

# **The Land of the Sky**

*Written by*  
**Young writers from the Land  
of a Million Elephants.**

# CONTENTS

## The Land of the Sky

Written by young writers from the Land of a Million Elephants.

Illustrations by Somphone Thongphet

Edited by Bounthanh Phongphichid, Melody Kemp,  
Percy Aaron and Charlotte A. Silverman.

Proofread by Marcia Vannithone, John Dunstan,  
Margareth Eldridge, Dr. Jim Cerini  
and Daovieng Norath.

Cover and Page layout by Souphatsone Phongphichid

Registration number: 427/ພາ22102012

895.91913 --dc21

ISBN 978-9932-01-053-0

Published by Creative Writer's Group (CWG)

Printed by Lao Uniprint Press Co.,Ltd.

1st edition. October 2012

Vientiane, Lao PDR

Acknowledgments.....	v
Introduction .....	ix
<i>Sida Saenluang</i> Khayung Tree .....	1
<i>Siphandon Seng Aloun</i> The Teacher without a School.....	11
<i>Phonevixay Phetsamone</i> The Fish Are Gone.....	21
<i>Thitsavanh Samaykham</i> The Creek Changed Its Course..	30
<i>Khansamoud Dethkensarn</i> My Mother's Stupa .....	39
<i>Sylikhan Keophouthong</i> The Price of Land.....	52
<i>Xaignaphone Vongkhamsa</i> Return Life to the River.....	61
<i>Sengmany Sorthanoxay</i> The Cost of Fertilizer .....	69
<i>Noiphasouk Phommahane</i> That Friend of Ours .....	77
<i>Alounny Meunluang</i> The Land of the Sky.....	90
<i>Alisa Meunlaad</i> The Old Home Village .....	101
<i>Oulaylack Meunluang</i> Choko Farms.....	109
<i>Vanlady Phaphimpha</i> Chilo .....	119
<i>Damlongsay Lonhsaithane</i> Title Deed .....	127
<i>Neuy Phetthavong</i> New Hope .....	138
<i>Choulamany Saybouakeo</i> The Good Man of the Village...	144
<i>Phayvanh Phengphanh</i> Natural Resources.....	156
<i>Olisa Khamvongsa</i> Uncle Ko .....	165

<i>Ketmany Keoduangdee</i> Land Grab.....	177
<i>Nouksamai Keokunha</i> Struggle to Challenge Destiny ....	187
<i>Khongsavath Linthalath</i> Lak Sao Et Village .....	199
<i>Bouakeo Senemonty</i> Crystal Lake.....	215

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This edition of Land of the Sky would not have been possible without the contribution of numerous people committed to bringing Lao creative writing to the attention of an international audience.

This project started when Melody Kemp approached Daovieng Norath for funds to translate these stories into English. Daovieng’s wife, Henriette Norath, suggested that volunteers be used to help. This project took off from there.

Lao expatriates, whose names appear below, then translated these short stories into English. They are Bounluang Vannithone, Bolyvong Tanovan, Nouksamai Keokunta, Phivanh Phoumin, Somsy Rasavong, Thongrith Phoumirath, Viengkeo, Vixay Vue, Vongdeuan Nanteau, and others who were happy just to participate.

Bounluang Vannithone, Natrudy Saykao, Daovieng Norath and Melody Kemp were members of the core group which gave this project impetus.

A website was created to facilitate and manage the translations and fundraising for printing the book. See web link...

<https://sites.google.com/site/criticalandcreative-writinglao/the-land-of-heaven>

A number of people contributed generously towards the printing and publishing of this not-for-profit collection of short stories. For a complete list of donors refer to web link...

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/ccc?key=0AvBZ4YtiufwRdGpEWVViX3FuYk1TRGIpdzBkQnEwN0E>

A special thanks to the Land Issues Working Group (LIWG) who made a significant financial contribution.

Credit to Bounthanh Phongphichid, Melody Kemp, Percy Aaron and Charlotte A. Silverman, for patiently editing and re-editing the stories, while always striving to remain faithful to the voice of the individual writer. Marcia Vannithone, John Dunstan, Margareth Eldridge, Dr. Jim Cerini, and Daovieng Norath proofread the original edits.

A big thank you to Soupathsone Phongphichid for setting the gorgeous layout of the book.

Without the driving force and untiring efforts of Bounthanh Phongphichid, who remains so strongly committed to raising awareness of Lao writing, this project would not have been possible. A special debt of gratitude is owed to him.

And finally this book would not have been possible without the individual storytellers, who dared to dream and dared to write. One day, Lao creative writing will be greatly indebted to them.

# INTRODUCTION

Nature created the earth, rivers and forests to be companions to the world's peoples. If we are devoid of any of these, we will have no way of growing food or sustaining ourselves.

Rural people are most closely connected to Nature. Their breath will be cut short if the earth is wounded, the rivers dry up, or the forests are destroyed. Country folks, some would argue, are the real backbone of the nation. They are the ones on whom we rely for our daily sustenance, and who keep the machinery of the economy turning by producing food for the local community and for export.

While no human beings can choose where they are born, they can choose to do good deeds for others and for the earth. Many however have forgotten how to do that. Urban dwellers get caught pursuing wealth and possessions. Concern for others eludes them.

In general, rural people, regardless of location, live interdependent lives and thus show generosity, selflessness and concern for others. They readily share whatever they have: food; the workload in the rice fields; planting or harvesting. They readily lend a hand to build a new house. Kindness and community spirit bind them together; money and wealth is a fleeting attraction.

Times are changing. Business and advertising are invading every nook and cranny, every aspect of people's lives. People have turned to worship of wealth and power instead. In the end, human greed is limitless. The unbounded and shameless grab for material wealth has caused so much suffering that even flowers weep and birds shed tears incessantly.

We need to think about the nature of the changes that are occurring in our world as a result of greed and unchecked economic investment. The students who contributed these stories have taken examples from their own experiences. A sincere understanding of other people's problems and a generosity of spirit towards others are the most precious, priceless and incomparable treasures to have.

This volume, *Land of the Sky*, is a collection of short stories written by secondary school students at Park-song Secondary College, Champassak Province. The publishers fervently hope that these short stories will provide readers with some insight into contemporary Lao rural life, and some valuable food for thought.

## Khayung Tree

*Sida Saenluang*

About five hundred metres from Lingsan Village lies a small orchard consisting of an array of edible plants: bananas, chillies, and a variety of local aubergines. A dilapidated hut is located in the middle of the orchard. Inside are a cooking pot and kettle over a makeshift fire-place. Old bedding, a mosquito net and a grass mat can be found on a small bamboo bed.

In this hut lives sixty-year old Thieng, which he used to share with his wife Chanh before she left for her heavenly abode. They had a happy life together and their daughter Boun attracted the attention of the village boys with her grace and beauty. At the age of twenty, she married a young man and went to live with him in Vientiane.

Three years after Boun left home, she stopped sending news. The old couple were heartbroken that their own flesh and blood had forgotten them. Still they lived in hope that she would get in touch. Day by day Chanh's depression increased and she started falling ill. One day she passed away.

Alone, Thieng no longer had the motivation to live. He spent his days reminiscing about the happy life he

had shared with his wife.

Chanh had taken good care of him. When he returned from work each day she would ask him if he were tired, would tend to his wellbeing when he was sick by making rice gruel and sponging him with wet cloths to keep his fever down. Their life together had been intimate and blissful. His heart was still with his dearly departed wife. He had no desire to start a new life with anyone else.

Not too far from his hut rose a *khayung* tree<sup>1</sup> about fifteen metres into the air. Its canopy of green leaves gave a refreshing shade to the plants in Thieng's orchard. It was also a shelter for birds, whose joyful chirpings offered him a little pleasure in his sad and lonely life.

The wood of the *khayung* tree is made into expensive furniture, and is consequently highly sought after by traders from local and overseas markets.

One day, tired after weeding in the front yard, Thieng leaned against the *khayung* tree. A few minutes later he heard a vehicle stopping by the gate of his orchard. An immaculately dressed man wearing sunglasses got out of a white pick-up and walked over to greet him.

1. (*Dalbergia cochinchinensis*) (the Thailand Rosewood or Tracwood) is a species of legume in the Fabaceae family. It is found in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam.

"Hello uncle, my name is Khamphanh and I am a wood exporter. While driving past your orchard, I could not help but notice your *khayung* tree. I am very keen to buy it from you," said the man scrutinising the tree.

"I am sorry. I cannot sell it to you because it is the last of its kind around here," replied Thieng, instantly defensive.

The man was persistent. "Please sell it to me. With the money you get, you can do many things. You can have a comfortable life."

Thieng realised that the young man wanted the *khayung* tree badly. He was just like any other timber merchant on the lookout for precious wood. "No, I cannot sell it," replied an undaunted Thieng after a moment's consideration. Finally, a dejected Khamphanh left the orchard, thinking long and hard about the best way to buy that tree in order to make a handsome profit.

Late that night just before Thieng fell asleep, he argued with himself about whether he should sell the tree. Later, he dreamed of a beautiful, young woman who came out of the *khayung* tree. She sat down and greeted him; her two hands joined and bowed her forehead as a sign of respect.

"Uncle, please do not sell the tree because I would



like to live on this land as well," she begged. "If you sell it, then I, the spirit of the tree, will be chopped into small pieces and exported to faraway lands. I will never see my homeland again."

Three days later, the timber merchant returned to Thieng's orchard and tried again to talk him into selling the tree. "Please, Uncle, sell me that tree. You don't need it. I will give you ten million kip for it." He held out his ten fingers.

"No, I have decided I will not sell it, no matter how much you offer. I ask you not to return," replied Thieng tersely, showing his annoyance.

The following day, while Thieng was weeding, a strong gust of wind blew away his rusty corrugated roof. His belongings were scattered in various directions. Heavy rains then followed the storm. Thieng sought shelter under the *khayung* tree. His teeth chattered uncontrollably; the first signs of fever.

A few moments later, he was surprised to feel some warmth coming from the tree. He suddenly remembered the dream from the previous night. Looking up at the tree, he thanked it for its support and life energy and promised that it would never be sold to anyone. He vowed to protect it at any cost.

Once the rains stopped, the sky began to clear and the birds chirped in the cool moist air. Thieng slowly salvaged his meagre belongings. He used a torn plastic sheet to make a temporary roof over the dilapidated hut. He then prepared simple rice gruel for dinner.

The following day, Thieng shivered in bed with fever and was unable to get up. Hearing of Thieng's illness, Khamphanh rushed to see him and promptly took him to the district hospital. Three days later, Thieng recovered. Khamphanh arranged for someone to tend to Thieng's daily needs.

On the day that Thieng was released from the hospital, he greeted his benefactor gratefully. "Khamphanh, I don't know how to repay you for what you've done for me. I don't know what would have happened had you not been so kind."

"Don't say anything. We'll talk about it when I take you home," replied Khamphanh.

On arriving at the orchard, Thieng felt quite upset at the dilapidated condition of his hut and wondered how he would be able to carry on with his life. He breathed long and hard, wanting to discuss with Khamphanh the care that he had received. Suddenly, Thieng's thoughts were interrupted by the voice of a young man at the en-

trance to the orchard.

"Is this grandfather Thieng's hut?" called the man. Thieng and Khamphanh turned their faces to the voice at the door.

"Yes, it is," replied a puzzled Thieng. A few moments later, a fair, good-looking young man of about twenty-five walked into the hut. The visitor hugged Thieng, who had no idea who he was.

Excitedly, the man introduced himself. "Grandfather, I've finally met you. I'm very lucky to find you alive. My name is Benja and I am your daughter's son. Before she died, she told me to find you."

"What happened to your mother? When did she die?" asked a shocked Thieng.

"She died from cancer of the liver when I was fifteen. She suffered for two years before finally passing away. I live with my grandmother now."

"I did not expect Boun to have such a short life," mumbled a saddened Thieng, tears welling in his eyes.

"Grandfather, do not worry about mother. She no longer has to suffer," replied Benja trying to comfort his grandfather.

After a short pause, a puzzled Benja asked, "Who is that man, grandfather?"

“Oh, his name is Khamphanh. He took me to the hospital when I was sick,” explained Thieng. “He wants to buy the *khayung* tree from me. But I don’t want to sell it.”

Benja, being a city boy, was quick with his opinions. “You might as well sell it. You can then move to Vientiane to live with me. I’ll look after you. Who will take care of you when you are not well in the future?”

Overhearing the conversation, Khamphanh seconded Benja’s advice. “You are right. Sell the tree. Why do you need to keep it? You will be better off living with your grandson once you’ve sold it.”

Let me think about it for a few days,” replied a hesitant Thieng, sighing heavily.

Benja then turned towards Khamphanh. “Please do not disturb my grandfather. In time, I will persuade him to come to his senses. Anyway, I am grateful for your kindness in looking after him while he was in the hospital. I’d like to know how much you spent on his care.”

“It is nothing much for people I know well,” replied Khamphanh humbly.

Undeterred, Benja delved into his backpack, grabbed a bundle of cash and said, “But you don’t know him well. Here is five million kip which I’d like to give you. Hopefully, this should cover the expenses.”

“Don’t worry about it,” replied Khamphanh, though he was beginning to have second thoughts about letting the money go.

“Please, accept it. You must take it,” insisted Benja.

Khamphanh pondered the consequences. Should Thieng refuse to sell the *khayung* tree, he would lose even this money. Finally he decided it would be wiser to accept the money, before saying goodbye to Thieng and his grandson.

The following day, Benja asked his grandfather to accompany him to Vientiane.

Thieng apologised regretfully, “Sorry Benja, you will be returning to Vientiane alone. I like living here. I don’t like big cities because I don’t feel at home. In any case, I am attached to this *khayung* tree and I am afraid that it may be cut down by intruders.”

“Now I know you don’t want to leave this place because of this tree,” exclaimed an unhappy Benja. He gave up his plan for his grandfather to return with him to Vientiane, but before leaving he organised the building of a better and sturdier dwelling for the old man.

On the day of his departure, Thieng saw his grandson off at the entrance to the orchard. “Don’t hesitate to contact me if you have any problem,” said Benja. “Here is

my telephone number. Don't lose it."

"I won't," assured Thieng.

Once his grandson had left, Thieng returned to his orchard stopping by the *khayung* tree. Looking up into the canopy, he saw sunlight shining through the branches. Suddenly, a drop of water fell on his cheek sending a cool sensation into his heart. He felt a surge of indescribable peace. "I will never leave you," he promised the tree. "I will be with you until my last dying breath."

## The Teacher without a School

*Siphandon Seng Aloun*

From under the floor of an elevated wooden house comes the sound of a young adult voice, loud and clear.

"When you add two numbers in your head, without writing them down, don't just think about the two digits. Instead, you should think about a way that makes it easier to add them. For example, when adding the numbers 130 and 220, most people would just add the two numbers together. This method takes longer and it's easy to get the wrong result. The best way is to add the rounded numbers in hundreds first: 100 and 200 to get 300, then add the two remaining numbers 30 and 20 to get 50. Finally, add the two resulting numbers, 300 and 50, to make 350. Do you all understand?"

"Yes," shout the children in unison.

In Oudomsay Village, everyone knows Khamla. The children have nicknamed him 'the teacher without a school'. Each day after regular school hours, about nine or ten students from the local primary school attend extra tuition at his house. He teaches them many subjects. Most of the things he teaches are not in the curriculum of their school. But the children understand him well, and apply what they have learnt to their everyday

living and because of that they have a deeper appreciation of life.

The villagers notice that although some of the classes involve studying at Khamla's house, at other times the children lead him into the forest for class. There he explains the importance of plants, trees, creeks, rivers, and the living environment around them. The children show intense interest and appreciation in his explanation.

Some parents are surprised when their children tell them that the plants and trees are extremely important in their everyday lives. They tell their parents, for instance, that trees emit the oxygen they breathe every second. With no plants and trees, they would not be able to live.

Khamla is the eldest son of Mee and Sorn. He was a good boy, always speaking softly and politely and never arguing with his parents. He was hard working, rising early each morning. After feeding the ducks and chickens, he worked on the family's small farm with his parents. He tried hard to set a good example for his two younger sisters and the other children of the village.

Khamla loved to study. He was always seeking knowledge about all things. He loved studying so much



that in school he was the most outstanding student. After finishing high school, he won a scholarship to study at the Teacher Training Institute in Vientiane. He excelled in all subjects and majored in mathematics. In college, he met students from other provinces. When his friends had difficulty understanding their lessons, they would always come to him for help, knowing he had a special way of explaining things.

A teacher once said to him, "Very good Khamla. You have the ability to explain the subject matter to your friends and you are willing to share knowledge. That makes you the sort of wise and valuable person that our country needs. You set a good example to others."

After finishing the end-of-the-year exam, everyone in the dormitory packed their belongings to return to their villages. As they were getting ready to say their goodbyes, the dean of the faculty hurried over.

"Everybody listen to me," he called, "I have some very good news for you."

"What is it, sir?" asked one of the students full of curiosity.

"Our department will have a test to select our best students. They will then be eligible for scholarships for

further study in France. The test is next week."

The students roared with happiness as this signalled a very special opportunity to study overseas. On the day of the test, there were two hundred candidates for the ten places available. When the results came out, Khamla was very happy to see his name third on the list.

The institute told the students they would be leaving in three months. Khamla felt anxious during this long period. It felt like three years to him. The long wait in the city tormented him. He was homesick and really missed his parents and sisters. His mind frequently wandered back to the happy, easy life in his village, especially meal times with his family. His thoughts lingered on the precious times when he helped his younger sisters with their studies and told them folktales.

The next day, Khamla went to see the principal. "Sir, is it possible for me to visit my village while I am waiting?" he asked.

"Yes, but you must return on time," replied the principal.

"Certainly, sir ... I will make sure I return ahead of time," Khamla said in delight.

After travelling for two days, Khamla arrived in his village. Nothing had changed. Everything remained the

same as in his memories. The smells were so familiar; the earth, grass. Even the smell of the manure he found reassuring. He never detested these smells because they were the smells of his childhood. In front of his house, some young children were playing and under it his mother and sisters were sitting and chatting.

He called out to one of the kids, "Pumpkin ...Little pumpkin!"

People turned around when they heard the loud voice calling, and saw Khamla approaching them. "Uncle ...uncle has come back!" yelled his nephew, who ran towards him, embracing him with joy. Then everybody gathered around, smiling and patting him on the back. As the news spread that Khamla was back, neighbours took turns to visit him. They talked until very late in the evening.

The next day, Khamla and his mother walked together to their farm. His father had gone to the town while his sister stayed at home, taking care of her sick child. His mother weeded around the tobacco plants, and Khamla dug a new patch of land in preparation for planting coffee. He worked about fifty metres away from his mother.

Khamla enjoyed the hard labour. He dug the land

vigorously feeling the sweat on his face and body. He experienced the aches, pains and blisters of a person who had not done physical labour for a long time. Now and then he took a break and drank water thirstily. An hour passed and it was time to get back to work. Khamla got up, took his pick and raised it high, driving it down with force.

Boom!

He was thrown into the air and knocked unconscious, his body landing face up. His mother heard the explosion, and came rushing. He was lying paralysed on the ground, his body covered with blood. She lifted his head, holding his bloody face to her body.

"Oh God!...my precious son. Please help my son. Please help him!" she screamed desperately. Her neighbour, Pheng, came running.

"Please Uncle ...Please help my son. I'm begging you," she cried out to Pheng.

"Quick! Hurry ... Let's take him to the hospital," Pheng said urgently.

At the hospital, Khamla was immediately admitted to intensive care. The blast had smashed the bones and severed the tendons in his hands. The injuries were so severe that the doctor had to amputate both hands.

The explosion had also blinded him.

On hearing the news, family and friends started visiting the hospital. Four days later, Khamla came out of his coma. He felt a great pain at the end of his arms. When he realised that he had lost both his sight and his hands, he cried uncontrollably.

“God! Why did this happen to me? How can I study overseas with this disability? Why didn’t I die so I wouldn’t have to suffer? What have I got to live for? I want to die.... I want to die.” His loud and despondent voice was heard throughout the hospital.

Weeks later, when nobody was around, he got out of bed. Holding the stumps of his arms out, he felt for the walls. He bumped into tables and chairs, and got so frustrated that he yelled, “I want to die. I want to die.”

“Son, don’t do this to yourself. Whatever happens we can take care of you. We still love you. You have to fight it, son,” his father tried consoling him.

Months passed and Khamla’s condition improved. The doctor allowed him to go home for rehabilitation, but Khamla could not take his mind off suicide.

One day his parents went to get medicine from the hospital. One of his sisters was washing vegetables at the back of the house, while the other had left for the

farm earlier. His nieces and nephews were playing in the front court yard, and Khamla was lying in bed, thinking and grieving for his future. It was the day he was supposed to leave for France, to study with his friends. Instead, he had become an invalid, disabled by his injuries.

He could not do anything for himself and had become a burden on his parents. Khamla thought he would rather die.

He got up from the bed, and walked towards the window, feeling and following the wall until he found the opening. He decided to jump. He hit the ground hurt but alive. He was disappointed that he was still breathing. Yelling with frustration he lay on the ground.

His nephew heard the loud thump. Something heavy had fallen from the window. He ran over and saw Khamla lying on the ground, crying.

“Uncle! Why are you doing this? You are my only Uncle. If you die, who will I live with? Who will tell me stories? Who will teach me? His nephew cried putting his arms around him. The boy’s tears soaked the front of his shirt. He then realised that even his ‘pumpkin’ nephew still needed him. It would be very selfish to commit suicide.

“Oh, my Pumpkin! I am sorry. From now on I will not think in that way. I will stay with you forever,” said Khamla.

Then both uncle and nephew cried on each other’s shoulders. His sister and the children, who were looking on, wiped away their tears.

From that day onwards, Khamla devoted himself to caring for and teaching the children in the village. Now, each day they come to his house for lessons. Unable to see, he uses his voice to teach the children.

Khamla is happy and satisfied that he is able to pass on whatever knowledge he has. He hopes that one day the children can contribute to building a better and more prosperous Laos for everyone.

## The Fish Are Gone

Phonevixay Phetsamone

Loung Keng, forty-four, lives with his wife and young daughter in a small hut in a village called Kong Toum. About five hundred metres from their hut, in the middle of the field, *mai dou* and *mai kene*<sup>1</sup> trees form a small forest. In the middle of this forest is a large pond that has become a haven for white ibises. The birds cluster around this pond as it is abundant in fish, fresh water prawns and snails. The flowering plants that fringe the pond infuse the forest air with an exotic fragrance.

One morning, Loung Keng got up and stepped outside, breathing in the fresh air. As the sun rose slowly, a flock of birds headed towards the water. They, like him, depended on the pond for their sustenance.

“My dear, get up. It’s daylight already,” he called to his wife. “Get up and cook the rice. And wake up Bouala, or she’ll be late for school.”

“Where are you going so early in the morning?” Pa Chone, Loung Keng’s wife, asked as she yawned.

“I am going to check the fish traps in the pond. By now, the otters might have dragged the traps away,”

1. These are very valuable timbers used in making furniture and building houses. Their botanical names are *Pterocarpus macrocarpus* **Kurz** and *Hopea odorata* **Roxburg** respectively.

Loung Keng replied. Picking up his knife and a creel, he headed off towards the pond.

Luckily, there were a lot of fish in the traps.

“This is great!” Loung Keng said to himself as he rapidly filled his basket with fish. On the way home, he felt very happy, thinking how pleased his wife would be to see that she could sell so much fish in the market.

As he entered the hut, his wife called out, “How was it today? What sort of fish did you get?”

“I got a full basket today of *pa nin*, *pa nai*<sup>2</sup> and some carp,” he answered. He handed the basket to her, and she emptied the fish into a large basin.

“Oh, that’s a lot of fish. If it were like this every day, life would be easier. We could sell them to the neighbours and then we would have enough money to buy our food,” Pa Chone said to her husband.

That evening, the family sat down to a delicious dinner of fish, bamboo shoot soup, *phak tiew* and *phak sameck*<sup>3</sup>. Seven-year old Bouala loved fish. Her favourite was carp marinated in *padek*<sup>4</sup> juice with fresh chilli

2. Commercial fresh water fish.

3. These are names of some Lao vegetables. Their scientific names are *Crotonylum formosum* (Jack) Dyer and *Commelina zeylanica* (LPN) respectively.

4. *Padek* is a traditional Lao condiment made from fermented fish. It has quite a pungent smell. The juice can be used as a sauce on its own.

sauce.

The next day, while Loung Keng and Pa Chone were preparing the soil to plant some tapioca, a black Toyota Vigo pulled up nearby. A middle-aged man got out of the car stretching his legs

“Uncle, does the land around here belong to you?” the man asked.

“Yes. Why do you ask?” Loung Keng answered, wiping the sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand.

“Oh, nothing, I was told that this area has very good soil, and the forest in the middle of the field has a beautiful pond in it. I just wanted to stop by and have a look. Is it OK if I take a look around?”

“That’s OK. Please go ahead,” Loung Keng answered generously.

The man then walked around the field and small forest. He looked around him. Every now and then, he stood and looked up at the dense foliage. “Uncle, it’s beautiful here. I see birds eating fish from the pond,” said the man.

Loung Keng did not answer, remaining motionless. He wondered what the man wanted.

“Uncle, do you want to sell this land?” the man asked finally.

“Oh no! I can’t sell it. It’s been in my family for many generations and it provides us with a living,” Loung Keng answered.

The man continued to press Loung Keng, making him some very good offers. But Loung Keng would not agree to sell.

One week later, the man came back to see Loung Keng again. But this time, he did not press him to sell the land. Instead, he offered to rent the land for two years, saying he would pay ten million kip a year. He intended to grow strawberries, he said.

“You can think it over. I will come back for an answer in three days,” the man said getting back into his car.

That evening, Loung Keng discussed the offer with his wife. “What do you think about that man wanting to rent our land?” Loung Keng queried her.

Pa Chone sat quietly giving the issue some thought. The truth was she did not want to rent the land, but on the other hand, she needed money for food, for medical expenses and for her daughter’s education. She wanted a bright future for her girl.

“If we rent our land, we will have some money for our immediate needs – but where would we work for our other needs?” she asked her husband.

“Why don’t we ask them to provide us with a new house and a plot of land to work on?”

“It’s up to you,” she told her husband.

On the appointed day, the man turned up as promised.

“Uncle, have you made up your mind?” he asked.

“We will rent our land to you on the condition that you pay the rent in advance, plus you provide us with some accommodation and a plot of land to work on. As for the forest around the pond, you have to keep them as they are.” Loung Keng felt he had made the conditions clear.

“No problem at all. In fact, we have a block of land with a house on it for you and your family. It’s ready for you to move in. It’s only about two kilometres from here.”

Soon after that, Loung Keng and his family moved to the new plot of land which was only fifty square metres – not enough to grow a reasonable crop of fruit or vegetables. Most importantly, it was so far from the pond that he was unable to go back and fish in it again. Thus, he lost the major source of his income.

As time passed, the fish that used to be the family’s favourite started to disappear from the table, causing

Bouala to complain.

“Mum, I want to eat some fish.”

“You will have to put up without it a bit longer. There’s hardly any fish in the market now,” Pa Chone tried to appease her daughter.

“Dad, can you get some fish from our pond?” Bouala pleaded with her father.

“We have rented out our land and are not allowed to fish there anymore,” he explained to her.

Not long after that, Bouala became ill, running a high fever. Her parents were very worried. But two days later, she recovered. As soon as she regained her health, she developed a craving for fish. She asked her mother to buy some grilled fish.

The mother was stumped – she did not know where to get any fish for her daughter.

“My dear, can’t you go and reason with the people who rented our land to see if they can let you get some fish from the pond? I’m sure they won’t mind,” she said. Something his wife said suddenly put a thought in Loung Keng’s head.

“That’s it. Why didn’t I think of that before? The person who has rented our land is Lao. He won’t be so heartless to deny me some fish.”

The next day, Loung Keng strapped the fish container to his waist, threw the fish net over his shoulder, and set off towards his land. He smiled to himself at the thought of making his daughter happy.

As soon as he arrived at the edge of his old land, he saw that the forest had been cleared and his old hut razed. His tapioca and vegetables had been bulldozed away. The investor was standing nearby, waving his fingers around to direct the driver of the bulldozer. There were about ten workers, male and female, clearing land for strawberry fields.

The man saw Loung Keng approaching. “How are you, Uncle? What brings you here today?”

“Oh, I missed the pond so much I just wanted to see it again. And if I may, I would like to get some fish, if that’s OK with you,” Loung Keng said.

“Go ahead. My workers also fish there for their daily meals.”

Loung Keng continued walking towards the pond. He could see the pond from afar because there were no trees or any vegetation to obscure the view. He was shocked to see that some of the large trees had been cut down, leaving only short stumps. He was angry at the investor – but he had to hold his tongue. First, he wanted



to get some fish and then he would question him. The lotus and other vegetation that used to be plentiful in the pond had nearly disappeared. There was no sound of bubbles made by the fish. He wondered what had happened.

Loung Keng cast the net into the water and then climbed back to the edge of the pond to have a drink of water and a cigarette. An hour passed, and there was no sign of any fish. He kept on waiting until the sun was high in the sky, till it was uncomfortably hot and humid. Disappointed to catch no fish, Loung Keng decided to pull in the net.

He bitterly regretted that he had agreed to rent his land to the investor because apart from exchanging fertile land for a tiny plot, his valuable trees had been cut down. In addition to that, those workers had plundered the fish from the pond, leaving nothing for his family.

His daughter was waiting at home, hoping to eat fish that evening. How would he explain to her what had happened?

"Oh my daughter, the fish are all gone from the pond," he finally sobbed to himself.

# The Creek Changed Its Course

*The Creek Changed Its Course*

*Thitsavanh Samaykham*

Phab Creek was full of aquatic life, rich in shrimps, clams, and crabs. Both its banks were covered with lush vegetation. In the middle of the bed sat a big rock that protruded from the surface of the water. In some parts of the stream, trees and grass created clumps where fish and shrimps laid their eggs. The livelihood of the villagers was closely associated with this stream for several generations. They used its clear water to nourish their gardens and meet their daily domestic drinking and cooking needs.

When I was a child, I used to swim in this creek. The water was clean and cool. This made me feel part of the environment - a memory that has never faded away. Even right now, when I am thousands of kilometres away from there, I think of it constantly.

I left my village to finish school in the city. My parents supported me for the entire eighteen months of study, sending me money every month to cover education and other expenses. But as I entered my second year of school, the money came less frequently. I didn't know what had happened. At the time, there was no telephone, and communication was very difficult.

To pay for my school, I had to earn my own money. During the lunch break, I worked as a waiter in a restaurant. Three years later, I completed my studies in agriculture. Then I headed home, planning to relax for a while before looking for a job.

I was looking forward to seeing my parents and friends again, and especially to swim in the Phab Creek. As I approached my house, I noticed the silence. Usually, there were always people there chatting to my parents.

I walked upstairs and found my father lying in the middle of the room, surrounded by villagers.

"What's happened to Dad?" I asked.

Uncle Khamphanh said, "Put your bag down first, nephew"

My mother was sitting near my father, tears on her face. She must have been crying for several days. Uncle Khamphanh, my mother's older brother, took me out onto the veranda.

"Your father fell and broke his ribs, carrying water from the creek. Now, it is very dry. There is no water to drink or use any more."

"How could that happen?" I was horrified.

"Don't you know?" he replied. "Our creek is no longer the same. There's a project for growing wheat for a beer

factory located two kilometres north of here, near the exit road. The crop uses so much water the creek no longer flows through to our village.”

“Didn’t they realise that their project would affect the village drinking water supply?” I asked.

“They did. That’s why they decided to build a reservoir. But it was too small and could not store enough water for the villagers. During the dry season, the reservoir and creek are both dry. Every day, we have to go and get water from the other side of the mountain. Your father had to carry his water home too.”

The following day, I went to discuss the issue with the village headman. “Have you discussed this problem with the project owners?” I asked him.

“Oh, yes, many times. But they haven’t done anything,” he replied.

“Please do it once more. This time I want to go with you. I know how to talk to them. I just need you as the headman to accompany me.”

The village headman could not refuse my request. The next day, he took me to see the project manager. When he saw us walking in, he said, “What can I do for you?”

The village headman responded, “Yes, we want to

ask you about the reservoir. This is the third time I have come here.”

“We are trying to seek funds and will start construction as soon as possible.”

“When you say ‘as soon as possible’ how many days will that be?” I asked immediately.

The project manager stared at me, wondering where I had come from and why I was so direct. He kept his composure.

“I cannot set a date for funding application and its approval. I’m not the one making the decisions. There are others doing that. I have to consult with them before I can let you know.”

“Why don’t we do this, sir?” I made a suggestion. “While we are waiting for your bosses’ decision, could we excavate the old channel to get water flowing through to the village again?”

“No, you cannot do that.”

The manager and I spent almost an hour arguing back and forth. At the end, I made the parting comment, “We need to resolve this issue within a month. If we don’t hear from you, we will solve it ourselves.”

The manager’s curiosity was piqued, “What will you do?”

I was noncommittal, "I can't tell you right now. We will see," I replied tartly and then got up to leave.

A month went by, and our deadline expired. Living conditions in the village got worse and worse. The villagers had to go further away to look for water. Finally, we could not continue to live with such hardship and decided to do something about it.

At a public meeting, everybody stared at me when I expressed my opinion saying, "Can we agree to do this? I will take you to the site of the levee. We will breach it and let water flow through."

"Well, it may be like banging our heads against the wall. The project owners will hold us responsible," said a man. His statement was followed by some murmurings.

"I agree with Thitsavanh's proposal. If we act unanimously, they wouldn't dare touch us," the village headman said.

"They might ask the police to arrest us." Some of the people at the back of the room were concerned.

"Which policeman would dare arrest us? We are fighting for the public interest, not yours or mine," I responded confidently.

"That's true. If they have to arrest anybody, they can arrest me first," the headman agreed.

The villagers spent time talking over ideas and finally decided to take action. Carrying shovels and spades, they walked up the creek bed until they reached the embankment that was part of the project. After looking left and right to make sure nobody was watching, they started digging into the levee.

Half an hour later, a company worker passed by and noticed that the villagers were busy destroying the embankment. Very soon the project manager and about five employees rushed to the scene.

The boss shouted at the top of his voice, "Stop! Stop! You can't do this. Our community has a legal structure which we should use to resolve issues peacefully!"

"We cannot tolerate this anymore. Everything has a limit," the headman replied. The villagers continued to dig without paying any attention to the heated conversation.

The project manager raised both of his hands shouting, "Stop! Stop! Please!"

"We have come here three to four times already, yet nothing has happened," I shouted back.

"Let's do it this way," the project manager suggested. "Why don't you and the village headman come in and discuss with us? I am sure we can agree on something."



We can keep minutes of the discussions. If we cannot agree, then we can see what alternatives there are. The villagers can stay here and wait for our decision. This is a plea. Stop digging holes in the embankment!"

"OK, let's stop," the village headman agreed. "You wait for us here," he said to the villagers. "This time, we won't take long. We should be back within an hour."

The atmosphere in the project office was tense. The manager asked his secretary to bring us soft drinks. Then he explained the situation. "Right now our wheat crop is forming pollen. If we don't have enough water, the pollen won't form and the crop will fail."

"So, what do you want us to do?" the village headman responded. "When you built the embankment, you never asked for our opinion. Now you are faced with a problem, what do you think we should do?"

"Let's do this," the project manager proposed. "To prevent pollution of the water source, we will find a temporary source of water for the villagers. As for the larger reservoir, we will definitely build it next year. If you breach the levee now, we won't have enough water left to irrigate the wheat fields and our business will fail. So, please, understand that."

The village headman spent a few seconds thinking

about the proposal, then turned to me and asked, “Thit-savanh, what do you think?”

“Well, since we don’t have a better option, we have to agree to this compromise,” I answered,

“OK. In three days, we will install the water-gravity facilities,” the manager assured them.

Once the two parties reached an agreement, they prepared and signed the minutes of the meeting.

Three days later, a ten-wheeled truck came to the village with a fifteen-man crew equipped with plastic pipes and fittings. Two villagers led the team to a water source high in the mountain range, about three kilometres from the village. After five days of pipework construction, water flowed unimpeded to the village.

The villagers were happy to have their drinking water restored, but they had to wait until the following year for the larger reservoir which would allow their gardens to be irrigated.

## **My Mother’s Stupa**

*Khansamoud Dethkensarn*

That day brings back many memories.

It was the first day of Lao New Year celebrations. I carried a bucket filled with scented water, candles and incense sticks to the Kongtoom Temple. My mother’s stupa is on the south side of the temple, standing one-and-a-half metres high. The red and white painted stripes make the stupa resemble a coiled snake.

I was sitting in front of the stupa, my hands together in supplication, looking up at my mother’s photograph. Whenever I see my mother’s picture it tugs at my heart and brings back memories impossible to forget, even though she passed away a long time ago. I still remember her vividly. Her face was round and her arching eyebrows framed her brown eyes. Her nose was a bit high and her cheeks dimpled. She was a simple person, and never worried a bit about her beauty. When Mum was alive I lived in happiness. She always took very good care of me.

One day, after coming back from the garden, my head and body ached. I skipped dinner and went to bed early.

Mum walked into my room, “My child, why didn’t



you have dinner?" she asked with concern.

"Mum, I don't feel like eating, I've got a headache. Please let me sleep for a little while, and then I will feel better."

"Are you sick? Take this medicine."

"No, I do not want it. It's so bitter," I told her, my face sour.

"If you don't take something, how can you get better? Hurry up my child, and take this tablet."

At that time, my family grew cabbages. My mother was the one who bore all the hardship. She worked very hard from dawn till dusk bringing us up. She didn't want us to suffer. She wanted us to have a good education so that we could have a good future.

Some salespeople had introduced Mum to a variety of chemicals and fertilizers used for killing pests and promoting growth. They said that the fertilizers would make the cabbages grow bigger and better in a shorter period of time. This would fetch a higher price at the market. While our mother was spraying, my sister walked into the garden. My sister, who was worried about Mum's health, wanted to spray the chemicals.

"Mum, please let me do the spraying. Let me do that."

"It's only a little job. I can do it myself. You should move away because the chemical can get into your eyes," my mother insisted.

"Mum, you are growing old and your health is not good. You shouldn't be working hard," my sister argued.

But Mum wouldn't listen to her. "Get out of here," she scolded my sibling.

Once the cabbages reached a good size, our mother took them to sell at Thateng District market. At that time, except for one bus a day, there was hardly any public transport. This meant a long walk to the market if the bus was missed. From home to Thateng was a twenty kilometre hike. Mum usually left home early to sell the cabbages and returned when it was dark. If she had any unsold cabbages, she would stroll along the streets of the village trying to sell them, returning much later.

One morning, the sky was clear and the air was fresh. Mum did not go out to sell her cabbages because a merchant was coming to buy them directly from her. After breakfast, she left for the garden to meet the trader. He arrived in a blue and white Hyundai. As he got out Mum noticed he was tall with fair skin. He offered to buy the cabbages directly from her.

"Aunty, you sell cabbages I heard."

"Yes. How much per kilo will you pay?" Mum responded.

"Nowadays vegetables sell for very little. You know that," the buyer answered.

"No, the prices are still high. In this village they pay 4,000 kip per kilo," Mum insisted.

"Oh! That's not true. I am from this region and I know when the price is up or down. Sell them to me and I will pay 2,000 kip a kilo."

"Really?" Mum said, showing no interest in his offer.

Kee, who worked in the next garden, joined the conversation. "Sister Deng, this morning when I went into the village, I was told that there were merchants from Savanakhet buying cabbages for 4,000 kip a kilo," Kee interrupted.

"Is that true Kee? Then why is this trader saying the price is down?" Mum asked, the suspicion clear in her voice.

"Yes. It's true," the trader interjected, "but they buy the cabbage without the outer leaves, unlike us. We buy the whole lot."

"OK," he continued, "I will pay you 3,000 kip a kilo, and will buy 100 kilos. Please sell the cabbages to me, as I am here already." The merchant was trying to be

very persuasive.

Mum was quiet for a while. If she did not sell the cabbages she would not have enough money to buy supplies for the week. In the end, she decided to sell them for the price offered. As soon as she got the money, she gave it to my sister Phorn to buy food. With the rest she bought me my school uniforms.

Sometime later we were cutting the grass under the bright sun when Mum blacked out and fell heavily to the ground. I was so nervous I did not know what to do. I called my sister for help.

"Phorn, come here quickly," I screamed.

My sister was weeding a corner of the garden. As soon as she heard my voice, she rushed over.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Look! Mum has collapsed. She did not answer when I talked to her." I was crying while trying to explain to my sister what had happened.

"Carry Mum to the hut. Bring some balm for her to smell. Then fan her." Shortly afterwards our mother regained consciousness.

"Mum, do you want to see a doctor? He can check you," my sister asked, concern in her voice.

"No, I'm all right. Why fuss about seeing a doctor? It

will be wasting more money," Mum said.

When she had recovered, we all went back to work in the garden, returning home after dark. The next morning, after finishing her housework and preparing breakfast, Phorn told me to call Mum to come and eat. Walking to her bedroom, I wondered why she was sleeping so late. She was never this late.

"Mum, come and have breakfast. Mum, get up, breakfast is ready," I called through her door but she did not answer. When I entered her room she was lying motionless. I grabbed her arms trying to wake her up, and was shocked when I felt her boiling hot body. I rushed to my sister who came immediately.

"Mum, you should see a doctor," she said to my feeble mother.

For the rest of the day, my sister did not allow Mum to work in the garden. We gave her some medication and made her rest at home. We worked alone in the garden that day.

After the sun set beneath the horizon and darkness crept across the village, my sister and I headed back home. When we got there, it felt quiet, as though the house was abandoned and no one lived there. We climbed the steps and my heart skipped a beat when I

saw Mum lying unconscious in the middle of the room. Her body was hot to the touch, but her legs and arms were so cold. This time we took no chances and rushed her to the hospital in Parksong. On the way Mum had convulsions in the ambulance before relapsing into unconsciousness. My sister and I did not know what to do except embrace Mum's body and cry. When we finally reached the hospital the doctor took a long time to examine her before coming outside to see us.

"How is she doing?" my sister asked.

"She is running a high temperature and she is very weak due to the hard work she has been doing. I want her to stay in the hospital for a few days to rest. We will put her on a drip," the doctor said.

"Nang, you will need to stay here to look after her," my sister said.

Two days later, as Mum improved, she was discharged from the hospital. Her face looked pale and tired. Soon she was back on her normal rounds of visiting temples, scolding her children, chatting to her neighbours and talking to her relatives. We were so glad to observe her progress, but were concerned that she was still working too hard. We tried to prevent her from getting back to the garden because we were worried about her health.

At that time selling cabbages was our only source of income, which was why Mum had to bear all the hardship even though it was very hard work.

"We need to put up with hardship," she always told us. "It makes us stronger, and we should never give up. Hard work helps us survive. Please remember that."

Six months later the symptoms of her illness recurred. My sister took her to the hospital, but she showed little progress.

"Has somebody cast a spell on her? Has she been cursed?" an elderly neighbour named Keo asked when she came to visit Mum.

"You have a point. I took her to see a doctor, and everything was fine. At that stage she only had a temperature," my sister answered, her face showing how tired she was.

We took her to see a well-known shaman in Kong Village. When we entered her house we saw an altar decorated with *lei*<sup>1</sup> (floral necklaces). There was also a statue of an old man with a long beard in a sitting position. The statue was dressed in a black long-sleeved shirt and adorned with flowers around the neck. Skulls surrounded it. A little doll stood in the middle of the altar. Candles

---

1. *lei*: a floral necklace.

and incense sticks were placed in front of the statue.

"What can I do for you?" the female shaman asked us.

"We came to see you because I am ill," Mum told her.

"Let me see. Please come close." The shaman took an egg and placed it on Mum's skin.

"Oh this sickness is sent from the forest spirit. When you work in the garden he becomes upset and feels you are annoying him," she exclaimed.

"How do we overcome this?" asked my sister nervously.

"Actually nothing much needs to be done. You only need to prepare a plate with candles and flowers. Then put the plate under the big tree near the river. While you are doing this, tell the spirit that you have been wrong and ask it to accept your apologies. That is all you do. Your mother will get better after doing this." The shaman explained the procedure in detail to my sister.

The following day, we followed the shaman's instructions carefully. Mum's health improved for a short while, but soon her condition became worse again. She had a high temperature and coughed up blood. From time to time, she had convulsions. She wheezed and could

not eat, looking thin and pale. She lost consciousness at times. We did not know what to do. We felt so sorry for her.

"Mum is suffering a lot," I thought constantly.

My sister called our brother Phui who lived in Vientiane. She asked him to come and take Mum to the hospital there, because city hospitals were better equipped and the doctors were more experienced. "Phui, please come and take Mum. We have tried everything, but nothing has helped."

"OK, I will be there," my brother responded.

The next day he arrived. He walked in, "Where is Mum? How is she?" he broke into sobs.

"She is in her bedroom asleep," my sister told him sadly.

Phui walked into Mum's room. He was shocked at her condition. "Oh! Mum, why are you in this state? I am going to take her to the hospital right away," he said.

"We do not have any money to pay for expensive care," my sister said.

"Don't worry. I will take care of this matter," my brother reassured her.

The next morning, my brother took Mum to Vientiane on the bus. She was so sick she could not even sit

up. As soon as they got to Vientiane, Phui took her to Mahosot Hospital.

After examining Mum, the doctor approached my brother who was waiting outside.

"Your mother has TB. She works too hard, and on top of it, the chemicals she has been exposed to have poisoned her, making it hard for her to fight any infection."

After being treated at the hospital, Mum again made a partial recovery, so Phui called us, "Don't worry, she's OK."

When we heard the good news, we were so happy. We hoped she would be well enough to come back home.

A week later, Mum had a visitor; someone she had not seen since she was young. The person was Mum's older sister. Mum was so overcome with emotion that she fell unconscious. No one had expected this to happen. Doctors attempted to revive her, but failed. Mum died.

Phui called to break the news. Phorn picked up the telephone.

"Phorn, Mum has gone, she has left us," Phui sobbed.

"What? Mum has passed away?" Phorn was

shocked. "Is it true? Has Mum really gone?" she repeated, screaming loudly.

I rushed to her. My sister and I cried for days. It seemed to us that the whole world had collapsed. Even the sky was sombre. We had lost the most precious person in our life. She would never come back.

# The Price of Land

*The Price of Land*

*Sylikhan Keophouthong*

The atmosphere in Somphorn's garden is cool and refreshing. The air is clear and full of natural fragrance. The garden is very important to Somphorn's family as it provides the main source of income. He, his wife and eighteen-year-old daughter have planted cabbages in this garden. They water it every day and keep a careful check on weeds, bugs and other insects.

Due to their continuous efforts they are able to sell their produce, though they receive only a meagre amount of money in return. Sadly, this income is not enough to cover the cost of living, or the construction of their two-storey house.

For this reason, Somphorn decides to seek work with the Community Development Agency, leaving the garden to the care of his wife and daughter. He reasons he will have time to help them put up fences, weed or take the cabbages to the market on weekends. This will only happen if the Community Development Agency does not send him to outlying communities.

"When our daughter grows up and has a family, I will give her all the gardening responsibilities," Somphorn says to his wife.

"Don't speak of the future too soon. Let's look for money to finish this house first," his wife cautions him.

"I am looking for money right now. I just don't know where to find any," he says.

One day, a passing vegetable wholesaler visits their garden and exclaims, "Oh! Your cabbage garden is beautiful! What kind of fertiliser do you use?"

"We grow these cabbages organically. We use only compost," Somphorn's wife answers, wiping the sweat off her cheeks.

"I've come from the town, and would like to buy cabbages for the market at the border," the female merchant tells them.

"Well, your timing is good. We are about to take some to the market," their daughter says with delight.

"I will buy a lot, but you must give me a good price," says the woman.

"How many kilos do you want?" Somphorn's wife asks.

"Well, if we agree on the right price, I will buy the lot."

Mother and daughter look at each other. They have never imagined that somebody would want to buy all the cabbages in one lot. They whisper to each other for

few minutes, annoying the merchant.

“Look let’s do this, and not haggle too much. I will pay six million for your crop,” she says loudly.

“Mum, do you want to take six million for all this?” the daughter asks, ignoring the trader’s impatient tone.

“I don’t know what to say. Telephone your father and ask him what he thinks.”

Her daughter takes out her mobile from her pocket and speaks to her father. “Mum...Dad says ten million,” she calls to her mother who is talking to the merchant.

“What! Ten million is too much,” the trader blanches. “Let’s agree on seven million.”

“Telephone your father again,” the mother instructs.

“Dad says eight million, otherwise no deal,” the daughter tells the two women who are waiting for the answer.

The wholesaler tries to bargain the price down to seven and a half million but Somphorn’s wife stands firm. In the end, the merchant agrees to buy all the cabbages for eight million, knowing it is a bargain.

After the sale, Somphorn comes to help prepare the empty garden so that a new crop can be planted.

They make plans to spend the money from the sale of the cabbages. Five million will go to buying building

materials and hiring workers to finish the house, and since Somphorn has not visited his in-laws for three years, another two million will be spent on bus tickets to Savanakheth and gifts for the relatives.

A week later, when they return from Savannakhet, Somphorn and his wife take their motorbike out to the garden to see about planting the next lot of cabbages. When they arrive at the gate, they see a picture of devastation. Their garden is now a flat expanse of red dirt scarred with the tracks of a bulldozer.

“Who bulldozed our vegetable garden?” Somphorn’s wife screams in shock.

They go around asking the neighbours.

“I heard that a company has investment rights to plant rubber trees. It was they who bulldozed your land,” a young man says.

“This is not right! They act like this country has no law and order. Whatever it takes, I will fight to get my land back,” Somphorn exclaims angrily.

Back home, he is very worried and thinks hard about how to get his land back. If the company takes possession of the land, there will be no source of income for his family.

After a lot of thinking, he decides to see someone at

the local council office, who tells him to talk to the provincial office. At the provincial office, he is told to see the company director.

The next day, Somphorn goes to see the director but is told he has gone overseas, and will be back after a week.

A week passes and Somphorn goes back to the company office. This time he meets the director.

“Your company has bulldozed my garden and taken over my land. I want it back,” Somphorn begins.

“Our company was given permission to invest in this area. We saw that the land was neglected and nothing was planted there, so we decided to clear it,” the man explains. “Now we are preparing the land for planting. We were given access to your land and other suitable land around it.”

“Your company must give my land back. My family’s livelihood depends on it,” Somphorn argues loudly.

“Go and talk to the provincial officials, because they are the ones who allowed us to invest in this land,” the director replies.

Sensing that there won’t be any agreement, Somphorn goes back home very frustrated. He is so despondent that he does not feel like eating or drinking. He

goes to see his friends and relatives for advice.

He wastes more time and money chasing the matter. Eventually the last of the money from the sale of the cabbages is spent. His bad luck is compounded, for when he goes back to work, he is fired for being absent for so many days without sanctioned leave. Running around, trying to get his land back has cost him his job and his money.

All these events compound Somphorn’s depression.

Two days later, he and his wife go back to their garden, and see that it, along with the neighbouring land, has been fenced off with barbed wire. The stakes which marked the boundaries of their garden have been ripped out and nothing remains to indicate it is theirs.

Somphorn does not give up and continues to look for ways of getting his land back.

A month passes before Somphorn goes again to see the company director.

“I have come to ask for my land back because the season for planting cabbages is approaching. We need access to our land so please give it back,” Somphorn pleads.

“I have told you already that you must take this up with the provincial officials,” the company manager says

angrily.

"I've already been there, and was told to come here and reach an agreement with the company," Somphorn replies.

"In that case, let's do this. We don't want any complications. How about we compensate you ten million kip for any losses you have incurred?" the company director offers.

Somphorn is quiet for few minutes, not knowing what to do. He thinks that if he doesn't take this money now, he might not get anything at all later on.

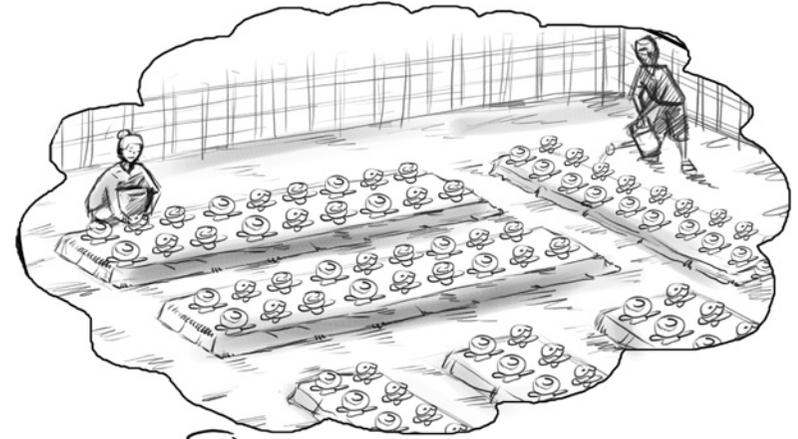
"Ten million isn't enough. Can't you offer more?"

"Ten million is a generous offer. Many people did not even get that much." It is clear that the director has made his final offer.

Again, Somphorn thinks very carefully, worried that he might end up with nothing. In the end, he has no choice but to accept the offer. He takes the bundle of cash and leaves the office.

Sitting on his motorbike, he looks at the money again. He holds a handful of fifty-thousand kip bills.

He wonders how best to spend the money. First of all, he wants to finish his house so that it will be ready to welcome his future son-in-law.



But after that how will he be able to support his family in the future?

He looks up at the sky and asks the sacred spirits above, "Is the land my parents left behind for me worth only ten million kip?"

## **Return Life to the River**

*Xaignaphone Vongkham*

The sun is shining, the sky is a brilliant blue, insects buzz, butterflies fly past, and birds sing beautiful songs. Shrubs and plants thrive in the forest and the mornings are cool and pleasant.

Uncle Sah, a kind and hardworking man, wakes early each day to feed the ducks and chickens. When they come into the house, he doesn't chase them away but gives them extra grain instead. After feeding the poultry, he usually goes downstairs to sweep the dirt floor beneath his house while his wife prepares food for him.

"My dear, is breakfast ready?" he calls to Phun, his wife.

"Ready. I'm bringing it," she answers.

Uncle Sah and Phun leave for their garden carrying their lunch, as they do every morning. When they arrive there, they are acutely aware that something feels different that morning. They don't hear the birds singing but assume that it might be because they are so late that day.

After a while, he leaves his lean-to shelter in the fields to fetch water from the creek. He sees that the water level is unusually low. He is startled, not knowing

why. He hurries back to the lean-to with his water bottle only partly filled.

"Why are you in such a hurry?" his wife asks, seeing him puffing.

"The water in the creek has almost dried up. I am going to go find out what is going on," he replies before returning to the village to ask the people if they know anything. He worries that if he doesn't have water for his vegetable garden, the crops will die.

"Hello! Hello! Please come here," Uncle Sah calls to his middle-aged neighbour working in his garden next door.

"What is the problem, Uncle?" the man asks.

"What's happened to the creek? It's almost dry."

"That's normal. It will come back up very soon. It has happened before. It moves up and down like this all the time," the man replies, but Uncle Sah is unconvinced.

The sun is going down slowly behind the mountain. It will be dark soon, so he and his wife head home.

The next morning, two men from the village come to the house. "Uncle Sah! Uncle Sah! We don't have any water," one man shouts.

He walks downstairs to meet them. "Yes, I know. I barely had enough water for my garden," he says.

"Then, we should find out what is going on."

"Yes, that's a good idea... let's go," he agrees.

Uncle Sah and the two men walk upstream. The sun is high, the air is hot and it feels like it is going to burn every living thing to ash. They walk about two kilometres upstream. On the way they find two small ponds near the creek drying up. In the middle of one a man is picking fish out of his net.

"Is your fish pond drying up too?" Uncle Sah calls out to the man.

"I'm taking all the fish out right now. If not, they will die," the fish farmer replies.

"We want to know why the creek is drying up, so we walked up here to see," one of the villagers says.

"I would also like to know that," says the fish farmer.

"Well. Then, let's all go together," Uncle Sah suggests.

"Do you know where the source of the creek is? Is it far away?" asks the fish farmer.

"It doesn't matter how far. We need to know what is causing this problem for the sake of our two villages," replies Uncle Sah, urgency his voice.

The fish farmer stops what he is doing and follows them upstream. He lives in Na Lau Village while Uncle

Sah and the others come from Don Village. The land gets steeper a kilometre past the fish pond. They continue uphill through a rocky area towards the source of the creek.

Not long after they come to a dense forest with tall trees. They see vines hanging above their heads. After the climb, the shade from the trees is cool and pleasant. The four men sit down for a rest. They scoop some water onto their faces to wash off the sweat.

“Soon we will find the source of the creek,” says Uncle Sah.

“I agree. I think it’s near,” replies the fish farmer.

As they go deeper into the forest, they hear machinery followed by the sound of crashing trees. The four men are frightened. A few more steps and they are confronted by an empty field. About ten recently felled trees lie on the ground. The empty field is about eight hundred square metres. On one side there are dry logs indicating that logging activity has been going on for some time. The loggers, five of them, stop working when they see strangers coming towards them.

“Who allowed you to cut the trees in this area?” asks the fish farmer, pushing himself forward.

“Our company has a permit to plant rubber here,” re-



plies the head of the group.

"Don't you know this area is a watershed?" asks Uncle Sah.

"We are just following company orders," says the man.

"I heard that a foreign company was coming to plant some rubber trees near Na Lau Village, but I never thought they would log the watershed," comments the fish farmer.

"You must stop cutting down the trees right now. Our creek is getting very shallow. You have caused great problems for our two villages," Uncle Sah raises his voice.

"Talk with the head of the company. When they give orders, we jump," the man replies sullenly.

The fish farmer is undeterred, "You must stop right now. We will take this matter to the village board. You can't do this," he threatens.

The villagers turn and hurry back to Na Lau Village. It is almost sundown by the time they get back, tired, hungry and thirsty. After a brief rest, they go to see the village headman.

"I spoke with the company when they raised the issue of planting rubber trees, but that was not the loca-

tion we discussed," explains the headman.

"They are intentionally cutting down valuable trees," the fish farmer asserts.

"The creek that used to have a lot of water is drying up. My vegetables are turning yellow and dying right now," says Uncle Sah.

"That's right. In the future, we can't depend on water from the creek for our gardens," another chimes in.

"The company should pay us for our losses," the fish farmer shouts angrily.

The next day the chief, Uncle Sah, and the fish farmer go into the city to meet senior representatives of the company. In response, the head of the company takes the three men in a pick-up truck, to the mountain where the workers are still logging the watershed.

"We are so sorry. We mistakenly cleared the wrong area. I am going to order the workers to stop right now," the company head says, sounding apologetic.

"My vegetable garden has dried out. I won't be able to sell my vegetables at a good price this year," Uncle Sah tells him.

"My fish pond has also dried up. Your company needs to compensate me for loss of income," the fish farmer interrupts.

“We never thought that land clearance would cause such big problems for the villagers,” the company head says sadly.

It takes almost three months for the villagers and the company to come to a settlement. The company finally agrees to compensate the fish farmer and the ten families from Don Village whose gardens depend on the creek. It also agrees to reforest the watershed area. Five years later the creek, once dry and sandy, is flowing again, bringing great joy to the residents of the two villages. Everyone understands the importance of leaving watersheds intact, and they realise how their rapid action saved their creek and their livelihoods.

## **The Cost of Fertilizer**

*Sengmany Sorthanoxay*

Uncle Si has been living in Saeta Pong Village for a long, long time. He grows coffee beans on seven hectares. This is large enough to make a living. Volcanoes spewing ash and dust over millions of years have left a rich legacy of fertile soils, making it ideal for growing coffee beans.

Uncle Si is illiterate. He plants his coffee the old-fashioned way without using chemicals. That’s why the beans on his coffee plantation don’t look as healthy as those in some of the other plots. They grow very slowly; sometimes the leaves turn yellow and drop off. He has tried desperately to find solutions to these problems but with little success. Nothing ever gets better.

Uncle Si and his wife, Par Morn, are both resting on their plantation. “My dear,” he says to her, “what shall we do with our coffee plantation? If we go on like this, we won’t be able to sell our beans.”

“I don’t know what to do either, dear,” replies Par Morn. “Why don’t you do what some of the others are doing?”

“Use chemical fertilizer, you mean?”

“Yes. Now it seems that just about everyone is using

chemicals. If not, they tell me the coffee plants are less healthy," his wife replies.

"That means spending money, and where is the money going to come from?"

"That's correct. I don't know who we can borrow from," Par Morn replies, feeling just a little hopeless.

The elderly couple sit quietly for a while, thinking about their problem. Uncle Si smokes tobacco wrapped in a dry banana leaf, blowing the smoke into the air. Suddenly an idea comes to him. "Oh! I heard there is a company giving out fertiliser in exchange for future coffee crops.

That's it, dear. Go and find out which company it is," suggests Par Morn.

"Yes, I will ask around and see if it's just gossip." Sure enough he finds out that there is truth to the story.

The following day, Uncle Si and a group of the villagers decide to go and try their luck at asking for a loan from the company. They are all successful. After collecting the loaned fertilizer, Uncle Si applies it immediately to his coffee plants without hesitation.

A month passes. His and the other villagers' coffee plants look healthier. They share in the happiness and pride of their unbelievably robust coffee plants.

Each morning just after getting up, Uncle Si looks out

over his coffee plantation contentedly. He has a smile on his face which will last the whole day because his coffee plants now have glossy green leaves and bundles of new red shoots to be admired. When he looks at the revitalized crop, he wishes he could expand his coffee plantation many times over.

After three years, Uncle Si's coffee plants mature and start to show white flowers which fill the whole plantation with their sweet and distinctive aroma. Passers-by find the scent intoxicating and difficult to walk on without stopping.

Between October and November, the coffee beans ripen in their shiny bushes. The trees are all covered with promising red coffee cherries. Uncle Si and his wife are happy because after nurturing the crop for the past few years, the crop is now ripe for harvest.

When the beans are due for harvesting, the company's polite and friendly representative comes to negotiate the repayment of the fertiliser loan.

"The company will purchase Uncle's crop as a form of repayment for the loaned fertilizer. That means you must sell all the harvested coffee beans to our company every season," the company representative says by way of opening the conversation.

“Yes... that can be done.” Uncle Si accepts, seeing his first big profit.

Two or three weeks later, the same representative comes to collect the coffee beans as agreed. He loads the newly harvested beans, leaving the rest for later. This year Uncle Si has over ten tons for sale. But the company pays him for only two tons, taking the rest as payment on the loan.

“Why do I get paid for only such a small proportion of the harvest?” Uncle Si is clearly surprised at this turn of events.

“Uncle, nowadays the price of the fertilizer is very high. That’s why the company has to put up its charges,” the representative replies poker-faced, showing no signs of sympathy.

“Initially you said that the fertilizer was 150,000 kip per bag, but now you say the price has doubled! Isn’t it a bit overpriced? By rights, the company should only charge me the price agreed to at the beginning,” Uncle Si confronts the company man but without any success.

When Uncle Si has finished talking it is clear the company man will not budge from his position, much less offer a fair deal.

After the disappointing negotiations, Uncle Si walks



home. On his way he meets a young fellow from the same village who joins him. They talk along the way.

“Hey Kee, did you get cheated by the company too? Did they pay you less than half the value of the coffee beans, just like they did to me?” he asks, anxious to compare notes.

“Yes, I too have been cheated - just like you, Uncle,” Kee replies.

Every villager complains about the company overcharging for the fertilizer. They all had to pay double the amount agreed to initially. When they wanted to make a claim for full payment, the company wouldn't listen; instead they chased the villagers away. Hearing so many people saying the same thing, Uncle Si understands that he is not the only one who has been taken advantage of by the company. They have lost faith, as well as money.

When it becomes clear that they cannot solve the problem individually, they decide to approach the company jointly. The company director turns pale on seeing so many protestors. The villagers present their case again, and noisily argue with the director. But he is stubborn and refuses any compromise. The arguments carry on from morning till the moon is high in the sky and the villagers are tired and hungry. Disappointed and disillu-

sioned, they return home.

The next day, Uncle Si sets up another meeting in order to settle things once and for all. “If the company is going to cheat us like this, we should boycott them,” he proposes.

“That's right. There are other companies and buyers. We can negotiate a deal with them,” Kee adds.

“OK, we just stop selling coffee beans to this company. Let them suffer,” a grey-haired man suggests.

Soon what the villagers have discussed reaches the company director's ears. He panics, fearing that the villagers will stand by their protest, and not sell coffee beans to his company.

“If the villagers refuse to sell us beans, our company will go bankrupt. If we can't supply them raw materials, we will be fined for breach of contract by the overseas companies. At the moment the world coffee market is skyrocketing,” the director grumbles to his deputy.

“Then what do you suggest?” his assistant asks.

“Go and negotiate with the villagers. I have been arguing with them so many times, they don't trust me. You go instead.”

“So what are the terms of negotiation?” the deputy asks.

“Easy. Just agree to all their arguments. Even agree to pay bonuses in cash on top of what they demand.”

“Wouldn’t we lose all our profits if we did that?” asks the deputy.

“Not at all. We’ll still make a profit, but the margins will be less than before. In the long run it doesn’t matter. Next time our profits will increase.”

The company man successfully negotiates with the villagers of Saeta Pong Village. To guarantee supply, the company drafts out a proper form of agreement, setting out the terms of the fertiliser/coffee bean trade. This will prohibit the villagers from selling coffee beans to any other company that comes to the area, trying to buy beans. However, the fluctuating price of coffee beans means that the villagers will get paid global prices. Whatever the company did in the past, its new generosity creates a lot of trust among the villagers because the outcome is beneficial to both sides.

Since that time the villagers’ incomes have improved. Some families have enough money to afford new vehicles, while others can send their children to schools in the big cities. Uncle Si and Par Morn are happy just to have enough to live on. Being strong and healthy and having financial stability are regarded as ideal.

## That Friend of Ours

*Noiphasouk Phommahane*

In a lush forest on the outskirts of the town of Parksong, twenty students from the four local high schools are touring the Nong Khoumkhiew (Blue Lake) Project. Though they live in Parksong, the teenagers do not know much about the project or how important it is. They listen carefully, taking notes as the fifty-year old guide, a man with dark skin, hollow cheeks and strong eyesight, explains the project in a clear, resonant voice.

“My name is Bounma. I am the head of Thongseth Village. I’m happy to see that you young people are interested in seeing how our reforestation program works. This project is known as the Nong Khoumkhiew Project. It was started because in the past people used to come by and fell a lot of trees in this area. It’s a major watershed: the source of the Say Seth and Say Katam rivers and the Champi and Markchanh creeks.

“These streams supply water to the people of the four southern provinces of Champassak, Saravan, Sekong and Attapeu. If all the trees in this region were cut, we would have a major disaster on our hands because the people living in these areas would run out of water. I would like to tell you about the man who initiated this

project, a close friend of mine, Mr. Hubert. Thanks to him, we now have a large forested area like this one.

“Who is Hubert? Where did he come from? Why did he get involved in the Nong Khoumkhiew Project? What were the reasons that pushed the local people to conserve forest resources and plant trees in the area around Parksong? What started the friendship between Hubert and me?

“Let’s go back to the past. When I was still a child, I frequently hunted in this area as it teemed with many wild animals: rabbits, deer, and wild pigs. The animals found cover and a home in the dense vegetation with its many ponds. Local residents were able to harvest a variety of food in large quantities, making this forest an intimate part of their lives.

“Then, things started to change gradually as more and more people moved into the region. People were looking for ways to make a living: hunting, cutting trees for firewood, carpentry, and building materials. Forest resources were used not only for family needs, which could have been met by natural regrowth, but also for commercial purposes. It was easy to predict the rapid depletion of resources provided by Nature.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Natural resource degradation had been in Bounma’s thoughts since childhood and through his college years in Czechoslovakia. The idea of preserving natural forests around villages had followed him everywhere like a shadow.

Once he came back to his native region, Bounma volunteered to work on a German coffee-growing project. When the project ended, he came back to his village and was appointed village headman.

Allowing the villagers to live in peace was Bounma’s focus. This became increasingly difficult as destruction of the forest became more and more serious. Each time he walked through the forest near his village, he felt distressed at seeing the treeline being eroded. The glorious trees were fewer and fewer in number and variety because they were being logged.

One day, as he and his father went to a newly cleared area, Bounma said, “Dad, if this situation persists, wild animals will disappear and streams will dry up.”

His father sighed heavily. “Yes, that’s true.”

“Is there a solution for this, Dad?” Bounma asked.

“How can we fix it? The villagers have not yet fully understood the issue of forest destruction,” his father replied.

From then on, Bounma held several public meetings, explaining the importance of forests, and why it was critical to protect them. The people attending had a wide range of opinions because some poorer families depended on timber sales to make ends meet.

Just when Bounma's dream of protecting forests started fading, good luck made him meet someone he had never dreamed would become a close friend – a man who shared the same ideas.

One day, Bounma rode his motorbike to the centre of Parksong to buy batteries for his torch which he used for catching frogs at night. As he walked out of the store, a silver-haired foreigner with a cheerful face and a slight stoop approached him. He must have been about the same age as Bounma.

"Excuse me, do you speak English?"

"Yes, a little," replied Bounma, having learned some at school.

"Please tell me where I can buy some coffee."

"Lao coffee or Nescafé?"

"Lao coffee," the foreigner replied, with eyes wide open. "In fact, delicious Parksong coffee is what I'm after."

Bounma took him to a store to buy a bag of local cof-

fee. To express his thanks, the man invited him to share a beer at a nearby shop. Over beer, they introduced themselves and then talked and talked. That beer was the start of an enduring friendship.

Bounma got to know that the man, who called himself Hubert, was from Switzerland. He had read about Laos and had become interested in its people, culture, customs, and beautiful landscapes. He had long dreamed of coming to Laos to see for himself what it was really like. His holidays were due and he used the opportunity to realise his dream. Among the many things that attracted him about the country, was Lao coffee. Ever since stepping into the Land of the Million Elephants, he had been hooked on it.

Bounma invited Hubert to visit his village, Thongsath. The Swiss was taken up by the village lifestyle and friendship. He enjoyed the way that male friends gathered at Bounma's house to share food and drink and chat about various things. Sometimes, only coffee was served but there were always endless discussions.

One day, Hubert overheard Bounma and two male villagers talking. He did not understand the language, but suspected that there was something wrong.

"Is there a problem?" Hubert asked Bounma after the

visitors left.

“Yes. People are coming and secretly cutting down trees in our forest,” Bounma replied. “This is a long story and I don’t know what to do about it.”

“Can you take me there? I’d like to see what is going on,” said Hubert.

“Sure. It’s only a short walk.”

Bounma and Hubert walked out of the village, heading towards the Nong Khoumkhiew area. On the way Bounma explained that the area used to be virgin forest and was the watershed for the Say Seth and Say Katam rivers and the Champi and Markchanh creeks which flowed through the four southern provinces of Laos. As they moved deeper into the forest, they found the remains of lopped trees. Coming upon their decapitated remains was quite depressing.

“In my country, they wouldn’t have been able to do this. It’s impossible to log in watersheds,” Hubert commented.

“It would be great if we could follow the practices of your country,” Bounma said.

“You can do it, but only if everybody agrees – both the government and the people,” Hubert added.

“I know. I have been looking for ways to prevent



people from cutting trees in this forest, but to no avail. I don't know what to do. Can you help?"

"If this continues, the forest will disappear and the water will be gone. That would be very dangerous. We need to start some project immediately."

"A project? That would mean a lot of money. Where are we going to find it?"

"I need to go back to my country and talk about this with my friends. Maybe we can find the funds to do something."

Hubert went back to Switzerland. Using his own money he travelled around, talking to people he knew about the Nong Khoumkhiew Project. He contacted businesspeople, various organizations, and wealthy college classmates.

Bounma counted the days, waiting for Hubert to return. Deep in his heart, he still wondered whether the project Hubert and he were dreaming about would ever materialize. He tried to be realistic and not hope too much.

So, he was extremely excited when he learned that Hubert was about to fly back to Laos.

The Nong Khoumkhiew Project became a reality in 1995. At first, Bounma and Hubert hired five or six young

villagers to work on the project, one of whom was Khampheng, Bounma's own daughter. Hubert served as the team instructor, teaching them about the importance of upper watershed areas.

At dinner, Bounma asked his daughter, "What did you do today?"

"We went into the forest, collecting the seeds needed for the nurseries. Once the saplings are taller, we are going to replant them at various sites in the protected forest area."

"Can't you use seeds from somewhere else?" Bounma asked.

"We tried, but that didn't work. Uncle Hubert says that seeds from our forests are the best."

"How many trees have you grown so far?"

"Almost a thousand! Dad."

"That's great!"

"Dad, National Planting Day is coming. I would like you to urge the villagers to come out and help us plant trees. As a villager elder, that should be easy to do."

"No problem. I will talk to them," Bounma smiled.

The day of the tree planting arrived. Villagers of all ages, male and female, came to set the seedlings of over fifty tree species. Their hard work reestablished the same

balance of trees that had populated the forest before. Afterwards, the project staff organised a schedule for sharing the care of the seedlings.

By the third year, the Nong Khoumkhiew area came to be filled with mixed rows of big and small plants, including wild frangipani (*champa pa*), *tonh ka chouk*, *tonh khinou*, *tonh ka dow*<sup>1</sup> and other plants. Everything looked so beautiful, with air so fresh and cool. Under the canopy of trees, birds called from every corner, giving life to the forest once more.

By 2000 the Nong Khoumkhiew Project initiated by Hubert and Bounma was a great success. The villagers never dreamed that such a small program could revive the forest. Later others heard about the outcomes and were impressed, sending delegates to learn more about the project, hoping to implement similar efforts in their villages.

One day, the project staff caught an intruder who was illegally felling trees in the reserve. The offender was brought to the village headman. “Where are you from?” Bounma asked.

“From a village, south of here,” replied the frightened man.

1. Local tree varieties

“Don’t you know this is a prohibited forest? Anybody found logging here will be punished,” said the headman tersely.

The man trembled with fear and confessing to his wrongdoing accepted full responsibility. After he received a scolding, he promised never to transgress again and the villagers allowed him to go home.

After this incident, the young people in the village introduced a round-the-clock surveillance program. Still, the odd intruder continued to cut down trees every now and then.

“Only strong leadership at the village level will be able to protect this forest,” Hubert said at a night meeting of the villagers.

As living conditions of the rural people got tougher illicit logging and deforestation spread. The construction business boomed elsewhere and demand for timber in neighboring countries increased. Finally, something never envisaged by the people of Thong Seth Village happened.

One day, the young village guards and project staff on patrol deep in the forest were flabbergasted to see three bulldozers in the process of levelling off part of the secluded forest. They found out that these vehicles be-

longed to a foreign company granted a license to invest in a coffee plantation.

The leader of the young guards admonished the drivers. "You cannot do this. Please stop. You absolutely cannot bulldoze any further."

When the news reached Bounma, he convinced the villagers to build a fence around the protected forest to prevent the construction workers from further incursions. An impasse occurred. The company needed to expand their land holdings, but the villagers refused to budge.

Hubert traveled to Vientiane quite often to talk with high-level leaders and ask for help in protecting the Thong Seth region. He also went back to his native country to gather more funds and support for the Nong Khoumkhiew Project. Similar reforestation projects failed in twelve other villages, and had to be terminated. Therefore, Hubert had to do all he could to make sure that this project survived.

One day, Hubert told Bounma he was going to transfer the project to the villagers because he was planning to go back to Switzerland. Bounma was shocked.

"The forest belongs to the villagers. I think they are aware and concerned enough to preserve it forever."

"I'm sorry you have to leave, because our project has been successful. No matter what, I promise that we will continue to support your great vision."

Before Hubert left, the villagers organized a *baci*<sup>2</sup> for him, tying scores of cotton threads on his wrists. Hubert drank cup after cup of clear rice wine offered by the elders, and smiled happily.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nowadays Bounma is very pleased to have the chance to brief visiting students about the Nong Khoumkhiew Project. He knows those young people will be the backbone of the nation in the future and will carry the vision of what they see today.

"This project would not have been feasible without one man called Hubert. He understood the value of this forest area, and was concerned that people might be deprived of fresh water. He started this project to rebuild a forest that had been lost. Hubert's good intentions and good deeds will live forever in our thoughts."

---

2. Lao traditional ceremony

# The Land of the Sky

*The Land of the Sky*

*Alounny Meunluang*

At the dawn of a new day, the sun shines through leaves of the forested hills surrounding Nong Da Village. Cool breezes blow gently. Everywhere you see the verdant green of trees and grasslands extending in all directions.

The soil in this area is rich. It is a plateau with volcanic soil and minerals nurtured by a cool moist climate. This is why villagers at Nong Da grow coffee for a living. It's a tradition handed down for generations.

The relationship between villagers and their land is like fish and water. They cannot be separated. Villagers at Nong Da have never had any formal land title certificates. However, the right to inherit land has been accepted among them since eternity. They know who owns each piece of land and the extent of the boundaries. This has been honoured without quarrel or disagreements for hundreds of years.

Chanthaphorn is the daughter of Mae Thip. After completing high school, her parents sent her to Vientiane to continue her studies at the Institute of Law and Administration. After five years of perseverance, she finally graduated.

She was homesick, thinking about her parents, brother, sister, aunt and uncle. On receiving her hard-earned certificate, she decided to return to her village for a visit.

As she approached the outskirts of Nong Da Village, she felt uneasy. She could see clearly that things were not what they used to be. The forest around the village had been cut down and cleared, and the mango trees from which she used to collect fruit as a child, had disappeared.

"Mum, who cleared the forest next to our village?" she asked with annoyance.

"I'm not sure. It sounds like Spock or Spack," her mother stuttered, unable to recall the name.

"Do you know what they are planning to do?"

"A coffee plantation. That's what they said."

"Did they compensate the villagers for the lost land?"

"They said they would, but to this day no one has received anything."

Some days later Chanthaphorn went for a stroll and visited Uncle Gnab, her mother's older brother. He was very happy to see her and told his wife, Chanh, to bring some mangos which had been stored away for



ripening.

“Uncle, was your land cleared by the company as well?” Chanthaphorn asked.

“Oh! I suffered the same way and have almost no land left.” He exhaled slowly and deeply.

Uncle Ghab told his niece many other stories. They talked for a very long time. Afterwards Chanthaphorn visited other friends and the chats she had with each, made her aware of the momentous changes that had taken place in the village while she had been away.

That night Chanthaphorn was unable to sleep. She pondered over many things, twisting and turning so much that the wooden floor made loud squeaking noises that woke her mother who was sleeping in the next room.

“What’s happening, dear? Can’t you sleep?” her mother asked.

“No mum. I can’t,” replied the young woman.

“Why can’t you sleep? Are you thinking of your boyfriend?” her mother teased.

“No mum. I’m worrying about the villagers and don’t know if there is any way to help them,” she explained.

The next morning after breakfast, Chanthaphorn met Nang Taen, a village youth leader. The two found

that they shared similar concerns as they discussed the villagers' problems. They discussed ways to help the poor people.

Chanthaphorn and Taen talked as they walked to the house of the village headman, Phor Phuan.

"Who is that with you, Taen?" Phor Phuan asked.

"Chanthaphorn - the daughter of Mother Thip. Don't you remember her, Phor Phuan?"

"Is that so? I didn't recognise you. Now you are a fully grown woman," the village headman remarked before asking where the girls were heading.

"Well, right now we are coming to see you, Uncle," replied Chanthaphorn.

"What's the problem?"

"We want to know about the company that cleared the land around our village. Did they get your permission, Uncle?" asked Chanthaphorn.

"Yes, they did, but it wasn't clear exactly where they wanted to set up the plantation. I know they obtained a concession for one hundred and fifty hectares in the vicinity of three villages, Nong Da, Huay Xeu'm and Huay Hin. However, when they actually started to clear the land, they pushed further into Ta Wan, taking over an additional sixty hectares of land belonging to the legiti-

mate owners there."

"Yes. It's this clearing of people's lands that I'm interested in and how they are affected. Has the company paid any compensation to the villagers for the land they commandeered?" Chanthaphorn asked.

"It is this very matter that gives me much grief," replied the headman with a long, deep sigh.

"So, are you saying that people have not received any compensation yet? Have our villagers presented this issue to the relevant higher authority for consideration?" she queried further.

"Yes, we have. Definitely."

"Then, what was the answer?"

"They said they will investigate and look for a solution, but that was almost a year ago now. Everything remains the same and unresolved," explained the headman.

"This implies that some officials are colluding with the company and sharing the profits," Taen commented.

"Sshh," Phor Phuan put a finger to his lips, signalling them not to talk too loudly about this matter as it could be dangerous.

"Uncle, tomorrow, could you take us to the city to see the relevant officials? I have a copy of the

regulations which outline the people's rights to compensation from concessions that take their lands," Chanthaphorn said, showing a small document with a blue cover for the village chief and Taen to see.

The next day Chanthaphorn, Taen and Phor Phuan left the village and headed to the district administration office. The headman outlined the problems that remained unresolved to the district chief. The official expressed sympathy and agreed to take up the matter with the company.

Before leaving, Phor Phuan turned and said to the official, "Please pay attention to our plight and help us. If it continues to take a long time, we will erect our own fences and claim back our lands."

"Be patient. You are impatient like a youngster." The district chief rose from his chair, stepped forward and tapped the headman's shoulder lightly.

"I'm serious, sir. Our patience is wearing thin," Phor Phuan said resolutely.

Despite the seriousness, the district chief continued to joke with the three of them.

Soon after, they said goodbye and left.

One week later, they had a meeting at the primary school of Ta Wan Village. The district chief chaired the

gathering to which the head of the company, relevant officials, and the affected villagers were all summoned.

Uncle Thit Phanh, the most senior elder, represented the villagers. He outlined the problems faced by people of the four villages.

"Your company cleared the land and while doing so created such mess. It's not acceptable. These lands do have legitimate owners. They are our inheritance given to us from the sky. We have inhabited this land, developed it, and made our living from it since the time of our great-grandfathers. You came here, cleared our trees and destroyed our coffee, cardamom and vegetable gardens. You expect us to do nothing? We will not surrender. That's for sure."

"That's right, this land belongs to the sky," one man shouted from the back, as voices erupted from different directions.

"Given the situation as it is, what do you want our company to do?" asked the company head.

"You must pay compensation to all affected villagers who are suffering," Phor Phuan raised his voice.

"On what article of law are you basing your claim?" the man asked the villagers, not for a moment thinking they knew anything about the law.

Chanthaphorn could contain herself no longer. She raised the blue book so that everyone could see.

"This is the Prime Minister's Decree. Part 3, Section 43, 'In the case where land concessions extend to cover villagers' land, the entity with the concession must pay compensation to affected villagers by taking into account the assessed land value and adding to the assessed value, the produce of an average year multiplied by 10'.

She went on, "One more thing, in Part 3, Section 1, Paragraph 26 the decree states, 'the land concession must be land that was previously cleared, or forest land that is degraded and will not recover by itself'. You have taken and cleared villagers' gardens. That is unlawful."

The villagers turned their faces towards Chanthaphorn, listening attentively to her as she read the regulations. They admired her courage.

"Thank goodness for the young of today, they know how to sort out what is right and what is wrong. They don't speak without basis or reason. Isn't that so, everyone?" asked the district chief, nodding and looking around the group before him.

"That's right. You are so clever, Chanthaphorn," numerous voices broke out from around the room.

"As head of the company, do you have a response?" the district chief turned and asked the company head.

The man was speechless, not knowing what section of the law he could use to counter the villagers' claims.

"We apologise for having created problems and stress for all of you," he replied. After a pause, he added, "We will pay full and appropriate compensation for the damage caused to all families."

Hearing this, everyone was happy. Before the meeting broke up, the company volunteered to provide meals for everybody as a gesture of goodwill. Everyone enjoyed the meal, the locally-made alcohol and beer.

"Do we know who is responsible for the success of our fight?" Phor Phuan shouted loudly.

"Chanthaphorn! Chanthaphorn!" a group of men chanted in unison.

Chanthaphorn blushed like a ripened tomato. Normally, an outgoing and confident person, she was now very embarrassed.

"It's not just because of me. It's because of all of us, with our hearts and minds united as one," she said humbly.

Village headman Phor Phuan glanced at the young men and women sitting around the tables with Chan-

thaphorn and Taen. "Without Chanthaphorn, Aunty Thip's gem of a daughter, our story would not have been told. Our problems would not have been solved. If there are more of you as clever as Chanthaphorn, our villages and our district will be blessed with justice, peace and happiness."

## **The Old Home Village**

*Alisa Meunlaad*

The setting sun had almost touched the horizon. Uncle Punh and his sixteen-year old daughter, Bouala, left their fruit and vegetable garden, carrying on their backs baskets of chillies, eggplants and cucumbers from their garden. It was quite a distance from home.

The gentle evening breeze of the highlands had different effects on father and daughter. Every now and then, it blew Bouala's hair across her face. For Punh, it brought memories of a song he used to serenade a girl with when he was young. He hummed the tune softly, conscious of the presence of his daughter walking behind.

"Dad, what are you mumbling about? Can you speak louder? I want to hear what you're saying," Bouala teased her father.

"Oh... I've forgotten the lines of the song I used to woo your mother with before you were born," he chuckled.

"That was almost forty years ago. Right, Dad?"

"Exactly. That's why I find it impossible to remember all the lines."

They walked along a creek, sometimes having to

climb the bank. At one point, Punh slipped and fell. The basket toppled, sending chillies and eggplants scattering all over the ground. Bouala laughed.

"Come on! Instead of laughing your head off, why don't you come and help me pick up these vegetables?" her father said, controlling his irritation. "It's getting dark now."

Bouala hurried to help him. She gathered the scattered vegetables and put them back in the basket. After adjusting their loads they continued on their journey.

"This year our crop is better than ever, don't you think, Dad?" Bouala said, encouraging her father to talk.

"That's right... everything is beautiful this year," he replied.

"Dad, do you remember you promised to buy me a bicycle once we sold our stuff? Remember?" "I haven't forgotten."

Bouala smiled and followed her father. She had been dreaming about the bicycle for a long time. Usually her mother took the produce to the city market for sale. Some days she got twenty thousand kip. Other days a bit more. From this, she saved a little towards buying her daughter a bicycle. After almost a year, she had the necessary amount.

When Punh and Bouala got home, they received unexpected news.

"Today someone came to tell us we have to move to a new place," Punh's wife said.

"Who? Why?" asked Punh.

"They said a foreign company has been given a land concession. Our land is included. They'll be starting a coffee plantation. That's what I was told anyway. We have been given a week to move."

"Where do they want us to move to?" Bouala asked her mother.

"Next to the Lamphorn Creek," replied her mother.

"No! No! I don't want to move from here," shouted Bouala angrily.

"What are we going to do about this situation, dear?" Punh's wife asked him.

"If they have a land concession from the provincial authorities, we won't be able to do anything. People from this area will just have to move," he answered.

Bouala's wish for a bicycle was crumbling. The company's concession covered an area of more than one hundred hectares and would swallow her family's garden. For her, the loss of the family garden was akin to losing part of herself. It was as if her stomach was being

ripped from her body.

One week later, the deadline for moving arrived. Every villager from Pong Village complained about having to leave the area. Their future was uncertain. It was not known if their new area would sustain them as well as the current place had.

The move progressed very slowly. Lines of tractors and carts carried their belongings. Villagers carried bags on their backs, babies in their arms and sadness in their hearts. It took them two days and two nights to move to Somsanouk Village where they would start their new lives.

The head of Somsanouk and a number of local villagers were waiting to welcome the new arrivals and to show them where to build their new homes. With around fifty families making the the move, it became difficult to find building materials. They would mostly have to recycle wood from their old houses.

Their allotted land was about a hundred metres away from the creek and the land designated for farming, a further kilometre.

They had to use all the money saved for Bouala's bicycle to cover their daily expenses. In four days it was gone, building their new house. They had no new source

of income. Despite promises, they did not receive any compensation for the loss of their house or land.

Punh and his daughter tried catching fish in the nearby ponds. Since so many were forced into the same activity for sustenance, the competition meant that some days they went home empty-handed. They planted vegetables, and until these were ready for harvesting, they had to forage in the forest for greens.

A week after moving, they went to see the area designated for farming. Then the complaints started. How could they grow anything on land full of rocks and sand? The land they had left behind was so much better.

Even more galling was that they could see lush green vegetable gardens and rice fields belonging to the long-time villagers of Somsanouk. The soil there was dark and ideal for cultivation.

The following day, Punh and four other families went to see the headman of the village.

"Could you please allocate some other land to us?" Punh begged him.

"Oh! Where are we going to find land for you? There is barely enough even for us," was the reply.

"The land you gave us for cultivation is not suitable," said one of the men accompanying Punh.

"I don't know what to say. You have to go and discuss this with the company. They are the ones who tendered for the concession that covers your land," said the headman.

Punh and his fellow villagers knew that was pointless and controlled their anger. They returned to the stony ground and persevered with tilling the land and sowing seeds. A year passed. They were not very successful as they lacked the know-how to improve the infertile soil.

A second year passed and still the situation did not improve.

And one young girl's wish for a bicycle was destroyed. "I want to go back and have a look at our old garden," she told her parents at dinner one evening.

"What are you talking about?" her mother asked.

"Dad, let's go and visit our old village tomorrow."

Uncle Punh looked at his daughter and nodded his head in understanding.

The next day they went back to Pong, their old village. Where once there had been a community, they now saw rows and rows of coffee saplings, extending as far as the eye could see. She climbed to the top of a hill, and sat down under the one tree the company had left untouched. She looked down and tried to figure out



where the old vegetable garden had been located. She finally assumed that it had been at the western end of the plantation.

If the company hadn't been given the concession, she would have been riding her bicycle to school with her friends by now. How she yearned for her old neighbourhood.

A hand caressed her head gently. She looked up and saw her father's face.

"Let's go, dear... Our old place no longer exists. Everything has become history already."

## Choko Farms

*Oulaylack Meunluang*

If you wander twenty kilometres east of Parksong, you will come to the small village of Houay Xay. About twenty-three families live there. Running through the village is a small stream which the people call Houay Mong. It flows down from the nearby mountains, meandering through some woodland areas, past row upon row of choko<sup>1</sup> farms and cauliflower patches. From the top of the mountain it resembles a beautiful green carpet.

The villagers use this small stream to irrigate their crops. Another stream on the other side of the village called Houay Keo is where the villagers get their drinking and bathing water. Most of the people consider this water course larger and more beautiful than Houay Mong.

Loung Luan and Pa Si farm chokos in the village. They sell their produce in the local market. They have an eighteen-year old daughter called Nali. Loung Luan hopes that one day Nali will marry and have a family of her own. He plans to build a new and larger house for the family so as to attract acceptable suitors for his daughter. He hopes that his choko farm will enable him

1. A locally grown variety of vegetables.

to achieve his dream.

One day a representative of a foreign company contacts the village headman. His company has a concession from the authorities to set up a factory for exporting tapioca flour. He produces a piece of paper from his briefcase which he says is the authorisation.

“How large is the land area in the concession?” the headman asks.

“Ten hectares,” the man answers.

After some discussion and agreement on certain points, the two go on an inspection tour of the land.

Not long after that, the construction of the factory begins, with the company employing many young people from the village in the building work. The company opens up land for the tapioca plantation to supply the factory with raw materials. Five months later, the construction is complete coinciding with the tapioca trees being big enough to start producing the raw material. More young people from the village are recruited to work in the factory. Nali, not going to let the opportunity to earn some money pass her by, applies for a job.

One day with a beaming smile, she tells her father that she has been accepted.

“What will you be doing?” he asks.

“Selecting the tapioca for processing,” she replies. “Many young people from our village are also working there. The pay is good. I will get 300,000 kip a month,” she adds.

“Don’t you go and spend all your salary. Save some to help us build our new house,” her father advises her.

“What about the money you get from the sale of your chokos, Dad?”

“I’m afraid that it may not be enough – I’d like you to help a bit.”

“Alright Dad, I will.”

Life is looking rosy in Loung Luan’s household.

One day, as usual, Loung Luan goes out to tend his farm. He notices that some choko plants have yellow leaves, and others have withered. He is shocked, not knowing what has happened.

“Oh, the house is not even built, and now this is happening to my choko plants,” he mumbles to himself.

He is so worried that he cannot sleep that night.

“What’s bothering you, dear? Why don’t you go to sleep?” Pa Si asks her husband.

“It’s the chokos. I don’t understand why they are going yellow and dying like this,” Loung Luan answers.

“How long has this been happening?” she asks.

"I noticed it only today."

"Then why don't you go into town to see the district agricultural officers for help. They've always helped us in the past when we've had problems," Pa Si suggests.

The next morning, Loung Luan sets out early. He meets one of the officials.

"I would like someone from your office to come and check my choko farm."

"What's wrong with your choko farm?"

"The leaves have suddenly gone yellow and look like they are dying," Loung Luan says.

The official sits there deep in thought. Then he says, "This sounds more serious than mere yellowing of leaves. There has never been this sort of problem in your village before."

"That's right. This is a new thing. If it continues, I won't have any chokos to sell," Loung Luan responds.

"Don't worry, Uncle. I will send our analysts to check the farm tomorrow," he assures Loung Luan.

At nine o'clock the next morning, two technicians from the agriculture office arrive at Loung Luan's farm. After looking at his plants, they go to check nearby farms where the choko vines have also started to turn yellow. After a brief discussion, one of the men asks, "Uncle, do

you use water from this creek to water your plants?"

"Yes. I use water from the Houay Mong," Loung Luan answers.

"In that case, we will take some water samples from the creek back to our lab for analysis. Come and see us in about three days."

On the appointed day, Loung Luan leaves home very early in the morning for the agriculture office as he is so anxious to know what is going on. He arrives before the office opens. By 8.00 am, officials start trickling in to work.

"Oh, you are here already," one of the technicians greets him.

"Yes, I have been here since early this morning," Loung Luan answers.

"OK. Come inside."

The official tells Loung Luan that the water from Houay Mong is contaminated. It contains cyanide, one of the by-products of tapioca processing.

"In that case, we can't farm anymore then," Loung Luan says, looking downcast.

"You and other farmers should go and talk to the owner of the factory to find a solution to the problem," the technician suggests.

Later, Loung Luan and other villagers, who have choko farms along the Houay Mong, go to see the supervisor of the tapioca factory.

"Your factory has been discharging cyanide into the Houay Mong. We use the water from this creek to water our crops. Now the choko plants are dying. We hold you responsible for this," Loung Luan complains to the factory supervisor.

"We only discharge a small quantity. It shouldn't be a problem."

"No problem? Then why have our choko vines become yellow and withered? You must come and see with your own eyes," Pa La explodes angrily. Her farm is adjacent to Loung Luan's.

"We will come tomorrow, if that's OK. Today we have work to finish here."

"OK, then. Tomorrow it will have to be," Loung Luan agrees.

Later that afternoon, after Nali returns from work, Loung Luan asks her to ring the agriculture office to ask the technicians to come to the farm the following day so that they can confirm the water is contaminated.

The next day, Pa La and Loung Luan take the factory supervisor and some workers on a tour of the choko

farms. They see the yellow choko leaves left on the supporting frames. Nearly all choko fruits are speckled with yellow or brown dots.

"You see, they are all dead now," Loung Luan points out.

"This may not have been caused by the discharge from our factory at all," the supervisor responds. "It could be some disease brought in by the seedlings, or a variety of fruit blight."

"Does this mean you are not accepting any responsibility? Is that it?" asks Pa La.

"How can you prove all this?" asks one of the factory workers.

Loung Luan is restless, looking left and right, anxious for the agricultural staff to turn up. Thirty minutes go by, and there is no sign of them.

"If you have any evidence to prove your case, you can come and see me at the factory," says the supervisor, turning and walking away. Just then the two technicians arrive on their motorbikes.

"Well, welcome. Just in time. We have been waiting for you," says a relieved Loung Luan. He calls the factory supervisor and says, "These two officials will explain the problem to you."

“The discharge from your factory contains a lot of chemicals poisonous to plants and humans,” one of the technicians starts to explain.

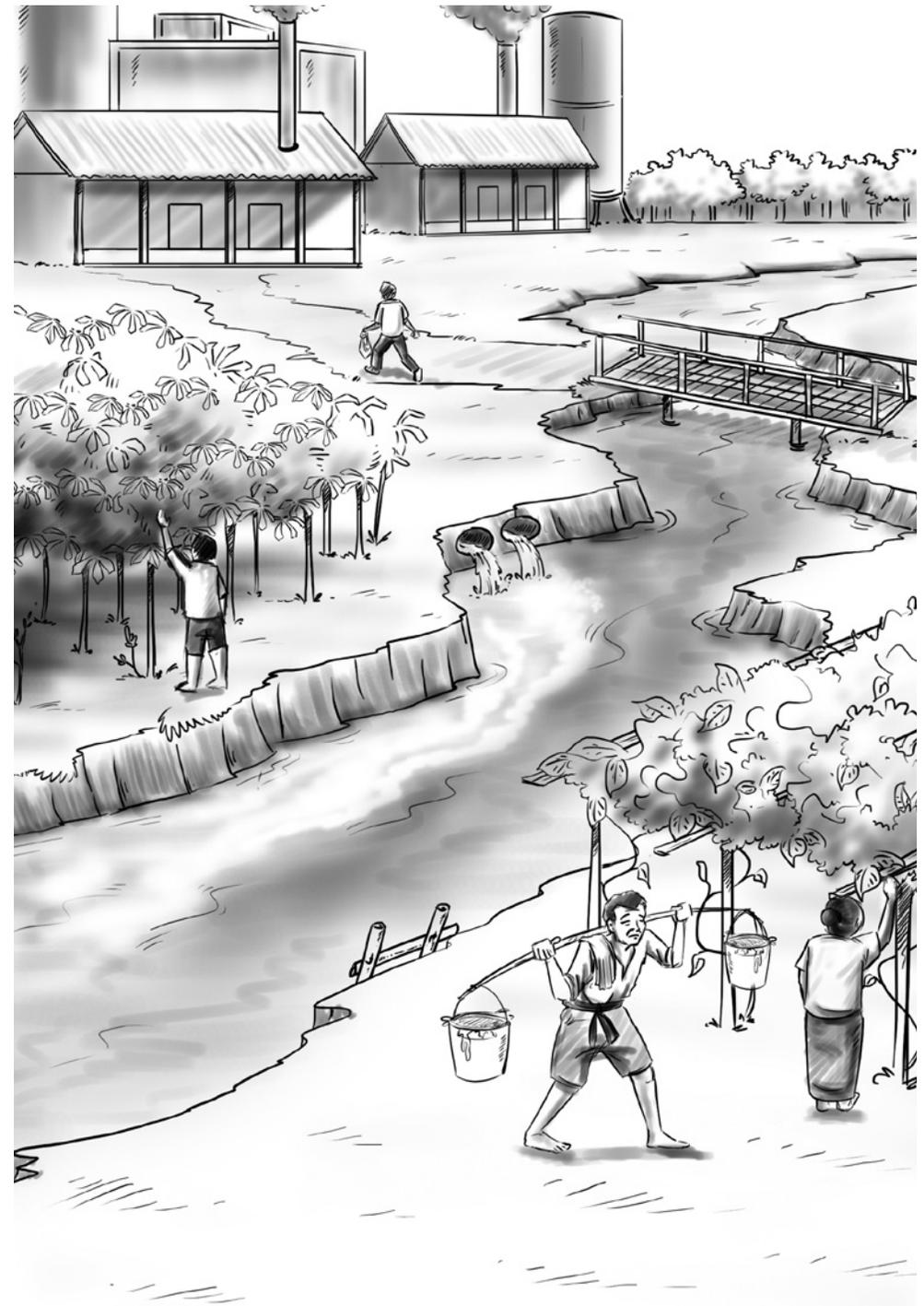
“How do you know that?” interrupts the factory supervisor, not prepared to believe what is being said.

“Here is the result of the lab analysis of the water from this creek,” the second technician replies, handing a sheet of test results to the factory supervisor. The supervisor is speechless. He nods his head, acknowledging the results.

“You have to dig a catchment pond to contain the discharge from your factory. Don’t let the discharge flow into the creek again. Otherwise, not only will the chokos be affected but all humans and animals using or drinking water from the creek will also die,” explains one of the men. “Cyanide is deadly.”

Consequently, the factory supervisor has his workers dig two catchment ponds to hold the discharge from the factory. They close the old outlet pipes, and open new ones allowing the discharge to flow into the new ponds.

Loung Luan, Pa La and others whose farms are affected by the discharge go to see the factory owner. They demand compensation for the damaged crops.



They visit him five or six times – but come back empty-handed. The supervisor explains that there are cash flow problems, and offers some tapioca flour as compensation.

Loung Luan and other farmers have a meeting to discuss the supervisor's offer. In the end, the villagers agree to accept the tapioca flour as compensation, but insist on seven bags each. The villagers take their claim to factory supervisor and in the end both sides compromise.

"Are five bags of flour really sufficient compensation for the dead chokos?" Pa La asks Loung Luan.

"Well, five bags are still better than nothing at all," he answers.

## Chilo

Vanlady Phaphimpha

Twenty kilometres north of the town of Parksong, live twenty-five families in the tiny village of Phoumone. The road to the village is lined with tall trees whose thick green leaves often meet overhead. The green corridor provides extended shade making the surrounding area fragrant and cool.

Phoumone is famous for its *chilo*<sup>1</sup> – the tastiest in the whole district. They are very popular among the villagers as they are rich in protein. Grilled or stir-fried, plain or with spices, the *chilo* are a popular dish. Some people make *pon*<sup>2</sup> which goes really well with raw or steamed vegetables.

Uncle Seng and his wife are the best *chilo* hunters in the village. Poverty has driven them to this speciality. They have no money for farming or growing vegetables like the others in the village, so each day they hunt for *chilo* in the nearby forest and around vegetable gardens. What they don't eat they sell door-to-door.

"Hurry up my dear... come and see over here. There

---

1. *Chilo* (pronounced *jee-law*) = cricket

2. *pon* = one kind of popular authentic Lao dish, usually made of *padeak* and fish. The fish is boiled in clear *padeak* soup; grilled garlic and chillies may be added to taste

are plenty of holes. Come quickly," Uncle Seng calls to his wife.

"Where?" she asks, bending down and peering at the ground.

"Here. Quick ... dig them out quickly," urges her husband.

By noon their baskets are usually full. After keeping what they need, they sell the rest. "*Chilo!* Anybody for *chilo*? Very cheap. Three for a hundred kip only," Uncle Seng calls to the neighbours as he tries to sell their surplus catch. The people of Phoumone Village are used to his familiar voice almost daily, especially during the rainy season. When they hear him, they buy some.

Today, despite being a bit tired, they are very happy because they have caught a large amount of *chilo*. Back at home, his wife sets aside enough insects for their dinner and then he takes the balance out to sell.

When he returns, his wife asks, "How was your luck today? Did you sell them all? How much money did you make?"

The couple lead a simple life. Their wants are basic. Their bamboo house with thatched roof has remained the same, while their neighbours have built timber houses with corrugated sheets or tiled roofs.

On this particular day, Uncle Seng goes out to hunt for crickets as usual, but his wife does not accompany him. It is not his lucky day. No matter how hard he looks, he finds only empty holes. He is downhearted when after several hours of searching, he has caught only four or five crickets. But he does not give up easily. Instead, he heads towards Nakham Village, about two kilometres away.

The people of Nakham grow sweet potatoes, chokos and cabbages. He notices that the cabbages are huge and look better than those grown in his own village. After chatting to a local, he learns that the villagers use imported chemical fertilisers and pesticides. Under the circumstances, he thinks it unlikely that he will find any crickets here because they would not have survived. How wrong he is! When he looks around, he finds *chilo* holes everywhere, particularly along the fences of the vegetable gardens.

He is delighted and starts to dig into the holes without delay.

"Uncle, after you finish, don't forget to fill up the holes, OK?" a garden owner calls out.

That day, while Uncle Seng is returning home, some villagers see his basket full of *chilo* and want to buy some.



He wants to take them home first but they are insistent.

"Uncle don't go yet ... please sell us some *chilo* ... did you catch a lot?" a woman grabs at his basket impatiently.

"Today I filled one basket," he says.

"I want some. I want some," another woman shouts.

"I think we should share them... a few each... at least," an old lady suggests.

Eventually, the four families divide the catch, leaving nothing for Uncle Seng himself. They pay him and go back to their houses delighted.

Later that night, members of these families feel dizzy. They vomit and suffer from terrible stomach pains. The village headman, the only one with a car, has to rush them to the hospital.

In the morning, Uncle Seng is surprised when the headman comes to his house.

"Uncle Seng, where did you catch those *chilo* that you sold to the villagers?"

"I... uh... dug... uh... from around Nakham Village. Why?" he asks, sensing something is wrong.

"Do you know that those *chilo* were contaminated with pesticides? All the people who ate your *chilo* had food poisoning. I took them to the hospital last night."

“How are they now?” Uncle Seng asks, quite concerned.

“They are all very ill. Some of them are on a drip.”

“I saw they used pesticides in their gardens. Other insects had died but the crickets survived. I was surprised but thought they would be OK to eat,” Uncle Seng tries explaining to the headman.

“Not at all. The doctor said that these *chilo* have grown resistant. They survive but chemicals have accumulated in their bodies making them toxic.”

Three days later, the village headman summons everybody to a meeting. “A few days ago members of four families ate *chilo* caught by Uncle Seng around Nakham village. They all vomited and if I hadn’t got them to the hospital in time, they would have gone to the place where the roosters do not crow<sup>3</sup>. I can see that some people in our village have already started using chemical fertilisers. It would be better if you stopped using them right now because the consequence may be deaths in our village.”

The village headman advises the villagers to start using natural fertilisers produced from buffalo and cow

manure. He suggests replacing expensive chemical mixtures with locally available plants such as *kheua khao ho* roots<sup>4</sup>, bitter white cedar, kaffir leaves and lemon grass. The trick, he says, is to crush and mix these plants with water and use the mixture to water the gardens.

In the beginning, no one believes him, but they see that those who have followed his advice have vegetables that are growing well, and are not eaten by bugs. They eventually agree that the village headman knows what he is talking about and his ideas are gradually adopted by everybody. An added bonus is they no longer have to spend money on expensive chemical fertilisers or pesticides.

Uncle Seng and his wife thank the village headman for not taking any action against them. The fact that he did not know about chemicals spared him, and he knows he will never forget his mistake.

Uncle Seng and his wife can now smile and joke with each other when walking between the rows of the village gardens. The couple continue to hunt for crickets in and around their own village. They still sell them to the villagers because people are confident that the crickets

3. ‘The place where the roosters do not crow’ is a Lao idiom meaning the place where people go after they die.

4. *Kheua khao ho* = a kind of root with a bitter taste used for medicinal purposes. The scientific name is: *Menispermaceae*.

are not poisonous.

## Title Deed

*Damlongsay Lonhsaithane*

Uncle Somboun has lived in this village all his life. At fifty he is a healthy and hard-working man. Every morning he gets up early to lead his cattle to pasture. He normally seeks areas dense with new shoots which his animals enjoy most. As a result of the good grazing, the cattle are fat and healthy. In the late afternoon he collects firewood as he leads his animals home. It's a daily ritual enabling him to maintain his independence.

The war broke out while Somboun was still a child, severely disrupting his schooling. He studied up to the third grade only. His lack of education, he felt, had limited his ability to achieve more in life. So when he attended any religious ceremony he would pray, "Dear God, in my next life please bless me with a good education."

One day, Somboun overheard people in his village talking about a company which had received a twenty-five-year lease of land from the government to grow coffee. Representatives of the firm would be coming to the village for an inspection. Two days after hearing the news, the village headman announced a meeting over the loudspeaker, urging everyone to be present. He told them to be ready to indicate the boundaries of their

plots so that company officials could check land titles. This evidence of ownership would later determine compensation for the use of their land.

The majority of villagers were easy-going people and did as advised, but Somboun did not attend, reasoning that if he leased his land, he would have no place to work or graze his cattle.

One day later while he was resting under his house, the headman and a stranger approached. The headman said to him. "Uncle, why didn't you come to the meeting to tell them where your plot of land is? Everyone else has done so already."

"We need to obtain evidence of ownership," the other man added ominously,

"Well, my land is outside the area allocated to the company. I had no reason to attend," Somboun replied casually.

At that, the headman and the company official turned and walked off. Only later did Somboun realise that this man was the boss of the company.

The following day, Somboun went bushwalking near his farmland. He spotted many varieties of hardwood trees that had been standing tall for many years. Monkeys swung from branch to branch, chattering happily.

He admitted to himself sadly that in the future the forest would soon be gone, and with it the monkeys too.

Two days later, Somboun heard the headman's next announcement. This time he asked all land owners to come to the community centre and collect their compensation. Everyone was happy to receive payment from the company. They did not consider the consequences that would follow. Somboun knew money could not replace this beautiful natural environment. Money would be spent eventually but nature, if cared for properly, would last forever.

A week went by. Somboun saw three cars drive through the village. Soon after, he heard a very loud noise. Though it was coming from the other side of the village it was deafening. The boss had ordered his workmen to fell the trees using chainsaws. The process of clearing land for the company's coffee plantation continued for over ten days. Soon trees of all sizes were lying all over the land.

One day the boss came onsite to inspect the work completed so far and noticed a sizeable clump of trees left untouched.

"Who owns that land?" he asked his workers.

"That belongs to Somboun. He did not allow us to

include the land in our title," one worker replied.

"Huh. That's a real eyesore. Why don't you just cut them all down? They look so odd standing there," the boss yelled.

"The owner forbids us to do so," another worker replied, continuing to cut into the trunks of trees.

"I see...so it's that old man," he grumbled. Returning to his car with some of his workers, he started the engine and headed into the village.

Somboun was relaxing at home when a car pulled into his front yard. He went to the window to see who was coming. Seeing the company boss along with two of his workers getting out of the car, he thought that it must be something important for them to come to him.

"Somboun, are you at home?" the boss called out loudly from below.

"Yes, I am home, please come upstairs," he yelled back.

The three strangers climbed the stairs to meet him. The boss tried to build a rapport with Somboun and convince him to sign over the title deed for his land. Somboun remained unconvinced and uninterested. When the trio realised that the usual entreaties would not work, they left without saying goodbye.

"What are we going to do with this stubborn old man?" the boss asked his workers as they drove off.

"Simple. We just need to apply some force until he gives in," the first worker suggested.

"Yeah, that is what we must do. We will show him who he's dealing with," another worker added.

"Good," the boss said quietly.

Several days later, Somboun took a stroll around his property. He noticed that several trees had been cut down within the boundary of his land, but he said nothing as the damage was minimal. He mumbled to himself that if they were to grow coffee plants, they couldn't plant more than ten trees in that area anyway.

Five days later, he strolled around his property again. This time there was evidence that they had advanced further into his property. Somboun was extremely worried and feared he would lose his land. His face showed signs of extreme anger. He stood silently for a while. After composing himself together, he approached one of the workers who were clearing his land.

"Stop immediately. You have already advanced too far into my property," Somboun yelled.

"I know nothing about that. The boss just ordered us to keep clearing. We are only doing what we have been

told," he replied casually.

"You can't do such a thing," Somboun mumbled, walking away angrily.

In the distance, he noticed the boss ordering his workers around. He decided to take his anger to the right place.

"You know what you are doing here is not right," he screamed at the boss.

"What is not right? We are just following the plan here. You are making a serious accusation, but, if you are not happy, we should go and see the headman. Such accusations are not acceptable, you know that," the boss replied unperturbed.

"Ok, I will report this to the headman when we meet there tonight," spat Somboun, his face full of rage. He stood seething silently, his eyes like red hot chillies. He glared at the boss without blinking. Then, full of dignity he turned and walked away. The boss was unconcerned.

Later that evening, Somboun reported to the headman's house and waited for the boss' arrival. After waiting for some time, the headman ordered his assistant to fetch the company man. Somboun waited and waited. Finally, at 6 pm a blue van arrived. The boss got out car-



rying a folder and came upstairs to meet them.

“What is going on? This uncle made a report that your company has cleared the trees on his property. Is that true?” the headman asked.

The boss denied any wrongdoing as he pulled out a document from his folder and showed it around. “We did not clear his property. Do you have anything to prove we have done so? It’s his word against ours. We can go and survey the land. See, this document shows our boundaries.”

“Well, I don’t have any documents, but I know exactly where my boundaries lie,” Somboun asserted. But sadness and defeat had appeared on his face.

“You just can’t say things like that. You must have documents to prove it,” the boss added spitefully.

“Somboun, listen to me. I don’t think you have a case here. If you don’t have any evidence, you can’t prove you own the land,” said the headman to an embittered Somboun.

Somboun simply had no evidence. He was even more upset that he was uneducated and could not defend his property. In the end, he had no way of justifying his position. Instead he left wearing his sadness like a child. The boss grinned victoriously.

On his way home, Somboun saw people celebrating, making him even sadder. As he feared, he was close to losing his property to the company. He went home and lay down with his arms over his forehead, feeling hopeless before dozing off to sleep without dinner.

The next morning he woke up, rubbed his eyes and looked outside. For once the sky was clear. He got out of his bed, had a quick wash, got dressed and went downstairs. It was then, he saw a stranger riding a motorbike toward his front steps.

“Uncle, where can I find the village headman?” he asked, sitting astride his motorbike.

“He’s not at home. I heard he took a sick person to the hospital in the town. Please come in and have a drink.” He invited the man in with the courtesy common amongst village people.

“What brings you here?” Somboun asked when the guest came upstairs.

“Well, I am the head of the Land Management Authority. I’ve come to inspect the project land,” he replied.

“In that case, can you help me?” Somboun asked expectantly.

“What sort of help?”

Somboun told him about the issues he had with the company. The inspector volunteered to accompany him on a visit to its office. There he asked the man for the title deeds of the land adjacent to Somboun's.

About an hour later, they all went to the site together. After properly measuring the land, they found out that Somboun's plot had in fact been encroached upon.

"Somboun is right ...you have advanced into his land by almost twenty metres," the inspector said.

"My boundary extends to there," Somboun pointed.

The boss was stunned at this sudden reversal and said, "Well if it is so, I have no problems accepting your judgement. We may have made a mistake by going over your boundary. We are prepared to compensate you for your loss." He spoke softly with hands joined together.

Somboun being a fair man was willing to forgive. He showed himself to be generous and kind. "Don't worry," he said.

The boss, knowing his guilt, was amazed at Somboun's magnanimity. It was clear he was not even going to ask for any compensation or lay charges. So as a conciliatory gesture, the company would help Somboun get his land title, and pay any associated costs in full.

A week later, Somboun saw another man on motor-bike approaching him. He put his hand into a briefcase and pulled out a document which was a title deed. Somboun was ecstatic. His eyes rolled with delight. He had never possessed a title deed before. He was conscious now that nobody could claim ownership of his land.

# New Hope

*New Hope*

*Neuy Phetthavong*

The raindrops drum loudly on Somdee's corrugated roof. During a particularly strong wind, two sheets of tin are blown forty metres away from his house.

The following day, it stops raining. The sun starts to shine, the clouds gradually vanish and blue sky begins to spread everywhere. Everything that is alive, humans and animals must again struggle to survive, searching for food.

Somdee, a fifty-year old man, is thinking about how he can improve the livelihood of his family. He seriously considers working in the city because he is sure that he will earn more money.

"Please don't go, dear," his wife Chanh pleads. "Getting something in this village would be much better, don't you think?"

"Oiy! Working in the coffee farm? I have had enough of that," Somdee answers.

"So then, what will you do in the city?" she retorts. "You have neither the skills nor work experience."

"I will do anything. You just stay home and I will send money back to you."

The next day, Somdee travels to the city to find

work. He approaches a couple of factories but has no luck. They want people with education and experience. Disappointment follows disappointment and he considers returning home.

Then the following week, he gets work on a construction site in Parkse District. His first salary is 300,000 kip, just enough for personal expenses.

He works hard and three months later his pay jumps to 500,000 kip. He is able to save some money and send it to his wife.

Chanh is very pleased to receive the money. She lives within her means and wants to save something so that they can buy a plot of land for coffee farming. Now their dream might be fulfilled, she thinks to herself.

Every three months, Somdee visits his wife. After a year has passed, Chanh has saved some money. One day, while he is visiting she says to him, "Dear, I think you should stop working in the city."

"I haven't got enough money yet," he replies.

"I think we have enough. We don't need more," she says.

"No! I have already decided that I want to return," Somdee insists.

The following day, his wife sees him off at the front

gate. She does not want him to go, but once he has made up his mind, there is nothing she can do.

Somdee is dedicated to his work and the following year he is promoted to supervisor. Being in charge, however, means more responsibilities and at times he works until midnight. He doubles his income, and their dreams of owning a coffee plot seem nearer.

Then, one day while climbing the scaffolding to the second floor to check on workers doing some concreting work, he slips and falls to the ground. Everyone runs towards the spot where he is lying. He is lucky to be alive. His boss rushes him to hospital. Somdee has broken his right arm in several places. He is put in a cast and the doctor keeps him in hospital for a month.

“Doctor, how is my arm?” he asks.

“Your arm will heal, but you will never be able to lift anything heavy again.”

The doctor’s words distress him as he feels that it is the end of his construction career. His dreams have been shattered and tears flow down his face. He wonders why heaven has punished him.

When Chanh hears the news, she rushes to the hospital.

“Dear, I can no longer work,” Somdee says to his wife,

his voice full of frustration.

“Please don’t worry about work anymore, just come back and stay at home,” she consoles him.

A month later, Somdee is discharged from hospital. His boss hires a minivan to take him home to Nonsouk Village. He also gives him two million kip as a gratuity.

At home, Somdee cannot handle heavy tasks. He is only able to repair fishing nets, and set fish traps along local canals and streams. The couple soon spends the money he received as a gratuity.

One summer day, officials from an organization visit Nonsouk Village. They see a lot of fertile land and ask the villagers if any of them are interested in raising cattle. They will supply the livestock to those wanting to join their project, but the money will have to be gradually repaid.

Somdee and his wife, seeing a golden opportunity, immediately apply to join this project, saying they will raise four cows. Chanh has the money she had saved and Somdee offers it as advance payment, but one of the representatives replies that it is not necessary at this stage.

“No, I am afraid if we don’t commit the funds we will spend all the money,” argues Somdee. “We intended

doing something useful with our savings. When this project came along, we felt it was the right way to use the money," he explains.

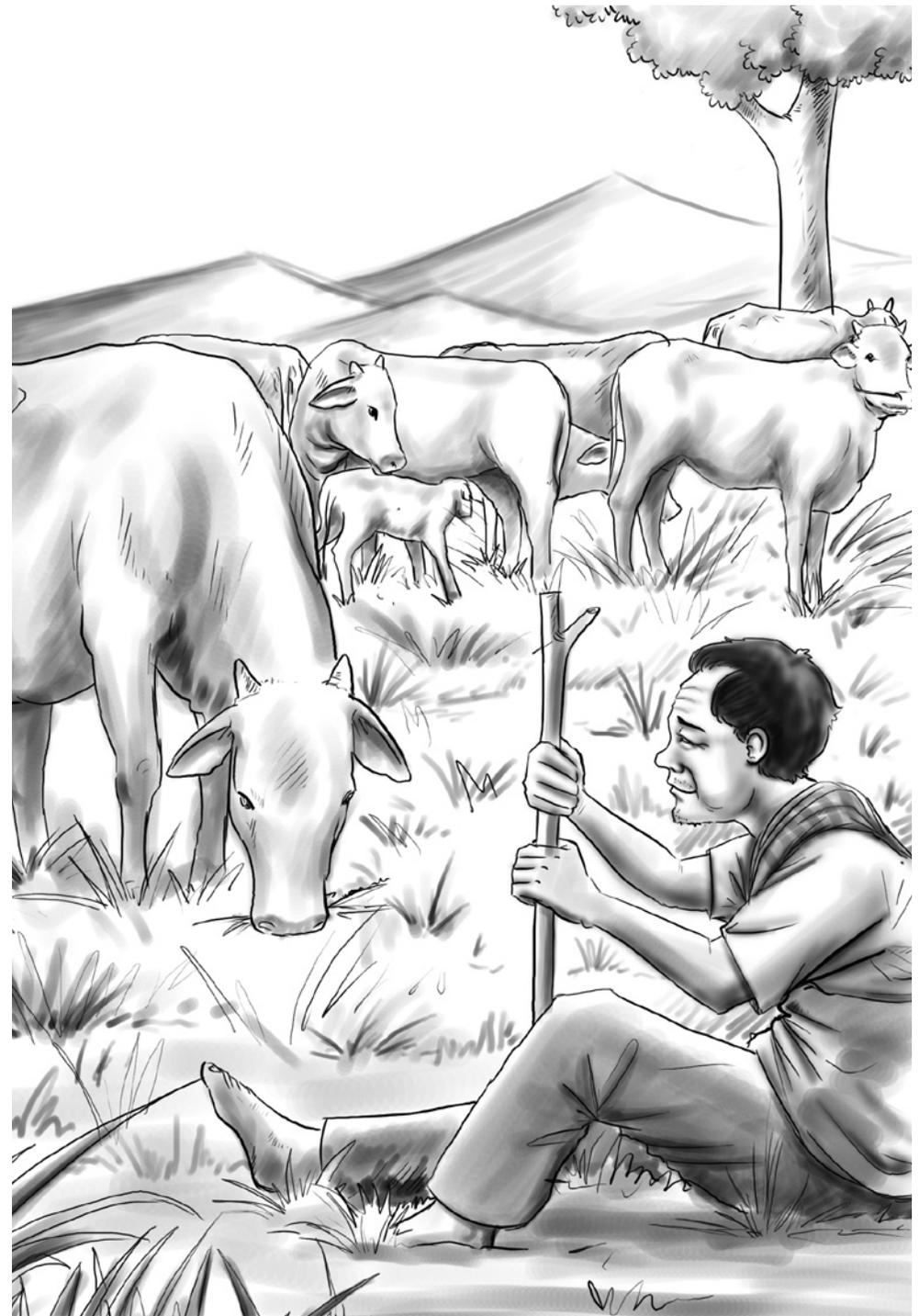
The following week, fifteen cows are brought to the village by the project workers. Somdee is very happy and feels he is about to embark on a new career. It is not hard work. He just needs to take the herd to the field for grazing.

After two years, they have two new calves. One day, Chanh takes lunch to her husband.

"Hello, dear," says Somdee, when he sees his wife approaching.

"We have big well-fed cattle. It will not be long before we have a big herd," Chanh says, proudly watching the cattle graze.

"Yeah, in four or five years, we could sell some," Somdee agrees. "We will no longer live in poverty. Yes, the proverb 'Where there's a will there is a way' is true," Somdee laughs. His wife smiles in response. Both of them tilt their faces up and look at the blue sky.



# The Good Man of the Village

*The Good Man of the Village*

*Choulamany Saybouakeo*

Every person born into this world has to struggle for survival. But does anyone ever question the aim of life? Some say it is to accumulate wealth and glory. Others say happiness is the goal. Yet, others contend that there is no real happiness. If there is happiness, it's only temporary. However, those who are truly happy, are the ones who help others without expecting anything in return.

For three years Somkhit worked as an agricultural officer in Parkse, a city in southern Laos. After marriage, he decided to move to Parksong to live with his wife. All his friends asked, "Somkhit, why are you moving to the countryside? If you work here two more years, you will be promoted. Your future will be bright. Think carefully. We are concerned you are making the wrong decision."

He understood his friends' good intentions and their concern about him. Their comments filled his mind until the day came when he was leaving.

"Dear, I hope you won't regret your decision later," his wife, Vanchanh, said to her loving husband.

"No, I'm clear about my decision," he answered. "Working for the government enabled me to make a lot of contributions, but working in the countryside will also

contribute to the country as a whole."

When he was a student at the College of Agriculture, he went to Parksong for his practicals and it was there that he met Vanchanh, a slim girl with an oval face. Despite being a village girl, Vanchanh was clever, confident, and easy to get on with. They kept in touch by mail and telephone, but because of circumstances they had to delay their marriage. It wasn't until the third year in the provincial Department of Agriculture that their love could really come to fruition.

Now Somkhit found himself living with his wife in Nawai Village, twenty kilometres south of the town of Parksong. Vanchanh's mother had passed away earlier in the year and her father four years before. A small coffee plot had been left for their daughter and son-in-law but the harvest was meagre, as the few trees that survived were too old to bear crops. After her father's death, nobody else had stepped in to care for the plot. It rapidly deteriorated into wild bushland.

A few days after moving into her parent's neglected plot, Vanchanh asked Somkhit, "Dear, do you have any ideas how we can earn an income? I was thinking about growing some vegetables and raising ducks and chickens. What do you think? Are we going to grow coffee like

everybody else around here?"

"No, we don't have enough capital and I don't want to follow the crowd doing things just because others are doing so. I think we should have ideas of our own. If we want to do something we should try something different."

"What, do you suggest?"

"Well, I think we should grow vegetables and raise poultry for our own use, so that we don't need to buy them from the market."

Vanchanh smiled at her husband, feeling confident that she had chosen the right man. Living with Somkhith, she would not go hungry.

All went well with Somkhith's mixed vegetable garden. He planted chilli, eggplant and snake beans. Along the fence there were cucumbers and papayas. At times like this, Somkhith really appreciated the knowledge he had acquired in the department. His garden was like a laboratory, enabling him to experiment with many kinds of seedlings. He wanted some money to buy the adjacent land for a fish pond, but he didn't know where he could raise the capital.

A year passed before the young couple's crops came in. The garden that neighbours thought untidy and

messy was now a productive green patch. Most people in Nawai grew coffee, cabbages, chokos and potatoes to feed themselves or to sell in the local market. When they needed other kinds of vegetables, meat or fish, they went to the market in town. When they saw Somkhith's garden, they often bought from him instead. Soon he could not meet the demand.

Vanchanh was full of praise for her husband. "Dear, you did the right thing growing a variety of plants."

"I have seen that everyone grows the same commercial crops, which is risky. If we had done the same, prices would have dropped and we would have gone bankrupt," Somkhith explained.

"They only think of money."

"Yes, but sensible development shouldn't be like that. We cannot just run after money. We have to think about longer term food security. Does our happiness depend only on money?"

"No. Not at all."

"That's it...If happiness meant only on money, I would have married the daughter of a rich man in a big city."

Vanchanh smiled wryly at her husband's words.

"You're insulting me."

"No, it's just the truth."

As time passed, Somkhith got to know and be comfortable with the villagers of Nawai. He had some ideas for the village and so he went to see the headman.

"How are you doing, Somkhith? You have been here for two years and people know you well now. You should be the village headman instead of me," he joked.

Somkhith, a serious man, blandly replied. "No, I don't have sufficient experience."

"So why does the wind blow you this way today?" the headman teased.

"Just wanted some help, and to chat... I have noticed that some villagers have empty gardens. I would like them to come and learn from me how to grow crops. If you support the initiative, I think they will take it up," Somkhith said.

"Aren't you afraid they will compete with you at the market?"

"No. I really want them to have more income for their families."

"You are so generous with your knowledge. It's not easy to find people like you."

Three days later, five families came to learn how to manage a mixed garden. Somkhith's garden had become a model for what could be achieved. Vanchanh would

watch him from the window as he explained to the villagers how to look after various plants. His gestures and jokes would have them laughing their heads off.

On some days she made papaya salad from the fruit in her garden. Other times she prepared a vegetable salad with sesame seeds and asked all the trainees to join in the delicious meals. Soon, the villagers grew to love this young and generous couple.

One month after the training, the headman told the villagers that they could cultivate an empty piece of land, one kilometre from the village that they had previously cleared. The villagers, who had attended the training sessions, were very keen to try out what they had learned. After four months their labour began to bear fruit. The following year the villagers didn't need to buy vegetables from the town any more.

Somkhith's positive contribution created a deep and positive impression on the headman. Since the first day Somkhith had come to the village, the headman knew him to be special. His knowledge and his willingness to share it had enabled the villagers to live well. Some of the good things they had talked about and anticipated had already become a reality.

One day the headman went to visit Somkhith and



Vanchanh at home.

"We are glad you have time to visit us," Somkhit greeted the community leader.

"Well before this you came to see me...it's only fair I come to you," he replied.

"Good, feel free to visit us as often as time permits," Vanchanh added politely.

"Time's always a problem. Who says being the headman is easy? I've come to ask if Somkhit would replace me as the headman. What do you think, Vanchanh?"

"No, no way, sir. I do not agree," Vanchanh protested.

"Why are you stopping him? Are you afraid he will find a second wife?" the headman teased.

"No, not that," Vanchanh said with a smile as she looked at her husband's face.

"When are you going to have a baby? You're the only ones in the village without a child." The headman had wanted to ask this question for a long time.

"We don't want one, just yet. When we are ready, we will," Vanchanh replied unabashed.

The headman glanced at the small bookcase full of books that Somkhit had collected.

"Somkhit, it's good that you have time to read," the

headman remarked.

"When I'm alone I read them and nourish my brain. If I don't read, I don't learn."

"That's good. I know you often have good advice for us all. I have a problem and I want to talk to you about it."

"What's the problem?"

"As you know, our village has no electricity. For two years we have asked the district authority to help us with this, but until now nothing has been done. We don't know how much longer we can live in darkness."

Somkhith thought about it for a while, and then said, "If the villagers really want it, I have an idea. I don't know if you'll agree."

"Tell me about it," the headman said. Vanchanh also wanted to know. Somkhith told him that a small hydro generator with the capacity to produce electricity enough for thirty households was currently available. The generator could be imported from China for fifteen million kip.

"It's not really that expensive," Vanchanh remarked.

"There are twenty-eight households in our village. How many watts can a household consume?" the headman asked.

"Twenty watts per household. We cannot use more than that," Somkhith explained.

Somkhith added that he had seen people using such a generator in the south, but the villagers had to follow, very strictly, some basic rules. They had to collect the money for the equipment and share the cost of its maintenance. But the most important thing for the generator to function was they had to have flowing water. So it was up to the villagers to protect the river and the watershed. If the river became dry, the generator would become useless.

"We really have to get it. We have wanted electricity for such a long time," the headman said, determination in his voice.

The following day, the headman called a meeting at the local hall to tell them of the plan to install a generator. The villagers were happy but some were not sure it would work. In the end, all present agreed to contribute towards the purchase of the generator. Those villagers who did not have the money were allowed to pay later. After the meeting, Somkhith and three other young men went up the nearby hill to survey the best location for installing the generator that would tap Ju Creek, three kilometres away.

Somkhith contacted a friend in Parkse, asking him to handle the purchasing process and to find a reliable person to install the generator. His friend advised him to build a seven-metre long canal to divert the water. A waterfall at the end of this canal was considered the ideal location for the machine. Somkhith and eight villagers worked for three days to complete the job as planned.

One week later a Toyota roared into the village. Two tradesmen, a generator, a roll of large electrical cables and other equipment fell out. The villagers who had never seen those things before gathered around the car with great curiosity. Somkhith and the headman divided the young people into two groups. Somkhith took one group and one of the workmen to haul the generator and equipment up the hill for installation. The headman took the other group to put up pylons and attach the cables to households. After two days the work was complete. The villagers enjoyed a rest after three days of hard work. With some relief, Somkhith returned to his garden. The headman had a plan in mind. In two more days there would be a ceremony to celebrate the arrival of electricity. It was an auspicious time for the village

The following day, Thao Ki, the village motorbike mechanic, ran to find the headman.

Huffing and puffing, he shouted, "Sir! Sir! Somkhith has been bitten by a snake!"

"Oh dear! How? Where is he now?" the headman asked with a sinking feeling.

"We sent him to the hospital in a truck early this morning."

Soon the news of Somkhith's misfortune spread through the village like wild fire. The villagers were anxious for his well-being. The headman was restless, fearing Somkhith was in danger of losing his life. He rushed to visit him in the hospital. None of the villagers was able to sleep that night. They waited for news from those who had taken Somkhith to the hospital. A day and a night passed, and still there was no news.

On the third day, the headman's Hyundai returned to the village. The villagers rushed to hear the news. The headman's eyes were red, and his face was pale from lack of sleep. He took a deep breath and said, "Somkhith is now out of danger. He was bitten by a green snake, which is not deadly. Had it been a cobra, he would have been dead by now. My dear friends, they say, good people neither drown nor burn. Isn't that true of Somkhith?"

"Yes, that's true," the villagers shouted in unison.

# Natural Resources

*Phayvanh Phengphanh*

Loung Khamdee sat on a hillock, watching over the thirteen cattle that grazed the green fields. He remembered what his father had said to him before he passed away many years ago.

"Khamdee, please don't sell this land. It has some treasure in it."

"How do you know that, Dad?" Loung Khamdee had asked.

"When I was a soldier, we saw French people come and dig some rocks from here. We chased them out, threatening them with our guns, and they ran for their lives," he chuckled at the memory.

"Do you know what kind of treasure, Dad?"

"I don't know, but it might be valuable. We have inherited this land. It's God's gift to us, so don't let anybody take it away. Remember this well, son. You have to look after it and pass it on to the next generation."

Loung Khamdee remembered his father's words well. Every time he took his cattle to the field, he would look around, scanning the surface of the land, hoping to find evidence of some treasure, but he never did. Sometimes, he and his wife would use a pick to dig for crickets

to eat, but they never found anything else.

One day, while Loung Khamdee was leading his cattle to the field, he overheard villagers talking. "Next month a company is coming to excavate land for minerals, right here in our village," one said.

Loung Khamdee went to see the village headman to ask what was going on.

"Is it true that there will be a survey company coming here soon?"

"I haven't been told anything about it, yet," was the reply.

"Well, but the villagers are talking about it?"

"I don't know. Where did they hear it from?"

Loung Khamdee led his cattle to the field, worrying about what was going to happen in the near future. He had a bad feeling about it as he recalled his father's warnings. He was afraid that the company would excavate and find minerals on his land. If this were to happen, what could he do about it?

The worries were clear on his face. His wife noticed that her husband had been uneasy for a few days. Finally she asked, "Dear, what are you worrying about? Please tell me?"

"Oh...I've heard that a company is coming to exca-

vate for minerals around here," he answered.

"What has it got to do with us?"

"I'm afraid they will come to our field, too."

Two weeks later, when the cold mist hadn't quite disappeared from the air, Loung Khamdee walked out of his house, to see four big trucks full of equipment parked in the village. He watched as a man went in to see the headman. After that, the four trucks headed towards the fields at the edge of the village. The accompanying workers started to build camps and install the machinery straight away. Eager to know what was going on, he followed them to the site and walked over to a man who appeared to be the head of the group.

"Where are you going to dig?" asked Loung Khamdee.

"From here to that hill over there," the man pointed.

Several months went by when one day Loung Khamdee and his wife saw a crowd of people gathered as they walked to his field. He pushed himself forward to see what was going on.

"Oh! This is my cow. What killed it? Dear, our cow is dead," he called to his wife, Pa Phorn.

"How did it die?" she asked hysterically.

The villagers were standing around talking and

speculating, but no one appeared to know what had happened. A middle-aged man ran over to tell them that five more cows were lying dead, upstream, near the river bank. Loung Khamdee and his wife were shocked and ran with the rest of the crowd to see. The dead cows were another farmer's.

It was most unusual for so many cows to die like this. It became an issue of great concern. That night, the villagers gathered for a meeting at the headman's house. Loung Thit Peng spoke first, "A couple of days ago, I noticed that some patches of grass around our village had become yellow and withered. My cows ate the grass around there and went down to drink water from the river. The next thing I knew they were dead."

"Then, it must be the gold mining company causing this problem. We have never had things like this happen before," Loung Khamdee added.

"We must demand compensation for our dead cows," a young man, of about twenty-five shouted loudly.

"We don't have evidence. We can't accuse them without proof," Loung Thong reminded them.

"I suggest that we go to see the vet in the town and let the experts tell us what the real cause of the deaths was," the headman suggested.

"Yes, good idea. Yes, we agree," many responded.

Everyone agreed that Loung Khamdee and Loung Thit Peng would take one of the dead cows in Thao Seng's truck to the vet in the town. The three of them waited anxiously for the results.

"We cut the cow's stomach open and tested the residues of food in its gut. We found the grass had traces of mercury, which is used to separate gold from the soil and rocks," the vet explained to them.

When they got back to the village, Loung Khamdee and Loung Thit Peng went to report to the headman. The next day, he accompanied the two men to see the manager of the company.

"The boss is not here, he will return in a couple of days. We cannot make any decisions for him. Please come back in two days," a secretary told them.

When Loung Khamdee walked to his field, he was surprised to see workers attacking the soil with machinery. He had never seriously thought that they would come as far as his property. By now he suspected that the treasure on his land was gold. It was very valuable and desired by everyone.

Loung Khamdee sat on the grass, watching the men working. He thought to himself, these workers must earn

a very high wage and be well-fed, because they never got tired. He sat there for an hour, thinking and watching before heading home.

As soon as he walked in the door, Pa Phorn told him, "Dear, it's good that you're home. Do you know that the fish in the river are dead? The headman said we shouldn't eat them because they're poisoned."

"If the fish are poisoned, then we can't drink or use the water from the river. What do we do?" Loung Khamdee asked.

"The headman said we can use the water from his well."

"How can we live like this?"

"Tomorrow, he has called all the villagers to a meeting with the company," she said.

The next day, the village headman outlined to the company manager the problems that the villagers were encountering. The manager at first tried to deny any responsibility. Then Loung Thit Peng stood up and told him about the autopsy on the dead cow, and how five of his cattle had died.

"You have to pay compensation for our dead animals and for the fields that you dumped the contaminated soil on," Loung Khamdee demanded.

The manager, after a side discussion with his staff said, "We will compensate you for sure, but at the moment we have no money coming in. The money that we need to pay for the workers' wages is also delayed. So please be patient, and give us ten days. In that time we will consider all the environmental impacts of our activities on the village. Then we will find a way to rectify and restore the livelihood of the villagers."

The words of the company manager seemed reasonable and the villagers agreed to wait for ten days.

The villagers were surprised to see the men working day and night. Loud mechanical noises could be heard all around the village. On the eighth day, there was silence. The villagers thought that the workers were having a rest after such long and consistent effort.

The next day, one of the villagers walking to his farm in the early morning passed the camp site about eight hundred metres from the village. He was surprised because it was unusually quiet. He couldn't see any machinery, not even a single truck. Everywhere he looked it was empty. Only the ashes from the cooking fires were left. He ran back to the village with a loud cry.

"The company has gone! They have all gone!" His loud and anxious voice woke everyone in the village up.

One by one they emerged from their houses.

"Dear. Wake up. Wake up. The company has gone." Pa Phorn woke her husband up.

"You mean they've left?" Loung Khamdee didn't want to believe it.

Loung Thit Peng ran down the steps, yelling at anyone who would listen, "My goodness! Five cattle dead. Who will compensate me now?"

Amidst the confusion, Loung Khamdee went to his field and sat down on his favorite log. He thought of his father's words, 'Don't sell this land'. Loung Khamdee hadn't sold his land to anyone: they had come and dug it up without his consent, much less offered him any compensation. He wished that everything would just go back to the way it had been before the mining company came. If he could go back, he would not feel so exploited and angry.

He muttered, "Father, I don't have the ability to stop this. Father, I'm sorry." He felt very sad and sobbed bitterly.



## Uncle Ko

Olisa Khamvongsa

Despite his light frame and sixty years Uncle Ko is quite strong. He has wavy hair, round eyes and a rather flat nose. His incisors show when he smiles. He is friendly and generous towards people in need.

People buy firewood from him which he cuts from his wood lot. He puts a lot of effort into solving problems that arise in Sengthip Village. He gazes at a clump of *khi lek*<sup>1</sup> trees which he has planted on eight hundred square metres of land. He admires their symmetry. The trees are bushy with plenty of branches that sprout into a dense canopy. Despite their sturdy appearance, these trees are softwoods suitable for making charcoal. The villagers like to make *kaeng khi lek*, a soup that they believe is rich in iron.

When he looks at his small plantation, he feels great satisfaction that his efforts bring in a daily income of at least a hundred thousand kip from the wood and the

---

1. *Khi Lek* is also known as *Cassia Siamea*, *Hematinic*, *Cassod Tree*, *Thai Copper Pod*, *Black-wood Cassia*, *Bombay Blackwood*, *Iron Wood*, *Siamese Senna*, *Thailand Shower*, *Yellow Cassia*.

According to the information found on various sources, *khi lek* leaves are high in alkaloids and vitamin A, not iron as believed by many Lao. *khi lek* literally means iron residues. Oil from the seeds is a rich source of fatty acids.

leaves. Others have grown eucalyptus and rubber trees only to witness the detrimental effects on the soil and environment. Ko opted instead for the native *khi lek*.

If he had his way, he would prefer not to have monoculture but his land and capital are limited. He repeatedly reminds others that growing only one species of trees is not the way to nurture a forest, that good forestry is about growing a diversity of species in order to achieve a balanced ecology.

This plantation of *khi lek* was created about twenty years ago when there was a serious crisis at Sengthip Village. The Mak Vanh Creek at the top of the village almost ran dry, and with it went the fish supply. The drying up of the river was caused by the continuous and indiscriminate felling of trees by villagers. The whole area was gradually denuded and local agriculture suffered heavily from the lack of water.

By the time the villagers realized their mistake, it was too late. Some villagers moved to other areas.

"Are you going to leave the village, just like the others?" Ko had asked his neighbour Khamkeo.

"I'm sorry but I have to. There is nothing to do around here. Nothing is the same anymore," a disheartened Khamkeo had replied.

At that time, Ko was about 40 years and had just started his family.

"Where do you think you might go? Everywhere things are bad," said a worried Ko. He repeated the same thing to all the departing villagers. Alas, they chose not to listen to him.

One even retorted, "We will die of hunger if we stay here. You can stay if you want, but we'd rather make a new life elsewhere."

The villagers started to leave, a few at a time. Eventually Sengthip Village was almost deserted. The nights brought an eerie silence except for the hum of insects. Against all the odds, Ko and some of his relatives stayed put.

One day he called them to a meeting, "If we remain here, we have to work as a team to survive."

Elderly Kongmee supported him. "I agree. We have to listen to Ko and follow his advice."

Twelve people made up the remaining clan. Ko proposed that they build three weirs near the headwaters of Mak Vanh Creek. The men would fell trees to build the framing structures, and the women would carry dirt and rocks to make up the backfill. His clan finally managed to make a series of small cascading reservoirs. When the

first reservoir filled up, the water would flow into the second one, and so on. The clan members used water from the third reservoir for the gardens they cultivated along the banks of the creek.

Initially, Ko and his clan tried planting fast-growing crops such as beans, tomatoes, chillies, corn, pineapples and the like, because they yielded crops in less than a year. Shortly after, they began planting orange, lemon, lime and mango trees.

The first three months were the hardest because Ko and his clan were always hungry. They had to rely on food bought from elsewhere. Meat and fish were almost non-existent. But by the sixth month, their work started to pay off and they soon had an abundance of vegetables with the occasional surplus being sold in the town. Hope was infectious and they began to believe that they would make it. They all appreciated the importance of trees in preserving the environment, and they collectively decided to forbid the felling of trees in the watershed. Further they organised extensive tree planting in the area cleared in order to ensure regular supplies of water.

One day Ko went to town where he met an old friend, Siphanh, who worked at the agriculture office. Siphanh

offered Ko the opportunity to visit a pilot development site in the north of the country. The plan was for selected villagers to experience the achievements of various project sites so that they could emulate similar methods in their own villages.

“I really want you to go because you will find it very beneficial. But all the vacancies may have already been filled because the selection process started last week.”

“So I might have missed the chance,” replied a dejected Ko.

“Leave it to me. I’ll see what I can do,” assured Siphanh.

Despite his late application, Ko was lucky. Another candidate had withdrawn due to domestic problems.

Ko benefited immensely from the site visit. Inspired, he began to envision many projects that would take the village from subsistence to prosperity.

In Luang Namtha, Ko saw a rubber plantation on the edges of ethnic Hmong and Lanten villages. He also travelled to Muang Sing to see the local dispensary. In the small town of Muang Long he learned about the local development, and was struck by the potential of *khi lek* plantations from which the villagers derived their income from firewood. The *khi lek* trees were pruned an-

nually until the trunk was about elbow thick. This stimulated the tree's regeneration for many years.

He thought back to the time when the indiscriminate destruction of trees around his village had caused such a catastrophe. Ko thought that planting wood lots would be a great way of preventing future deforestation while earning an income. During the last stage of the site visit, his team had a chance to cross the border to Sipsongpanna in southern China, to observe a working *khi lek* plantation. Rows of *khi lek* trees along the roads offered cool shelter to motorists and passers-by looking to escape the hot sun. Apart from making great firewood, the *khi lek* trees also had other benefits.

Before returning home, Ko bought ten kilograms of *khi lek* seeds from the locals. During the two-day bus trip back home his brain buzzed with ideas on what else he could do with large tracts of denuded land. He calculated the costs and labour required to realise his dreams.

When he finally got home, his wife Siphay, their eight-year old daughter Boualay, and others greeted him.

"Dad, what's that in your bag?" asked his curious daughter.

"*Khi lek* seeds," replied Ko.

"What are they for?" she asked.

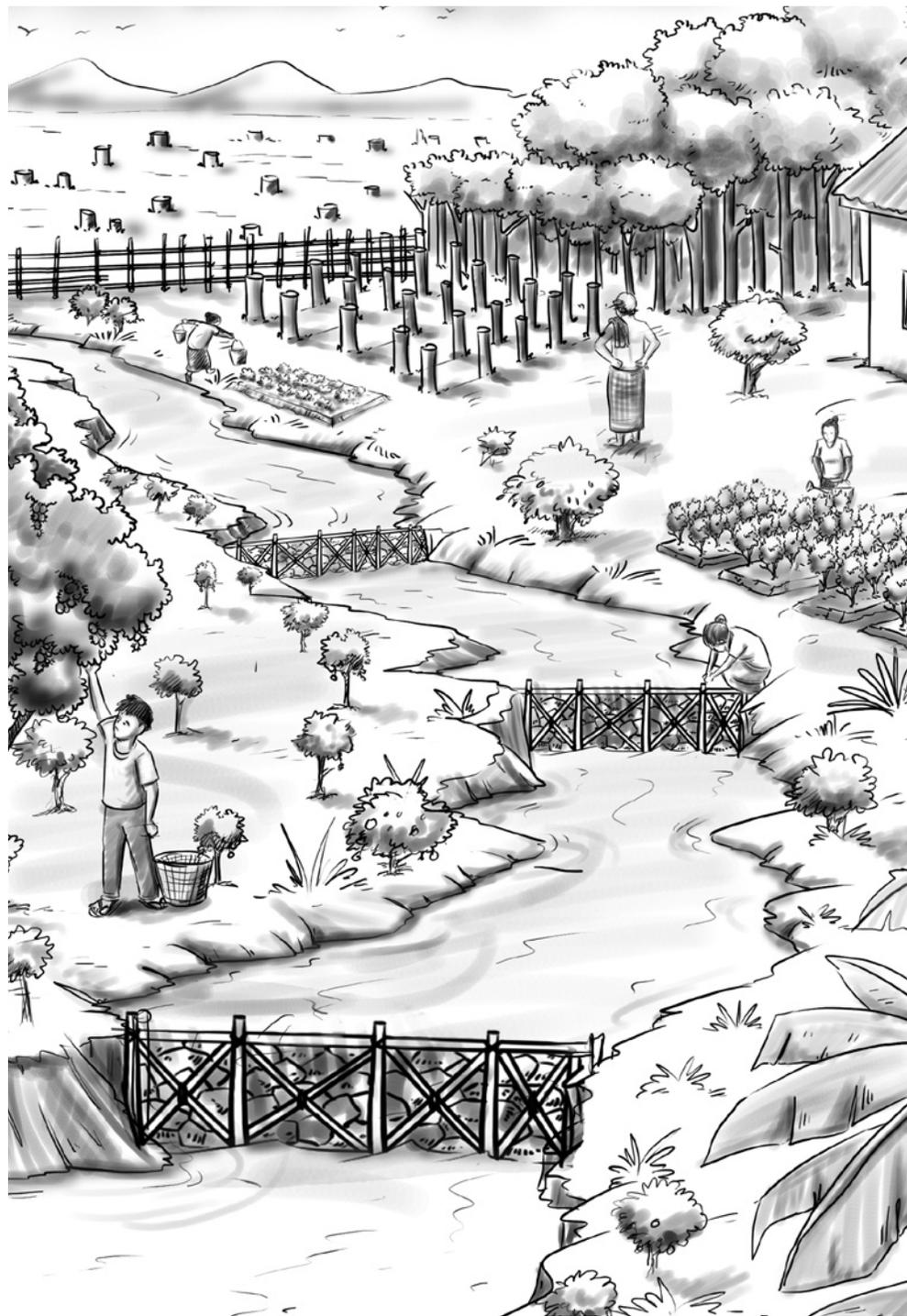
"I can't tell you yet. You will know about it tomorrow," answered a tired Ko.

The following day, Ko called on some of his clan to help put the *khi lek* seed in little plastic bags filled with potting mix. After three months of watering, the seedlings in front of Ko's house were already knee-high.

Ko surveyed various tracts of denuded land and in the end, he reserved an eight-hundred square metre plot. Kongmee, Ko and seven other clan members took a week to plant all the seedlings. They had to water the young trees regularly and remove the weeds to minimise the competition for nutrients.

Ten years later, the young trees matured into thick green vegetation joining areas of wild jungle not far from the village. Ko rostered three households to prune the *khi lek* trees in order that the village had a regular supply of firewood. He divided the plantation into ten lots enabling firewood to be harvested from one lot each year on a rotational basis. In doing so, his extended family managed to derive income from firewood while ensuring the continuous supply of it.

The firewood business became famous and the sub-



ject of village and town gossip. One day Som, who had migrated from Sengthip ten years before, heard about the firewood business at the town market. Unable to contain his curiosity, he urged other ex-Sengthip villagers to return to their old abode in order to check the stories out.

Sometime later, he and a couple of others arrived at the small village. Previously it had consisted of single-storey houses with corrugated tin roofs. Now the homes were two-storey concrete structures, some with rich red terracotta tiles. There was a pump and a power generator for use during the night. Signs of prosperity were everywhere.

The visitors climbed down when the truck stopped. The driver yelled to no one in particular, "Where is everybody? The whole place is so quiet."

A woman muttered, "I can't see anyone around here." A moment later, old Kongmee appeared in the doorway of one of the houses leaning on his walking stick.

"There is grandpa Kongmee," exclaimed Som with delight. "Grandpa, you look great for your age."

"Oh well, I am doing my best, but my strength is nearly gone," murmured a tired Kongmee.

"Where is everyone?" asked a puzzled Som.

"The men are pruning the trees in the plantation, while the women are working the vegetable patches by the river," answered Kongmee.

"And they do this every day?" asked Som.

"Yes, I am the only one left behind in the village," he replied.

The visitors wandered over to the *khi lek* plantation. Ko saw them coming, and thought they wanted to buy firewood.

"Ko, do you remember me, Khamtanh?" an excited older man introduced himself.

"I didn't recognise you," replied Ko, happy to see them.

"It's been about fifteen years since we last saw each other, isn't it?"

"My plantation is about ten years old," agreed Ko.

"You old rascal, you never told anyone that you had all these tricks," teased Khamtanh.

"Well, you guys left, despite my attempts to get you to heed my advice," retorted Ko in an 'I told you so' tone.

"Had I known what was possible, I wouldn't have left," replied Khamtanh sheepishly.

"So tell me Ko, do you cut firewood every day?" Som asked eager to understand what he was seeing.

"Of course," responded a confident Ko.

"Really? Don't you ever run out of stock?" a middle-aged woman asked sceptically.

"No. The plantation has been sub-divided into lots, and each lot is harvested on a rotational basis, allowing the depleted trees time to regenerate," explained Ko.

"Do you sell firewood every day?" asked another inquisitive visitor who did not hear the question the first time.

"Yes, as a matter of fact, we have a hard time meeting demand," Ko replied patiently.

"If that's so, do you plan to enlarge the plantation?" Khamtanh asked.

"No. We are trying not to expand monoculture. It creates an imbalance in the ecology. However, that does not mean that we are against expansion. Instead, we would like to plant trees native to the area. If that can be done, we will begin to return nature back to its original state."

The visitors nodded at Ko's knowledge and wisdom.

While the men were talking about the trees, five women walked back to the village from the riverside gardens with armfuls of produce: vegetables, bananas, and citrus, all clutched in grateful arms.

"We are pleased we visited you," said a grey-haired woman.

"You can come to the plantation this afternoon if you like," suggested Ko's wife.

"Look at this wonderful place you have created! All kinds of produce! You've got everything. You'll never suffer from hunger," muttered one jealous visitor.

"We owe everything to uncle Ko. It was he who created this small paradise," said Ko's young niece proud of her uncle.

"If all the village leaders had this sort of vision and the ability to implement positive changes in rural areas, Laos would definitely prosper," said Khamtanh as he patted Ko's shoulder.

## Land Grab

*Ketmany Keoduangdee*

*The various ethnic groups in the highland regions of Parksong District, and the wider area of the Boloven Plateau in southern Laos, cultivate plots of varying sizes for cultivation. Due to seasonal patterns of agriculture, a large number of lowland people tend to move to the highlands to harvest coffee beans or work in orchards. On the other hand, the highland people of Parksong rarely look for work harvesting rice or cultivating other people's paddy fields. That would be viewed as unusual.*

*The highland Laven people have a popular saying 'Never judge Parksong people as being lazy. We only look for work elsewhere when there is no local work around'.*

*In recent years, foreigners have increasingly been granted licences to work on lands in return for investment in the country. Licences are meant for rural development in plantations of rubber trees, manioc, sugar cane, etc. These activities have damaging consequences for traditional land owners. Some foreign licence holders use the opportunity to brazenly grab the lands of existing owners.*

Sipheng and his family were well-known to Parksong residents. Born and bred in Nong Phong Village, he married a local woman named Phuangphanh. At thirty-

eight, he was a rather tall man, with sharp features and bronzed skin from years of working in the fields to support his family of seven.

He was poor compared to other villagers. The one acre plot that he received from his parents on his marriage was barely sufficient to feed his large family. However, by rotating a variety of crops such as maize, taro, manioc, chilli, egg plants, ginger and galangal, he was able to eke out a living. He always told his friends at the local coffee stall, "I have only a small plot of land. I have to plant fast-growing crops."

One morning, while Sipheng was sipping his coffee, his eldest son, eighteen-year old Somphanh, came huffing and puffing, like an animal in the hot sun. As soon as he saw his father, he started talking fast. Sipheng didn't even bother to listen. He knew that something was wrong. He did not want to waste the last of the rich, thick coffee and quickly drained the still hot brew. Both father and son then jogged back to their house. Knowing there was some real threat, Sipheng grabbed a machete from the veranda and jumped to the ground.

Seeing her husband in an agitated state, Phuangphanh asked him, "What's the matter?" Then as she saw the weapon in his hand, she tried to calm him down.

"We'll see," he replied angrily.

Arriving at his orchard, he saw a tractor knocking down the trees. Taking the machete, he leapt on the vehicle and raising the weapon threatened to hack the driver. The terrified man stepped on the brakes immediately.

"Get off the tractor right now," screamed Sipheng, seething in anger. The driver pointed to a group of men standing at a distance under a big tree. Sipheng saw the men wave, gesturing to him to come over. He recognised Phet, the village headman, and his brother Sipha, but he did not know the others except that they were not from the village. Two men in suits, looked like government officials.

Sipheng traced a line on the ground with his machete and told the driver, "If you cross this line, you are a dead man." He again raised his machete and touched his own neck indicating to the driver what he would happen to him should he ignore the warning.

"Sipheng, please come over. We have business to discuss with you," the headman shouted out to him.

Sipheng's wife arrived at about the same time and sighed in relief, "I thought you were going to kill the driver," she panted.



“If he had breached our land, I would have,” said Sipheng furiously.

“Go to those people. They want to talk to you,” advised his wife.

Phet introduced him to the rest of the group and explained their objectives. One of the men in suits opened his briefcase and showed him documents stamped in red.

“My husband can’t read. You will have to tell him what it says,” explained Phuangphanh.

The official then read from the paper and summarised it to Sipheng. The government had granted a licence to a company to expropriate one hundred hectares of land around the village. However, surveyors from the company had reported that there were less than seventy hectares of vacant land. Therefore, the company had to confiscate adjacent lands to make up the deficit.

“Hold on, what if the survey lines encroach on my orchard?” interrupted Sipheng.

“Many people are in the same situation as you and have agreed. Even I have given a part of my land,” explained Phet.

“They can afford to because they have enough land to give up. But my plot is tiny. It is not fair to seize ours,”

argued an irate Sipheng.

“The company will compensate you,” said Phet, attempting to defuse the tense situation.

“What compensation? How much? Can we use it to replace our crops?” replied Sipheng still furious.

“Calm down, Dear,” murmured Phuangphanh soothingly. However, she was quickly admonished by her husband, “You too. Do you think that money can replace our crops?”

The argument dragged on for more than half an hour, with both sides unwilling to give in. Sipheng said that his land had been handed down for generations. He would not allow it to be taken away under any circumstances. The compensation would not last his lifetime, probably only two months. What would happen then?

He told the headman that he could afford to give up some land because he had a sizeable holding, and with the compensation money, could even buy motorcycles for all of his children. However, Sipheng was not lucky enough to have inherited a large plot. Worse, with so many children to look after, the land was vital to the survival of his family.

The interpreter explained to Sipheng that his boss wanted to have the lands in one contiguous block, rather

than trying to work around Sipheng’s land, which would be like an island.

“What is going to happen to my family? How are we going to cultivate our crops?” countered Sipheng, addressing his complaints to the chubby foreigner who kept trying to say something.

“My boss says that he will give you five million kip as compensation. In addition, you, your wife and all of your adult children can work on the plantation for wages of thirty thousand kip per day. Overall, you will receive over one hundred thousand kip each day. Are you satisfied now?” asked the interpreter.

“It appears we have no choice,” murmured Phuangphanh.

“That is good, dad. I can learn to drive tractors,” exulted his eldest son Somphanh.

“You can buy me a horse so that I can ride to school with sister Pheng,” exclaimed his younger son Somphong.

“Are you crazy? I won’t ride with you,” replied his young daughter Sompheng.

With pressure from his family, Sipheng finally gave in.

Months passed and Sipheng received only half the

compensation promised, though three of his children were hired on the plantation, while he was given a job spraying pesticides and herbicides. His wife was employed to remove weeds. Somphanh started working as an assistant to Somchai, the driver. Somphong and Somphian, another son, were hired to complete the fencing around the plantation.

Everyone had a job, albeit heavy ones. The heaviest job was done by their mother because she had to get up earlier than everyone and prepare breakfast and lunch for the family.

The tractor driver would siphon off the fuel and sell it without the boss' knowledge. He and Somphanh would then get drunk from the proceeds.

A year later, the benefits that Sipheng had initially received from the job opportunities at the plantation began to wane. The family received only half of the wages, with the other half recorded as credits to be paid once the crops were harvested and sold.

Phuangphanh's tireless work was starting to take its toll on her health. She began to lose a lot of weight. Her husband worked hard in sun and rain, spraying chemicals. Initially, he wore a protective mask, overalls, rubber shoes and gloves. However, when he found the protec-

tive gear uncomfortable he removed it. He started inhaling the chemical mist. He began to suffer from fatigue and loss of balance. On one occasion, he had to crawl home and ask his wife to massage him with a menthol-infused balm.

Finding the work too arduous, two sons resigned from the plantation. One joined the army while the other tried to become a singer in Parkse. Their supervisor let them go, but reneged on giving them unpaid wages, claiming they had not met their quotas.

The son, who wished to become a tractor driver, was dismissed without any wages when he was caught stealing fuel. The driver, who had taught him to do so, said dismissively, "I'm sorry for you, but I can't help. It's everyone for himself."

Everyone in Sipheng's family suffered. Phuangphanh's inexplicable weight loss was attributed to her eating contaminated crickets while she was weeding. Sipheng, after initially taking care to avoid exposing himself to the chemicals, began to deliberately inhale them, even claiming that they had a fragrance similar to honey. His exposure gradually made him very ill.

Months later, Sipheng went to the coffee stall. His friends recognised him only when he started talking.

"Is that you, Sipheng? I thought that it was a walking skeleton," exclaimed one of his friends.

Sipheng told them about his experiences working on the plantation. An elderly man named Vaen reminded him of an old proverb, 'It is better to be independent. Even when we don't have land to work on, we can find sustenance in the forest'. He added, "I have never heard of highland people dying from hunger."

## Struggle to Challenge Destiny

*Nouksamai Keokunha*

"Oh God! Why am I so poor?" shouted Pa Mee in anguish and frustration. Her husband had passed away three months before, leaving her with three children and a tiny plot of land on which coffee was grown.

These responsibilities were very difficult for the middle-aged widow to cope with. She was an orphan with no traceable relatives to turn to for help. Often she would exclaim, "My husband should have taken me with him," or "Why has he left me miserable and all alone like this?"

Her eldest daughter, Bouachanh, whose heart was torn with grief at her mother's sorrow, usually managed the house. She would have carried the full burden alone, had she been able to. Her father's death had been like a lamp extinguished.

She did not want to see her mother's condition deteriorate further. She decided to take some new initiatives as her family's future was in her hands. She had to take the lead, prioritising the family's needs. At eighteen, Bouachanh was in her last year at Phoumone High School. Her younger brother, Khamphanh, would gradu-

ate next year and her younger sister, Amone, would enter high school.

One day, Bouachanh overheard Amone ask their mother for money.

"For what?" her mother enquired.

"School fees," Amone answered.

"How much?" her mother asked.

"100,000 kip," the girl said.

"Why so much?"

"It's for the whole year."

"I don't have it. I've only 50,000 kip."

Bouachanh thought that she could sell her seven-gram gold necklace to pay her sister's fees. The necklace had been a gift from her father for passing her exam last year. It was the one thing she had that reminded her of him. She hoped that his spirit would understand her decision.

The next day she brought it up with Pa Mee, "Mum, I'll sell my necklace."

Her mother's response was immediate, "No!"

"We don't have any choice. The rice is also finished. One day when I'm better established, I'll buy a new one to replace it." She took her mother's silence as a sign of agreement.

Shortly afterwards, Bouachanh went to a gold shop in the Parksong and sold the necklace for 800,000 kip. If she could keep a tight budget, she knew that this amount could last her for two months.

The next thing on the agenda was to leave school. This would save on school fees and she could also help her mother more on the farm. She thought about it for few days and then announced, "I'll leave school to help you on the farm."

"Are you sure?" her mother asked.

"Yes," Bouachanh responded firmly.

"This matter concerns your future, doesn't it?" Pa Mee countered.

"Mum, I don't want to go to school," she replied promptly. "I would rather help you and give the other two a chance to remain at school. And anyway, education is more than just going to school."

Her mother was surprised but said, "If you feel like that, I'll not stop you."

One month later, a couple arrived at Pa Mee's house in Non Sengchanh Village. They were Keo and Pheng, well-known money lenders from another village. They had come to town to collect debts. They lived on the interest they earned from money lent out at usurious

rates. They had heard that Pa Mee was short of money and thought that she might be a potential customer. While they were there, Bouachanh came home from the coffee plot.

"I heard that you have money problems and we wish to help," Pheng murmured to Pa Mee politely.

"Yes, I'm short of money," Pa Mee responded after a long pause.

"We can lend you money at a low interest rate. Are you interested?" Pheng asked.

The money from the sale of the necklace was running out and Pa Mee was aware that there was no food left. Other bills were falling due. If she did not accept the offer, she didn't know what would happen. The coffee was not ready to be harvested yet and they needed another two more years before the plantation would start producing. She thought for a while before answering, "Yes, I accept your offer."

"Wait a minute Mum. You have to know the interest rate first before you agree. How much is it?" Bouachanh asked the man.

"Ten percent," Keo answered.

"Why so high?" Bouachanh exclaimed. "That's blood sucking."

"This is a cash principle, and interest is calculated monthly," Keo continued.

"I will lend you one million kip first. At the end of the month, I will come to collect 100,000 kip as interest," his wife added.

"You need to have collateral, otherwise we do not lend money," the husband said.

"I do not have any assets to offer as security," Pa Mee replied.

"You have the coffee plot," Keo suggested.

After a time, Pa Mee's food money was about to run out again. Her other expenses were increasing too, with her son at school in Parkse and a daughter entering high school. She was extremely stressed. For the last few months she had worn a frown on her face. She had paid the interest for the first few months only. The debt on interest alone kept creeping up till by the second year, the principle had doubled.

One day, Keo and Pheng appeared at Pa Mee's house. "Aunty, we have come for the interest. For many months you have not paid it."

"I do not have enough money to even buy food," Pa Mee responded. "The boy needs money for school too."

"Do you need more money?" Keo asked.

"If I take another million, I would owe you more, wouldn't I?"

"It doesn't matter, take the million," Keo replied persuasively.

"OK," Pa Mee capitulated.

Six months later, the couple returned again and demanded their money. "We want the principle and interest back. We need to make other loans."

"Oh...it is so sudden. How can I find money now?" Pa Mee was really worried.

"You need to find it regardless," Keo insisted.

"I don't have it and don't know where to find it," she pleaded.

"Why don't you transfer the papers of the land to us? That way we can cancel the debt completely," Keo said seriously.

"No, no, we only gave you the land ownership paper to secure the second loan. I can't pass the authorisation to you." Pa Mee explained the situation to her daughter, who had walked in, carrying a bucket of water from the river.

"Mum, have they come to collect the debt?"

"Yes, they want the principle and the interest. I just don't have it. So I will have to pass over the authorisation

to use the land to settle."

"No, I will not let it happen. I don't agree," Bouachanh shouted.

"If not ...give our money back," Pheng said raising her voice too.

"How much do we owe you in total?" Bouachanh asked.

"3.84 million kip," the woman replied.

"OK!" Bouachanh exclaimed, shocked.

"What happens if you cannot find the money to pay on time?" Pheng asked.

"I will find it definitely," Bouachanh asserted.

"A verbal agreement is not good enough. Let's sign a contract," Keo said.

Then Bouachanh and the couple headed to the village chief's office so he could witness the contract. According to the terms of the contract if the debt was not settled on the due date, Pa Mee was bound to pass over the authorisation certificate for the coffee plantation as settlement. If the land was worth more than the debt, the couple would return the surplus to Pa Mee.

Bouachanh was uneasy. If they couldn't meet the deadline, what would happen, she wondered. Now Pa Mee was worried that her daughter looked unwell. She

urged Bouachanh to eat and drink more, but the girl always replied, "Mum, you eat first...I am not hungry."

A week later Bouachanh got a letter from Somchai, a close school friend. Somchai now worked in Parkse. After reading the letter, Bouachanh felt better. Hope sparkled in her eyes.

Somchai suggested that she join her at an entrepreneur training course in Parkse being held by the Lao Women's Union. The organisation was seeking women interested in setting up their own business. Training would be offered to these people. Neither of them knew anything about the subject but both wanted to give it a go.

In Parkse, Bouachanh stayed with Somchai. They discussed various business ideas and finally Bouachanh chose a one-week course to learn how to produce dish-washing liquid from local ingredients such as tamarind, lime and *mak feung*<sup>1</sup>.

Returning home, Bouachanh investigated the market for dish-washing liquid in her village. A Thai merchant sold it for seven thousand kip a bottle. Bouachanh knew that she had to compete with this brand.

Her formula consisted of soaking and squeezing six

---

1. *Carambola*

litres of local tamarind, *mak feung* and lime juice into a bowl, soaking wood ash, and then extracting the resulting clear alkaline solution. Then she needed to add one litre of concentrated dish washing liquid and mix the three together until the solution made white bubbles. Then one kilogram of cooking salt had to be added, mixed well and left overnight. The resulting mixture she sold for 3,000 kip a bottle; a saving of 4,000 kip over the Thai product.

Bouachanh and Somchai started a partnership, with Somchai supplying the concentrate and empty bottles regularly from Parkse and Bouachanh doing the rest from the local products. She started stocking up limes when prices were low. In the beginning, the local people were doubtful that the quality would be comparable to the Thai product. Some still bought the foreign detergent. After just two weeks, word spread that Bouachanh's product was as good as its rival. Most importantly, it saved them 4,000 kip per bottle.

The business grew enough for Bouachanh to reorder more solution and bottles. After six months, Bouachanh reached her four million kip target. That figure was her motivation, but it meant that she owed Somchai 2.2 million kip. She was in a dilemma. If she paid Somchai, there



wouldn't be enough money to pay Keo and Pheng. She wrote to Somchai asking for advice.

Three days later, her friend replied that she should pay off her mother's debt first. Somchai would find ways to deal with costs in Parkse.

As the due date grew closer, her mother worried that Bouachanh might not have enough money to satisfy the greedy couple. Pa Mee murmured, "I trust that you can get our mortgage papers back."

Keo and Pheng arrived at the village with happy and expectant faces. Both parties met at the headman's house. He turned to Bouachanh, "Do you have the money to pay off the debt?"

"Have they got the mortgage contract?" she responded.

The headman looked at the couple. They wondered if Bouachanh really had got the money together. Why was she so self-assured? The husband pulled the contract out of his bag. They were surprised when Bouachanh stacked the money on the table in front of them. Pheng counted the money and nodded to her husband that the payment was in full.

To hide their shock they said, "Bouachanh, if you ever need money again, please let us know."

Bouachanh replied with a firm expression on her face. "Thank you, but from now my family will never borrow money again."

The headman smiled, "Bouachanh...I am so happy for you... your land is saved. Your eyes are open to see the sky, and you can show your face with dignity again."

## Lak Sao Et Village

*Khongsavath Linthalath*

This morning the air is fresh and clear. Dew still clings to leaves and grass; a remnant of the previous night's cool Parksong weather. In the fields and gardens, flowers are in full bloom, their scent and colour attracting bees and butterflies. A bird chirps happily as it looks for a partner. Chanthorn is no different from that bird as she looks towards the western horizon.

She longs for the return of a young man. Why is she still waiting for him? Her feelings have been relentless since she met this person. Before meeting him, she had never noticed the blue skies or the beauty of nature that was all around her. Since then, she has come to cherish every breath she takes, and the importance of waking every morning.

All the pictures from the past are still clear in her mind.

\* \* \* \*

That fateful day the sky was overcast. A misty rain fell slowly, slowly down, spreading cool air throughout the town of Parksong. A white Toyota coming towards Parkse had to slow down as the road was slippery and dangerous. The weather outside added to the coolness

of the air conditioning inside the car. Kenepheth, one of the three passengers in the car, found his teeth chattering continuously. Soon the drizzle turned into a down-pour, soaking Mother Earth.

“With rain like this maybe we should pull over for a while,” he told his assistant Kanha and the driver. The three men, who worked for a Swedish NGO, were passing through Parksong on their way back from Saravan.

Arriving at the Lak Sao Et intersection, they turned towards a grassy field. The vehicle came to a clearing before the three men realised that they had stopped in front of a primary school. The timber walls were chipped in many places and termites had infested the wood. The doors and windows had long fallen off.

Kenepheth got out of the car and ran to shelter under the corrugated roof of the school. After wiping his face with his handkerchief, he tried combing his wet hair. As he glanced inside the classroom, he saw the students jotting down everything their teacher was writing on the blackboard. The rain beating down on the corrugated roof drowned out her words as she turned towards her young pupils. She tried raising her voice above the din coming from the roof, but to no avail.

Some areas on the floor shimmered with puddles

of rain that had seeped through the damaged corrugated sheets. Some tables and benches were wet. Students avoided the wet areas, clustering together in the dry parts of the classroom. Kenepheth was attracted by this young teacher. He studied her carefully. She had the dark, glowing complexion of somebody who worked a lot in the sun. His eyes wandered from head to toe of her slender, healthy body. Her well-groomed black hair, tied at the back, added charm to her oval face.

This is what is called ‘beauty in the forest’ he mused. This only happens in fairy tales, he thought.

Chanthorn was born and raised in Houayhee Village, Lak Sao Et. She had been a student at the school in which she currently taught. While most of her friends went looking for work in the towns, Chanthorn, after completing her teacher training in Parkse, had returned to teach in her own village as she strongly believed that all the children there should complete, at least their primary education.

Sensing that someone was watching her, she blushed with embarrassment but kept teaching, “Animals cry throughout the forest... birds look for partners.”

“Animals cry throughout the forest... birds look for partners,” the students repeated.



Finally the class ended. The children gathered their belongings happily and ran into the rain. Chanthorn put her books into her bag. As she left the room, she came face to face with the man standing outside.

“Where are you from?” Chanthorn asked.

“We came in to shelter from the rain. I hope we didn’t disturb you,” Kenepeth answered politely.

“That’s OK. If you are not in a hurry to go, please come to my house.”

“Thank you. That would be a pleasure.”

Chanthorn opened her umbrella and they walked side by side along the puddle-filled dirt track. Kenepeth’s shiny black shoes were quickly caked in mud and the water inside his shoes made him uncomfortable.

Inside her house, Chanthorn offered him with some hot tea. It gradually warmed him. She then brought some bananas to the table.

“Have you ever eaten this type of banana?” she asked.

“I’ve had some in Vientiane,” Kenepeth replied.

“Local bananas are different from those in Vientiane. Please try one, they are very nice.”

Chanthorn took a banana and handed it to him. How could he refuse such a kind gesture from this Parksong

girl?

Kenepheth peeled the aromatic banana and put it in his mouth. He had not come across this sweet taste before. It was so different from the bananas sold in Vientiane.

“Oh! Very delicious! Where are they from?” Kenepheth asked.

“They’re grown here.”

“Really?”

“You didn’t know? These Lak Sao Et bananas are very popular. They are sent all the way to Vientiane.”

Soaked to the toes, his assistant Kanha and the driver finally arrived. “Boss, the car can’t go any further. The radiator is leaking,” Kanha explained.

“Oh! Can’t it be fixed?” Kenepheth was not expecting this.

“No. It has to be taken to the nearest city for repairs,” answered the driver.

“What are we going to do now?” Kenepheth asked.

“We’ll leave the car here and get a ride to town,” Kanha suggested.

“We can’t leave the car here. Who will look after it? OK. You two go and I’ll stay overnight with the locals?” Kenepheth suggested.

Kenepheth had spent fifteen years with his organisation and had visited nearly all the provinces. He had had many narrow escapes. Once while travelling by speedboat near the Golden Triangle, his boat had swerved to avoid a Chinese cargo vessel and had hit some rocks. The damaged boat had to be towed for repairs to the Burmese side. Another time, near Savannakhet, his car had rolled over many times before ending up in a ditch. He had escaped with a few scratches though other passengers had been seriously injured.

“If you like, you can stay at my house,” Chanthorn offered.

“Won’t your parents mind?” Kenepheth asked.

“I don’t think so.”

“Where are they?”

“Working in the banana grove. They’ll be back shortly.”

During his two-day stay at Chanthorn’s house, Kenepheth got to know her parents and some of the other villagers. Most of them worked on banana and durian plantations.

She even took him to meet the village headman. “Could you help with the school building? As you can see the corrugated roof has many leaks. Soon the children will have nowhere to study,” the headman said.

"He has already seen how bad it is," Chanthorn added.

"I will find a way to help. I will put this to my boss when I get back to Vientiane. I think it's possible."

Two days seemed like a very short time for Chanthorn to learn and understand many things from Kenepheth. He was not like many other young townspeople she had met previously. Many of them looked down on country people as uneducated. They approached young women only to flirt with, leaving them later on. However, Kenepheth was different. He was polite and humble. All the things he said were meaningful.

On the second day, Kenepheth told her that he would like to speak to the students.

"Sure. You can have all day. I'll let you do the talking and I will observe," Chanthorn said.

"I will not go by the book. Is that OK?"

"No problems," She sat at the back watching Kenepheth address the pupils.

"Who can tell me the difference between people in the town and in the country?" he asked. The students looked at each other blankly. "No need to answer now. Discuss it before answering," he added.

This question made the young people think hard. They were quite unused to questions like this. Certainly

Chanthorn never challenged them like this. Kenepheth waited for a while.

"Who is going to answer?" he asked.

An eight-year old student raised his hand shyly.

"Ha! A brave boy. Please congratulate him," Kenepheth said, and the students started clapping.

"Country people eat sticky rice, townspeople eat hamburgers," the student answered.

"Very interesting. Give him another clap. Who can explain what a hamburger is?"

"A hamburger is bread with some meat in it," another student said.

"Yes. That's right. Give him a hand now. Could one of the girls give me some ideas?"

Kenepheth pointed to a girl in the front row. She blushed and stood up slowly.

"Townspeople drive cars, live in buildings, and eat bread while country people live in timber cottages, work in paddy fields and gardens," she answered.

"Is her answer correct?" Kenepheth asked.

"Correct," shouted some students.

"Give her a clap, for her interesting answer. Any more answers?"

There were no more. The students were rather puz-

zled that every time someone answered, Kenepheth congratulated the person, and then asked the others to clap. Sitting at the back Chanthorn had a quizzical smile on her face. She too wanted to know what Kenepheth was leading up to.

"I come from the city. Do I always eat bread? Why is my nose not long like a *farang's*?" Kenepheth asked with a smile. All the students burst out laughing.

"You are Lao. You are Lao," some students shouted.

"OK, townspeople sometimes eat bread, but not every day. I preferred the answer about country people working in paddy fields and gardens. That is more accurate."

Later on Kenepheth explained to the students the importance of country people. They were the real backbone of the country and the hub of the nation's economy; without their produce the townspeople would have to buy expensive imports. Rural people all over the world were normally friendly, helpful and sharing. Goodwill always came first. It was different in the city where money was needed for everything.

Kenepheth concluded the lesson by leading the students in a song.

The students learned many new things and had

a great time. They had never come across this kind of teaching before.

"All the kids liked your teaching technique. Were you a teacher before?" Chanthorn asked.

"Never, but I know how to get people enthusiastic."

"So what is the best way to teach?"

"Should I show a crocodile how to swim?"

"No! If you have something good, I'd like to learn."

"We should understand the children's psychology. They like having fun. If they have fun then they want to learn. We don't need to give them the answers. Teachers make students listen. It is better if they get them to think and use their minds and imagination to ask questions. This also builds self-confidence. We call this technique the student-centred approach, but in most schools they use the teacher as the focus. When children grow up, they find it difficult to think for themselves. When we ask them about their goals in life, many cannot answer."

Chanthorn listened eagerly to every word and then asked with curiosity, "So what is your goal in life?"

"Ha! Ha! You want to know all my secrets, isn't it?"

"It's OK, if you don't want to answer."

"It's no secret. I can tell you. Helping underprivileged people is my life's dream," Kenepheth replied without

hesitation.

"This is what you are currently doing?"

"Yes."

"I see. You look like a man happy with his work."

"Doesn't teaching make you happy?"

"Not yet. I need to improve myself more."

"If you are determined, then realising your dream isn't impossible."

Before he left, Kenepheth renewed his promise to try and get funds for the new school building. The headman promised him that the village would contribute thirty percent of the cost, plus labour. This made Kenepheth more confident as donors normally do not give funds if there is no local commitment.

Kenepheth took this rural teacher's heart with him. After meeting this man, Chanthorn felt she knew more about life than before. She was not ashamed to admit that she had fallen deeply in love. All of a sudden, he had appeared in her life. Perhaps it was the wish of the One Above.

Back in Vientiane, Kenepheth discussed the school project with Olaf, his Swedish boss. Kanha, who had seen the condition of the school, backed him up.

"Kenepheth...we have only five thousand dollars

left in the budget," Olaf sighed.

"We need at least ten thousand dollars to build a semi-permanent building with concrete floor, timber walls and corrugated roof," Kenepheth explained.

"We'll have to wait for next year then," Olaf replied.

"It can't wait. This term ends in two weeks. The villagers need the term break to build the school," Kenepheth said before walking out deep in thought.

Kenepheth talked to his friends in the construction industry, but nobody could help. A month passed and he was unable to find a solution. The new school term would start in two months he thought. He could see Chanthorn's smiling face and was afraid that he wouldn't be able to keep his promise. If he could not make it happen, he would be so embarrassed. There had to be a way out.

A few days later, the secretary called him as he was entering his office. "Kenepheth, there's a parcel and letter for you."

"Where is it?"

"On your desk."

Kenepheth picked up the package and looked at the sender's name. He was excited that it was from Chanthorn of Lak Sao Et. Opening the box, he found aromatic

bananas which he shared with his colleagues. Everyone agreed that they were great.

"We are jealous of Kenepheth having someone in Parksong sending him bananas," the secretary teased.

"Don't you know that Kenepheth has left his heart there?" Kanha asked with a knowing smile.

Kenepheth sat on his desk and opened the letter that came with the parcel.

*Ai Kenepheth,*

*This innocent girl is still waiting for you at Lak Sao Et. This dork hak tree is counting the days and nights for your return, for you to water and fertilise it so that it can bloom heavenly flowers.*

*I will be waiting here for you like the sea and will not be moved by other...*

Kenepheth sat deep in thought for a while. Then putting the letter into his pocket he walked to Olaf's office. Since they had started working together, Olaf had become not only his boss but also his best friend. He always discussed business and private matters with him.

"Olaf. Can I withdraw \$3,000 from my life insurance?" Kenepheth asked.

"What do you want to use it for?"

"To build a school. It might be enough when combined with our organisation's funding."

"That should be OK. When they do the audit, I'll explain to them."

"Thank you so much," Kenepheth could not have been happier.

When Kenepheth's colleagues heard about the plan, each of them chipped in with their own contributions.

Five weeks later, the same white Toyota pulled up at Lak Sao Et again. Chanthorn had a big smile when she saw Kenepheth emerge.

"I thought I would never see you again in this life."

"I've come as promised."

It took the villagers one and a half month's hard work to build the school. Finally, a new building replaced the old. At the handover ceremony, everyone from the organisation in Vientiane turned up. All the villagers were grateful for their kindness, especially to Kenepheth who had initiated it.

This school happened because of that stormy day. It became a *dork hak<sup>1</sup>* tree that Kenepheth and Chanthorn

---

1. *Dork Hak: 'Flower of Love' - white flowers traditionally used at wedding ceremonies.*

embraced. It will grow and continue to bear flowers.

## Crystal Lake

*Bouakeo Senemonty*

Under the vast blue sky, cotton-wool like clouds drifted lazily. The sun sent its glittering rays down to Earth. The sound of water could be heard as the thin stream flowed through the tiny hamlet into the river. The varying landscape of hilltops and small valleys were breathtaking in their beauty. Hillsides dotted with beautiful *farng deng*<sup>1</sup> wood trees were covered with a carpet of multi-coloured wild flowers. To any visitor, it was apparent that Phon Ngam<sup>2</sup> Village was appropriately named. Fifteen families lived in these idyllic surroundings.

Half a kilometre upstream lay expansive Crystal Lake. In the past, this lake teemed with water creatures such as fish, crabs, small prawns and shellfish. Pink and white lotus flowers showed off their petals. Every day, a flock of birds twittered enthusiastically as they fed on the fish. At dusk, young lovers lingered romantically along its popular shore.

Nowadays, those idyllic scenes are a part of history. Crystal Lake with its clear, cool expanse of water has given way to a swamp of thick *phak tob*<sup>3</sup>. The *phak tob* has

1. Local species of tree giving red flowers.

2. Beautiful Hilltop Village

3. Water hyacinth

extended its strangling dark green leaves everywhere, their tentacles rising up to one metre above the water. The lake has been transformed into a breeding ground for millions of mosquitoes. Local people dump their garbage into it resulting in a stench that pervades the whole area.

Phon Ngam today is quiet and sombre because of frequent illnesses. The lively noises of the animals can no longer be heard. Flowers wilt in sadness and birds shed tears.

Between the columns supporting his house Bounthieng, the village headman, was having a discussion with Khampeng, the head of the local Women's Union.

"I've told you many times to convince these young people to clean the lake," he said.

"I've tried many times but the boys always come up with excuses," she tried to explain.

"You young people are so ignorant. You don't appreciate anything until it affects you directly," the headman burst out angrily.

Khampeng was in an awkward situation. She was the newly elected head of the village Women's Union. Teow, the previous head of the union had left plenty of

problems for her to deal with. Some youngsters had begun to rebel, ignoring their parents' advice. They acted without thinking of the consequences. Many started to live meaningless lives. Some girls were lured into prostitution in the city and neighbouring countries. Human trafficking and sex work had now arrived right at their doorsteps.

One day, it rained cats and dogs with no sign of letting up. The heavy downpour kept everybody inside. This weather was unusual and caught people unprepared. Flood waters lingered in everyone's front yard. The water level in Crystal Lake rose several metres flowing into the river on which the locals relied for drinking water and home use.

Three days later, several families came down with diarrhoea at the same time. This had never happened before. In the past, a few people had been affected with some kind of stomach problems, but never this many. They all suffered with terrible stomach pains. The headman, Khampeng, and Chantha, the youth leader, worked very hard to assist the sick villagers. The headman asked two young men, Keth and Mee, who owned a Hyundai truck to take the sick to the hospital in the town.

When the head of the district health authorities

learned about the incident, he immediately sent some staff to investigate the situation. Their findings were expected. The illness was due to the dirty water from Crystal Lake, contaminating the river.

While the sick villagers were in the hospital, Khampeng and Chantha stayed to look after them. They took the opportunity to discuss the different issues that were currently affecting their village.

“Chantha, we have to do something, seriously,” Khampeng started a conversation.

“What are you going to do?” Chantha asked curiously.

“You mean what are we going to do? The problems in our village nowadays are not just about public health, but also about social issues. Things are increasingly getting out of hand.”

“That’s true. So what are we going to do?” Chantha wanted to know. He was not a person of initiative, but neither was he a troublemaker.

“We have to give them something to do, something to make their lives more meaningful,” she suggested.

“Like what?”

“Anything that also generates income for them.”

“That sounds like a good idea.”

The following day, Khampeng travelled to Parkse to meet with the Provincial Women’s Union. Her trip coincided with a visit by delegates from neighbouring countries that were there to meet with the union to discuss multilateral cooperation.

The delegates agreed that many problems could only be resolved jointly: environmental issues, regional epidemics, illegal drugs and human trafficking.

“It’s great that you want to do something for the young people in your village,” Sompheng, the deputy head of the Provincial Women’s Union, told Khampeng.

“We have thought about this for a long time, but we don’t know where to start.”

“Firstly, we have to work together to see what potential and resources you already have in your village. Then we can plan the activities. Tomorrow I’ll send Somdee, our activity planning officer, with you to assess the actual situation. After that, you can work together and come up with some appropriate activities.”

The following day, Khampeng and Somdee headed back to Phon Ngam village. During the trip, the two women had more time to talk, and got to know each other better. Khampeng learned that Somdee had wide experience in many countries conducting training

in various development issues. She had also assisted women in different villages around southern Laos.

At Phon Ngam, Somdee stayed at Khampeng's house where she was served grilled fish, *padaek*<sup>4</sup> and *dok khae soup*<sup>5</sup>.

"Khampeng, did you boil the *padaek* before you made the sauce?" asked Somdee, wary of having problems with her stomach.

"Of course I did! We also boil drinking water now. Since the recent incidents everybody is scared."

The next day while the two women were walking past Crystal Lake, Somdee noticed that the lake was covered with thick, green scum. "What kind of plant is that?" she asked curiously.

"That's *phak tob*."

"Why don't the villagers produce something from it?"

"That plant is a nuisance weed. It's complete junk."

"No ... it's not junk. It's money," Somdee argued.

"What are you saying? I don't understand," Khampeng was surprised.

"*Phak tob* ... *phak tob*," Somdee repeated, "*phak tob*

4. Fermented fish sauce

5. Hummingbird flowers / *Sesbania grandiflora* flowers

can be transformed into money."

Later, she explained that nowadays neighbouring countries used *phak tob* as raw material to make furniture and bags that were exported to Japan.

"I don't understand how they could possibly use *phak tob* to make bags," Khampeng frowned.

"The process is quite complex but once you know it, it's easy. However at this stage, it's too early to talk about the process."

"But I'm curious. How do we transform a weed into money?"

"Right now, we should just send the raw materials to experienced manufacturers. First, to those who have already exported this kind of product."

Two days later, Khampeng and Chantha called all the young men and women to a meeting at the 'One Heart' community hall in the village. The meeting was chaired by Bounthieng, the headman. First he talked about the epidemic which had threatened lives. Next, Chantha talked about the social problems affecting village youth. Finally, Khampeng presented them with a list of possible future activities.

"Somdee, the representative of the Provincial Women's Union, is here to study the situation in our village.

She suggests we try two kinds of activities which could generate income. If you agree, we will prepare a follow-up plan.”

“Tell us about the two activities,” a young man in the front row said.

“Making sun-dried bananas for domestic sale, and providing raw materials for export,” Khampeng answered.

“How can we do it? We don’t have the know-how,” an eighteen-year old girl spoke up from the back.

Khampeng turned to Somdee, signalling to her to take over the meeting. Somdee smiled, nodded her head and stood up.

“We will arrange for some villagers to visit you. They will train you to produce sun-dried bananas based on their own experiences. As for the water hyacinth, I can help directly because I have provided similar training to other villages in the past.”

The following day, Somdee started by showing fifteen young people how to harvest the stems of the *phak tob*, emphasising the importance of cutting each to a length of exactly one metre, then ripping off all the leaves, leaving only the stems.

Next, she showed them how to select only flawless

stems, free of tears or scratches. They then cut the stems in half, washing them well with detergent. She demonstrated that the clean stems were then dried under the sun for five days. During these five days, the stems had to be turned over many times to ensure they were evenly dried. Finally, she showed them how to collect the dried stems and tie them into bundles of equal weight. The final product she told them could then be sold for seven thousand kip per kilo.

Somdee stayed at the village for a week, helping the young people and answering their many questions. Finally the day arrived when she had to go back to Parkse. The village chief, Chantha, Khampeng and the young people felt genuinely sad about her leaving and all went to see her off.

“I wish you could stay a few more days,” Khampeng said, her eyes teary.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be back,” Somdee replied, gently patting Khampeng on the back as she climbed into the waiting Hyundai.

“Mee, be careful with your driving? Get her home safely,” the headman told the driver.

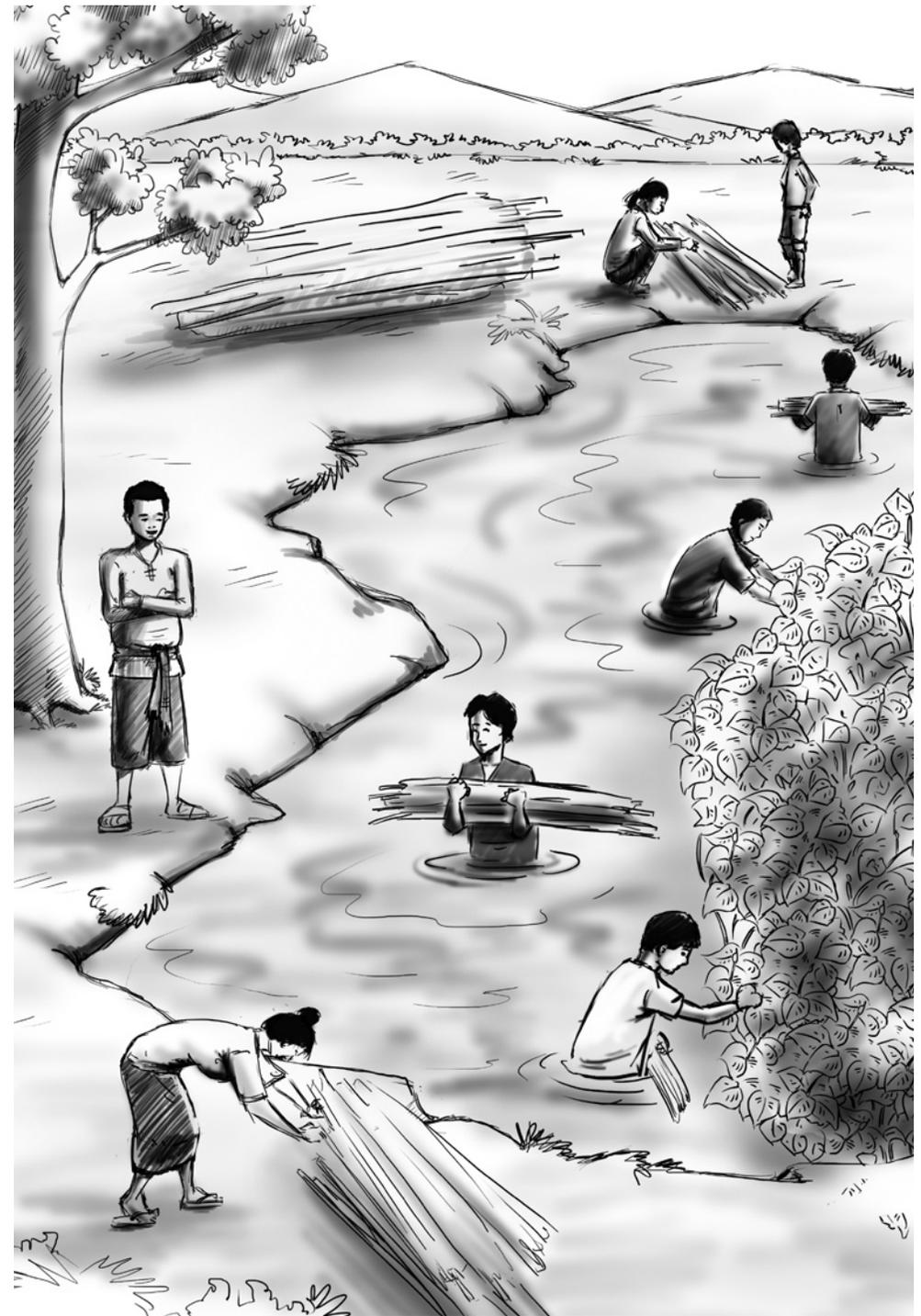
The Hyundai drove off slowly, while the young people waved their good-byes.

“Good luck, good luck,” their farewells followed her up the road.

A few weeks later, the headman walked by the river and was surprised to see fish swimming in the river. Along the river banks, grass had started to sprout, some blades still having the previous night’s dew on them. The air was crisp after the heavy rains of the previous weeks. He heard sparrows perched on the tree above him singing sweetly. It was nice to hear the birds singing again, he mused. He noticed that flowers had started to bloom in different places among the bushy grass. Life at Phon Ngam Village was returning.

Drawing closer to the lake, he heard the sound of people ahead. Young men and women were in the middle of the lake talking and laughing as they cut the *phak tob*. Everybody looked cheerful. Khampeng and Chantha were among them.

The headman scanned the lake. He sighed contentedly when he saw that half the lake had already been cleared by the young people. He could no longer see empty plastic bottles floating on the surface of the water. The lake which used to be filthy was becoming clean again because the people themselves had taken the initiative.



His face was painted with happiness and he ruefully admitted that he was a bit envious of these young people. "If I were only thirty years younger," he said to himself before conceding, "but we can't bring back the past. So it's best to leave it to the younger generation. How did Khampeng and Somdee think up such wonderful activities for young people so that they could make money at the same time? They help the lake by cleaning it."

From now on, the lake will be as clean and clear as crystal – just like its name –Nong Sai.