-boys' school.

Together, we taught English to all the classes at the school, meeting each one once a week for a one-hour session. This rotation was designed to provide students with valuable exposure to native-speaker American English—an opportunity they wouldn't have otherwise had. It's worth noting that this high school served as a training ground for the country's future military and political leadership. In fact, one of our students, Thaksin Shinawatana, eventually became prime minister. While I don't specifically remember him, he would have been among the cadets we taught during that year.

The cadets were exceptionally well-behaved, sitting upright at their desks and always paying close attention. The Thai academic year runs from June to February, and we taught at the military schools in the mornings and afternoons. While Linda did not teach in the afternoons at the Thai Army Academy, she took on added private lessons and a similar job at a local business. In the evenings, we "moonlighted" at AUA, teaching English to classes primarily composed of young university students.

When we weren't teaching at schools, we held lessons in our home-based classroom, providing extra income while maintaining a comfortable living

arrangement. Our shophouse served as both our home and workplace, allowing us to enjoy a stable routine with decent-paying jobs. On our days off, we explored Bangkok's local sights—temples, markets, and restaurants, immersing ourselves in the hustle and bustle of the city. Beyond Bangkok, we also took time to explore other destinations during Linda's stay. One of our students, a Thai named Jai, would pick us up in his French Citroën and take us on day-trip excursions outside the city.

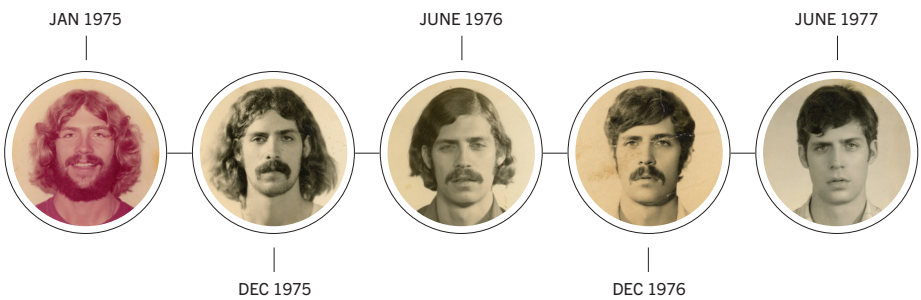
One weekend, we traveled to Kanchanaburi, a historic river town about three hours northwest of Bangkok, best known as the site of the infamous Death Railway and the filming location of *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. The town, with its riverside setting, was a stark contrast to its dark past, where thousands of Allied POWs and forced laborers suffered while constructing the railway under brutal Japanese occupation during World War II. Another time, we visited Nakorn Nayok, a tropical enclave an hour north of the city, where cool waterfalls and fresh mountain air provided a refreshing escape from Bangkok's hectic pace.

On some outings, our three-year-old neighbor, little Dom, joined us, adding a family-like warmth to our adventures. I have a photo from that day in Nakorn Nayok, capturing Linda holding Dom in her arms while I followed closely behind as we cautiously crossed a rickety wooden bridge near the base of the waterfalls. These excursions offered the perfect opportunity to step away from the fast-paced city life, allowing us to recharge and appreciate the peaceful, scenic beauty that stood in stark contrast to Bangkok's bustling streets. With our teaching commitments balanced by travel and adventure, life in Thailand wasn't just stable—it was genuinely enjoyable.

My ability to speak Thai continued to improve to the point where I was conversant due largely to having used it so much in social gatherings and day-to-day interactions at Pee Nun's and Pee Jit's. However, my tones were still atrocious. The Thai language has five separate tones, meaning that the same word can have up to five different meanings depending on the tone used. I was certainly aware of these tones and tried to memorize them for

different words, but it was virtually impossible as it overloaded short-term memory. Luckily, I discovered a book called *The Fundamentals of the Thai Language*, which was a godsend. It explained the Thai alphabet system and showed how the spelling of a word determines its tone. Eventually, I was able to read Thai at a second-grade level. When I was unsure of a word's tone, I'd just ask how it was spelled and that would tell me the tone. The effort to learn written Thai not only helped with my daily communications, but it would prove beneficial later when I returned to the U.S. and attended the University of Minnesota. While my Thai had become fluent over the years I spent living in Thailand, there was another interesting transformation I'd like to share at this point in my story—my appearance.

When I arrived in January 1975, I had the classic hippie look: a full beard and long, wavy hair. Within the first year, the intense heat and humidity prompted me to trim both. By the time I met Miam in mid-1976, I had already lost about half of it. Like most Thais, Miam wasn't fond of facial or long hair, so she launched a campaign to convince me to shave and cut my hair even shorter.



When I began teaching at Dr. Chalao's and beyond, keeping a professional appearance—being well-groomed and wearing a tie—became essential. Over time, I made the shift to a clean-shaven look with shorter hair, a change that's clearly visible in the photo timeline below. The first photo was from my passport, while the others were taken for periodic visa extensions. Miam took great pride in showing these photos to her friends, happily taking credit for "cleaning me up!"

In August 1978, we learned that Miam was pregnant. While it was unexpected, we both felt strongly about not getting an abortion. It wasn't a decision we took lightly as it forced us to confront an undeniable reality. The pregnancy became a turning point—not just in our personal lives, but in our relationship. Suddenly, life in Bangkok was no longer just about the daily routine; it was about something far bigger, something permanent. Our circumstances, including my need to use the G.I. Bill, the birth of our child, and Miam's need for a visa to enter the U.S., made marriage the most practical path forward.

The decision to marry was a blend of moral obligation and practicality. Though our relationship had deepened over the two years we'd been together, the choice wasn't driven by romantic idealism. Instead, it was a logical step—to ensure a stable future for our child and to provide Miam with the legal means to live in the U.S. The visa requirement added urgency, leaving little room for hesitation, especially with the deadline to start using the G.I. Bill for college rapidly approaching.

In the end, a convergence of practical considerations and life's realities paved the way forward, making marriage the clear and responsible choice. On November 2, 1978, we went to the local district office and completed the paperwork, officially registering our marriage. I don't recall Randy or Linda being there for the signing, which reflects just how bureaucratic and matter-of-fact the event was. Looking back, I'd call it a marriage of moral obligation and necessity—a decision made to provide a stable foundation for our child and to ensure that Miam could be with me in the U.S. under the right legal terms. It wasn't an idealized or romantic beginning, but it was a commitment grounded in responsibility, mutual respect, and the sense that we were doing the best we could for the situation at hand.

At that point, my game plan was clear: after the baby was born, I would obtain a Thai passport for Miam and an American one for the baby, secure a spousal visa for Miam, and return to Minnesota by August. I planned to start college courses soon after, as I had only four years left in my ten-

year window to use my GI Bill benefits. The goal was to earn a bachelor's degree as quickly as possible, then pursue a master's in teaching English as a second language. With these academic credentials and my prior teaching experience, I believed I could access the best-paying teaching jobs abroad.

The process of securing a visa for Miam took an unexpected turn early on. The U.S. Embassy required a Thai birth certificate, but she didn't have one. To resolve this, her father visited the local district office in Ban Kruat, where an official retrieved an old handwritten record, erased the original name, and replaced it with Miam's. Unsurprisingly, the Embassy rejected this makeshift document and instead required an affidavit verifying her birth date—something we were ultimately able to obtain.

What's particularly amusing about the whole ordeal is that Miam has continued to use the altered birth date—December 11, 1952—as her official one. After reconnecting with her biological mother years later, she learned she was actually born sometime in October of that same year, though no one in her family could recall the exact date. Given the rural poverty of her birthplace, such discrepancies weren't uncommon. In fact, the U.S. Embassy likely encountered similar cases regularly and relied on affidavits as a standard workaround to meet government proof-of-birth requirements.

In early 1979, we received a letter from Mom and Dad saying that they were planning to fly to Thailand to visit us. We were surprised but also excited at the prospect of showing them our life in Bangkok. On the day of their arrival in late February, we went to the Bangkok airport and waited, but they never showed up. Lacking a telephone and not knowing what had happened, we returned home, wondering why they weren't on the flight. Later that evening, we heard the doorbell ring and went downstairs to see who could be visiting at that hour, as we had no students scheduled for lessons in our classroom downstairs.

To our surprise, when we opened the door, Mom and Dad were standing there with a Thai man. Their flight out of Minneapolis had been delayed,

causing them to miss their connection in Japan. They eventually caught a later flight, but when they arrived at the airport and saw we weren't there to meet them, they sought help. Fortunately, they crossed paths with a kind stranger who, after seeing our address, personally brought them to our place. It was unbelievable—yet another case of good karma, considering they could have just as easily encountered someone who might have taken advantage of them.

Shortly after arriving, Mom and Dad informed us that they had a one-way ticket for Linda to return home with them—no discussion, no debate. Apparently, having three of their children living overseas was one too many. As it turned out, upon her return, Linda was greeted with a bouquet of flowers by her future husband, Steve Kohnen. Whether my parents orchestrated this reunion or not, I can't say, but her return was probably inevitable. With my own plans to leave later that year and Randy following a year after, the Thailand family dynamic was bound to shift anyway.

In the meantime, we wanted to make sure Mom and Dad enjoyed their visit to Bangkok, but we soon ran into an unexpected problem. The toilets in our shophouse were not the standard U.S. model. They were squat toilets—essentially low, flat fixtures on the floor—that we had all gotten used to. But for Dad, using them would be quite a challenge. I remember him appearing from the bathroom, looking baffled, and saying, "You expect me to piss in that?" Faced with an unsolvable dilemma, we decided to book them a room at the Florida Hotel just down the road.

Aside from that first hiccup, the visit went smoothly, and the three of them left on March 3rd. Just two days later, Miam went into labor and gave birth to our first child, Patti. When I went to the local district office to register her birth, I was informed that she wouldn't be granted Thai citizenship due to a recently passed law concerning foreign parents. The Thai government had implemented this law to prevent children of refugees from the Vietnam War from gaining Thai nationality through marriage to one of their citizens. Unfortunately, this new regulation also applied to all foreigners, including me.

We had initially discussed the name Alisa, as it worked well in both English and Thai. However, feeling a deep sense of resentment over the unexpected news regarding Patti's citizenship, I decided to choose an American name instead. Sitting in the district office, I first thought of the name Jennifer, but then remembered that my cousin Jerry Heuring had a daughter with that name. While sitting there and realizing I needed to come up with a name quickly, I recalled the name of a girl who sat next to me in high school history class—Patricia Lehn. So, by default, my firstborn child was called Patti. Incidentally, she doesn't particularly like the name, and since graduating from college, she has gone by Tricia.

The period from March until our departure in August was hectic and challenging. Not only did we have to make all the necessary preparations for leaving, but we were also adjusting to life with a newborn—something neither Miam nor I had any experience with. We were unfamiliar with the constant demands of caring for such a young child, from breastfeeding to the endless cycle of diaper changes and nighttime awakenings. While I had changed diapers before, dealing with sleep disruptions was entirely new territory for me. To make matters even more difficult, Patti was colicky and often fussy, which added an extra layer of stress to our already overwhelming situation.

Since Linda had left with my parents, we were in dire need of maternal support. Thankfully, Anita Nobthai, a fellow AUA teacher and longtime resident of Thailand, stepped in to lend a hand. She provided crucial help with so many newborn care tasks, offering invaluable advice and support. Her experience helped ease the stress and made the transition far more manageable. Thanks to Anita, we were able to stay focused and organized as we prepared for our upcoming journey back to America.

As our August departure approached, the reality of leaving began to sink in. Nearly five years earlier, I had arrived in Thailand with a harebrained idea for funding my stay while living a carefree, stoned existence, lost in my Asian dream. That fantasy had long since unraveled. I had hit rock bottom with

no practical options left—until an unexpected, stopgap job opportunity changed everything. It not only gave me a way to make a living but also opened the door to a potential professional career abroad, something far beyond anything I had imagined in my original plan. And that plan, I should note, certainly hadn't included the responsibilities of a family.

All of this culminated on August 2, 1979, as I boarded a flight on Air France, with my Thai wife and our newborn daughter. We left Thailand for an overnight layover in Paris before continuing to Minneapolis, where we would begin a new life together. We had said our goodbyes to Randy, who would remain in Thailand and continue living at the shophouse for another year. With that, we turned the page to a new chapter, one that would undoubtedly be filled with its own surprises and challenges.

I felt a mix of hope and excitement about what lay ahead. The journey that awaited us in the U.S. promised to be more purposeful than the carefree, uncertain path I had envisioned five years earlier. Looking back, I realize that everything I had experienced in those years—good and bad—was necessary to get me to this point. Those years had not only shaped me in ways I couldn't have anticipated, but they had also led to a future career and life as an expat, something that just seemed to make sense given where I was in my life. It wasn't just about starting over in the U.S.; it was also about moving forward into a life that I believed was more aligned with who I had become.

The Bartender: Pouring drinks at the Blue Moon, the bar where I became best friends with Mike, Denny, and the rest of the potheads, I genuinely enjoyed bartending and was good at it—so long as you didn't ask for something fancy. Hey! Rum and Coke, anyone? Now, that's one I could do all night.

The Smokers' Den: Setting up for a slideshow, I decided to get a little goofy. This part of the basement, thick with two kinds of smoke and blasting music in the evenings, was Randy's and my hangout. Once Mom was at work and Dad was asleep upstairs, we'd party hard. Pure decadence!

Two Hippies: Mike and I fully embraced the long-haired, bearded look. We were inseparable during my year back in 1974. His terminal leukemia was rarely mentioned—he just wanted to party until the end, and I was right there with him that year.

The Party Van: If walls could talk, Mike's customized van would have stories beyond belief. It was more than just a vehicle—it was a mobile hangout, and the setting for some of our wildest adventures, including a two-week trip to El Paso, Texas, via the Rocky Mountains to score a large stash of pot. Crazy!

Car Crash: Dad's beloved red LTD was severely damaged just behind where Randy had been sitting. Had I not accelerated, the other car would've smashed directly into Julie's side. The car was still totaled, but as usual Dad came out well with the insurance company—a talent I believe I inherited from him.

Pee Nun's Place: I'm seated between Pee Nun and Pee Tian, with drinks on the table and a picture and shrine to his late wife on the back wall. Later, Pee Tian and I would move the table, lay out thin bamboo mats, switch on the rotating fan, and fall asleep on the floor in our sarong-style garments.

The Party Gang: Randy had flown back to the U.S. when this picture was taken, so the sign was a playful nudge to come back and join the fun. We'd sit on the floor, drinking beer and sharing Thai dishes, Later, we'd bring out rice for the meal. The glazed look in my eyes is a telltale sign I'd had more than beer.

Seriously Spicy! Eating at a street vendor is cheap and common, and it looks like I just bit into a hot pepper. Miam and I were enjoying a bowl of boat noodles, but that one bite set my mouth on fire. Miam, however, looks completely unfazed by it all.

Teacher Dave: Nicely groomed, wearing a proper tie, shirt, and pants, and standing at the front of the class, I'm every bit the teacher, explaining a language point to a group of cadets at the Pre-cadet Preparatory School. They were the best-behaved students I ever had!

The Royal Thai Army Officer's Academy was the prestigious institution where future military leaders were trained, known for its rigorous discipline, demanding standards, and deep-rooted traditions. Here, I'm posing with a graduating cadet and his sisters in front of the academy's outdoor ceremonial area.

Picnic at Nakorn Nayok: With little Dam peeking out from behind our friend Jai, we enjoyed a picnic together by the river at the Nakorn Nayok waterfalls. Jai took us on quite a few trips the year Linda was with us, but now I'm left wondering—where was Randy for this one?

Evenings with the Siblings: Smiling and lounging on our modest living room furniture in the shophouse, we're at ease in our evening attire—the boys in sarong-style garments, shirtless, of course. We truly were an anomaly: three siblings teaching English and living like locals in a distant land.