

Mother Told Me to Follow the Sun

By Boun Sandraow
Chapter: The Jungle Journey

I was nine years old now. The pain of Yung's passing remained strong; the image of his eyes shut and his body breathless burned into my memory. Sometimes, remembering that Yung was one with the earth made me want to scream. But I didn't. I held everything inside and used the pain and anger as motivation to move on with my life. The Communists may have murdered my father's body, but they could never kill his spirit. That knowledge helped me carry my heavy heart as I prepared to embark on a journey to another world.

We had been living in the dry, rocky, hilly valley of Goong Lervi for two years. Our daily lives were not much better than the day we first arrived. People were still getting sick and starving to death. The Communists were still monitoring our every move and they still beat and abused us. They slept in our common-house, took our food, and let our young starve and die.

The villagers came home from working hard on their farms all day to see the soldiers sitting around the village playground chasing and harassing the young women. Sometimes the Communists even forced the women to have sex with them. If the women refused, their families would face severe consequences. The Communists would threaten to send their fathers and brothers to the re-education camp.

After Yung was taken to the camp, my family experienced poverty. It was hard for Mah and Kham to work the farm without Yung. My sister and my three young brothers couldn't help because they didn't know how to do anything except eat.

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My journey began with an idea, a way to pass the time in the forest. I wasn't the only one who dreamed of escaping this life. I had two friends, Khan and Tong. When we played in the jungle we pretended we were running away. Sometimes we even passed the Hmong village, which took us nearly half a day to reach. Though we always went back home, we dreamed of leaving, someday, for real. We imagined a happy future, far away at the edge of the world. We decided we were going to escape the Communists and find freedom.

Tong was a skinny boy, a little younger than me. He was not quite four feet tall. Khan was the opposite of Tong. He was big, burly, and filled with confidence, while Tong was shy and fearful. Khan had thick black hair and thick eyebrows, and from a very young age he was known for his ability to eat any and all foods that he could find. His parents always complained that he ate too much. They would say he should move in with the pigs. Khan had fun lying to his sister, telling her that if she ate too much, she would stunt her growth. Often this would convince her to let him take her food. Sometimes it seemed that Khan loved food more than anything else. I was the oldest of the group, but Khan was the biggest and strongest, and Tong, well, Tong depended on us.

It was a quiet day outside. The sky was bright and peaceful. I went to Tong's hut to see what he was doing. Without planning ahead, I walked right up to my friend and uttered the words that would change our lives: "tonight, we leave."

I had been thinking about leaving after Yung was sent to the re-education camp, but I had waited for an appropriate time to let Tong and Khan know my plans. I didn't want the villagers to think I was disrespecting the memory of my father by leaving too soon after his death. With my father gone I felt the hopelessness of this life. We were like slaves for the Communists. I now felt that staying even one more day was too much for me. I had to find a better life. I vowed never to be a Communist slave. I vowed to leave my village forever.

It was May, the end of the sowing season. The weather was nice and warm at night. It was the best time to go.

Tong looked into my eyes. He could tell I was serious, and that this time we were really going to leave, and not come back. He nodded silently in agreement. I told him to tell Khan we were going and to bring some food for the journey. By nightfall we would be ready to go.

That afternoon, my last afternoon at home, I was very emotional. I sat on the floor of my hut, across from my sisters who were taking care of my infant brothers, and stared at my siblings. I knew I might never see them again for the rest of my life. I felt terrible about not telling them of my plans, not even saying goodbye. But if I was going to succeed in my escape, I had to keep my secret—even from them.

Dinner came and went like any other night. Even though my father wasn't sitting with us, it seemed he was there in spirit. I kept thinking about leaving and my anxiety made it hard to finish my meal. Usually, if I didn't eat all my food, my brother would harass me. But for once in his life he didn't bother me. Even he had trouble digesting the idea of living life without our father.

I took my leftovers outside and gave them to our family pig. After feeding him, I got ready for bed, and lay down. I stared at the ceiling for a long time, waiting impatiently for everyone to fall asleep. Finally, I heard Mah snoring. I raised my head and looked over at her. She was sound asleep. My moment had come. It was now or never.

I quietly got up and made my way to the corner of the hut. I tied my quiver with my knife in it around my waist and slung a bamboo tube of water over my shoulder, then tiptoed out the door and down the steps. A few yards away, I turned around. I looked back at my hut one last time. I knew I wasn't coming back, and that this could be the last time I would see my family. Putting my hand on my heart, I silently wished my family a good life and hoped that fate would bring us

together again someday.

After saying my unspoken farewell, I sprinted toward Tong's hut. As I approached, I could see him inside, putting on his loincloth. He walked out of his hut with a bag of rice in his hands. He was making a lot of noise. "Tong," I called his name softly, "walk slowly, and be quiet, or your parents will wake up and catch us."

Tong looked worried as we headed toward Khan's hut. "What's the matter?" I asked him. "You look scared."

"Are you sure this is the right thing to do?" he replied uneasily. "What if the Communists see us? They will kill us."

"Calm down," I told him, raising my voice slightly. "How do we know they won't kill us if we stay here?"

I was getting angry. My journey was not going to end here, all because of Tong's sudden fears. Turning away from him, I started to walk quickly toward Khan's hut, determined to leave Tong behind. A few seconds later, I heard his footsteps. He was running after me. "Wait," he called. I looked at him, happy that he was sticking to his word.

Tong and I quietly approached Khan's hut and waited outside for him. We waited for a while, but he didn't come out. I was beginning to think that maybe Khan was having second thoughts about leaving. After about five minutes, though, he came out the door. When he saw us he smiled confidently. I felt a sense of relief.

"Are you ready to leave?" Khan asked. "I'm ready and I've brought some rice. My mother would have killed me if she saw me take it," he said, laughing.

Khan and Tong had stolen rice for our journey. I could not bring myself to steal from my family, especially from my younger sister and

brothers. All I had brought was the water.

Standing there in the darkness, Khan, Tong and I made each other a solemn vow. We would leave forever, and together we would find a better life, no matter what happened. We promised that we would not return home no matter what hardships we encountered. Even if older villagers saw us and tried to take us back, we vowed to resist them, fighting to our deaths.

It was a strange vow for three children to make. But once said, it bound us together, and drove us forward on the harrowing journey to come.

Our first important decision was whether to travel through the jungle or on the beaten paths leading out of the village. To follow the paths would be much easier, but we knew it would also be easier for us to get caught. We quickly decided to go through the jungle.

We did not really know where we were heading. We had no maps and no path to follow. All that guided us was what Mah had told me. To get to Thailand, she said, “You must follow the setting sun.”

To me, Thailand was as far away as heaven. Mah would tell me to go there, because she couldn’t afford to make clothes for all my brothers and sisters. Pointing to my loincloth, she used to say, “Son, you are growing up. You don’t want to feel ashamed of these ripped clothes. You need nice new clothes to wear when you grow up. You go to Thailand and work. You earn money to buy yourself clothes to wear.” She didn’t mean I should leave so young. But I couldn’t wait.

The jungle we had to cross was dark and thick. My people also believed it was home to dangerous ghosts and spirits. The corpses of soldiers who died during the years of fighting between the Communists and rebels were cremated in the jungle. The forest was home to their spirits, which frightened all who passed through their resting place.

At night, the only light in the jungle came from swarms of fireflies. We had to feel our way, but we were used to this nearby jungle. The air was fresh and cool.

We knew we would face many dangers on our journey. Beyond the ghosts we had heard about, the scariest threats were tigers, snakes, land leeches, and bees—if you bumped into a low-hanging hive an angry swarm would sting you all over. As we walked forward, we had to trust that luck, fate, and our ancestors' spirits would protect us.

That night, after leaving the village, we hiked for what seemed like several miles. We walked as far as we could in the pitch dark. Finally, in a small clearing, we lay down on the ground, trying to get some sleep.

Thoughts of Mah crept into my head. The realization that I would never see her again haunted me as I tried to sleep. I felt uneasy, knowing that Mah had no idea how much I loved her. I felt guilty because I did not tell her I was leaving.

The first day after we left the village, we hiked past many mountains and valleys, but we weren't even sure that the jungle would lead us to Thailand or anywhere else. All day we heard the sounds of screeching monkeys, and wherever we looked there were creatures crawling on the jungle floor. Very little light penetrated the foliage of the jungle, but looking up at the sky I could see the sun through the thick leaves. The sun was our only guide.

Most of the time we walked in silence, but when we stopped to rest we'd joke around, trying to ease our fears. Tong was afraid we'd get lost in the jungle forever and never reach our destination. He was also worried that if we traveled too far, we wouldn't be able to get back to our village. I told him we had to be strong. If we kept going we would

succeed.

Bringing rice with us wasn't really a good idea. We had two big bags, but no way to cook it, so we had to eat it raw. The hard texture of the uncooked rice made our mouths sore. We were already homesick for our mothers' cooking.

We walked and walked, until finally the jungle became less dense and we could see further. We climbed up on a large boulder and looked out at the horizon. We saw nothing but peaceful green jungle and rolling mountains. It seemed like it went on forever. There was no sign of human life. As we rested on top of the boulder, we felt a deep sense of solitude.

Overhead a bird flew past us. It landed in a nest in a nearby tree. The forest was silent. We began to talk about the families we had left at home. We wondered if they thought we were dead. Khan leaned back against a tall tree that was resting against the boulder. I could see tears in his eyes as he told me that it was about this time that his mother usually came home from the farm.

"My mother is probably home by now," he said, tears streaming down his face. "I didn't even say goodbye to her."

Suddenly, he turned his head to me. I looked away to the horizon, pretending not to notice his tears. Tong didn't seem to be paying attention to us. He sat to my left looking bored, angrily swatting mosquitoes. My attention shifted to the bright horizon, where I watched the sun starting to set.

Mah once told me that the world was flat, and that if you traveled beyond the horizon you would fall off its edge. I wondered how close we were to that distant edge, and whether we might fall off.

That made me think about Mah, which brought tears to my eyes. Staring at the horizon, I cried inside, not wanting my younger friends to

notice and lose confidence in me. But every time her image appeared in my mind, the tears came rushing down. The thought of never seeing Mah again bothered me terribly. I couldn't control my feelings. The hardest part of my journey became the struggle to keep going in the face of my increasing desire to return home to Mah. But I remembered the vow I made to my friends, and I pushed myself forward.

After the sun set, Tong said, "Let's find a place to sleep, somewhere away from these mosquitoes."

Khan responded, "You may be afraid of mosquitoes but I don't even fear tigers."

I laughed at them both. Joking with each other kept us from thinking about home, and gave us the strength to go on.

Finally it was time to sleep. In the cool mist of the jungle air, we curled up together to keep warm. It wasn't as comfortable sleeping on the ground as it was sleeping on the bamboo floor of our hut. However, it felt good to be in the forest because it reminded me of when Yung took me hunting. We often camped out together, waiting to kill an antelope. We'd build a fence around us using grasses and branches to protect us from the wind.

The next morning we traveled on. We had lived our whole lives without shoes, and the soles of our feet were strong. But now, as we pushed through the bushes of the jungle, we often cut our legs with sharp dead broken grasses and branches from small trees. Suddenly we were stopped by a jungle swamp. We paused, not sure how to cross it. We knew that leeches were common in such areas. Since we were wearing only loincloths and our feet were unprotected, we were extremely vulnerable to those nasty creatures. They would jump onto you, bite into your skin, and suck your blood. They did not just suck blood; they also forced themselves into any unprotected opening of the body including the ears, nostrils, and other body cavities.

As we stood by the swamp, a leech suddenly jumped up and stuck to Khan's leg. "What do I do?" Khan yelled, "It's on my leg. Get it off."

"Rip it off before it starts to suck your blood," I said.

Khan didn't listen to me. He jumped around, feverishly trying to shake off the leech. The leech didn't detach itself, but instead quickly slithered up Khan's leg, squirming under his loincloth. Khan let out a sudden scream.

"My God," he yelled. "My God. It's in my dahl-lei (penis)."

"Take the thing out before it goes further into your body," I screamed at him frantically.

"It's in me. It's in me. I can feel it crawling up inside me," he screamed.

We could think of only one way to get rid of it. He had to force it out, pushing as hard as he could while urinating.

Khan grunted, trying to urinate. He struggled, but eventually, the leech was forced to the tip of his dahl-lei. I tried to grab the leech with my fingertips, but instead I ended up pinching the end of his dahl-lei leaving me wet and Khan howling in pain.

It was disastrous. Thinking quickly, I came up with a new plan.

I remembered that once my sister, Lai, had a leech stuck in her nose. Instead of trying to grab the leech with her fingers, Mah prepared a small piece of string with a loop in it. She told Lai to blow through her nose, until the end of the leech appeared. Mah got the loop around it, pulled it tight, and the leech came out.

Remembering this, I took a small piece of string from my tattered clothing and tied it in a loop. Khan urinated again while I prepared to

catch the leech. The leech appeared, forced out by Khan's straining. Quickly, I pulled the loop and captured the wiggly creature. I threw it into the swamp. We all sighed with relief. If we had not been able to get the leech out, we most likely would have had to find our way back to our village so that Khan's mother could remove it. Luckily for us, we succeeded and Khan was okay.

We made our way around the swamp and fortunately did not encounter any more leeches. On the other side, we began looking for a place to rest. Khan was still in obvious pain. Finding a good place to stop, we refreshed ourselves with some rice and water, laughing about Khan's ordeal. We tried to help him get his mind off his pain.

As we ate and drank, Khan seemed to feel better and began to relax. He turned to me with a smirk on his face. "Boun," he said, laughing, "you are the first person to touch my dahl-lei. Even I never touched myself like that." Tong broke out in hysterical laughter. I was embarrassed. I threw some rice at Tong.

"Keep joking and I'll find another leech and put it back in there," I said to Khan. Tong laughed. I continued teasing my friend. "If only your dahl-lei were bigger, maybe I would have removed the leech sooner."

Tong and I laughed, but Khan was upset and embarrassed. "Shut up," he screamed at me, hitting me on my back. I hit him back and threw some rice at him. Khan threw his rice back at me. After a few minutes of this, Tong had had enough.

"Stop throwing rice, or we'll have none left," he yelled at us. Khan and I stopped and began to pick up the rice we had wasted in our fight.

That night I dreamt of my village. In the dream, I was with Mah, who cooked warm food, while I relaxed with my family in our dry, comfortable home. In the dream I also heard the beautiful songs of the birds from my village, and when I woke, these same birds were singing

beside our makeshift camp. For a moment I thought I was home, but as I looked around I saw nothing but jungle. I realized there was going to be no warm breakfast here.

During the first two days of our journey, we were really excited and proud to think that we were the only young, brave kids who would get to Thailand to make money and have nice clothes to wear. But soon that sense of pride and independence was replaced with a sense of isolation and regret. We were tired.

The jungle appeared to be endless. We began to feel that the journey had been a mistake, but we couldn't talk about it because of the promise we had made to each other to continue on no matter what happened. The farther away from the village we got, the more we realized that we were at the point of no return.

Soon we came upon a creek flowing westward. For the next day we followed it, jumping like frogs from rock to rock. Although that was difficult, it allowed us to avoid the thick undergrowth of the jungle floor and the leeches that we dreaded. We passed several waterfalls. The scenery was breathtaking. We had fun playing in the creek and we were able to forget about the uncertainty of our journey and the sadness of leaving our families.

Early one evening as the sun was setting we came upon a Hmong village along the side of the creek. We had seen smoke in the distance, and as we got closer to the village, we heard babies crying and other village sounds. We were worried that these people would see us and force us to return to our village. To avoid getting caught we decided to leave the creek and head back into the cover of the jungle. Soon, we came upon the Hmong villagers' fields.

We knew that they were Hmong because the village and dwellings were different from the village and dwellings of the Kmhmu people.

The Hmong, like the Kmhmu, were an ethnic minority who lived in the mountains. They claimed they were descendants of the Mongolians who migrated from Mongolia to Laos many years ago.

On their farms they grew corn, watermelon and opium, which was then legal to grow. Our eyes lit up when we saw a field full of ripe food. Tong was ecstatic. “Look at all of this food,” he said. “Let’s take as much as we can.”

“Yeah,” Khan and I agreed. We started to raid the farms, stealing as much food as we could carry. Then we ran into the jungle and sat in a small clearing, stuffing our mouths and filling our empty stomachs.

The opium plants had three different color flowers, but the fruits were all green on the outside with white and black seeds on the inside. The poppy seeds were very small—smaller than sesame seeds. Poppy seeds were my favorite and I still remember their sweet taste. They tasted delicious especially since all we had had to eat since we began our journey was uncooked rice and wild fruit.

Near the farms, we found a cave where we decided to spend the night. As we entered, I saw a bat fly out. The floor was crawling with insects and I stumbled upon the shredded skin of a cobra. I had often heard older villagers say that snakes liked to live in caves. I was terrified that we had wandered into the home of a cobra. “This place doesn’t feel right,” I said. “If a cobra lives here, it could kill us. I think we should leave.” But Tong and Khan felt that if we slept outside there would be other dangers, like wild animals, and they preferred the shelter of the cave.

“The cobra is probably dead,” Khan said as he picked up the skin. “If it were alive, it wouldn’t leave its skin.”

Tong, who was scratching his arms, agreed. “Khan is right. The cobra is dead. Plus, if we stay outside, we’ll get eaten alive by the

mosquitoes.”

My friends were intent on staying, so I had no choice but to sleep in the cave—except I hardly slept the whole night. Even inside the cave mosquitoes buzzed noisily around my head, and the constant fear of snakes made it hard for me to close my eyes. But Tong and Khan were sound asleep. The annoying mosquito bites made me think of Mah who was always nagging me to cover my skin for protection against mosquitoes in the open fields. Lying uncomfortably in the dark cave I was sad, because I would never hear Mah’s voice again.

Waking to the rising sun shining into the dark cave, we decided to continue our journey by going around the Hmong village through the jungle and back to the creek. The running water was cool, making traveling easier than in the steaming jungle. More importantly, there was no threat of leeches.

We got back to the creek and continued to follow it. Soon, however, it stopped going west, and we were forced back into the jungle. Because of our fear of leeches none of us wanted to lead the group. Eventually we drew straws—or more accurately, reeds—to decide who would be the one to walk in front of the others. Tong chose the smallest reed and we lined up behind him, proceeding cautiously.

After only about two miles, we found a river flowing westward. It was beautiful. The water was clear and the sun shone brilliantly on the smooth ripples of the drifting current.

On the banks of the river were hundreds of butterflies. Many of them sat perched on the reeds that grew in the shallow water. Their beautifully colored wings looked almost like the petals of flowers. That day we wasted many hours along this shore, skipping stones and splashing each other in a wild water fight. I remember running along the tranquil beach of this isolated wilderness, chasing Khan and Tong, and the butterflies, and being shocked by the reverberating echo of our

own screams. We felt we were alone in the world, and we were getting used to it. Tong and Khan were now my family; the beauty of nature, the river and the lush jungle were becoming our home.

We played so long that we could not travel further because the sun was already setting. We realized we had wasted the entire day, so we returned to the jungle to find food.

That night we found a grove of banana trees. We camped out under the stars, eating bananas and dry rice until we were full. The brilliance of the stars in the evening sky was exhilarating. But even more breathtaking was their reflection sparkling on the dark surface of the river.

The next day we left the river behind us and headed into the jungle. We were lost in the wilderness. Long ago I had left my bamboo water tube behind, because it was heavy and there always seemed to be plenty of water around. But now we were climbing to a higher altitude, and the jungle was very dry. There were no streams and not even any fruit trees.

By the afternoon we were terrified that we might not find any water. That was the irony of the jungle—one moment it would be a friendly ally; the next, it would become a bitter enemy.

We were getting extremely thirsty. We remembered the river we had left behind and thought about turning back. But we realized that we no longer knew the path that would lead us there. We were desperate. We pushed forward, hoping each step would bring us closer to some water.

“I hope we find water,” Tong said, nervously. “I hope we find water,” he said again.

His words annoyed me because I was trying to keep my mind off water. We were all afraid, but I did not want to expose my fear and

show weakness.

We needed to be strong and push forward. We kept traveling all afternoon and still there was no water in sight. It was extremely hot and muggy. My throat began to hurt as I tried to speak. Khan and Tong both said that their throats were hurting too.

The sun went down and we still had not found any water. As we pushed forward in the dark, all of us collapsed at once. We just couldn't take it any more. We were worn out, exhausted. We were beginning to hallucinate. My eyes couldn't see clearly. My brain and body constantly demanded water.

"I can hardly even move my arm," Khan murmured.

Tong just stared blankly toward the sky. "Why won't it just rain?" he kept repeating, "Why won't it just rain?"

I looked to the sky and quietly prayed to Yung. Please let it rain, I pleaded.

Khan was moaning in pain as he hugged a tree, hoping that water would fall from the sky. Tong was lying on the ground holding his throat, begging for rain to fall into his mouth.

"Roi da joi dhare."

"Grandfather spirit help me," he pleaded.

I couldn't take it any more. The pain was tremendous; my throat was throbbing. In desperation, I turned to the tree. Using all my strength, I broke off a curved strip of bark. Leaning back against the tree I carefully squeezed as much urine as I could out of my body into this makeshift cup. I never thought it would come to this, but I was in so much pain that I could no longer deny my body the fluid it needed.

Lifting my own urine to my mouth, I clenched my teeth and

proceeded to drink the nasty liquid. It was horrible, but there was no alternative. The taste was both salty and bitter. My throat was no longer dry, but I still felt no relief. A wave of nausea swept over me. I crawled over to my friends and closed my eyes. I did not sleep that night. Instead, I lay still, imagining water. Delusional, I was too thirsty to sleep, and I spent the night tossing in waking nightmares.

That was the most excruciating pain I had yet suffered on our journey. Khan and Tong lay next to me. We were all in serious pain.

When the sun rose in the morning our throats were burning. It was now difficult to speak. Looking around we found ourselves in a dry and rocky land with high hills to cross and no water in sight.

My body ached and my feet and hands trembled. My legs felt heavy as I moved them. I could no longer think straight. At the bottom of a hill, I collapsed. I did not have the strength to go on. I lay back and considered just waiting there, hoping to die quickly. I even remember thinking that in this dry land at least there were no leeches. I imagined my body lying lifelessly in this pit, but consoled myself with what I then saw as a moral victory—at least I would avoid the indignity of being eaten by the hideous creatures.

But I did not allow myself these thoughts for long. Getting up, I continued to push forward. My vision was now blurry and what looked like stars floated before my eyes. I could think of nothing but water and as I stumbled forward I felt more animal than human.

I saw that Khan was now far ahead of Tong and me. Although he was barely visible, I could still hear him, because as he stumbled forward he murmured repeatedly, “Oum.... oum... oum (water).”

Then suddenly Khan screamed. His voice was dry and raspy, but the words were clear. “I found a banana tree,” he yelled.

Tong and I struggled toward his voice and arrived at the tree to see

Khan desperately hugging its trunk. As if in slow motion, I watched my hand—which no longer seemed to be part of my body—pull out my knife and plunge it deep into the plant. Again and again I stabbed until finally, after what seemed to be hours, the tree bent forward and its wet stalk was revealed.

I began sucking on the splintered stalks of the tree like a vampire sucking the blood out of a person's neck. I was possessed and relentless as I squeezed and sucked every ounce of its water. I began to feel invigorated. Although I was still weak, my vision was no longer blurred. I couldn't believe I had cheated death.

Khan and Tong took turns with me, squeezing and sucking the splintered stalks, nourishing their bodies with the liquid. We leaned back against what was left of the tree. None of us had ever thought we would need water so desperately. We never realized how much we needed water to stay alive.

Lying against the stump of the banana tree we felt relieved. Yet as our strength returned we began to realize that we were not yet out of danger.

"I don't want to keep going on this route," Tong said. "If we keep going we'll die. We need water. And we've seen the best land—it's behind us." Tong wanted to track back to where we had come from, and hopefully find the beautiful river we had left two days before.

Khan replied sympathetically, but sternly. "We can't give up now," he said. "We must push forward as we promised. Either way we may not find water, but at least if we go forward we may eventually reach our destination."

Khan tried to comfort Tong by telling him that if we found another banana tree, he could be the first to drink. This did not make Tong feel any better. And what began as a quiet discussion soon grew into a

heated argument. I interrupted the feud.

“Enough. Let’s move while we still can.” We had already committed ourselves and it seemed to me that now we had to go forward and accept our fate.

Taking some bananas and some pieces of the tree’s pulp, we walked on. But after only about half a mile, Tong started complaining that he was nauseous and dizzy. Khan and I ignored him. Yet Tong continued to complain, and then suddenly he collapsed on the ground. I immediately rushed to his side and held his head. He spoke softly to me.

“I can’t go on,” he said. “I’m so dizzy and weak. I’m afraid I’m dying.”

I was afraid too. I didn’t understand what was happening.

Khan stood away from us, staring blankly ahead. I yelled at him to come and help. Looking back at him I could see in his eyes that he was not angry, but terrified. I looked down at Tong and noticed that he had a glazed look in his eyes. He trembled and opened his eyes gently.

“I . . . I guess I’m just exhausted,” Tong said. “I guess I just need to rest.” His eyes closed and his body went limp. I thought he had died in my arms. But then he opened his mouth. “Please take care of me, Boun,” he whispered.

Tong closed his eyes and lapsed into unconsciousness. I rested his head on my shoulder and cradled his body in my arms. Khan, meanwhile, held Tong’s legs in his arms, silently massaging them. Not knowing what else to do, we camped there for the rest of the day. We figured if Tong died, we would have to bury him in the jungle.

I lay next to Tong and wondered what it would be like if he died. I asked myself if we should ever have left our village. Then, just before

sunset, Tong regained consciousness. Pushing me aside he tried to stand up, but he fell back to the ground. He started to speak, very quietly. "I had a nightmare and in this dream I was alone in the mountains," he said.

This was not a good sign. In Kmhmu culture we believed that such a dream meant that Tong's soul had actually left his body, and we felt that soon his body would die as well. But Khan and I were glad he was at least speaking. I silently thanked Yung's spirit, and wondered if somehow we were being watched over and protected.

Although finally awake, Tong was still unaware of his surroundings. He looked around and asked where he was and what had become of his family. When we tried to remind him of our long journey, he became angry and insisted that we return home.

Khan spoke calmly but firmly to Tong. "We made a vow to never return and we won't break it."

Tong admitted now that he remembered but said weakly, "I'm sorry, but I must break my promise." He said he feared that he would soon die if he continued on this journey, and that maybe leaving the village was a mistake in the first place. Looking up into my eyes he whispered, "When I die please put some food and water on my grave before you leave."

It was then I realized that Tong might be right. Leaving the village had been my idea, and as I looked into my friend's eyes, I realized that this whole ordeal was my fault. Maybe soon his death would be my fault as well. I held him close to my chest and tears began to flow down my face. "I am sorry I have made you suffer. Please forgive me."

Khan intervened. "Don't blame yourself, Boun. We all agreed to leave."

The three of us sat and rested, not sure we had made the right

decision.

Tong's eyes closed again and he once more lost consciousness. We still needed water, and although we didn't want to leave Tong alone, we knew we had to go look for bananas or water nearby.

Khan and I started making our way down the rocky slope. Suddenly Khan shouted, "Water!" A tiny rivulet was dripping down the rocks. The Kmhmu did not drink water from their hands, because it would anger the dragon who lived in the water. So as we'd done all our lives, we pulled leaves off a nearby tree and rolled them into cone-shaped cups. The water was sweet. We carried some back to Tong, held his head up and poured it into his mouth. The pain of thirst began to fade.

A little further down we found several banana trees. Yet though the water had saved us, for now, we were still not happy. Tong lay near death, and the route to Thailand remained a mystery. I wondered if Mah had been right about following the sun. After all, she had rarely even left the village, and had certainly never gone as far as Thailand. She was always afraid to go too far away from home. But even though she felt that way, she encouraged her children to travel to distant lands, to learn about other people and their cultures.

I looked at Tong and realized that he was suffering from a disease I had heard my parents call malaria. I also knew that sometimes it was fatal. People who had malaria often craved water. They also looked for a warm place to lie down to stop their bodies from shaking.

As he lay huddled on the ground, Tong's body shook violently, and although it was a cold night, his body was wet with his own sweat. Often he moaned for water, and Khan and I had to spend much of the night getting water for him. Since Tong also complained of being cold we built him a fire, but nothing we did seemed to help.

Khan and I spent the night mostly in silence. We helped Tong

when we could; otherwise we lay silently next to him. That night we cried often and slept little.

Two days passed before Tong spoke again. He was still quite weak, and he was not yet able to walk. He complained of being hungry, but when I found him fruit, he only took a few bites before complaining again. He grumbled that the fruit didn't taste like rice, and he wanted real food.

He pleaded for us to find rice for him to eat. But we had long since finished the rice we had taken from the village. When we told him that it was impossible to find him anything but fruit he became hysterical. He yelled at us to leave him alone and angrily said that he would just have to accept death. He moaned that only his grandfather's spirit could help him now, and then said that even that was hopeless. He told us he had prayed for days with no response.

We were all feeling helpless. Yet after a while Tong's spirits revived a little, and he insisted that we continue on. We moved forward little by little. We had to stop every five minutes, making our journey slow and difficult. Tong had lost a lot of weight, and although he no longer complained as much, it was clear that he was still quite sick.

Looking at him I noticed how deep-set his eyes looked, and how fragile his skinny frame appeared. His breathing was now deep, long and loud, and as he inhaled and exhaled I could see the veins in his neck throbbing.

The terrain now changed again. The jungle became lush and green, with many streams. Water was no longer a concern, and although Tong's illness slowed us, as his health improved we began to regain our confidence. We thought that perhaps Tong's grandfather had finally heard our prayers.

At that point we were in the deep jungle where there were many new plants and animals we had never seen before. Near our village

there weren't many large animals, but here in the jungle, where there weren't many people, the animals roamed freely.

As we moved on through that wild terrain we came upon a herd of red antelope. The Kmhmu people believed it was bad luck for a traveler to see two red antelope together. It meant that the traveler, as well as his family, would suffer a tragedy or death. I was scared because Tong was still sick. But I still enjoyed watching the wild antelope because I had never seen so many together.

Though Tong was much better, he tired easily. When he walked, he still groaned with every step he took. I laughed at him when I saw him sitting under a tree eating fruit like a monkey. "I wish my mother could see me eating fruit like an animal," he said. I had the feeling that we were all like the animals now because we hadn't eaten real food (rice) for so long. All we ate was wild fruit.

By the third week, we were still wandering lost in the jungle. There were no human homes around us.

"It wouldn't surprise me if my mother thought that a Communist mistook me for a rebel soldier and killed me," Khan said. I understood why he thought that. Khan was big for his age, and he was brave and full of confidence and energy. He had everything it took to become a rebel soldier.

"I don't know...my mother probably thinks..." Tong said.

"She probably thinks you left home to go live with the monkeys in the trees," Khan interrupted.

We all burst out laughing. Tong was laughing so hard that he started coughing violently. "My mother probably thinks I ran off into the jungle and got lost," he said. "I hope she's not worrying about me, but I know she is. I hope I haven't brought any pain to her, but I

probably have.”

Tong’s words changed our mood suddenly. They made me imagine what my own mother was thinking.

“My mother has probably accepted that I’m dead,” I said. “She knew I had dreams of leaving someday. I never told her my plan to leave because I didn’t want to hurt her feelings after everything she’d been through. She knew I wanted to escape because I tried to run away after my father was sent to the re-education camp—when my uncle caught me as I was leaving the village. I just feel sad that she lost my father and me all at once.”

We became quiet for a moment. A nice breeze blew over us, cooling us off. Closing my eyes, I prayed to my ancestors to keep us strong. I also prayed to my father’s spirit to keep us safe.

As we moved forward, we came across countless new plants and wild fruit along the way. One day, I tried a strange new fruit—one that I had never seen or tasted before. The fruit was red and purple. I peeled it and ate it. It tasted luscious, unlike anything I had ever eaten.

This exotic fruit didn’t only taste good, it made my entire body feel good. I regained the energy that I hadn’t had since the last time I ate home-cooked hot rice. I was ready to conquer the jungle. The energy I got from this wild fruit made me feel like running as fast as I could until I saw Thailand waiting for me on the other side of the Mekong river.

Yet soon after I had eaten the fruit, I felt very strange inside.

“Boun, your neck and back are red,” Tong said.

I stopped and stretched my neck around, but I couldn’t see my back. I asked Tong to look closer and tell me if the redness was from mosquito bites or something else. He examined my back. “Now it’s on your arms and legs,” he shouted.

I started to get worried. I asked Khan to look too. “Boun, you’re turning red all over,” he screamed.

I looked down at my chest and stomach and saw that my skin was covered in a red rash. “What’s happening? What’s going on?” I yelled frantically.

As I stood there, screaming and panicking, my body began to itch. My entire body, especially my eyes and ears, were itching like crazy. I was trying to scratch myself all over.

Then, suddenly, I began to feel sharp pains in my stomach. I bent over, holding my stomach as the pain kept getting worse.

“Are you okay?” Tong asked.

“Is there anything we can do?” Khan asked.

The pain was killing me. I couldn’t even speak. My stomach hurt so much that I forgot about the horrible itch and redness that covered my body. I fell to the ground, howling in pain. My eyes watered from the itch and I couldn’t see Khan and Tong clearly. But I felt their hands on my body.

“Boun,” they kept saying. “Boun, what’s the matter? Tell us what we can do.”

I couldn’t speak. The pain was overwhelming. I could feel my stomach rumbling as the pain got worse.

Finally, it all came out at once. I raised my head and threw up. I started crawling around, throwing up all over the place. Then I crumbled to the ground and closed my eyes, begging for the pain to stop.

Tong and Khan were sitting close to me, but there was nothing they could do. I passed out, and when I came to I was still groggy.

Khan and Tong scratched my back when I asked them to. It was still early evening. After I regained consciousness I couldn't fall back to sleep. That night I lay delirious and exhausted, yet still awake, mumbling prayers to my ancestors.

By morning the nausea and delirium had begun to fade. My prayers had been answered. I had had a bad allergic reaction. As my mind cleared, I saw Khan and Tong waiting anxiously beside me. I forced myself up, still feeling weak, but so happy the pain was gone. I began to feel a new confidence that we would reach our destination.

As we pushed forward through the wilderness, we came to a clearing, and saw before us a broad, powerful river. No river we had ever seen was even half its size. We had never seen any body of water as wide or as beautiful as this wondrous river.

It was the Mekong. On the other side stood the land we had long sought: Thailand. The Mekong was the longest river in Southeast Asia. It flowed through much of the continent. It formed a border between Laos and Thailand, reaching over into Cambodia and flowing into Vietnam. Among Southeast Asians, the Mekong had a reputation for being a fierce opponent.

As we stood proudly in the jungle clearing, and triumphantly took in the spectacular sight before us, we were ecstatic. We had survived the jungle. We had survived illness and narrowly avoided dying of thirst. Now, at the edge of Mekong, we marked the end of our jungle journey and anticipated our final obstacle—crossing the river.

On the other side was freedom.