Passage from Nong Gua

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PASSAGE FROM NONG GUAN

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Praichon Intanujit
July 8, 2002
PASSAGE FROM NONG GUA

Date Recommended: July 10, 2002

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Acknowledgements

This memoir is written in memory of my paternal grandparents, Grandma Klib and Grandpa Ring, whose presence, talks, tales, fruit orchard, home and hut will always be remembered with gratitude and love; my mother, Suwanthong Intanujit, who endured her 49 years of life with incredible strength and tolerance, and my father, Tanadet (former Damri) Intanujit, for always going out of his way to get us out of trouble; the children and people of Nongua, who will always be meaningful models for my life; and Nong Gua for the rice fields and the woods that will always remain in my heart as the most joyous playground and the sanctuary of ordinary and hard days of my younger years.

I want to thank my father and my sisters, Pa and Kob, for their lifelong support and for helping me put together the past memories of our family.

I thank my thesis supervisor Dr. Dale Rigby, who helps make the completion of this thesis possible and whose valuable advice and patience are much appreciated. My thanks go to Dr. Elizabeth Oakes and Dr. Joseph Survant, who I will always remember as the teachers I want to be.

Warm regards also to Peter Carey, Trish Lindsay Jaggers, and Zacchaeus Compson from our unconventional spring 2002 writing workshop and my kind readers, Michael Null, Gerrit Otte, Manfred Schunk, Ann Martin and my teacher Boworn Rawdkhem for their encouragement and informal, yet important and helpful, comments.
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I was a sophomore from a small village when Pira Sudham, the author of *Monsoon Country* and *People of Esarn*, came to speak at my university about poverty and the forgotten beauty of his people, my people, the poor people of Esarn, the Northeastern region of Thailand. Listening to his sad yet courageous stories, I was reminded over again that I, too, had stories to tell, though it would be some years before I finally sat down to puzzle them out. The result is a memoir of my childhood years in rural Surin, where the mother tongue is Khmer, where most are poor farmers and their rice fields are both their work place and their children’s playgrounds.

While writing this memoir I couldn’t help but wonder why I had so often recalled my childhood years as among the dearest times of my life, despite all the rural hardship. There must be magic in being a child. There must be wonder in grandma’s tales, the hunting of wild fruit, the swims in the pond and those walks in the woods. My village was my world, and it has much to teach largely because its being complex, difficult and painful and yet somehow simple and, above all, beautiful.
I left my home village, Nong Gua, when I was nine, a village back between 1979-1983 owning two public ponds, one public school, one main dirt road, a local bus leaving once in the morning to the city of Surin and returning in the evening, and rice fields and forests that extended to the horizon. It was a secret part of the universe. There is where my childhood began and where I left an oddly dear part of my life behind.

Father took us, the three older children, on a bus ride to town and then on a train, miles away to our new home. It had to be a bus and a train simply because we never had a car, couldn’t afford one. Mother and my two youngest sisters, one six and the other not yet six months were to wait until mother’s application a teaching position at the same school as father was approved.

Only a short month before we had listened with the blithe disregard of playing children when mother told us father decided to resign his teaching position to acquire enough money to pay for our debt and he had to take a big test to resume his career. Mother said others would never do what our father did, since to get a position right away you had to be among the top ten of thousands of test takers nationwide or you would have to wait for months to be contacted. Mother knew plenty who had to wait for years and still had no contact.

The news came one day that father came in third in the test. Our parents took the news quietly and so did we. From a small choice of schools, he chose one called Krasang. The name was as foreign to him as it was to us. We had no maps and knew
not where it was or what it looked like. The news took effect immediately; we had to pack and leave our village as soon as possible.

The day we left, everything was still and strange, as if the village had gone to sleep in broad daylight. Grandpa Ring must have arrived at his hut hours ago and Grandma Klib might have been in the garden, inspecting the herbs and the fruits or in the kitchen. Aunt Dor must have been taking inventory in her small store, maybe cussing the fates. Noi might have been up to some new mischief, while the rest of the village was out performing their daily chores. We left without saying good-bye and no one seemed to know we were leaving. It happened so soon I couldn’t even think of stopping by at our grandparents. After mother’s fifth child, our youngest sister, was born, we didn’t go to their place or Noi’s as often. Mother might need a hand with our baby sister anytime.

In one way it was like any other ride from the village, the songtaew ¹ inching slowly over the dirt road. Only this time, mother wasn’t with us and we would not head back by dusk. I had plenty of time to think on the bus but I couldn’t think clearly then. After passing the first wood, Nong Gua quickly disappeared from my sight, a village so small and unknown to outsiders. Only the ride seemed forever.

Father bought us grilled chicken and sweet sugar cane on the train. We ate without speaking. I looked out of the window most of my trip. In the crowd of people and the company of father, Ai and Pa, I felt utterly alone. The train rushed into the unknown. I missed mother terribly.

¹ Songtaew means two rows, a local bus with two rows of benches on the sides.
The Fall

Mother, my brother Ai and I were on the bed pushed to the far right corner, secured by the east and south walls. Mother lay on her back reading a tabloid. Ai and I sat on the other side of bed looking at the view outside the window, chatting away before he saw something that I strained hard to see but couldn’t. After telling me that I missed it, Ai started to pull in both sides of the window together. I reached for the window while he tried to take my hands away, but my hands were already pushing at it, the window, which hadn’t yet been bolted and needed no pushing. The force swept me off my feet, sending me head first out of the window and down to the cement floor. Nothing could be done to pull me back.

I thought I heard mother scream. Then everything around me grew quieter. Voices seemed to be fainter and fainter, sucked up by the strange, suspending air, faint voices matching none of the misshaped mouths and wild agonized eyes. Then everything around me became inaudible. From a distance, I could see our neighbor, Pa Pan, making her way toward our house. But like everything else she was erased, melted and became one with the blackness as the world began to die down before me.

Mother said doctors had to sew many stitches on my chin. “Blood everywhere and you had to stay in the hospital for three months,” said Mother with a smile if our conversation led to the fall. I had no recollection of this. The oldest memory of my life began with the fall and again after the recovery. Village elders reading my palms saw angel guardians and said surviving such a deadly fall was extremely rare and that I was a lucky child. I knew I was.
Ripe from the Trees

Around March, I would start watching the baby mangoes grow. They got a little bigger and bigger each time I visited my paternal grandparents, Grandpa Ring and Grandma Klib. I couldn’t wait to see them as big as my fist. Then, Grandma wouldn’t mind if we picked some and ate the young mangoes with fish sauce pickle. We ate until our mouths got sore, until we started to feel the squeezing, shooting pain inside our teeth. That was when, one by one, we started to give up and waited until the next morning to start our mango-slaughtering rite once again.

We couldn’t order fruits to ripen at will. How cruel it was to be waiting for them to mature and then turn golden about the head. We ate some, waited, and then ate more of their siblings. At last a couple of months later the change in color of our mangoes started to become visible. The sight of the ripe ones made our hearts leap with joy even before we could hold them in our hands.

We had a harvest to do. Our philosophy was to get them all. We picked all that we could. Yet we could never pick all without the help of what later I came to know as the natural rule of gravity. Nothing bothered us more than seeing hanging fat, ripe mangoes that we couldn’t touch. We could only grab them with our evil eyes, wishing the force of our stare would cut them loose. Grandma had to remind us to wait and eventually they would have to fall to the ground.

“The worms will get them by the time they fall!” I retorted.

It was so, too. Everyone knows how sneaky those fly worms are.

“See the black clouds coming? It will rain tonight and the rain and the wind will take them down by daybreak.” Grandma was never wrong about the rain.
When morning came, I was the first to arrive at the row of mango trees. The ripe mangoes lay peacefully on the damp ground by the trees. I collected four or five of them in the front of my T-shirt, ran back to the house and washed them with the rainwater coming through the tin pipe Grandpa attached to the roof. That would be enough to last the whole morning.

I held the right to all fruit trees at Grandma’s when my cousins and brother and sisters weren’t around. If there was more than one grandchild at the same time, quickness was needed at the sound of mango hitting the ground. Ladders wouldn’t do. From Grandma’s veranda I jumped to the soft ground and reached the tree to claim the fruit. It was always kids who kept their ears open for the sound of mango hitting the ground. Grandma ate ripe mangoes with rice for breakfast sometimes, but she didn’t care for it as a sweet anymore. My grandma was a caretaker of her orchard and garden. She went down to the garden to check the leaves and fruits every day. With custard apples she plucked the mature ones or ones with skin already breaking open but still firm and ready to ripen in a matter of hours. “Save them from those greedy bats,” said Grandma. But there was more to it. Custard apple meat easily came loose from the core when it was ripe. The rich, juicy flesh broke loose so easily and off they fell to bits on the dirty ground before we could save them. The dark, empty room at her house was where she kept the mature custard apples to ripen. Grandma never bothered to count how many she put in. She hardly ate any herself and they were mainly for us and visitors, but it was always me who made the most frequent visits to the room.

We didn’t have normal fruit trees at our old house except for the old fig. No one knew how old it was. It was there long before I was born. The tree yielded
thousands of ripe red tiny fruits that birds loved. We ate them, too. We devoured wild berries a hundred times faster than the tiny beaks would allow. We went so far as to eat even those birds didn’t touch and we could climb trees as if we were kin to monkeys.

Beyond the wired fence at the back of our house stood various fruit trees in the vast rice field stretching to the horizon, the trees that farmers didn’t take down. There were so many exotic types that we children didn’t even know all their names. But we visited them anyway, at least the tasty ones. Wah trees bearing oval, plump, dark purplish fruits were a must. There was something about this fruit that gave mother a headache. The purple juice stained and wouldn’t come off, so we had to be extra careful. We stopped at one after another wah tree until we were satisfied. Then we headed back before dark with different types of wild fruits in our shorts’ pockets and plastic bags as the tokens of our long trip.

Way up in another forest, north of Grandma’s place, there were plenty of wild mangoes to be fetched. We began our journey on foot as soon as we heard it was about time the wild mangoes were ripe. We had to walk a long way across the empty rice fields to reach the grove. We had never seen trees that bore so much fruit before, like a solar system of hanging lime-green eggs. We left with more than we needed. Mother would be very pleased. It was about the only wild fruit that she wouldn’t mind buying a bag of when some villager came by and offered a hundred of them for just one baht.²

The most special among all fruit trees was Grandma’s jan tree. The tree must

²One baht was about 1/25 US dollar until 1997 and at the present it is about 1/42.
have been as old as the house itself. It was strong and tall, yet, most of the time, my eyes somehow failed to register its existence. I was busy looking for ripe custard apples, pomegranates, guavas, jujubes and mangoes. I remembered Grandma told me it did yield fruit, but not every year. Losing interest, I guess I waited until I forgot.

At school one day, a friend gave me a lovely loog jan. Like its name, the fruit is a miniature of a full moon – round, smooth and yellow, a delicate yellow. If the moon could choose a smell, this would certainly be a good candidate for its soft and sweet scent. I looked around and saw that other girls had one in their tiny palms too, and probably a few more in their school bags or skirt pockets. They walked about and sniffed their loog jans from time to time, filling their lungs with the sweet smell from the yellow fruit. Each was a little too gentle with her fruit. They let them lie on their palms as if they were eggs, afraid to break the fragile shells. I observed them for a little while and decided I could not buy that kind of practice. I made eating part of adoring. But the one in my hand was still firm and hard although it was all yellow. I squeezed my fruit and tossed it about for sometime and felt if it was soft enough to take a bite. I squeezed some more and started breaking open the fruit. About the skin where my teeth first penetrated the flesh, the juice touched my palate. The taste of a forced-to-ripe fruit spoiled the beautiful moon cruelly but even that wasn’t too bad a taste.

I went to Grandma’s again some weeks later. For the first time, I saw loog jans hanging from the branches of the tall tree. The fruit was swinging away in the currents of the high winds. On the numerous limbs of the strong jan tree hung tiny

3 Loog is an offspring or in this case a fruit; look jan = jan fruit.
moons, beautiful moons that I couldn’t reach from below.

Later ripe loog jans began to fall. Grandma showed me a long stick for taking some down so they wouldn’t suffer the fall. Each moon fruit was almost too big for my palm and almost too beautiful to look at. I couldn’t bring myself to break them in halves and gobble them down so soon. Was I finally learning some patience?

The season of ripeness was about to come to an end. Most fruit trees stood lonely under the hot sun, with little fruit to boast of. They stood quietly in a row like a single file of morning monks, waiting for villagers to finish putting rice and alms into their bowls.

June afternoons without fruit were depressing. It was high time we toured the rice fields again. We walked toward Grandpa’s hut on the narrow embankments of the rice fields looking for the spot in the paddies where farmers didn’t put rice to grow and where water was deep enough for us to soak ourselves and keep cool. We broke the top layer and dropped ourselves in the rainwater pool shielding the strong green rice from the heat. Our bodies stayed in the water until we’d gathered enough coolness, and then the rest of the day could be spent fishing and climbing trees for fruit. We were busy and for a while we didn’t think about Grandma’s orchard.

In a row of green fruit trees under the summer heat, Grandma’s only jujube tree was not there when I went back to her place. What was left was just a stump that looked just like any other stump, as if there had never been any jujube tree before. It was the most majestic jujube tree in the village and I couldn’t imagine another one growing so strong and tall and giving more fruit. I looked at the stump and wished I wasn’t always wandering away with my cousins and sister. But what’s the use? What could a child do when adults already have their mind set on
something? I didn’t ask about the missing tree. Anyone could see that it wasn’t there.

One didn’t seem to be enough. Weeks after the jujube tree was gone, my grandparents had the jan tree cut too, the tree that I had just grown to love, the beautiful tree that I had only just noticed. The spacious veranda now looked strangely brighter and roomier without the shade from the tree, not even a stump of it. I didn’t ask Grandma about her jan tree either.

I don’t recall being upset. I only remember a sudden emptiness spreading across Grandma’s orchard and her house. Years later I came to realize that the jujube tree wasn’t really gone. Like many other mature and old trees, it could be cut so it could grow big and healthy again and produce more fruit. I then noticed new fast-growing branches coming out of the jujube’s stump. But even if it grew bigger than before, it would never be the same jujube tree I knew. The branches would be different. The shapes wouldn’t be the same.

It was different in the case of the jan tree; I was supposed to understand without being told why my grandparents had to have it cut. The tree’s branches swept the front part of the roof every day and night and Grandma couldn’t afford to have her tin roof fixed, let alone replacing it with a new one. Grandma couldn’t keep both. One just had to go, so the other could stay.
The Lost Uncle

Uncle Tu had traveled a long way in his wagon to visit Grandpa Ring and Grandma Klib. He was in his early fifties, a serious, hard working farmer like his father. Years of wrestling with winds, sun and hard work had worn him down badly. His hard face set emotionless on his dark neck. From the look alone, squatting near his father one got an impression he was meeting up with his equal or a senior friend. Grandpa did most of the listening. They talked of rain and crops. The subjects to them were like water to fish. I didn’t know how many wagonfuls they made each harvesting season. One couldn’t tell by looking at their faces either, the faces for all seasons and emotions.

Grandpa Ring divided up his land among his sons and daughters. Uncle Tu was given a piece of land down in a neighboring village where he settled down with his wife and children. Mother said he did well on farming. And according to her, Grandpa didn’t get much rice anymore. He was so old and his children were all grown and left to raise their own family. There was no one to help him, nor did he have money to hire hands like Uncle Tu did.

In his late seventies Grandpa Ring still left early every morning to be at his hut so that he could watch over his rice. The straw and plastic bag scarecrow didn’t seem to help much. It wasn’t like Grandpa to ask for help. His sons and daughters who made a living out of farming had their own farms to tend and those who didn’t either lived in town or had their own business to take care of. Other farmers’ children or grandchildren knew all about plowing and tending rice, but not us. We were raised differently, it seemed. And we tended to forget that our grandpa was a townsman
when he first came to Nong Gua, a governor’s son, served by a dozen servants.

Father said boredom drove him away from the life most people would die to live. In exchange for a new life, Grandpa left his first wife and their only daughter everything he owned in town to marry our grandma, a daughter of a village headman of another village. He bought some land in Nong Gua and it had been his home since then. But farming wasn’t in our blood anymore. It simply wasn’t there. If we walked all the way to our grandpa’s hut, it wasn’t because we wanted to chase wild birds from his rice field for him. Wild fruit trees and fish in the rice fields and a change of playground were all that we cared about. We must have been so taken up by everything else that we never quite knew when Grandpa started plowing, preparing the seedlings and putting little rice plants in the paddy fields. When we made a trip to his hut, there they were – fine, fresh green leaves dancing in the tranquil water under the bright summer sun. It was a sight to see. It was a hard work and he did it all by himself year after year.

Uncle Tu decided to stay overnight because it was already starting to get dark. After supper we all lay down in a row from one end of the veranda to the other, so we could take the cool fresh night air throughout the night. I lay still, keeping my ears open for stories I waited to hear of, stories that by chance might drop from Uncle Tu’s and Grandpa’s mouths. After some time, they finally touched a little on my uncle who had long disappeared and no one seemed to want to talk about the disappearance. My cousins and I liked to hear about him and pieced together all the stories. We never saw him in person, but the portrait Grandpa Ring hung on the wall inside his house made him mysterious and important.
That night, I took it as a great privilege to know more than any of my young cousins knew about him. Rumor had it that my lost uncle was after Lek Lai, Flowing Steel, a magical steel that men sought. According to Uncle Tu, anyone who has Lek Lai in possession would know no fears, for nothing could pierce your skin, not even a bullet, and certainly not a knife. Uncle Tu believed the talisman existed and he was after it himself just about anywhere the rumors led him, but without success. We would never get to hear anything like this at home, an object of supernatural power. Father might know something but never quite had time to sit down and tell us. Grandpa and Grandma listened quietly. Maybe they thought it was nonsense since we had heard of so many young and old men ruined because of it. I tried to imagine what the liquid steel might look like and feel like in my hand. The rumor went on to say that my lost uncle crossed the border and went down to Cambodia hoping to find it there. The only image I had of Cambodia was a dark, dangerous, dead man land. I pictured my uncle wandering alone in this strange land.

Then one rumor led to another. Some people said my uncle was a communist, the word that everyone including little children was scared to hear. I didn’t want to have the word coming out of my mouth myself. Bad things might happen to us. The government might think I was one of the communists and I might be arrested and put in jail and never see my family again. The word held a power of its own even though nobody seemed to know what a communist was. It was the kind of thing we were supposed to understand and not question. It was dark outside and I couldn’t hear anything but the sounds of night creatures performing their nightly chores. But one never knew who might be coming in the dark.
In the countryside the ghosts of Thai communists and Khmer communists must have haunted villages long before I was born. I didn’t feel safer at Ban Kriad, my maternal grandparents’ village, not so far from the Thai-Cambodian border in Gabcherng. There, people said communists were in hiding and you had to lock your house, close all the windows and put out all the light soon after night came or the communists would spot you from their hiding place. Almost every night the sound of a gong was heard from afar. I never liked to hear the creepy sound of the gong, slowly wading through the thick, night air, staying in your ears just a little too long and sadly dying off, so the whole place was left with even more emptiness and spooky dead air. 

Grandma Tim said it was the signal from the village headman, summoning a secret meeting for the safety of the whole village. They suspected the Khmer communists might be around since we were so close to the border. “They are still killing, that Khmer Rouge,” murmured Grandma Tim, “Who knows when they will ever stop... ”

I was told later that Khmer Rouge was evil and it didn’t want to run just its own country, but it wanted to have Northeastern Thailand too. Our government even had to put a special force around the border. I could hear the faint yet heavy drops of bomb after bomb from the distance, yet couldn’t tell who was shooting who. I should have been more afraid of this violence that shook my insides night after night, but I was more afraid of the unknown communists. I remembered covering myself with a blanket as if to be part of the night, darker, more invisible and safer.

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4 It is believed that around 2000 years ago a large part of Northeastern Thailand was ruled by the ancient Khmer. Khmer Rouge’s ruthlessness in the 70s had been a constant threat to the people along the border.
Rumor had it that Na Ae’s father had consumption and coughed blood and that was why we never saw him downstairs with the rest of the family. People said he’d lived on the upper floor for years now. I wouldn’t have seen the poor man myself if Na Ae’s mother, Pa Pan, hadn’t asked me to go upstairs one day to get something for her. I took Pa with me. We sat quiet on the spacious open floor of Pa Pan’s house. We kept our ears sharp and eyes keen so we wouldn’t miss even his shadow or his faintest footstep. Like many older wooden houses with mini-windows here and there, Pa Pan’s house was rather dark inside, even in broad daylight. Everything was quiet. We didn’t hear any cough, but, in the room straight from where we sat, the bed creaked. We looked at each other. Our eyes waited at what a half open door managed to conceal. He came to our view at last. Passing that wooden frame was a thin figure carrying his skinny self laboriously across the room and back. It was the profile of a black skeleton. I didn’t have time to register his face properly, nor did we want to. We didn’t have any reason to stay any longer either.

We were exposed. Our lungs must have filled with consumption now and soon we would cough clots of red and then black blood and die young, my younger sister Pa first and then I. Our mother would weep tears of blood. Father would be there telling her Nong and Pa weren’t ordinary children. They were Heaven sent and no children of Heaven would be allowed to suffer earthly suffering for long, that’s why they were taken back so soon. Mother would lament what did I do to deserve this grief, this pain? Had I made too little merit in my previous life? Is my karma too thick to be washed away with my love and pain for my girls? The whole village would come
to our funeral, the most glorious and yet saddest of all time. Grandpa Ring and Grandma Klib would be there to give us blessings. My cousins, my friends and their mothers and fathers would hover around the dark open coffin, crying for the two sisters dying young.

We didn’t die and it wasn’t until much later that we realized it wasn’t good karma or luck that saved us. I didn’t know anyone who didn’t like Na Ae’s family. We often saw friends and neighbors gathered around the open space beneath their house where the women of the house received guests, and sat at the loom, working and chatting away while waiting for rice to grow or resting after the harvest season. Yet her father kept himself upstairs, his social life restricted to the small space of the second floor a country house offered. We didn’t know if the poor old man confined himself because he was ashamed of his illness, or wanted to save his family and neighbors from any uneasiness, or if it was because he shared our myth that consumption was contagious.

Up until the day we left the village I never really heard anyone mention the old man on the second floor, who still breathed and must have been in need of friends and company. Sometimes in what we call the natural order of things our silent traditions have the sadness of a caged man.
Silk Mothers

To the east of Na Ae’s house stood several mulberry trees. My sister and I liked to walk around our neighbor’s well-kept half orchard half garden and check if the green mulberries already had turned black. Red is not good enough. The juice is still sour. We didn’t care for them. We threw a few in our mouths just to get the taste. We could wait. There was no real hurry and we had no rivals as far as mulberries were concerned. No one at Na Ae’s cared for the small bumpy fruits. They only cared for the leaves.

Three or four round and flat winnowing baskets were tucked between two beams. We saw her mother, Pa Pan, take them down one day and we didn’t want to miss our tour of inspection again. In each basket, crawling and stretching in slumber were green one-and-a-half-inch-to-two-inch-long worms, skinny and slithering and all. They looked like they were tired from too much crawling and twisting and tumbling on top of one another and were now ready to doze off. The boneless creatures occupied almost every square inch of each one meter-in-diameter basket. The bravest thing I could bring myself to do was to look calmly from some distance at a basketful of live worms! Pa moved closer and began to press some with the ball of her index. She had fun doing that too. The things would wither and die if she didn’t stop. Watching was enough for me, watching from at least two feet away so in case one of them tried to jump, it wouldn’t reach me. I could see how they stuck on Pa Pan’s hands and how she had to yank them off and throw them back to the swarm of their friends again.
Pa Pan would touch and spread and touch and spread them every day before she gave them food— the fresh mulberry leaves that she and Na Ae collected the day they calculated they would finish up the leaves they gave them before. They didn’t seem to suffer the weight of her hands. When she rolled some over I couldn’t help imagining a tiny piece of bamboo get them and rip their green bodies and they would slowly die right where their green fluid gushed out. Nothing happened, they were tough mothers-to-be. Pa Pan spread the mulberry leaves on them one layer, another layer, and another. Soon they were buried in the grave of green leaves. Pa Pan told us they wouldn’t die. There was plenty of air and, besides, they ate like pigs. Come back and see for yourself, said the silkworm expert. After sprinkling some water with her fingers, she put them back where she first put them away and went on to do other chores around the house. I finished my ‘looking’ job for the time being. Pa and I crossed the barbed wires and headed home.

We went back a few days later. Pa Pan loaded the first basket down and there they were, alive and all so plump. No leaf was left untouched. All over them was a graveyard of bits and pieces of green carcasses that some still nibbled at. They moved slower now because of the green that they stuffed into their bodies. I moved closer each time I visited. They were all so tame and harmless in there. I thought some had gone to sleep.

Then one morning when Pa Pan took them down, I could see each of them covered in golden threads still very thin and you could see that the mother worms were busily weaving silky threads inside. The studious mothers must have worked nights and days; the nests were thicker and more oval each time we saw them. They, on the other hand, got thinner. What will happen to them after this? I asked Pa Pan
one day. They will stop weaving and we will draw silk, said Pa Pan. Soon attached on the baskets were thick yellow capsules. I was also told they were hibernating in there. Maybe they had just begun to grow in the yellow wombs. Pa Pan told us to wait for a while and when the cocoons were ready to draw silk from, she would let us know. We waited.

Nothing was bad when waiting for one thing and still having something else to do. We stayed and watched Pa Pan and her daughters prepare meals sometimes. They seemed to be working on different kinds of food every time we saw them prepare some big meal outside their house. We were patient watchers, but if we decided we had had enough, we would explore their fruit trees again. Kids couldn’t afford to get bored around Pa Pan’s house. If we had enough fun, we could just tell her we had to go home. There couldn’t be more a reasonable reason than that; it was all nice and proper for teachers’ kids to stay home and read and not always play.

We were in and out of Pa Pan’s house like we were her own children. Nobody had to make us stop at her house and none of us had to run home as if being chased by a pack of dogs. Pa Pan often shared curries with mother, or whatever she cooked. If she didn’t bring a bowl herself, she would call from the barbed wires that separated school and state land from the rest of the village and one of us would be more than happy to go and take it. Pa Pan liked mother. She must have taken pity on mother and me, especially for what we had to go through in the time of the fall.

Pa Pan seemed to understand we were in the period of eating and sleeping. She carried out the tradition of inviting us for freshly prepared meals. Her children were all grown up and married off except Na Ae, her youngest daughter. Mother taught her when she was a school student. She finished grade 6, the highest grade at
our only school, and stayed home to help her family work in the rice field and around the house. A fine girl she is, mother would comment. Everyone could agree on this, and I could add that she was a handsome one, too. She was already eighteen, all grown up, knowing her way around the house. She could cook, weave and much more. Na Ae should soon have a husband of her own. We couldn't expect her to play and hang around like a little girl anymore. Pa Pan found a substitution in us and our main job was only to watch and to eat.

Pa Pan would ask the questions that other kids in the village wouldn't hear from their parents’ mouths: Can you eat this? Is this all right for you? Too spicy? Do you want some more? They were lucky if they had three meals a day. They were lucky if they had anything to eat with plain rice at all.

It was different with us Teacher’s Kids. There was hardly anyone in the village who didn’t know my father and mother. Father was a local, born and raised here before leaving for higher education in town and returned to teach at another village twenty minutes from Nong Gua where he met mother. Mother taught at the same school with him for some time before she got a position at Ban Nong Gua School. People called my mother Teacher Suwanthong and father Teacher Damri. And they knew us as Teacher Suwanthong’s Kids or Teacher’s Damri’s Kids. They made efforts to speak Thai to mother and us children or at least a softer Cambodian. We talked softly with grown-ups. We put on clean clothes every day and didn’t run around barefooted like other village kids. It seemed wherever we went people treated us differently. When it comes to eating, Teachers’ Kids were also a different breed; their stomachs were unusually delicate and needed extra care. One didn’t want to get
them sick and throw up because of the strange stuff in the food. Pa Pan was mindful of this.

There were dishes Pa Pan and Na Ae made that were rather different from mother’s regular Thai meals. We couldn’t eat everything they ate. But we tried and if we didn’t touch it again they didn’t mind. Here was where we first learned that one could eat the fruit of the silk-cotton tree, noon. Pa Pan had one giant noon tree on the other side of her house near her small duck pond. The fruits when still green have creamy seeds inside with shape and size of a small corn kernel and this is when noon, peeled, chopped and crushed in the mortar and seasoned with some fish sauce, sugar, chili and the juice from preserved minnows, could turn itself into a mouthwatering beverage. Mother said the white part that we ate now would become cotton later. We didn’t want them to lose too much cotton so we decided to be moderate with our appetite. A few more months and those one-foot-long noon fruits would be too mature to eat and when they turned brown the meat became cotton and the seeds hard and black. Some began to break and one saw white fleece hanging out. Pa Pan plucked the brown noons within the reach of her bamboo stick before they all broke open and got the cotton dirty with dirt when they reached the ground. My sister and I helped peel the hard shells, pull the cotton out and throw away the black seeds. One noon tree could give enough cotton to stuff many pillows and small mattresses.

The time had come for Pa Pan’s mother to sit on a stool on the open ground underneath her house to draw silk from a big basketful of yellow cocoons. In front of her was a clay pot balanced on top of three big lumps of hard earth. In it was hot water simmering from burning wood. With a big long handled wooden fork in her left
hand, she kneaded and pressed the yellow cocoons that plunged up and down in the hot water with each stroke she made, the stroke that twisted, bound the three thinnest threads together and made it one before they reached a tiny hole on the top of a long, thin bamboo stick fixed on one side of the pot. To her right, the old woman felt the thread through her fingers and gently pulled it down the large basket, about an arm length each time she pulled. The three strings from the silk nests kept coming out between the spaces of the fork. More cocoons were constantly added as the yellow coverings became thinner and more transparent. I went back and forth between the drawing in the pot and the drawn silk in the basket. But my main concern didn’t lie in waiting to see the end of the long thread drop itself from the hole, marking the end of the display of a household wonder when something else waited for me in the pot. Inside each sack, now getting thinner and transparent from losing its wool, lay the creatures—mini-mummies wrapped tight in built-in yellow shrouds—prim and well done. We ripped the white tombs with our fingernails and gave the mummies a couple of chews that made us crave for more. We couldn’t always wait for Pa Pan’s mother to pause and take the silkless ones out for us. So we picked them right off the pot with our fingers sometimes, a risky endeavor. I was lucky not to get my fingers burnt once.

That late afternoon the air was still thick with the smell of cooked cocoons and the ground covered with torn coverings. Still some perfect ones lay in the dish for the others who should soon return from the rice fields. Before dark the aged mother carried the gift of a day’s labor and the remainder of the golden nests upstairs. We got ready to leave. Mother must have been expecting us.
**Expectations**

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” Mother asked us when she remembered her favorite question, usually when we were reading or doing our homework. A doctor was mother’s favorite answer. So sometimes she went straight to the point: “Who’s going to be a doctor for Mom?” Pa said she would. Sometimes I did too. Mother’s eyes, which were already bright and twinkling from observing us studying, grew even brighter, pride almost burst open her closed, decided lips. Mother didn’t seem to mind much when Ai didn’t participate in reserving future careers. She already had in mind other plans that she believed would be as good and dignified for Ai after admitting that he might not make it to a medical school. My brother, mother’s oldest and only son stopped getting straight A’s after reaching the fourth grade. Unable to blame her disappointment on him, mother looked at my frail and listless brother walking back to his class one day and said to us it was the hemorrhagic fever that did it. That was one of the diseases transferred by common mosquitoes. This we were expected to remember, the three types of mosquitoes as the carriers of different diseases: tiger mosquitoes, the daytime biters, are the carriers of hemorrhagic fever; amphiues mosquitoes transmit malaria and black mosquitoes (culicine mosquitoes) carry germs that cause elephant-foot disease. The knowledge could come in handy when there was a test or school competition. One never knows what was going to be asked in a quiz or appear on the test... Good children are the pride of the nation, smart children, prosperous nation—the motto for the 1981 Children’s Day given by Prime Minister General Prem Tinlasulanon. This

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5 Lymphatic filariasis or elephantiasis.
too was the kind of thing mother expected us to remember. I remembered it all.

In her carefree, good mood, mother would clarify her wish to us: “I won’t ask much,” mother would begin. “You can be anything you want to be but at least one of my children has to be a doctor so when Dad and I get old someone is there to take care of us.” We didn’t see any trouble in her wish and certainly didn’t see how we couldn’t succeed. In the days when we thought we could go straight to any of the top universities and didn’t have problem studying, we rehearsed profession picking like picking fruits in our own grandma’s garden.

On a certain day I didn’t feel like playing by the rules, so I simply said I loved fruits and I was going to marry an orchard keeper and keep an orchard when I grew up. Mother was silent. It took her a few moments to adjust her mood and gather words. “You may if your dream is that small...” Her voice came clear and cutting. It wasn’t fun anymore when things didn’t go as she expected. Mother forgot it soon enough. It must have been one of those schoolgirl’s whims and I knew not what I was talking about. For our mother none of her children should talk about a career that wrestled with luck and labor and not talents and intellect. As much as she respected her farmer parents, none of her children should become like them. We were mother’s children. We were little white elephants raised in the jungle and should one day roam the city and force the common city elephants to stoop with awe. We were diamonds buried in the mud, yet our worth did not suffer. Sooner or later we would shine with all our worth and brilliances. I could hardly wait to go to Grandma Klib’s again. My bright future was left alone there.
The Twelve Maidens

The eleven elder sisters covered their empty bloody sockets with their hands, mourning their cruel fate. The soldier was sick to his heart. Taking most pity on the youngest whose kindness was known throughout the kingdom he risked having his head chopped off by sparing her one eye and left with a bag of eyeballs to be presented to the false princess.

So the poor blinded maidens all carrying the seed of the prince wandered on aimlessly with nothing to soothe their pains. They ate whatever the youngest could fetch for them. They wandered closer and closer to where a giantess claimed its territory... not knowing that the scent of their sweet irresistible blood was putting their lives in a great danger. The giantess set out to fetch itself easy prey. The monster got close to catching the maidens but every time different an animal came to their rescue.

Grandma stopped to check the curry before beginning to supply me with a series of stories about the hide and seek between the maidens and the giantess, and the rescues. There seemed to be no hurry in old age. Grandma went on with what animal did what. I sat still on the kitchen floor near her, listening with my ears and my eyes, waiting for my favorite part.

Goggle eyed giantess got madder and madder. The maidens ran and stumbled, got up and ran again with their hands joined. This time the mother elephant took pity on them.

“Hide in my stomach! Quick!”

The mother elephant lifted her tail and the hole under her opened wide and in the twelve maidens ran and disappeared. Just as the leg of the last one fell in and the hole closed, the angry giantess came in full form before the mother elephant.

“Elephant, did you see those twelve wretched girls coming this way?”

“No, not a sight. I didn’t hear or see a thing. I must have been preoccupied with eating.”

The giantess growled with rage and disbelief.

“Are you sure?” pressured the monster with much thunder from her scary mouth and the threat of her lidless, unwinking eyes. “I saw with my own eyes they were running this way! Don’t you fool me!”

“No even their shadows,” the mother elephant insisted with the most natural tone she could come up with while pretending to be busy with another young twig.

Not seeing even their shadows the giantess stormed away in fury.
I knew the story didn’t end here but Grandma stopped again. “It went on and on...” Grandma would say. She must have been tired now so I didn’t beg her to tell more. I only waited for a chance when she wasn’t too busy to drop a question or two.

“Will someone come to rescue them Grandma?”

“Good people won’t be left drowned in the water or burnt in fire,” Grandma echoed the old saying.

I thought so.

“If the false princess counted the eyeballs then she knew one was missing.”

“She didn’t notice. There were twelve pairs in the bag you see. The soldier replaced the missing one with a deer’s eye.”

Good for him. I didn’t want anything bad to happen to him either.

Grandma descended the creaky stairs and walked to the big wooden mortar to scoop out the recently crushed rice grains and put them in her old winnowing basket. Like most villagers, Grandma still ground her own rice although she had a bag of milled rice in store most of the time. When grandma needed the rice milled, my brother and I would load a rice sack into an all-purpose wooden cart and take it to Aunt Dor’s house. Hers was a simple rice mill. Grandma didn’t have to pay for this. Aunt Dor would do all the calculation and took full liberty in retaining a portion of already milled rice. Taking a sack of rice to Aunt Dor’s was our job. Grandma and her third daughter had avoided personal contacts long before I was born. If she happened to use the rice up before we knew it, Grandma ground the rice on her own. The wooden stick used to hit the rice had to be heavy or the husks wouldn’t come off. Holding the long solid wood straight and dumping it into the grains at the bottom of
the mortar, and lifting it up again was no entertainment for bare palms, muscles and back. It left me desperate when hardly any grain suffered under the strength of my hands, even after my palms were burnt and sore and my arms exhausted. “We need the rice today not tomorrow,” Grandma liked to say when she didn’t see me bring her a bowl of crushed rice. Grandma didn’t have all day like us, so, at the end, whether I offered to do the pounding or not, it was always Grandma who finished it. With the winnowing basket in her hands, Grandma walked a little way off to the empty field and stopped where she felt the good winds blow. Holding firmly to the sides of her basket, she threw the broken grains up and received them back and up she threw them over again. It was best to throw them from the edge where they would rise highest and receive them back with the edge where the husks fell off most easily. The winds blew away residues and husks so nicely I wished I knew how to master such throws. I got better after some miscalculation that dropped a handful to the ground, but never could I throw with such naturalness and confidence as my grandma. The pile of broken rice got whiter, yet looking more like the kind of rice Aunt Dor boiled with husks and spinach for her pigs. I watched the rising and landing of the grains and the blowing of the husks for a good while. It was understood between us that the tale ended here today. I told Grandma I would go play.

Grandma never finished tales in one setting, but I was grateful that she never refused when I requested one. Grandma told the same episode over and over. She was getting so old she didn’t remember when the story was up to the last time. But her old tale never bored me. Instead it came out as a new rain each time it flew out of her mouth, her busy hands handling the daily chores. I followed my Grandma to the garden, to the kitchen, to the shed near her house where she sat picking bad
beans from the tray. I went where the old tale was told. Words floated and my twelve
maidens began to run. They were always in white gowns and so small I couldn’t see
their faces or their missing eyes, only their long black hair. They entered the hole the
mother elephant opened for them and got out safe and white clean and ready to run
again.

To All My Dragonflies

“I’m going home Grandma!” I called out as I walked down the front stairs. “All
right!” Grandma acknowledged from somewhere in the back of the house.

Going home I had to walk past Aunt Yuan’s cabin. No one was around as
usual. I didn’t see Aunt Yuan in the peanut field opposite her cabin, so she and her
husband, Uncle Dom, must have been at the paddy fields.

Nong Gua was so small the roads had no names, nor needed ones. From the
road that went around the heart of village, the two public ponds, there was no history
of even a three-year-old getting lost. We either followed the public path or went from
house to house to reach our destination. Aunt Yuan’s was only a few minutes walk
from Grandma’s and from Aunt Yuan’s I had another couple of minutes to reach Aunt
Dor’s gate. Aunt Yuan’s small cabin looked so homey even when no one was there.
An ancient giant bougainvillaea growing so close to the left side of her house
stretched its branches over the roof. The tree showed off its thick crimson blossoms
year round, making her dark wood cabin the most colorful spot in the village. Aunt
Yuan kept her place clean. Only the two ends of the cabin had walls. The middle
space was open to the winds and the sun. Being a one-story cabin less than half a meter above the ground, the middle was a resting place to envy. Aunt Yuan didn’t mind if we used this open space as our playground as long as we kept it clean and tidy. She was most of time out in the rice fields, cutting grass for other people’s cattle or taking care of her peanuts or perhaps distributing her rice sake around. Mother was right about Aunt Yuan doing just about everything to bring little income home.

Approaching her cabin, I couldn’t help looking at those dragonflies meditating on the barbed wires on the other side of the road. The barbwire facing her cabin was a favorite place for our dragonfly catch. We had a grand time catching red dragonflies just a few days ago. I thought I had time to play with one or two before going home. I got to the other side of the fence where I didn’t have to face the early afternoon sun. My right hand moved forward and closer. I had it by the tail when the red dragonfly started to break loose from my grip. My thumb and index registered a violent stir of the little fellow.

It was big and healthy with large wings and a very big head. I looked at its big bulging eyes to see if there were really hundreds of tiny little eyes in them. They appeared so but I couldn’t really tell. I pulled a long hard thin stem out of a wild grass and inserted it with a bunch of seed-like flowers at the top and carefully pushed the end of it into the tail of my dragonfly, all the way down so it wouldn’t come off. I held the stem up with the little fellow moving his wings frantically at the other end. The world's smallest and prettiest helicopter was successfully sent out to the sky with my own hands.
My eyes followed the object of my delight balancing itself in the air, with a new fancy tail, before turning around to leave. Not very far from the spot I liked to sharpen my skills in dragonfly catching, a thin worn-out dime story was lying on the ground. Someone must have accidentally dropped it. Or perhaps the wind just blew it from one of the nearby houses. I picked it up. I had read some dime stories myself. Mother didn’t like to see me read this kind of story, saying they were junk and weren’t for children. The drawing was nothing like I had seen before. The lines were dark, heavy and untidy. I decided I didn’t like it. But my careless curiosity wasn’t to be held back. My eyes ran through sections of drawings and groups of words, page after page. My mind went numb. Everything, suddenly, felt strange to me. Why hadn’t I known this before? It was only moments ago when I stuck a stem through the tail of another dragonfly. Now here it was, in my hands, a story of a gruesome, hellish punishment for a man who took pleasure in torturing and slaughtering animals. I was terrified just to see the pictures of his naked body, pricked and bled by a spear, cut and torn by the deadly thorns of the merciless tree that he was forced to climb for eternity.

The pictures from older memories were reeling in my head. The group stoning that killed the bitch and all her pups near Grandma’s. The day I accompanied Noi to the spot he chose to drown the cat. How many defenseless creatures had we, watchers and doers, wronged? I wanted to hunt up all my dragonflies again. I walked home with a sudden hollowness. My feet carried me past Aunt Dor’s gate, the small public pond, the football field, ... The short, familiar route seemed unusually long that day. That was the end of my dragonfly game.
Kerosene Lamp

“Refill the lamp Nong. There’re some coins in the basket,” Grandma Klib told me the evening I was to sleep over at her house. There was only one basket Grandma talked about. Apart from everything she needed for her daily betel leaf chewing—fresh and sometimes dried betel leaves, a small red lime container, some areca nuts, a mini mortar, a stick to go with it and a pair of special scissors for cutting and slicing the nuts, Grandma kept some small change and, if she had any, some bank notes in this rattan basket. Grandma never left her house without it.

“How much Grandma?” I wanted to double check.

“The same. Fifty satangs.”

I selected two quarters out of the basket and took the empty tin lamp with me to Aunt Dor’s house. Aunt Dor let me do it myself. She knew I was too afraid of her to spill even a drop of her blue kerosene. One cup was enough to fill the lamp. I recapped it and handed Aunt Dor the old coins and hurried back. This would be enough to last Grandma many nights. The light was needed for the early part of the night only and as soon as everyone could find their sleeping spots Grandma put it out—saving some kerosene. There was no reading at Grandma’s and whatever you needed to see to do you did when there was plenty of sunlight. Night was only a time for words to float in the dark until everyone was lost in their own sleep.

Grandma often told us to pee before we got to bed. It was always wise to do so for if you woke up in the middle of the night and needed to pee you had to find your way like a blind rat to the pot without stepping on somebody. Grandma told us

6 Fifty satangs is equal to ½ baht
girls where she placed the pot and that we had to be careful in the depth of the night not to dip our hand in somebody else’s urine or, worse, to kick the pot and spill it all over. Boys didn’t need a pot. Neither did Grandpa. Only my sister and I had to learn to feel our way to the pot through the dark.

That night before Grandpa walked in I decided to ask Grandma.

“Why does Aunt Dor charge you, Grandma?” “Why can’t you have the kerosene for free?”

“Oh... it’s been this way. It’s always been this way ...”

I looked at my wrinkled grandma arranging things in her basket beside the lamplight. My grandma was so small and stooped. The lamplight flickered wildly as winds swept through the open door and spaces between the old planks, making her shadow on the wall large and strange. Behind her hung an old calendar that came with some wholesale items. No one knew when it was last needed, when life didn’t live by names of days or months, but days and nights and sunrises and sundowns.

How was I to understand her answer? How was I to understand that she had to pay for a cup of kerosene from her own daughter? I didn’t want to go to Aunt Dor’s now, but how could I not see her when Noi was her son and Grandma still needed kerosene?
Afternoons with Grandma

I didn’t become Grandma Klib’s principle masseur over night. I had to learn to treat her like soft sand so I wouldn’t fear breaking her old bones. I gave her back a good touch with my left foot and grandma would say it wouldn’t break and that I was light. After much encouragement I pressed my right foot and then my entire weight on my grandma’s back, not knowing how I should move. If I didn’t balance myself well I could slip and might step on one of her arms. So I moved my feet a couple of inches back and forth very slowly and gently for fear I would not only hurt her bones but rupture her heart and her lungs. Grandma shouted from the floor, “Don’t walk like an ant. Move your feet. Step on me. That’s it.” I did. Grandma was satisfied.

“Good. Harder there. Just keep walking. I will tell you if it is too hard.” When my feet were more confident and knew her back better I could move around without much instruction. Grandma loved a back massage. It relaxed her and it cleared up her muscle aches. Grandma would go inside after the massage and get me a treat of custard apple ripened in her dark, fruit-ripening room. She picked me the best one. She would give me small change if she had some; when added to a bit more from mother it would be enough to buy some red preserved jujubes and fried squid mixture at the shop in front of our school.

Both grandma and grandpa were skin and bones and leaning earthward. Grandpa’s back almost paralleled the ground when he walked with his hands crossed behind his back. Grandma’s was half better. Sometimes when it was very hot she took off the white cloth that she wrapped around her bosom. Her two breasts hung low, long, loose and wrinkled. I couldn’t help seeing a few moles the size of my
fingertip around her breasts. I asked her if she wasn’t irritated by them. Grandma said she had had them for so long, they were part of her now. I touched the biggest one. It felt soft under my finger. I asked Grandma if it would come off someday. No she said. “What if it does come off?” I asked. I’d bleed she said. I looked at dots and lines on her face. My grandma was so old and yet still managed her day with the zest and strength of a woman half her age.

Grandma gave herself a break in the afternoon after some work in the kitchen, the gardens, putting beans to dry and hanging some clothes on her fences and the rest. I watched her wash her face and smooth her arms, legs and neck with rainwater. She hardly used any soap, but grandma always smelt clean and old, like the smell of dry betel leaf mixed with old cloth one didn’t take out of the closet for years. Grandma started her afternoon chewing. In her old basket was everything she needed if she had to make a trip anywhere. Areca nut-betel leaf chewing was to grandma an indispensable meal though it didn’t fill her stomach. I looked at grandma taking the dried brown betel leaf out of a tied bunch and painting it with the red lime.

“Is it tasty Grandma?”

“So so.”

“But you have it every day.”

“My mouth feels strange if I don’t have it.”

“Are you addicted to it Grandma?”

“What do you expect? I’ve been chewing this every day, sometimes three times a day, since I was your mother’s age.”

Every other elder I saw chewed only fresh green leaves, but Grandma didn’t always get the fresh ones, so she had to make do with the brown ones. Maybe she
liked them better. They smelt milder to my nose. At the wide veranda fronting her north and west herb, vegetable and fruit gardens, and a row of mango trees behind her house, I sliced the areca nuts for her. Grandma filled the leaf with the areca nut slices. I took the leaf from her and fit it into her mini mortar that had just enough room for single chewing. I did the pounding today. Grandma sat with both legs stretched, rubbing her thighs and her lower legs, contemplating the winds and the trees.

If Noi or my brother were there with us they would sneak in a joke or two.

“Grandma when was my father born?” Ai began almost too happily. Then we would wait for the classic answer. If grandma didn’t answer it promptly, my brother didn’t miss giving her a big hint. “Didn’t you used to tell me he was born the year the tamarind tree was in full blossoms?” No matter how hard he tried, smiles and chuckles already broke the false suppression. Old grandma didn’t seem to mind the joke and went on with the same details, intense with her ancient memory: “Let see... The year your father was born that old tamarind tree at the back of my house got lots and lots of blossoms...” We couldn’t help being amused by Grandma’s certificate of our father’s birth. We heard stranger ones of other people’s sons and daughters: the year our oxcart got stuck in that muddy big puddle, the year her pig gave birth to six piglets, one rainy season it rained so much that the water in the big pond almost reached its rims and flooded the road. So the memories spoke.

Nobody knew when the youngest boy of the house first came into this world. There was no record of his birth, and most likely the rest of his elder brothers and sisters. When date of birth was required for school enrolment they had to invent one, comparing to the birth certificate of Aunt Yuan’s first son born about the same time
Grandma gave birth to my father. We would be people with forgotten birthdays too if father and mother hadn’t kept the record for us. I got the stuff out with the spoon and grandma put it in her mouth and started chewing. Soon she would spit red liquid that, after years of chewing, had turned her teeth all black and her tongue blood red. Mother said in the old days black teeth were considered beautiful and even young court ladies chewed betel leaf and areca nuts with red or white lime like Aunt Yuan and my two grandmas. I thought I would be scared of myself looking at the mirror if my teeth were the same color as charcoal. But my black-tooth grandmas and aunt laughed so deliciously. Their front teeth stood proud like the upper and lower levels of black fortresses as the gates of their mouths broke open.

Grandma got ready to begin her chores again after the afternoon rest and back massage. Blankets, sheets and dry beans she’d put out had to be taken inside before cool air blew in. Soon there’d be dinner to prepare. I had never seen my grandma stop moving around for long from daybreak till day’s end.

Grandpa’s Hut

Grandpa Ring’s and Grandma Klib’s internal clock set off each morning long before the Orion left the sky. Grandpa washed his face and started packing and grandma would be busy in the kitchen preparing some rice for him to eat while he was at his hut.

In winter Grandpa would come down and make a bonfire early each morning. We left our blankets to join his hand-and-back broiling when we slept over at his
place. Grandma never seemed to need the warmth from the fire. If she had some
taro or sweet potatoes, she threw them in the fire and let them cook so we could eat
them hot from the spot while she took one of the burning sticks upstairs for her clay
stove.

Getting all he needed in his bundle, Grandpa fastened it around his waist and
started his walk on the route he followed every day at dawn and returned by nightfall.
Grandpa’s hut was to the southeast of the village, the only one we knew on that side
of village. Half a century’s walk wore him down cruelly, yet it was this path that led
him to the hut, the closest shelter from the heat, the rain and exhaustion. Here was
where he watched his rice grow. Here was where he trapped fish, crabs and frogs.
And here was when the cold winds blew, he harvested the golden grains. Grandpa
must have known every size of raindrop, every shade of sunlight, every tree and
shape of paddy fields.

For us grandchildren, Grandpa’s second home was our special playground.
Though farther than any forests or other playgrounds, every step paid off at his hut.
His wasn’t like any other hut. It was bigger than some villagers’ real homes. The two
story hut was as good as a regular house, with a sleeping area, a basic kitchen,
farming tools, a garden of bananas, papayas, eggplants, tomatoes, basils and chili
below and a small pond to the left. We played adults there, cooking, inspecting the
gardens and Grandpa’s fish traps and fishing rods. Grandpa lay but a few traps
between the small canal he made at the rice field’s embankment. Grandpa’s traps
were always heavy when it rained for days.
Death in the Country

“Pi Toom, Pi Toom, Nok Saek’s 7 at the top of my roof!” cried Teacher Oiy for my mother one morning. I was faster than Mother. Teacher Oiy was already outside her house, holding her baby in her arms. Mother rushed down the stairs and joined us. We kept our gaze fixed on the black messenger of bad omen, not knowing what to do. Teacher Oiy was desperate. “Chase it away!” She didn’t wait for our help. “Go away! Go! Go!” As if the bird could understand human order. Its shriek sent a chill that made the hot morning strangely cold. SAEK! SAEK! SAEK! An uneasy air hung over Mother’s face and wouldn’t go away. Whomever the news was for, it couldn’t be good. The marks of trouble weren’t lifted from the new teacher’s face when the bird finally left. None of us could find a word to break the silence the bird dropped behind. I prayed it was just a bird.

We were still downstairs, Mother and I, when a villager came to give us the news later that morning. Gae was dead, shot dead in the rice field not so far from Grandpa’s hut.

The day we cremated him, many unfamiliar faces left their business in the rice field to attend the funeral. Most were poor villagers. The small procession with a dark brown coffin headed toward the woods which had always been our refuge and playground. The open spot where we children liked to rest after much trekking and hunting for wild flowers and fruits was to be the burial ground for our 19-year-old brother and cousin. In the center were several small logs, one on top of the other,

7 Nok Saek, a bird known as the Messenger of Death. Whenever it comes to rest at a rooftop to shriek, it has come with bad news. It’s widely believed so by many of my people especially in the country. But the fact is there’s hardly any live one around now.
forming a neat rectangular sepulcher on a spot where the ground was hard and grass grew least. Someone had been sent ahead of time to lay the foundation for the burning. The first ring of men and women gathered around the square, quick and quiet.

I couldn't tell if the villagers took the fact that black and white were funeral-appropriate into consideration or not, though many came in black or white or the combination of both. They must have, despite the fact that black and white were also their all-purpose colors besides brown and dark blue. The funeral colors and clothing of the people bore very little difference from the clothes people wore when they took their little boys and girls to school the first day of school, participated in their neighbor's New Home celebration, met with the village headman, made trips to sell their rice in town, or visited their relatives in another village. For occasions other than staying home, going to the rice field or a cockfight or herding cattle, one could expect to see more pants for men that day instead of shorts, the women in their silk sarongs and not those factory-made ones bought for a hundred baht apiece at the fresh market in town. And men put on their short-sleeved shirts for decency, though they felt more comfortable with fewer pieces of clothing on their bodies. Children were the privileged ones where clothing was concerned. That day I wore the same pair of shorts, my favorite T-shirt and a pair of rubber thongs I wore every day. No one could tell where I was going or what I was doing if they didn't see the coffin or hear the funeral song, Weeping Mother Earth. Nobody gave me a look that said "How could she?" Or "Who are the parents?"

Mother and Father weren't there with me that day, neither were my sister or
brother or other cousins. I was alone in the crowd, talking to no one, strolling here and there, unable to stand still for long in one spot.

As the coffin was lowered down on the waiting wood, an old man opened the lid and told us to throw in whatever we would like for Gae to have while he was waiting to be reborn. We selected from the pile of clothes, shoes, pillows and other of his small items Aunt Dor and relatives thought were necessary for him, or that he might like to have, and dropped them in the coffin. After the lid was replaced and kerosene thoroughly splashed to the dry wood and the coffin, the old man mumbled some words and signaled for the fire to be lit. The waves of fire leapt up high and strong as they turned the logs and the coffin burnt red. Everyone stared hard at the burning. I did not know what made them stare so hard. I could not stop looking at it myself. I looked and glided and circled around to get different views of the scene.

“You may throw in the mattress, mat and everything now. The burning’s strong and good,” said the old man, still staring at the fire.

Words were pouring out from people’s mouths incessantly. Don’t worry about your mother, your father or your siblings, Gae. Your suffering has come to an end now. Go to the place where you could rest in peace and return when the time is right for you. We’ll make alms for you. Don’t think of revenge. It’s all over now. Rest in peace. All your sufferings end here. Rest in peace now, Gae.

Not far from the big crowd, the old man’s hands were smoothing a bust of a man made out of a lump of clay he placed on the hard ground. He sprinkled the face with water and smoothed it some more. When done, the old man poured a thin string of water on his masterpiece. His mouth dropped blessings. When you are reborn, may you grow up to be a handsome man, as handsome as the mold here and may
your new life be full of happiness and prosperity. It was indeed a handsome face with large perfect eyes and a long, beautiful nose, a nose that Gae didn’t have in this life.

At the center everything was reduced to something unrecognizable.

So this is what happens to you when you die, I remembered thinking. You are there, talking and laughing and then you aren’t. You disappear and leave nothing behind but ashes. He hadn’t been back for long. Aunt Dor asked him to leave his factory job in Bangkok and come home after one of the machines ate part of his fingers. He was too old to go places and do things with us and we didn’t know what he did all day or where. I remembered Noi danced around with a magazine his brother brought from Bangkok one day, telling us he found it on the tamarind tree behind Grandma’s house and I wasn’t supposed to see it. I had to press him and beg him hard before he showed it to me. I glanced through and handed it back, not knowing what to say. It was a large collection of women's private parts, the entire copy. Gae must have spent a lot of time alone. Aunt Dor searched his mattress and Noi said there were a few more of the same kind, and she gave him such a hard time he didn’t want to come home. Aunt Dor seemed to know he spent some time with the village headman’s son and his gang on the other side of the village. Though she knew there weren’t really boys his age or female friends nearby, Aunt Dor didn’t like it. Besides hanging around with people his mother and the village didn’t approve of and turning those magazine pages, Gae didn’t do much to keep himself occupied. He must have been lonesome and probably wanted to go back to Bangkok.

Nothing much was said about his death, not the morning the body was discovered or later. The problem with the crime didn’t lie in the task of investigating
and hunting up the criminal. Like any other death in the country those days—natural, unusual or bad deaths, no investigation was needed and thus no investigation. The body arrived at Aunt Dor’s house soon after the news reached her. It didn’t take long for one to figure out who was behind this bloody business either. Gae had problems with the village headman’s son. So people said. And so they accepted that nothing could be done in his case; only the worst of fools would look for trouble in the house of authority.

At home, we were not supposed to talk about this. Mother wouldn’t allow it, though everyone could see that nothing ever happened to those villagers who voiced their theory. Someone would have to get the whole village if he wanted permanent silence. Nobody had to do so either. People stopped talking about my cousin by themselves, got bored with talking about the same topic maybe, or became preoccupied with crops, rain and drought and hungry stomachs again, or were simply worn out by the unending backbreaking chores. Everything silently sank back to normalcy. Who knows what Aunt Dor put in the death certificate of her oldest son. Surely, it couldn’t read something like first-degree murder or it would be quite a stir for a village where nothing seemed to be a stir. In my later years I learned that heart failure was a common choice of cause of death. Aunt Dor could have put one of the most common choices of cause of death for Gae—heart failure. It would still be true. After all, the heart did give up after a serious loss of blood.
Scars

Mother said they would eventually shrink and turn the same color as my complexion. They didn’t. The full moon never waned from my right calf and the strange square near my big toe and the second didn’t grow any smaller— the two tokens from my favorite cousins Noina and Noi.

Noi was always there at the village as my first favorite cousin. Noina came later from town one summer with her mother, Aunt Yin, to pay a visit to Grandma and Grandpa. She was a tall girl for her age, tall with a town girl’s voice. She spoke Khmer like one just picking up the language. We forgave her since her father was a city folk. So she was a city cousin who became an active member of the old country gang. She followed us wherever we went. I really thought she would follow us to the end of the world if we only knew where it was. We became fast friends, Noina and I; and Noi, Pa and I were glad she could stay the whole summer. Our happy cousin was in a constant good mood. Nothing seemed to worry her one way or another, not even during the time the incident took place. Noina was squatting near the stove grandma placed in the back veranda when she wanted complete open air while cooking. I was sitting next to my cousin, chatting away and looking at the still burning charcoal on the stove. Noina used an iron thong to move pieces of charcoal around. When she had enough she put the thong on the floor and picked the unburned end of a long small piece up. Before I realized what she was about to do it was too late. The red end was already touching my upper right calf. I jerked her hand off. The charcoal fell to the floor. Noina chuckled. She looked at me looking at my pain, picked the piece up again and dropped it back in the clay stove. There was still a smile on her face. I
felt my newly charred spot with my finger and looked at Noi Na, numb and speechless. “It hurts, you know?” I meant for it to come out hard and angry but something melted it down and smoothed it up by the time it reached her ears and my own. Noi Na still wore a carefree face. The wound was working on me, warning me how much it was going to pain me. I felt hurt. I felt I didn’t want to yell at her. I couldn’t yell at her. Second to the pain, I knew that she didn’t think and didn’t mean to hurt me. I didn’t hesitate to scold my brother and sisters if they didn’t please me, but I couldn’t bring myself to scold someone outside our house. But this time I couldn’t laugh with her either. I despised her a little for the stupid idea of play, the idea that was now making my leg ache so much. I didn’t talk to her. I held my right calf with one hand and blowing at the pain before limping away for help.

“It’s far from your heart, you won’t die,” I was told. It was no comfort to me. Aunt Yuan got her black ugly oily paste out again and dabbed it on my wound with a stick. The dressing that mother used for my wound was already ruined. I didn’t tell her that mother didn’t want any more of her black medicine. I only told her the part that she strictly forbade: “No blowing Aunt Yuan. This is good enough.” I removed my leg before she bent down and sprayed her red liquid from betel chewing on my open wound. Aunt Yuan’s teeth knew no toothbrush or toothpaste. I didn’t care if betel leaves really help your mouth smell fresh and gentle like people said. Aunt Yuan looked at me hard. “What does your mother know? Is it not my medicine that saves your sister’s rotten head, your snakebite, and what about your father’s leg? Think about that.” I made no comments. I thanked her and limped back to Grandma’s house again. Later mother didn’t dress my wound. I don’t remember whether we ran out of gauze or if I simply took no care of my wound. But it didn’t hurt badly anymore.
The only problem was pus and the thick smell that drew more flies. The best solution, it seemed, was for me to put on my brown soft jeans, so they would save the wound from those flies that I couldn’t afford to keep an eye on all the time. Crossing the rice fields, I could feel the fabric rub the wound and the hot pus ooze through the right the leg. But I had to catch up with the rest. The pus seemed to pull in more fabric. Ai said it was a good sign. If it was trapped and had no way out, according to my brother, it would flow with the good blood and contaminate the entire blood system and I would get really sick. I would need a good doctor. Ai suggested I press and squeeze my calf a little now so it came out faster, but it had already leaked a good deal with me trying to keep pace with him and the rest. Back at Grandma’s after the long walk in the woods, I rolled the right leg of my pants up and had to be extra gentle to the hard cloth that stuck to my wound. The flesh and the pus became a super glue. It was impossible to separate the fabric from my wound without breaking open the wound again. I looked and pressed my swollen calf. It scared me to think that the germs and the pus might crawl up to my heart by now. Grandma only said I was doing fine, just keep the flies from laying their eggs and skip my hiking for a while, so there would be no chance for me to get dirty water in the puddles on my wound. I stopped hiking for a few weeks. At home mother cleaned my wound with antibiotic but didn’t dress my wound so it could breathe better, smell less and dry faster. The wound did dry up eventually. My only pants weren’t as lucky. Mother threw them away. It was beyond her strength to remove the stain buried way too deep in the veins of fabric.

Noina had already gone back with Aunt Yin when I was fully healed. The wound was now a distant memory. Then I got caught by surprise again. Noi and I
were under the giant guava tree on the right of his house, taking care of the burning garbage and fallen leaves. With a long stick, Noi held up the ear of a plastic bag half consumed by fire. We watched the hot plastic melt down and drip big drips on the fire, one after another. Without any warning, he turned with the stick pointing in my direction, smiling and chucking the same soft, trouble-free smile and chuckles Noina did that day. I protested, moving my legs away as quickly as I could. It was too late. The big drip was already thick on my right foot near the big and the second toe. The pain was unutterable. I tried to remove it with whatever my hands could find, but it was all sticky. By the time I got it out the heat was already gone. I brought home a new wound. Mother was more mad than worried this time. “If it were you who did this to Noi, I would be the first one to be scolded you know for not teaching my child well enough, and now I wonder if she even talked to her son about this now that it was you who was the victim of his idiocy!” I didn’t want to talk to mother when she was in a bad mood. “I won’t even go there to scold him. I hope she remembers this!” Mother was still fuming. I was afraid she wouldn’t want me to play with Noi again.

It was weeks of adjusting to pain. With the location of the wound, any kind of shoes hurt and to think of my not being able to walk properly or run! But it was even farther away from my heart compared to the wound Noina gave me. I knew I would be fine eventually. For the size, shape and texture of my new scar, I had to wait and see.

Noi didn’t talk about it when I saw him later. It wasn’t like him nor his mother to ask of pains or feelings. Noi Na was like that too. The pain was the only obstacle. When it was gone, it was only natural for us to resume our play.
Mother’s Shop

Mother decided to try her hand running a grocery store after raising pigs for sale became too much trouble. Returning from town one day, mother had just about everything for a grocery store: rice, sugar, MSG, soft drinks, rice, soap, shampoo, matches, razors, stationery, sweets, and the rest. Liquor was extra and sold for a few baht a shot. Old villagers often squatted in front of our house and chatted away while waiting for a tiny glass to be brought to them. I watched the familiar scene in front of me. Holding the glass between his first two fingers, Grandpa Mo tossed his head back, shot the hot liquid through his mouth and swallowed it in one swoop. He squinted his eyes so hard, sucking his teeth so noisily one got an impression he hated the liquid’s gut. He licked his lips once again and wiped his mouth with the edge of his pakaoma⁸ and got up to leave as another old friend of his stopped by. They kept coming back to Mother’s shop, old faces. Liquor is okay for mother as long as it wasn’t in Father’s hands. Mother had a few sips herself and hid the bottle away. It’s for circulation and my appetite, mother explained. Not for children. Not even a drop of it. We weren’t interested in them. Those old grandpas made it look almost like they were being tortured. We didn’t care for the smell either. When father came home drunk he smelt most terrible with his vomit and all. He didn’t talk sense anymore when he had a lot of drink and he didn’t seem to remember us. Mother said men are good only before they got liquor in their blood. We told mother we drank half a bowl of Aunt Yuan’s white homemade liquor with Grandma Klib and Uncle Tu.

⁸ A rectangular piece of cloth men especially in the rural area wear for their bath or simply fasten around their waist.
Mother didn’t mind it. It was more like a sweet intoxicant juice to her. She only told us not to have too much. Ai told me sweet it was, but it was as strong as any industrialized liquor.

For the first few weeks the business went well, but we hadn’t made a profit yet. Mother told us to wait until we got the capital back first and the excess would be the profit. Liquor ranked first in mother’s selling list. But, except for old grandpas who could afford only a tiny glass at a time, mother’s customers hardly paid their dues—the pain and risk of giving credit to people who don’t see the crime in losing credit or a lifetime delay in payment. It was the first time that we had debtors, many, particularly ones who took dozens of soft drinks and bottles of beer and disappeared without trace. Mother had a record of her debtors and she knew all about pursuing and pressuring, but when it was time to perform the act it became immediately unimaginable for her. “How do you expect me to squeeze the blood off the poor crabs?” Mother defended her lenience, when we thought she had to be tougher on those sly customers. Mother was hard on us and her pupils but she didn’t have a heart to coerce grown-ups, especially the old ones for what they owed her. “Not fit to be a trader and wouldn’t go far on this road.” That was what Aunt Dor would say, if she found out. This could not happen to Aunt Dor. The whole village knew it was best to avoid getting into trouble with my aunt. Aunt Dor was a dragon when her anger was built up to the point of explosion and she made no effort to hold back. She spat fire. One didn’t want to even try to open his mouth on such occasion. Uncle Pan stood against his wife from time to time and his resistance was only a first class ignition. Aunt Dor had a reputation this way—loud and peerless at cussing. She was so good at it we thought there must have been times she found pleasure doing so or she
wouldn’t have cussed so much. It was known that she took nobody’s promise of future payment, but cash; if not, then rice, silk, whatever didn’t rot and could be sold for even a greater price. Mother didn’t have that sort of policy. The list of her debtors grew longer. By this time we were more interested in examining the list than taking care of our shop. We thought how it would make her happy if only one of them showed up and said “I’m so sorry for taking so long to pay you back. But I got the money today... finally.” Not a soul turned up. A few months after the opening, the shop had to be closed.

But there was more to the story. Before mother’s there were two other grocery stores in the village where we could get sweets, one at the entrance of school and the one at Aunt Dor’s house. When we had a shop at our own home, we had a private free food source a floor away from our bedrooms. Minding the shop for mother was no burden. We didn’t really have to do much since it was downstairs and we lived downstairs during the day, playing, eating and sometimes sleeping. It began with a small treat of sweets before we found ourselves wanting more and unable to stop taking more. We were the faithful customers without recompense. Not seeing them as investments for sale, we raided the pantry.

Mother’s business was already in jeopardy with the incorrigible customers. We only quickened her course. Her hope and confidence in the shop shrank to the size of a dry bean. Never again would mother depend on customers having a hard time making ends meet. And never again would mother trust her business in the hands and mouths of children without a sense of abstinence. With no shop of our own, my sister and I had to return to the old shop in front of our school like before. The lady shopkeeper welcomed us warmly. We hadn’t been gone all that long.
When I was about eight, Na Mao, mother’s first younger sister, came to live with us. She was mother’s dark version. Born dark, Grandma nicknamed her Kamao—black in Khmer. We called her just Mao, Na Mao, since she was our mother’s younger sister. If your grandma had drunk fresh coconut juice when she was pregnant with Kamao, she wouldn’t have been born this color. That’s what people said. If you are born light-skinned, you’re already half lucky and if your face doesn’t betray you so brutally, you should never have to worry about becoming a nun or an old maid. Village elders seemed to see it all in the skin texture and color. They would press and feel our upper arms and they would say my skin was soft all right but Pa had softer, smoother and lighter skin. Such, they would add, was the skin of someone who would become a wife of a rich, influential man and lead a comfortable life with servants to do the work around the house and all.

Na Mao’s unattractiveness went unsaid. Mother married father when she was 19 and that was after her suitor, a young man Grandma found for her, died in a car crash. Mother was “sold” and Ley, mother’s youngest light-skinned sister looked “sellable,” despite her being rather ferocious for someone so young. My dark aunt had no suitors and she didn’t really have any male friends. No one made any speculation about her future marital status.

Mother told us Na Mao quit school early because she did poorly at school. Grandpa didn’t see the need to make her stay on, so, after completing primary school, the compulsory level at the time, she stayed home and helped grandma work. For mother all causes of hard life stem from not doing well at school and not pushing
oneself toward higher education. Her classic examples were from father’s side, Aunt Yuan, and her own, Na Mao, who was five years younger but is often mistaken as her elder sister. Like other villagers who quit school early, Na Mao had to toil in the hot sun. It could be anything, the work, the sun, the wind or maybe it was just her dark sad face in which a pair of lackluster eyes sat, or all of these together that made her look older than she was. That was when there was no smile or laughter on her face. She hardly smiled or laughed but how different she looked when she did! Na Mao didn’t talk much but when she opened her mouth she talked loud and laughed even louder. We listened in awe of the happy sound that penetrated the modest air of the quiet neighborhood. When she didn’t talk or work she watched. No talking, just watching, not in a menacing way or anything, but we didn’t like to turn around and see that we were being watched and the watcher still went on watching. I pretended not to know sometimes, but you could tell without seeing when she hadn’t quit watching.

We had no objection to her visit, yet we weren’t excited about it either. None of us was close to any of mother’s brothers and sisters. We were as busy with our outdoor life as we were before, and when classes resumed we put on our uniforms and disappeared the whole day at school except for running home for toilet, or lunch or water. No effort was made to entertain our guest. There wasn’t much to do in a village electricity or telephone lines hadn’t yet reached when you didn’t read or play, or teach, cook and clean like our mother. It must have been lonesome for her when I think about it now. In those days the thought never occur to us. At the end of the day we gathered under the same roof, and it wasn’t long before we fell asleep and dreamed our own dreams.
It would have been this way for weeks or perhaps months if Na Mao hadn’t put an end to this herself. Not long after her arrival came the news that crushed mother the way I hadn’t seen before. It was a regular school day. I was home for lunch just in time to see the news had already reached mother’s ears. Noi began chanting the clandestine line as soon as he reached school and more during recesses. The line rhymed so well. Even their names rhymed, Mao, Ma. Others of Noi’s boy friends chimed in. The lead singer and the chorus worked in full harmony and joy. It went on long enough for anyone with good ears to hear loud and clear what the two lovers did in the wood. It didn’t occur to me the person the line hit hardest was mother. Having no room for what she couldn’t imagine happening in her own family, the blow was sudden and severe. I knew it was supposed to be an incident of shame and anyone related to Na Mao ought to feel rotten. I didn’t. I didn’t know what seed of shame my aunt spread. I didn’t see the need of outpouring fuss for my aunt’s choice of intimacy or how it deserved tears and bitterness or shame. But mother’s eyes were red, her face sad and injured. Looking at the darker image of herself, she began laboriously as if she were made to face the most odious crime her own daughter committed, “Why did you do this?” Her lips trembled. It was long before she could translate indignance into more words. “If you don’t think about yourself, think about mom and dad. Think how they would feel.” I had never seen a person so broken. I was helpless looking at mother pulling herself together.

Na Mao looked rather lost, but more irritated and angry than guilty. If she were guilty or ashamed I didn’t know if it was more because mother was so hurt or because of what she and her male friend did. When she couldn’t look at the floor anymore she faced mother like an angry lioness. “So what?” she blurted out, hating
mother for making a family’s trash and shame out of her. Mother didn’t hold her back when Na Mao went up to pack her things and came down with her bag. It was the only way mother thought best for everyone. Shortly after she left, mother told us with a relief Grandma already found a young man to marry my aunt. We imagined people still talked, but the talk didn’t hurt anyone anymore, not even mother. Even the rhyme Noi got out of his head seemed to lose its fun and mischievous spite among children. Noi himself stopped singing it. Even the most talked about story of all couldn’t hold its flavor for life in one place and the same faces. Perhaps it was never meant to be made a crime in the first place.

Mother

There were few photographs of mother. The ones she showed us were those when she was in her late teens or perhaps. I remembered two of them so well. One was her in a shirt, big boots and tight hippie jeans. It was taken when she went on a trip with her suitor, a cadet to be, a young man Grandma Tim chose for her, a young man of determination and promising future. The photo placed next to it was that of his. He got killed in a car crash said mother. We couldn’t help but wonder what life would be like for our mother if he were still alive and had married her. We couldn’t help but think what it would be like if he were our father. The other was taken while she was in the middle of her dance. Mother looked so young and full of life. Her bright moon face shone with merriment. Her hands and fingers arched. She bent a little to the right while her dancing partner moved to the left. Like her smile, her
glittering eyes and shiny long hair, mother glowed. She faced the camera with full
confidence. There was no timidity in her eyes it seemed. We didn’t know where the
timid genes got into ours. Mother had to keep reminding us to chin up and smile
when we danced. “Play with your eyes a little. Don’t look at the floor. Look at the
people. Smile!” The part that we didn’t want to hear most: “Don’t be so stiff like a log!
Make it natural and lively!” Mother directed our performance whenever a dance was
needed. She pressed our fingers so they bent nicely when we danced. Mother
sometimes soaked her hands in the water she drained after the rice boiled. It softens
your hands so they bend easier she explained.

Her dancing time was over after she got a job as teacher and then married
father. She was from then on a coach, mostly to her own daughters, me and Pa.
Mother put me and my sister on the stage since we were in preschool, but we
dreaded these performances just the same.

9 Binla comes flying, comes playing in the winds,
Enjoying Mother Nature so enchanting and pristine...

Mother picked the hit song with a beautiful rhythmic southern melody. It
wasn’t hard for us to dance away with this song. We didn’t have many moves to
remember. Mother bought us new dresses especially for the dance—the fluffy doll
dresses that fit both of us perfectly. I was a blue binla and my sister yellow. Mother
put make-up on us, red lips, pink cheeks and blue eyelids. I was intense in my dance
and didn’t try to look for mother in the crowd below. Every pair of eyes fixed on me
and my sister. I glanced at Pa to see if we moved in unison and stood at the proper

9 A type of wild bird found in the southern part of Thailand.
distance from one another. There was no room for other thoughts but to make sure I remembered to correctly time the dance steps and positions. There was no moment of sympathy for the poor bird, caught and later killed. We had our dance to finish. We repeated the same steps until the song came to its finale. We were sweating when our smiling mother lifted us off the stage from below and took us home. Applause followed us but we didn’t care if the plaudits were ten times louder. Finishing the dance without making any mistakes or spoiling mother’s day was enough.

Coaching our dances and supervising our reading and homework gave mother something to do besides her regular teaching and daily chores. If we didn’t go to town on weekends and during school breaks, mother took long afternoon naps, except if the day happened to be the announcement day of lottery numbers. On such days, mother would turn the radio up so we all could help her catch the numbers. If she happened to win any number we didn’t have to ask. Mother would cry so loud her joy must have reached several houses past Pa Pan’s. “Mother, mother. Keep your voice down,” we sometimes cautioned her, smiling. We couldn’t help being happy with her too. Such good fortune didn’t visit our mother often and we didn’t mind if her cries caught our side of the village by surprise a few times.

Life in Nong Gua was hard for mother. The villagers looked up to her and welcomed her stay, but they also left her alone. However kind they were, mother couldn’t really mix with them, voice her troubles, gossip or smile fully with them. Father had his own society at the Men’s Club and we children had ours. With father being away most of the time and us being young and lost in our own play most of the day, mother hardly had anyone to talk to besides some her colleagues in all those years. There were months that mother looked beaten and couldn’t care less how she
looked. Those days mother would sleep longer in the afternoon. Sometimes she left her bedroom only to prepare some food. There were days that she fell ill and still had to get up and cook for us when we were very young. If mother didn’t have anything but rice in the kitchen we knew it was time for a bottle of fish sauce to come to our rescue once again.

We didn’t know when our mother began to seek comfort in liquor. It would be quite some time before she made no effort to hide her drinking from her children. Except us, nobody else should know. Father found out one day, but mother managed to have a bottle or two in hiding again. We had never seen our mother drunk, but when mother got the bottles out of the hiding place for us to sell to the villager who bought empty bottles, paper and metals, the number of empty bottles was quite a shock. Mother must have stopped drinking at some point but we didn’t have time to find out. Food and play left no room for other interests. Mother wasn’t happy when we didn’t read as much as we played and only thought of leaving home for fun.

When mother wasn’t home we were freer. But when she was home, besides some words of caution and her expecting us to study first, mother was still generous about our outdoor activities, although her bag of worries was never empty. One forbidden activity that we didn’t understand or want to understand was her not allowing us to play in the school’s pond behind our house, not even when in the deepest spot the water came up to only my shoulders. It was dangerous and you could drown was her reason. Mother didn’t swim herself. Nevertheless, we sneaked out and had a time of our life when mother wasn’t home or when she took her afternoon nap. The first time she caught us disobeying her, we were whipped several times on our legs and mother made us promise never go down to the pond again.
We kept the promise for many weeks. But being so close to the pond and knowing how good it felt to be one with afternoon water brought us back to it. Every time we got out of the water, we dried ourselves before mother woke up. But the unlucky day was just ahead of us. One day in the middle of the swim, mother shouted from the back window and demanded that we get out of the water immediately. The fun was over. We knew too well what kind of punishment awaited us. I was first in the row to step quietly up the stairs. What did I tell you? Why don’t you ever listen? We could hear her closer before we reached the top floor. As mother rushed to greet us with the speed and rage of a desperate woman, I, without thinking, turned around and ran down the stairs. Her uncombed hair flung wild. Her eyes were hard and merciless. “I wasn’t like this before!” mother yelled as she tried to catch us. “You rascals make me like this!” I was pretty sure we could outrun mother, but Pa and I stopped running after her second warning and soon my second sister, Kob, decided to go on no more. We remembered well the price of making mother angrier than she already was.

The afternoon was long and lonesome after the beating. Mother went down to make dinner. We looked for ways to make up for making our mother lose her patience. We ate quietly when dinner was ready. We didn’t dare make any noise. The confusion of the afternoon scene exhausted me. How many times had we brought home wounds from our play? How many times had we got ill? Mother hand washed our clothes for eight years now, ironed them for us and cooked for us. We are the cause of our mother’s suffering. We must be. Yet I wanted to think in her anger and outburst mother exaggerated her accusation, or was too angry to finish the list of the causes, if she could bring herself to name them all. How years of keeping the
house running transformed the young woman we saw in the pictures into the woman we saw that day. Did father see?

In the morning mother cooked for us like any other morning and we never liked what she cooked less. We didn’t try to sneak out to the forbidden pond again. Peace resumed, at least for a while.

Father’s Story

You have no idea what I had to go through. Even when I was a schoolboy in the village I scarcely had enough to eat. I had to look at other people’s children chewing sweets and candies after lunch. My mouth watered. My stomach made noises. I swallowed my saliva and climbed the mango tree to get some young mangoes to chew. I didn’t expect sweets. I only wanted solid meals three times a day like normal children. When I finished sixth grade, your grandma and grandpa said son we can’t really send you to school in town, and if you don’t want to work in the rice field with us, you may ask your eldest brother if he could help you in some ways. I was a top student. Your grandma and grandpa knew it but they couldn’t help me because they didn’t have money. I knew I wanted more education for myself. So I got on the bus one morning to look for your uncle in town. I had with me one bag, some rice balls dappled with bits of salt grains your grandma prepared for me, a piece of paper grandfather scribbled down the address of your uncle and ten baht in my pocket. It was my first time away from home. I was barely twelve. I knew no one. I walked all day looking for your uncle’s house. I dared not use my pocket money.
When I finally found him he said he already had his hands full with all his children. There was this lump in my throat. I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t go back coming this far. I decided to go looking for the temple your grandpa used to tell me about and ask for some shelter. Then it occurred to me that becoming a temple boy would be the only way I would have a chance to study... the only way. Like other temple boys, I had to run errands for monks, scopped floors till they shone, washed robes, dishes and all. We had to wake up at 5 or earlier. We took turn going out on morning alms-receiving with the monks and carrying for them whatever people put in their bowls. I studied hard. I ate little and studied like crazy. I remembered fast and I could recite just about everything. I was first in class. But I hardly had enough to eat. Temple boys had to wait until monks finish their pen 10 first and divided among us what was left. Sometimes it was just not enough. I went to the drinking fountain when I was hungry.

Do you know where the best place to study is? Graveyard. You bet. The best study room in the world it is. Sometimes I lay on the cover of somebody’s tomb and read until 2 in the morning. Ghosts? No, I wasn’t afraid of them. What can they do to me? The abbot put a sacred yan 11 in the middle of my head. In my tongue too. They couldn’t mess up with me then. Nobody studied like me. Those boys were too afraid of ghosts so I got all the graveyard to myself, nice and quiet, while everybody else was in bed.

When I was older, I had to work to support myself. For years I boxed. I was in

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10 Monks’ 11 a.m. meal, the only meal they have in a day.
11 The writing of ancient letters on cloth or tattooing on human skin that is believed to help protect against harms and evil spirits.
the red corner, always. I was known as Dang Toi Muang Surin. My friends still called me Dang Toi till now. I moved left and right and danced back and forth waiting for the right moment to strike my killing right. Shua! Sometimes I landed a full kick on the side of my opponents’ neck when their guards fell. Plo! I lost count how many I knocked down. Some had to be carried away unconscious. I was the champion of the ring for a long time before I quit. Then I was a football player and I played well and I was in the national team until that injury in Chiang Mai. I was carried out of the field in the stretcher. The doctor operating on my knee put a piece of metal inside to support my leg. It’s still here. I passed the paper exam to become a police cadet at the time but I couldn’t go for the physical test. I got used to this iron leg soon enough but I can’t walk straight since.

Trips to Town

Ma, whose house is that? I don’t know, child. What about that one? Who lives there? Are they relatives? Mother smiled a little and looked away again. The bus was driven on and it was my responsibility to stay alert. I couldn’t look too long on the right side or I would miss what was on the left, and then I had to occasionally strain to see ahead of me so if there was something interesting I could prepare to give it a good look when the bus got nearer. It was also a good idea to turn around and look back once in a while just in case I didn’t see what I should have seen. I was

12 Dang is red; Toi is my father’s nickname; and muang is city, thus the city of Surin, my father’s home province.
busy but I remembered not to poke my head or stick my hands out. I could lose my limbs. Mother already told us stories of people losing limbs and some died because some stupid truck or bus came just too fast and too close. Another thing that I really had to keep my eyes open for was a row of short concrete zebra-striped posts at each curve. I counted quietly to myself. 1, 2, 3, 4, ... I liked the row to be long. If it extended from the very first spot our country dirt road met the city asphalt all the way to the heart of the town it should please me well. I knew a lot of numbers.

Everyone in the songtaew bus liked me. They wouldn’t say it, but I could tell from their faces. They looked at me and grinned and looked away so I wouldn’t see. Strange people. “What a smart girl!” a plump happy lady finally put it into words. I smiled shyly. Mother smiled too but said nothing. If she didn’t arrange my dress or my hair, wipe my face and nose or tell me to sit still, she often looked out of the bus, lost in her own thought. I looked at mother from time to time. I didn’t want mother to sit quiet. I wanted her to talk to me more and be merry but I didn’t know what to say.

Going to town on weekends with mother was a mission. During school breaks father wasn’t home. He must have driven his motorcycle back from town once or twice, but it seemed he made a living and a home out of the Men’s Club. It was usually mother and I who made the trips to the club in town on a songtaew. When we arrived in town mother would call a tricycle if she didn’t feel like walking, but sometimes we saved ten baht and walked to the club. There, mother always went in alone. I knew mother didn’t like me to see what was going on inside. Or maybe it would embarrass father if I tagged along with mother.

I never got to see what it was like inside until the day mother left me by the door and walked in after she told me she spotted father. I stood waiting at the door,
looking at men about father's age or older keeping themselves occupied. Most were in the middle of their games. Some sipped beer while observing other people playing. Some talked. Some smoked. Everyone had something to do. I didn't see my father until mother stopped at the table in the middle on the window side. Mother stood a few feet away from father. There was no need of words between them. Still holding a stick in his hand, father quickly took out his wallet as if to pay the weekly beggar to get lost. No one paid attention to mother and father and mother looked at no one and talked to none of father's buddies. It was a very brief visit. Mother took the money from his hand and walked back towards me. Father bent down at the snooker table, aiming for another ball. He didn't know I was standing by the door. That was the only time I got to see my father inside the club.

After many visits to the club it occurred to me we were the only mother and daughter pair who stopped by and waited, if we arrived early. We had to wait on a bench outside the building for a good while sometimes and mother's mind would concentrate on either the door to the club or her own watch. I didn't know what mother was thinking. She was thinking alone and wasn't talking to me and I was thinking hard if I should say anything. What would I say? What else I hadn't said? What would sound best to her? I suffered. I kept my mouth shut for fear of displeasing her with my childish ignorance. It didn't change my suffering.

Mother seemed to know when to go. I didn't have to do anything but wait. Sometimes she went in and came out to wait some more before going in again. Father followed her out of the door a few times after the visits began. Mother's presence infuriated him. “I was about to get it and you came in! You Luck-blocker!” Mother made no reply. After taking his wallet out and drawing out some bank notes
and handing them to mother, he stomped back to his haven. Father must have given mother money every time, but I didn’t know how much. Seeing mother returning with money in her hand was already a good relief for me. This time, as mother returned, I knew what she had inside her fist. Mother quickly put the folded red bills in her handbag and said we were going to the movie first and then doing some shopping at the fresh market before we went home. Once we finished the part at the Men’s Club, all trips to town with mother were joy, the ride to and from town, the shopping in the fresh market, the bookshops or a movie at the theater. In the theater what happened at the Men’s Club didn’t exist and didn’t matter. I was lost in the story. I couldn’t help being amused and surprised by the skin headed female protagonist in a bikini, moving around, changing positions, and making herself look desirable. “You wild skin-headed woman!” I hollered from my seat in the mid row. Every head turned toward my direction. Laughter could be heard throughout the theater. It must have surprised mother too. Mother smiled and told me to be quiet.

“We aren’t going back tonight,” mother told me after the movie.

“Where are we going Mom?”

“We’re taking a train to Ubon,”

“Is it far?”

“A long way from here,” mother answered without looking at me. “We are going to do a little tour.”

Ubon was pitch black in my head, but I was thrilled with the idea of venturing into the world, but couldn’t help feeling guilty for the expense that didn’t bring food to the table. Ai, Pa and Kob must have been looking forward to our return now and the
sweets, food and fruits that mother brought back every time we came to town. Then I thought we were going back soon and maybe with even better gifts from the new city for everyone, so I didn’t say anything.

There was still some light when we arrived at Warinhamrak, the end of the northeastern-most rail line. We crossed the bridge of Moon River by a tricycle and there stood on the other side of the bridge the city of Ubon Ratchathani. Mother said we would find a place to stay first before it got dark.

We got a room in a white hotel that night. Everything was white, the bed, the walls, the bathroom, the floor and the windows. I had never seen a room so tidy and clean in my life. I couldn’t feel cleaner and richer. It was my first time in a hotel. No village girl got to sleep in a bed so firm and clean, with everything so tidy and white and a bathroom inside your own room. Mother said hotels, like men’s clubs, were no place for girls; only bad girls hung around hotels. But we didn’t really have friends and cousins there and I was with mother, so I guessed we were okay.

After putting things away, washing our faces and combing our hair, mother took me for a stroll along the streets of shops and neon and fluorescent lights. I had never seen so much light in the night before. Everywhere seemed to be as good as walking in broad daylight. I looked at people, cars, buildings and shops. Everyone would be so envious if they only knew I was walking the streets of Ubon. Mother walked confidently and we didn’t talk. Mother had to stop for me to finish my shop watch from time to time and other times I had to run to catch up with her. I couldn’t afford the idea of losing her in this city. I wouldn’t be able to know my way home from here.
We didn’t buy much except two packs of fried rice, fruits, some sweets and a tabloid. Mother thought we had to head back soon. We walked past more shops. I peered between two plastic models to look inside one classy clothes shop. As I turned away a finger bounced at my hair. I looked up and what I thought to be two plastic models smiled at me before resolving to their motionless position. I felt my heart pound. They were real and they were white. I had seen white people in the movies before but couldn’t imagine they were this white and this tall. I caught up with mother and told her what I just saw. Mother said I would see more if I lived here.

Mother forgot to buy water for us and told me to lock the room and open it to no one no matter what and she would hurry back. She left. I locked the door and began to wait. I sat on the bed by the window so I knew when mother was coming back. I couldn’t see my mother and the white room and every sound and noise outside the room began to scare me. What if mother didn’t come back for me? Mother was even quieter today and didn’t seem to be listening. Why did mother take me so far and not look happy? Is she thinking of going farther and farther away and not going back home? Is she now thinking she shouldn’t drag me along and should leave me here? Mother would never do that. She wouldn’t leave without me. I was miserable. I felt bad that we should come so far, just the two of us. Ai, Pa, and Kob must have been waiting for us and wondering why we didn’t come home. I looked out of the window. A few women walked by but I didn’t see mother. By this time my brother and sisters must have already gone to bed at Grandma’s. We knew that if mother or father weren’t home we only had to close the windows and lock the doors and walk to Grandma’s. I dropped all my thought at the knock at the door and
mother's voice: “It’s Mom, Nong.” I didn’t tell her how relieved I was that she was back.

We caught a train back the next day. We did a big shopping at the old fresh market in Surin before taking the songtaew back. Pa and Kob cried, thinking that mother ran away with me and left them behind. Mother told them we only missed the bus.