



Tales From Joy #10, 2024

There are reasons you may not guess, dear readers, to celebrate this happy photo:

Jane's daughter Kiki, age 13, is often sullen and unresponsive... and hates having her photo taken. Yet she spontaneously popped into the background, above...with a huge unbidden smile. Yes, that is something to celebrate!

My Thai family and I drove about four hours northeast of Bangkok on Saturday morning, as the heavy urban smog receded from our rearview mirror.

We stopped three times to visit restaurants and food stalls...

I would describe these folks as being devout and orthodox *Food-ists*, (the same appellation I apply to my own dear birth-sister, who cheerfully agrees.).



Our final destination was a luxurious riverside mansion, large enough to provide shelter for all fifteen of us.

Like Kiki, I am learning to tolerate and even almost enjoy these

frequent photo-shoots. They are written into the script. We were, after all, enacting Nawang-Joy's "Fan Dee, Part II"... another of the fantasies she conceived in bed, during all those months of recovery from her brain surgery.

As an introvert, I seek opportunities to be alone. That first afternoon, I hopped into the fiberglass kayak and went to see what the river could teach me.

First of all: fantastical birds, everywhere! (With apologies for that tease, to you actual bird-watchers.) I couldn't paddle far without running into a rock dam, though. I portaged a couple of them ...

clumsily dragging the boat behind me. And I was soon joined by a new friend: a lovely pure white duck.

First, I thought I'd disturbed her, cause she flew on ahead; I apologized. But she always waited for me around the next bend, swimming about ten feet ahead. I became, literally, enchanted with this gentle companionship.

I would have a photo of my friend, but I didn't take my cellphone with me, not knowing how rough the ride would be. And some things are better un-photographed, Im learning.



On my return paddle, she waited at one of my former portage sites, and demonstrated a superior route. I felt “washed” in a gentle iridescent silvery rinse, with a sense that my own openness would provide whatever guidance I might need. I saw her again the next morning, outside my window. And bid goodbye.

Another way to find alone time in SE Asia is to rise early... Most folks stay up much later at night than I, and sleep in.

The waterwheel fascinated me particularly. I’m told that the original meaning of *dukkha* (the Pali word that Buddha used to describe human suffering and our potential liberation from it) refers to the axle of a wheel which is awry... e.g. it doesn’t spin true.

I spent morning hours meditating and listening to the huge old wheel creaking as the river pushed it onward.



Jane (my cultural tour guide, and Nawng Joy’s younger sister) explained that the many water-wheels and tiny dams all along most

rivers were the former king's inspiration. He devoted his life to natural ancient methods of ecological renewal, cleaning up the Siamese countryside for millions of his subjects. I've never seen a man so universally revered. All that is now gone, with the accession of his son to the throne. I could, literally, be arrested for saying anything remotely negative about the current monarchy....enough said. Though I'm *itching to*.



We all played multiple ping-pong matches, everyone fiercely competitive... except mom who never joined in on our monkey antics.. I grew up with a pingpong table in my basement...and it came back to me, after a while. Nawng Joy is a killer!

Something we ALL did was sing, especially in the van....

Picture us toodling down a rural country lane singing along with John Denver, at the top of our lungs:

♪♪ *Country road....* ♪♪

♪♪ *take me home....*

to the ♪♪ *place ...*

where I belong.... ♪♪

Mom LOVES American music, and the whole family was bred on it, most especially the Frank Sinatra-style crooners.



We visited many farms, pretty much for the photo ops and to buy the best and freshest produce.



I was the last one picking strawberries in the broiling heat....

And every meal was a cross between a charming Norman Rockwell portrait of family togetherness and (uuuuh, how shall I put this?):



A pack of wild jackals ripping the entrails out of a recently slaughtered zebra.

Nawng Joy has changed immensely since her surgery and doesn't participate in the "kill" anymore.

She asked me to say a food blessing a couple of times, to the rolling of teenage eyes....

It was a little eery how similar Nawng-Joy's mom is so much like my own mother Charlotte:

She was eternally composed, with her hair and makeup, the matching handbag, shoes and clothing.

This was an opportunity for me to witness my childhood from another angle, since I am actually the eldest in this group. And seniority carries a lot of weight in Thailand. I gave us both a break!



I need to finish up this Tales, dear readers...since the next one is already bursting to be written!



With one more report and a confession.

Nawng Joy assigned me tasks each day:

The last day my task was to talk to Jane about my oximeter.

Joy knows it's been a yogini toy for me all year (ever since my siblings developed heart conditions).

So I demonstrated mine for Jane in the morning:

At first the pulse was high (in the

90's, as I'd been doing yoga) and the oximeter reading was fairly low: 93). Then she watched as I raised the oxygen level, and lowered the pulse to low 70's, within a minute or two.

That definitely got her attention, since she has high blood pressure, like most Chinese Thai. We'll meet again for a family banquet before I depart for America, and I'll describe my meditation to her, in a concrete way. She requested it.



And finally, I have a huge and juicy confession, dear readers. (I know y'all like this part the best!). It's big enough that I am flinching and giggling as I type:

Trying to not be so dependent on Nawng Joy and Aey, I booked my own transportation to Cambodia. First, I almost missed the van, cause it took more than 90 minutes to get to the departure site. They had to wait for me. Then the van stopped for lunch enroute, and I didn't notice when everyone else got onboard. They had to wait for me...

When I booked my ride, I'd convinced myself that this particular van was going to take us right into Battambang. (NOT).

So when we all got to the border, and I was rushed out of the van (NO ONE nearby speaking any English), I decided to leave my computer in the van, "knowing" it would be there on the other side.

As I stumbled through customs, carrying my suitcase for miles, up and down lots of stairs....following the nods and hand gestures of officials who were spectacularly disinterested in easing my route,

I began to realize that I would never see that van again! Hours later, when I was inside Cambodia, I had to confess to the new van driver that I had left my computer in Thailand(!) He was incredulous, but incredibly kind.

He got a photo of it from the Thai side and arranged for my computer to be brought by motorcycle across the border. The van load of folks, who were of course waiting for a long time, continued on without me.

Gratefully, I'm sure.



I spent several more hours there in Poipet, an extremely chaotic and dusty city.

And I remembered that:

*A sudden change of travel plans is..
dancing lessons from God**

Wandering around, I felt such grace, humility, kindness, and the willingness to cooperate whatever the circumstances.

My promotion (see Tales #1) is allowing me to see more clearly now, with less self-consciousness.

I took the next night bus to Battambang, having made a friend and written most of this Tale while I waited.

**Kurt Vonnegut*