

BEHIND THE SMILE.

The very personal story of Thanya.

Thailand is a land of smiles.

Some show genuine warmth , friendliness and happiness. Some are to entice and deceive, not being always genuine. Others are simply to hide fortitude.

In my life there have been too many and yet not enough smiles.

I am twenty-nine years old, born one of eight children. My birth was the sixth .We were a poor farming family from Bang Mai in the Korat region. My parents had this many children so that we could all help them in the paddy fields to grow enough rice for our own food and sell a little for necessities. Despite the heavy work at home and at school, we coped well, considering. My two brothers are now one farmer and one car mechanic. Two sisters died young, one in an accident and the other of heart disease. My youngest sister is at University studying in Germany.

As children smiles, we had so very often.

However, our Mother died of cancer near my fourteenth birthday and soon after at fifteen I left my High School studies unfinished. Deeply depressed and finally unable to face life alone, our Father took his own life just two years later. Family smiles changed in nature for all of us children.

I took up work for two years with a printing business. Then a girl cousin living in Bangkok told the family that she was working as a caddy near the capital and could find me better paid work doing the same. After a great deal of discussion permission was finally given me to join her. As a naïve country girl, I felt really uncomfortable about mixing with the rich clients on the golf course near the factories. Most came from Japan and Europe, but there were also many Thai players. As long as I worked quietly on the course and in the club shop, not getting involved romantically, the much- needed money kept me going. From eight a.m. until five p.m. came work every day of the week. Since I now lived with my cousin and her Japanese husband, after work I kept house for them. Happy smiles returned right up to my twentieth birthday.

Just a week after that birthday I met Frank, a forty-one-year-old German. Slowly we became friends, nothing more. I knew he was married. No way could I be anyone's second wife! After some six months he claimed to be divorced from his wife and even showed me the legal papers as proof. As yet we had not been lovers, but I believed that he had real affection for me. We made a series of family visits to my cousin and later to Korat, all occasions on a basis of friendship. All the time in the back of my mind was his Thai wife

and did they have children. For the next year he showed me a great deal of kindness. With the permission of my cousin he took me on holiday for three days. I went with mixed feelings of gratitude and uncertainty , on the firm understanding that we went as friends and no more. He kept his promise. Work continued as usual, but he visited me every day without fail. I was gradually feeling guilty about this relationship, which would not please my family. Though of course, I had begun to like him, I decided that it would be wiser for me to stop this friendship and for him not to see me again. I had never seen a grown man cry. With tears on his cheeks and with much begging, he finally persuaded me to think again.

Frank made promises to my family of his honest intentions and took me out more often. We even made business trips to Europe, especially Germany, Austria and Italy.

Still I could not bring myself to marry him, thoughts of how he divorced his first Thai wife, the risks of being treated the same repeatedly coming to mind. From 1998 until 2007, Frank was the biggest part of my life. Because of family support, his continued kindness and my growing affection for Frank, in 2000 I finally agreed that we sleep together.

Another change of smile during these years, but not mine this time. In 2003 we went to meet his family in Germany, who turned out to be extremely nice to me. Because he was a dealer in Christmas goods, every year he returned to the Essen Christmas Fair from November until December 24. I went there with him in 2003 , the 2004 Olympics and a ten-day tour of Vienna, Italy and even sailed to Greece, staying at good hotels and eating wonderful food.

My future smiles were to change yet again.

In November 2004 I started to feel sick, but this did not over worry me. At the Essen Fair, eye problems started. At first, there were small black patches in my vision. Of course, in time things began to worry me. Frank refused to take me to a doctor, but a mutual friend, a diabetic, introduced me to his. This doctor did nothing helpful, merely suggesting sunglasses. With no improvement, I returned to Thailand. Over two months in my own country in 2004 and 2005 alone I consulted a doctor. Frank still offered no support for my condition. Each visit I was forced to make alone. After various tests I was found to be HIV positive. My world fell apart. How could this happen to me, having only ever slept with the one man, Frank? I cried non-stop for days. During this time another German friend stood by me and still does to this day. From shame and fear I kept my condition to myself. Frank was away on prolonged trips quite often. Then one day after a golf tournament, I told him the truth. Closely I watched his reaction. His face fell; he cried and claimed that he was totally ignorant of being a potential

carrier. For himself now, he decided to have a check-up at the local hospital. Result, positive.

I went into hospital for a full month, not able to walk, eyes getting rapidly worse, and losing ten kilos. The change hurt me so much inside. The hospital was expensive and above all I begged to be allowed home. Meanwhile, Frank went to hospital as the result of "an accident". During his absence in 2007 some six months after my leaving hospital, my sister, who is not so trusting and naïve as me, opened Frank's laptop only to find over one hundred photos of him on various holidays with a Filipino woman. I felt so dirty and rejected, and him with another woman! When he came home he denied having someone else. I faced him with his lies. I told him that I was not angry, disappointed but understanding and would he stay with me until I died. For some moments he remained silent, not a word. Then one great argument followed. Frank just left me with my thoughts. I could not stay now, infected, blind, lied to, dogged by endless bad luck, but still I could not believe that he did not love me as I still loved him. Still very young, all my dreams of having my own children and a loving husband were being dashed for ever, but yet I hoped against all hope.

All the time in hospital there was no visit from Frank. His one metre eighty, slim body, his blue eyes and short brown hair were busy weaving yet another web of charming lies. This I later discovered.

Anne, a teacher, came several times to visit me and kept me sane. When at last I returned to the house, he left me alone for long periods, always with a different reason. Still I wanted to trust him, this man I loved. My sister brought me food and after many burns and accidents I learned to cook. Most of my lonely day was spent crying and repeatedly thoughts of suicide entered my head. I even took an overdose of sleeping pills, but I woke up hours later with a splitting headache. I never left the house, my only close friend being Amon, a Golden Retriever, that Frank had given me. I smothered him with all my remaining love and he acted as my faithful guard day and night.

Stefan, my sister's boy friend, had heard of the RAYONG CENTRE FOR PEOPLE WITH AIDS and had made several donations in the past. The couple had met through me. She had sometimes studied in our house, but could not now offer me a permanent place to live. With no home, nowhere to go, feeling most uncomfortable at the very thought of going back to Frank's house, I was so upset, confused and despairing of life itself by now.

We phoned Father Giovanni Contarin, the Founder of the RAYONG CENTRE. One week later, in August 2007, I was accepted, since Father was able to find me a spare bed. The Centre is the home of about thirty orphaned children under the age of eleven, but there are some twenty-five more teenagers at the Independent Living Home, a few kilometres away and another eight more at the Garden

of Eden, a sort of farming project. All these young people, except for the last eight, were living with HIV or AIDS. Besides being educated in local schools, they are all well fed and clothed by funds raised by Father Giovanni. Above all, they receive their twice daily dose of drugs to keep the ravages of our virus at bay. Many would be dead by now, if they had not been admitted to this haven of loving care. Besides the children, who so often made me cry with their jokes, laughter and sheer joy of living, there are older people at the Centre. Though they will not be cured as such, Father has found employment for all those able to do something within the complex life of the Centre. One wing of the Home offers a place for some to die with dignity looked after by volunteers from the many that in the past were themselves given a chance in life.

You cannot start to understand my new-found joy. No more days of silence. Human voices in conversation at last. Father and his team so gentle, caring and loving towards me, gave me such hope and being surrounded by other HIV/AIDS people, both very young and older, took me back to those early smiles. I had believed these smiles were gone and gone for ever. Contact with Farangs (Europeans) especially men, had left its deep wounds on me. Two volunteers at Rayong went a long way to helping those wounds heal. The kindness and understanding of Paul and Marco made me feel a lot less rejected, dirty and useless. Yes, my early smiles now started to show through.

A German friend phoned me in later 2007 to say that someone unknown had posted my story on the Internet. My immediate reply was to be left alone. Don't spread my story around! I am sure that Father understood my decision; he knew of the shame and guilt that was deep in me, but never did he agree that I should accept either. Never have I met a man so understanding and who can see deep inside all of us that he cares so much for.

In Rayong I helped to teach the youngest children English. I made friends with Rad, a ten-year-old boy, like me blinded by HIV/AIDS passed on by his late mother. We shared the same blind teacher of Braille. Then, when the new CAMILLIAN CENTRE FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES was opened in Lat Krabang, Bangkok the three children, Rad, Peter, and Jack, and I moved up here in the summer of 2008. This Centre, another of Father Giovanni's projects, is quieter than Rayong. Just at present the forty beds ready for children with disabilities are not full. One day, besides our new children living in we will be here for many others coming in during the day and returning home in the evening. It is nice for me to know that almost all the staff, except the kitchen and cleaning workers, have disabilities of their own. If they have been able to get on despite their problems, then I know that I can be strong and can do the same.

I still cry a lot and as yet I feel that it is hard to mix with new people. The thought of going out of the Home even for short periods scares me, but to be honest I know it is early days yet. I long for the return of my sight, but very slowly I am beginning to accept the fact that once the virus attacks our eyes, no drugs or operations can ever put things right. Those third smiles keep coming back now and again.

Father invited me to run the little shop at the Home, since I have had some shop experience. As the number of children grows and more and more adults come in on a daily basis, my work load will increase and this will help me to feel much more useful. I have my laptop to use, a radio for music and the staff stop by the shop when they can, we all eat together with the children and slowly my new family are meaning a lot more to me.

The first smiles are at the moment just a little thin, but in my heart I feel they could sooner or later grow so much stronger.