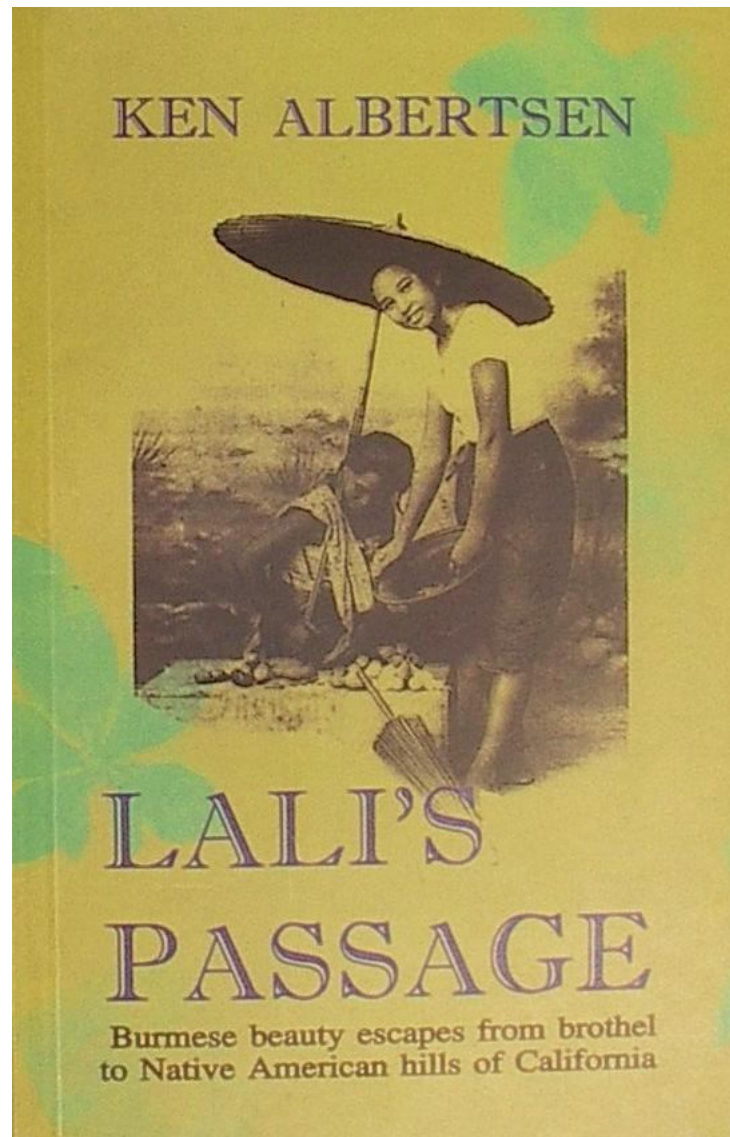




One chapter excerpt from LALI'S PASSAGE written by Ken Albertsen

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Excerpt, Chapter 2

"Lee, come," my two teenage lovelies called to me from outside the shop window. Shoulders scrunched, they shifted from leg to leg as if that generated more warmth. They were creating wet spots on the sidewalk and their hair, their blouses, their shoes were all drenched. "Come on Lee, Songkran. We go!" they called out beaming like toddlers in the midday sun.

These gals had been my buddies for the past three weeks. It was a package deal; I courted one

and the other came along - no strings attached. Mae and Yo had been friends since they were little kids. Even now, they slept on the same pad together. That funky mattress and a vanity were the only furniture in their threadbare apartment.

"Lee, come," Mae pleaded. "You, me, Yo go ride motobike together!"

"Ok, ok, I come. Wait a moment."

It was my first Songkran - the ten day water festival that hits southeast Asia every April - their warmest month. I'd heard how people spent their waking hours splashing water on each other, but nothing prepared me for the real thing.

I kickstarted the motorbike and the girls hopped on, Mae in front and Yo snug up in back. With me sandwiched in between, we took off down the alley. Trading their wetness for my body heat, we headed downtown in this northern Thai town called Chiang Rai.

The first gauntlet was a family group fronted by little kids with water pistols - who gleefully squirted us as we slipped by. The scene up ahead was more ominous. The muffled commotion was like an action movie stretched on a screen between the corner buildings.

Riding into the melee, we were met head-on by a squad of gangly boys who unloaded point-blank broadsides of water on us from plastic buckets. Their leader was a shirtless guy with a green bandana. Wielding a garden hose, he alternated between filling his buddies' buckets and taking a few shots at his new targets; two girls and a farang on a motorbike. Farang (pronounced "falang") is the Thai word for foreigner. His mirth spilled over as he broadsided us. Drenching a farang at Songkran is worth a fistful of bonus points.

As we entered the main thoroughfare, the full scale of the festivity came into view. There were drenched gangs of teenagers lining both sides of the street with buckets, hoses and water guns. Open pickups crept up and down the street, each manned by bucket brigades and supplied by on-board 55-gallon drums of water. One gang was adorned in matching red and yellow feathered headdresses with two younger kids beating tom-toms. Prodigious amounts of water were being thrown about.

I was as happy as a turkey in a typhoon as I slowed the bike, looking for an alley to escape the watery riot. My laughing bikemates would have none of it, imploring me to ride headlong into the fray. Not wanting to appear timid, I steeled my resolve and aimed the motorbike for a slight opening between a line of pick-up trucks and sidewalk revelers. Not one of my smartest moves. On the ride home I found myself reciting 'Mary Had A Little Lamb,' while inserting variations of the phrase; 'discretion is the better part of valor' at places where I forgot the words.

Arriving finally at the sanctuary of my small house on the outskirts of town, I parked the bike, walked to a sunny spot, stripped to my shorts and wrung everything out on some potted plants. The girls were percolating with residual laughter.

Mae chided me, saying, "You a cat, you no like water."

"And you're two Labrador puppy dogs, you like water," I retorted.

"Lababo puppy dogs - what is that?"

"You Lababos," I said while grabbing their giggling bodies and mashing them into mine.

'Smart play Montana,' I told myself, realizing I was wet all over again.

We took off shoes and went inside. I grabbed an armload of towels, and the three of us got to toweling each other off. I tossed them T-shirts and boxer shorts and within moments we were all warm and fuzzy.

Yo sat on a floor mat to continue the jigsaw puzzle that she started in the wee hours the night before. I asked if anyone wanted to watch cable TV. Yo grabbed the TV schedule and, reading carefully, announced, "I want watch disco very."

"Ok, you want to watch a music video channel? That's cool as long as you 'mute' it, 'cause we already have music playing on the stereo."

"Lee, 'disco very' it not music channel, it science and nature channel."

I put on my reading specs and looked closely at what she was pointing at in the TV listings. "That's Discovery channel, babe. Sure, let's do Discovery. You can watch the lions and baby polar bears, but let's kill the audio - ok?" She looked at me askew.

Mae put her arms around my waist and asked to see the photos that we'd taken a few days ago on our outing to a waterfall. I took one of her skinny arms and pretended to break it at the elbow - showcasing the anatomical marvel of how far her arm hinged in the wrong direction. She slapped my shoulder and shoved me. I clicked on the computer while she slid onto my lap and we were off to find the digital photos.

A bit later, two of their lady friends showed up carrying plastic bags of food and a cacophony of good natured Thai banter filled the room. They'd also been running the gauntlet of water brigades. They toweled off and went straight to the kitchen and began arranging the food they'd brought. I was reminded how Thai social life revolved around food and, at any given time, they're planning their next meal. I noticed the jigsaw puzzle sitting by itself and asked Mae where Yo went to and was told she was busy cleaning my bathroom.

I grumbled in mock indignation whether that was a commentary on my standard of hygiene and went to look into the bathroom to see if it was for real. Sure enough Yo was there, down on one knee facing away from me. I marveled wordlessly at the intensity of her tile scrubbage - especially when she took a screwdriver, removed the stainless steel floor drain. She then scoured both sides of it with the cleaning brush before screwing it back in place.

The phone rang, and Mae handed it to me. It was my Welsh friend Geoff. "My man, your presence is needed. I got four choice ladies here and I don't know if can handle them all by

myself." Mae, who spoke some English, looked over at me. She couldn't completely understand what I was saying, but she got the gist of it. She gave me her intrigued puppy dog look; half curiosity, half consternation. "Yeah you're gonna get drenched no matter what," I continued into the phone, "try wearing just shorts and sandals." Pause. "No, just bring yourself..., oh ok, go ahead and bring a fistful of flowers. Mixed color roses, why not, they ring the ladies' chimes,yeah, get your Limey buns over here. This is the happenin' place."

I felt an urge to hear Junior Walker, so I slapped in a cassette and his "Pucker Up Buttercup" filled the room. I picked up a banana, cradled it like a microphone and in a flash was belting out a duet with Junior.

'Pucker up Buttercup / I want to kiss you one time, Pucker up Buttercup / I want to kiss you one time, I want to ho-old you / Buttercup I want to show you how.'

Next morning, I woke up wondering who left the curtains open. My eyes focused just enough to see two girls sleeping on the floor cushion, illuminated by the salmon pink of dawn. Out on the porch still asleep on the reclining deck chair, Geoff and Yo lay bare-chested and wrapped in each other's arms - a Matisse study in pastels and cafe au lait. Lying next to me was Mae, wrapped in a yellow towel with her head at the foot of the bed. I gently grabbed the little foot in front of my face. She mumbled something in Thai and jiggled her 90 pound frame further from my reach. I sat up, bent over and kissed her on the cheek. I thought about how different life had become.

When people would ask me why I took the plunge to move to Thailand from America, I used to fumble around for an altruistic-sounding answer like; 'to reside in a Buddhist country' or 'to be able to help disadvantaged people.' Though there's some truth to those reckonings, the bare-knuckles reason was 'the ladies.'

As for ladies in the States; no doubt there are gaggles of attractive women, but how many would give a hoot for a middle aged guy like me? Guys of a certain vintage know what I'm talking about; that listless feeling of 'being a nobody.' Stateside, a hundred women can promenade by, and not one will appear to notice - beyond the mere physics of there being a body they need to avoid bumping into. Southeast Asia is a whole new world in that regard. In Thailand, a old coot like me can actually get eye contact and share smiles with ladies while out and about.

In America, a middle aged single guy has three basic options in the relationship department: One, he can pursue women with a resurgent burst of high school enthusiasm and chance to suffer all the inherent frustrations. Two, he can withdraw and stuff his loneliness and horniness into the shadowy abode of his residence. Or three; if he gets lucky he can embark on a 'serious relationship' with a real live woman. Such a situation may flower from mutual attraction, or it may even be sparked by real love. The un-pretty reality is many relationships that endure do so out of 'commitment' rather than a genuine desire to stay together.

But hey Erasmus, cattle have commitment to their pasture. Commitment is the same word

used for people who get taken to insane asylums against their will. Granted, a long-term marriage is rarely a wall-to-wall loony bin, but resigning oneself to being shackled up by default is not a whole lot better. There are a dozen sappy excuses a guy can give for sticking with his dog-tired relationship, but given a non-messy way out of it, he'd be out the door quicker than you can say 'unlock wedlock'. The other question that comes my way has to do with how I make ends meet. The answer to that takes a bit longer to articulate.

It was in San Francisco. I had some spare time so decided to go to the Exploratorium - a grand hands-on science place where school teachers and parents bring their kids. Inside the front entrance was a large display table. A bunch of kids were gathered around having a fun time. I glanced over their shoulders and saw what looked like a large version of one of those coffee table curiosities that have dozens of vertical blunted pins hanging down. This table sized version had thousands of pins. A kid would stick his hand under it, lift it up and the metal pins would slide up to show the shape of his hand. A little girl did the same with her doll, revealing its shape in the pins rising above... Fun stuff.

The kids were carrying on and I was thinking about my little boy in Portland - wishing his mom wouldn't make it so damn difficult for us to stay in touch. I got to thinking about getting in touch - literally. On the Internet, there's e-mail, there's audio and there's video. Three ways to communicate; writing, hearing and seeing, but no touching. So, I started tinkering with these contraptions in my basement and put together two identical boxes - each one about the size of a round loaf of bread. Each had 448 tiny metallic pins which were separately wired into a central control mechanism. The whole array was covered by a flexible synthetic material to give it a seamless feel.

The easy part was getting the two boxes to inversely mirror each other. The trickier part was getting some sort of curvature in the pin mechanism. After weeks of tweaking and fine-tuning, I got it to squeeze open a Concord grape - from the other side of the room. I was jazzed!

I did a demonstration for a fellow tinkerer named Cedrik who also lived in San Jose at the time. He thought of adding tiny carbon nanotubes bonded alongside the metal pins in order to increase the device's sensing capabilities. The nanotubes were a tubular form of 'Buckyballs' - a lattice-like matrix of carbon atoms. They're giants in the molecular department, but only a hundredth the width of human hair.

Cedrik had bundled them together and devised a way to gauge their abilities to convey subtle electrical impulses by incorporating their hyper-sensitivity to minute temperature and skin vibrations. Adding piezoelectric circuits enhanced the contraption's ability to convey the sensation of a person's touch. Since he owed me a big favor for something special I did for him a few years before, he declined my offers to have him share in the patent rights. My insistence bordered on pleading, but only elicited added reasons from him, such as his self-imposed 'vow if poverty,' to excuse himself from any legal involvement with the invention. He went on to introduce me to a couple of guys who headed a Silicon Valley tech company named Zcomm. They were interested in developing a commercial version of our device. At that time, I was set to move overseas to Thailand, so I wasn't in the mood to devote much time to shopping the invention around to different organizations.

In exchange for exclusive fabrication rights, the Zcomm people offered me a monthly stipend while the product was in pre-production, and per-item royalties if and when it became commercially viable. It was a push-over bargain for them, as I was eager to strike a deal and get on with my travels.

The first thing they did was drop the name I had given it, "Tactile Communication Device" or TCD for short, and give it their mass-appeal sounding name; Symtouch. I promised Cedrik that I'd buy him a big house with a science lab when I made my first million. He said he'd settle for a cottage and a candle shop.

Mae shifted her lithe body and, without opening her eyes, elicited a slumberous observation, "Lee think too much."

"So true," I concurred. "Hey bud," I whispered to Geoff, "let's go out to breakfast."

"Right-o, where do you want to go, then?"

"How about the place on main street that's \$1 for chicken, rice, sliced cucumbers and soup."

I leaned over to kiss Mae again. She brushed me off sleepily, mumbling some phrase with the word 'shave' in it. I told her it was Ok to stay and sleep, or eat, or whatever. I slipped a twenty dollar bill into a pocket of her jeans that lay crumpled on the floor. She noticed and protested meekly but I waved her off saying, it's for 'perfume, make-up, condoms, whatever...', knowing it would most likely get mailed away to her mother.

"So Geoff, my man, what do you think about my favorite little breakfast place?" As we entered, I glanced into the barrel-sized metal pot filled with brown fluid, sitting atop the gas burner. I couldn't quite discern whether some of the shapes floating within were their eyeballs or their feet, but the end product was some fine tasting chicken soup. As we found our table, Geoff commented on how well Mae and I seemed to get along.

"Yea, we have a lot of fun. But you know, before coming here from the States, I was so hyped to get cozy with an Asian lady that you could have brought the ugliest, hair-lipped Thai woman to my house and I'd have been groveling on the doormat just to touch her thigh. Now I'm one spoiled hound. Look out the door, man. Cute gals zip along on their motorbikes, hang out on the sidewalk....,"

"Yes, but many of those ladies are 'in the business', as you would say."

"Right, but I don't have a problem with that. Don't get me wrong. Mae is definitely one sweet gal. But the reality is I've become such a dog breath - awful boyfriend material."

"You mean because there are so many choices available?"

"Yea, like a bear at a salmon convention. You remember Marvin Gaye?"

Geoff started to hum an off-kilter rendition of 'Heard It Through The Grapevine' with a 'Waltzing Matilda' lilt that didn't quite fit. Across the street, a dog moaned.

"Actually, Gladys Knight did that song before Marvin, and she did a better version."

"Yeah, ok. So...?"

"When Marvin first showed up at the Motown studio in the sixties, he was this knockdown handsome young man and all the ladies went blotto for him. This was when Motown was just getting started - at that time it was a bunch of young black musicians trying to make their mark."

"They called them negroes back then, but ok, go ahead."

"So, mysterious Marvin shows up, and some evenings, when the day's sessions were over he would go down to the studio in the basement. Some of the lady back-up singers would still be hanging around. Marvin would sit at the piano and start into some romantic melodies. The ladies would gather around and add some back-up vocals."

"I get a feeling there's some point to all this."

"Yeah Geoff, the point is Marvin never singled out one gal for his own. You see what I'm saying? By being sweet with all the gals, he kept them all interested."

"I see. In his way, he was romancing them all." Geoff was perusing the newspaper, one of his less endearing dining room habits. "Blimey!" He scanned the article, "they found this crazy Alaskan guy who got lost in the Australian outback for twenty days. When the rescuers found him, the first thing the guy says was, 'I owe my survival to the Bible I carried with me the whole time, I guess.'" Geoff emphasized the 'I guess' and added a spin with his 'dumb red rooster' voice, "Duh, I guess the Bible saved me in the desert, duh, I don't really know, but it sounds like the right thing to say. What if he'd been carrying an old Mad magazine around that whole time, would he have attributed his survival to Alfred E. Neuman?"

I paid the \$2 and we split. Geoff expressed a concern about getting his passport visa renewed. He knew about going up to the Thai Burmese border to do that, but was unsure whether the border was currently open. I didn't have the latest info but told him about an ex-patriot named Royce who knew about such things.

Geoff hopped on the back of my motorbike and we headed up the road to Royce's place. Along the way I advise him to keep it sweet and simple. "Don't get Royce engaged in weighty subjects. Once he gets started, he can go on talking for hours."

"...like religion talk?"

"Yea that, and I've heard him go on about right wing conspiracy-around-every-corner stuff."

"...like?"

"Like the Federal Reserve printing the world's money for free and the Trilateral Commission controlling the world's governments," I continued while swerving onto the shoulder of the road to avoid a zero-clearance passing maneuver by a badly listing truck. "Basically the idea that every fiscal thing that happens is manipulated by some small nefarious group of men in business suits."

We found Royce sitting in his wheelchair by the wading pool while cradling some small electronic device. One of his Thai lady friends was busy clipping his toenails, while another was tidying up the kitchen. "Lee, how's it hangin'? Good to see you, Blood. Have a smoothie. He called out to the kitchen, "Two smoothies, tee rak (darling)."

Geoff made a comment about the sweeping view.

"You like it?" Royce said, "I chose this spot back in '86. Ten years before that I was a hired gun, property of Uncle Sam. After Nam, I went back to the States but just got depressed there. So I sold everything and moved my crippled butt over here." He pointed northwest, "see those hills in the distance, that's Burma."

"Did you see combat in Vietnam?" Geoff asked innocently while admiring the shellacked wicker design of the man's wheelchair.

I gave him a roll of the eyes.

Royce noticed my gesture. "No, that's cool. The short answer is yes, the long answer is it's best left for another time. So, the real question is, 'where's the best border crossing now for a visa renewal?' Shoot, I don't know, but I got a new friend in the Thai government who just granted me a year's visa. Let's say I nurtured the deal with a little 'tea money.' He winked, "...otherwise known as a bribe. Anyhow, I believe the border crossing up at Mae Sai just opened up." Royce rolled his chair toward the far side of the pool and motioned for us to follow, "whether you got business there or not, it's a cool place to visit."

"How's that," inquired Geoff innocently enough.

"Let's just say they got some darn lovely ladies working up there,"

Royce whispered, attempting to shelter his English-speaking girlfriend, Da, from knowing the truth about his rakish character. "It's no nonsense in Mae Sai. Not all the song & dance of meeting a gal at a bar, engaging in lengthy conversations, buying rounds of drinks, and on and on. Up there, you just show up, sit down, and some guy gives you a little 'menu' with photos of the available ladies. You make a choice, maybe haggle a bit over price, and pow - you're in! Wham, bam, kop kun ma'am - it's so nice and simple."

Royce had a habit of laughing at his jokes as if his own personal applause sign started blinking. His staccato laughter would redden his face while he repeatedly slapped his thighs.

In a sobering tone, Geoff asked if he has any qualms about procuring sex from an unwilling teenager.

"These gals are not unwilling, my friend. They even compete with one another for clients' attentions. Only the choicest gals are even allowed to strut their stuff in those places." Royce looked at me, and decided to lighten up. "I hear your concern, man. I don't doubt that some of the young ladies would opt out of the business if they could, but realistically, what would they go back to? Most of them are from Burma, and unemployment is all that's happening there." He took a swig of fruit juice and wiped his mouth with a hairy arm. "If a girl went around asking for a real job, she might, if she's lucky, get an offer to be a housemaid or a shop worker for - and I figured this out," he checks his dog-eared notepad - about ten cents per hour. That's for a seven day week working 12 to 14 hours per day."

"And that's if they even get paid," I added.

"So a lady-of-the-night can earn as much per hour working in a brothel as, say...,?" Geoff reckoned.

Royce's voice rose as he warmed to his subject, "in a half hour, a chick can earn as much having sex as she can in a week of menial labor - and in that half hour, she may have a damn good time." He looked back toward the kitchen, hoping that his current lady wouldn't catch on about too much of his rakish ways.

"If they're with you, I'm sure," Geoff jested.

"Huh? Oh yea, a particularly lascivious time if they're with me!" Royce's machine gun laughter kicked in.

"And what about AIDS? Aren't you concerned about that?"

"Of course. A guy's got to keep his Leroy wrapped. But hey, shit can happen anywhere. It's probably more dangerous to take a three wheeled tuk tuk through Bangkok than to have unprotected sex in a Thai brothel."

"I read in the paper that the Thai government complains that too many foreigners see Thailand as a sex haven - they say it's bad for their national image."

"The sex industry is the engine that drives the Thai economy," Royce said. "The government, rather than chastising those girls, should put them on a pedestal. Heck, the government should give those girls monthly welfare allowances."

"And monthly health check-ups," I added.

"Ahh, here are the smoothies. Thanks Da."

"You're welcome Royce the cynic," she grinned while giving him a mock slap across the face.

"That's Da's new English word - she learned it last night."

"Cynic," she called out again while inspecting a potted agave plant.

Royce spun around deftly in his chair and escorted us further along the deck to view another expansive view of the rice fields ripening in the valley below. He pointed out the intermittent brighter green rectangles that were seedling beds. "George Carlin recently said, 'if you scratch a cynic, you'll find a disappointed idealist. Sure I'm cynical, but you know, they called Joseph Kennedy cynical when he would gripe about business leaders mishandling their corporations in those times just before the Great Depression. But guess what? While the other fat cats were dancing around the Roaring Twenties, getting big bank loans without collateral, old JK tucked his money away in a safe place. He made it through the Thirties in pretty good shape.'"

"Sounds a lot like the what happened in Thailand in '97." I couldn't resist giving a hand to Royce's tire roll.

"Uh huh, what with bankers and businessmen wanking each other off with non-secured loans - all thinking the bubble would expand forever. Back in the mid-90's, some banker's brother-in-law could get a fat roll of money with just a phone call."

A yellow & green bird flew to the roof eave and entered a birdhouse. Royce had crafted it from a large African gourd. After it dried, he cut a hole in it for a passage way, then scraped out the seeds and let nature take its course. "But you know, I'm not cynic-ridden to the core." Turning to me, then back to Geoff. "The other day I was watching the sports channel, and there was this marathon with world class women athletes running through the streets of Seville - in Spain. And all along the route were spectators, regular people, who were clapping for all the athletes as they ran by."

"The winner was a North Korean woman," Geoff added.

"Ok cool, you saw it. Anyhow, all those spectators didn't so much care what country the athletes were from, they were happy just to clap and yell encouragement to all the superb athletes in action. Watching that brought tears to my eyes."

"Kon Royce, you want kin kao (eat rice)?" Da called out from the kitchen.

Royce asked, "are you fellows hungry? I think she's fixing some chicken thing with Indian curry."

Geoff nodded, "no thanks, we just ate."

"They no kin kao, Da sweetheart," Royce called back to the kitchen.

On the way back to town on the motorbike, Geoff asked what I was planning to do later that

evening.

"I'm going back to my pad and see whether the girls cleaned up from last night. Then I'm going to siesta. After that I'll probably go out and get a massage."

"How many women do you get intimate with each week?" he wondered out loud.

"No man, just a Thai massage. I'm not a total degenerate."

"What's up between you and Mae?" Geoff asked.

I tell him Mae's a definite sweetheart, but I'm too much of a bachelor to do right by any one lady. I can sense that Geoff is interested in her, but I don't want to make it too easy for him to move in on what I still consider my territory.

"You and her little friend seemed pretty cozy last night in that big chair," I told him.

"Oh yea, Yo is a very attractive lady. I think she likes me too."

"Go for it, Geoff."

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Lali's Passage - a fast-paced novel which follows the quirky episodes of Lali, a Burmese beauty who steals away from bondage, and later finds herself sequestered with a back-to-the-land Native American wannabe's camped in the California wilderness.

EGAT'S THAITANIC - Why Thailand Should Not Go Nuclear

Written spring 2009, this 75 page 'white paper' articulates why Thailand should not go forward with plans to build several nuclear power plants. Lists 18 recent environmental activists who have been killed by mysterious 'powers that be' for speaking out. Also includes list of illustrated contacts for viable alternative energy providers, with particular focus on 'concentrated solar.' Other chapters include specific ideas for conserving power use, and suggested ways Thailand could sensibly deal with its energy challenges for the 21st century. Note: This book is free, when purchasing any other from Adventure1.com selections.

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