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**A proposal for**  
**Mother Told Me To Follow The Sun**

**By Boun Sandraow**

At age nine, when most children were riding bicycles or having fun in neighborhood playgrounds, I was on the run in the jungles of Laos with two childhood friends, Khan and Tong. Our goal: to make it to Thailand and freedom.

I was forced out of my home village of Goong Mong Ghure, in the country of Laos, back in 1981 as a result of Communist infiltration. The Communists invaded my primitive village and executed many innocent villagers, including my father, during their hostile takeover.

Only two viable choices were open to me at the tender age of nine: Live everyday with trepidation, or heed the advice my mother once gave me when I felt all hope was lost, “Follow the setting sun.”

I chose the latter and embarked on a journey that can only be described as impetuous and improbable. Khan, Tong and I attempted to escape the wrath of the Communist regime by traveling through the dense jungles of Laos in search of the sun setting over the Mekong River.

But we really weren't sure that we would find the sun setting over the Mekong or even wake up alive the next day. We were alone and without home-cooked food during our three-

week secluded journey in the jungle. We survived on wild fruit and our own urine. The spirits of our ancestors were always with us.

Fatigued, starving and dehydrated, we somehow were able to survive our frightening jungle journey. However, our search to find freedom was not over. The three of us had to find a way to cross the Mekong to reach Thailand. I had heard as a child that Thailand was a place of prosperity and wealth for refugees who sought freedom and solace.

The spirit of my father helped safely guide me across the Mekong on my makeshift raft, but unfortunately Khan and Tong lost their lives to the mighty river. I made it to Thailand alive; however, I gave up the possibility of ever seeing my mother again and lost both of my best friends in the process.

I was a little child, alone in a new land with no family and no direction. I was eventually apprehended by the Thai border patrol and was brought to a military base where I faced a grave decision. The leader of the army threatened me and gave me a choice: Either learn to be a willing and able soldier fighting for the rebel army, or be sent back to Laos to be executed.

I didn't want to fight, but I had no choice. I truly believed that I would be tarnishing the spirits of my father and my friends if I gave up my life and did not continue my mission to find freedom. I reluctantly joined the rebel army and learned at a young age how to operate an AK-47 machine gun.

Forced to participate in violent acts of torture against fellow comrades and civilians for over two years, I lived in constant fear. My leader frequently pointed his gun at my head and

forced me to do things against my will.

In the early months of 1986, I escaped the rebel army camp, deliberately turned myself into officers of the government of Thailand and sought asylum in that country. I couldn't take the abuse from the leaders of the rebel army anymore, so I risked my life for a chance to escape. I was arrested and detained, then later sent away to a refugee detention camp.

I endured a strenuous life of solitude and verbal abuse for three and a half years while stationed at the refugee camp, before being sent to America on a special United Nations refugee program.

I came to America in the early fall of 1989 without any basic knowledge of the English language. I found myself alone in a foreign land many miles away from my home village in Laos, with only the memories of loved ones to keep me from being in constant despair.

There was much adversity to deal with when I first arrived in the U.S. People with whom I came into contact sometimes told me that I did not belong in America, because America was not a place for a refugee without reading or writing skills. Discouraged and down on my luck, I eventually fell in with a Laotian street gang where I felt a sense of purpose and belonging in this new world.

My time on the streets as a gang member was short-lived. Too many encounters with law enforcement officials forced me to rethink my outlook on life. It was then I thought of my father and friends and vowed to their spirits that I would not waste my chance to make the most out of my life. I got out of the gang and found my way to Boston, Mass.

In Boston, I immediately enrolled in a local high school and completed four years of studies in a limited amount of time. I went to school from early morning until early afternoon, spending most of my afternoons at the Upward Bound Advance program at Boston University. I was determined to grasp the English language and master the high school curriculum. At night, I worked hard at a Thai restaurant so that I could pay my bills and help support the people who gave me shelter. Once I successfully attained a high school diploma, I enrolled in Bradford College, located in Haverhill, Mass.

I struggled a lot with my classes and with the college atmosphere in general, but I persevered and was determined to succeed. I eventually completed a four-year program and graduated with a degree in psychology and political science in May of 1997.

Today I work at the U.S. Immigration office in downtown Boston. My hope is to help foreigners feel welcomed and help them learn what America truly has to offer: freedom and an opportunity for a better life.

My intense desire to publish my life story is not only to inspire people from all over the world, but also to create an awareness of my home country and my people. I feel my story can help generate publicity and general interest in my country that it sorely lacks currently. It is my passion to build a forum for my people and for me to be their voice. I also believe that publicizing my life story throughout the world will open a gateway for other refugees like me to find their own way to freedom and dignity.

As my mother's words gave me hope and the sun guided me to freedom, it is my

burning desire to offer my story as an inspiration to others that are lost, for my image to be their guiding light.

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My home village, Goong Mong Ghure, is located on the mountain slope, approximately five hundred miles away from the city of Louang Namtha, Laos. The Kmhmu [Pronounced: Ka - Moo] people live throughout Southeast Asia in such countries as Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam and China.

The perception of the Kmhmu, who come from Goong Mong Ghure, is that the earth is flat, and at the end of the world lies at the end of the horizon. These Kmhmu believe that they are the only humans who exist. The history of the Kmhmu people is passed down, through word of mouth, from generation to generation.

Goong Mong Ghure is a place entirely without technology. There is no electricity or running water. The lives of the Kmhmu people revolve around a seasonal calendar. There are six seasons during a calendar year: Burning, Sowing, Weeding, Harvest, Rest, and Clearing.

Villagers listen to the birds singing and the insects screeching to recognize the changing of these seasons. Each season has a special meaning and purpose, not only for farming but also in the everyday lives of the villagers. The seasons generate changes in daily tasks and duties, in the food consumed, and in the way villagers spend their free time. The seasons determine the course of the Kmhmus' lives.

My life story has been featured in several media publications: *People Magazine*, the *Boston Globe*, *The Eagle Tribune* in Lawrence, Mass. and *The Daily News Tribune* in Waltham, Mass. I was also a guest speaker at Brandeis University in 2005, and have spoken at Union County College in New Jersey in 2007. Media articles can be viewed on my personal website: HYPERLINK "http://www.bounsandraow.com" [www.bounsandraow.com](http://www.bounsandraow.com).

Currently, I am the President of the Kmhmu Society of Massachusetts, an organization dedicated to ensure the continued cultural practices of the Kmhmu ethnic group, as well as to educate the general public about Kmhmu culture.

I have written an 82,000-word book about my life in my fourth language - English. The book, as I envisioned it, looks like this:

**Chapter 1: When My World Changed** – Communists from North Vietnam invade our village. Their purpose is to change our lives by indoctrinating us to believe in the Communist philosophy.

**Chapter 2: Ruthless Tyranny** – Life in our village under Communist rule.

**Chapter 3: Broken Promises** – Villagers are forced to move from their homes in the mountains to a Communist-run village in the lowlands called Goong Lervi. While there my father, Yung, is detained by the Communists and taken to a re-education camp.

**Chapter 4: Yung & Old** – I am now seven years old and it has been a year since my father was sent away to the re-education camp. Then one day they bring him back but he is no longer the father I once knew. He looks ten years older than when he left us. There is nothing

left of him, except skin and bones. The Communists starved him before they released him.

Soon, he dies and my family is left to carry on without him.

**Chapter 5: Self-Exile** – Now nine years old, I leave my home with my two childhood friends, Khan and Tong, and set out on a perilous journey to Thailand through the dense jungles of Laos.

**Chapter 6: River Refuge** – We reach our goal. We make it to the Mekong River. I watch in horror as Tong and Khan are swallowed up by the mighty Mekong as we attempt to cross it. Finally I have reached Thailand - the Promised Land, but my victory is meaningless because of the deaths of my best friends. In Thailand, a Kmhmu family living on the border takes me into their home before the border patrol finds me. However, my good fortune runs out as border patrol guards come to the hut and capture me.

**Chapter 7: Encountering Evil** – I am taken to a Thai rebel army camp and forced into service by the evil leader, Rai Dai. I am not yet a teenager but I must learn to live the life of a soldier. I am no longer an innocent child. I now know what combat fighting is all about. I am being groomed to master the art of killing.

**Chapter 8: Kong: House of Leaders** – As I settle into life in the Thai rebel army I am sent on a dangerous mission with some other soldiers – to take pictures of the Communist bases on the other side of the Mekong River. It is during this time my comrades introduce me to the world of prostitution. I finally become a man.

**Chapter 9: Fatal Secrets** – Not happy with the information we obtained from our first

mission, Rai Dai sends us back across the Mekong River to spy on the Communists again. Then, in the early months of 1986, I escape from the rebel army camp, and deliberately turn myself into officers of the government of Thailand and seek asylum. I am arrested and detained, then later sent away to a refugee detention camp

**Chapter 10: Thai Prison** – Life in the refugee camp is hell on earth. After months of mental torture, I am sent to a United Nations camp to wait for my turn to be sent to the United States.

**Chapter 11: U.N. Camp** – While in the U.N. camp I meet a loving and kind family who look out for me until I leave.

**Chapter 12: Goodbye My Friend** – Just before I am to leave for another camp to prepare for my departure to the United States, Tom, the patriarch of the family, is killed and his body mutilated, for stealing vegetables from a villager's garden so his wife and children wouldn't starve. I am devastated.

**Chapter 13: Phanat Nikhom Camp** – This camp is set up to help the refugees learn skills that they can use to find work in America. After some weeks in the camp I am taken to the Bangkok International Airport for my flight to San Francisco.

**Chapter 14: New World** – I soon learn that America is not a place for a refugee without reading or writing skills. Discouraged and down on my luck, I eventually fall in with a Laotian street gang where I feel a sense of purpose and belonging in this new world.

**Chapter 15: Uncle Manh** – My time on the streets as a gang member is short-lived.

Too many encounters with law enforcement officials force me to rethink my outlook on life and I decide I don't want to waste this opportunity. I get out of the gang and make my way to Boston, Mass., where I meet Uncle Manh, who becomes one of the most important people in my life. I go to high school, learn to read and write, get my diploma and eventually enroll into college.

**Chapter 16: College Years & Beyond** – I attend Bradford College in Haverhill, Mass., and graduate with a degree in psychology and political science. In 2002, tragically, Uncle Manh dies, but I believe his spirit is protected and he will have a rich afterlife.

**Epilogue: Returning Home** – I have been separated from my family for eighteen years. My mother thought that I was going to die somewhere far away, alone. But on October 28, 2000, I return home for the first time in nearly two decades.