

## Heart's Refuge

The afternoon sun was so bright and hot it appeared to burn all living things. A hen with its chicks gathered at the heap of firewood under a mango tree. Sompheng was sitting on a stool and weaving outside her house. Like other country women, she wore a dark brown shirt with long sleeves and a Lao silk skirt. Her beautiful and nimble hands were moving slowly to the rhythm of weaving. Suddenly, she heard her five-year-old son calling.

"Mum, Mum! Let me go to see the sweeping truck," said Ainoy, pointing to a convoy of trucks coming through the village.

News of the arrival of the road construction group spread from mouth to mouth in every household in the village. The elderly people expressed appreciation and relief that the only road in their village, being dusty, dirty, muddy and riddled with holes for several years, would finally be upgraded. People exchanged excited conversation.

"Now our village will be developed!" said one villager.

"Right, there will be no more dusty, dirty, muddy road!" replied a second.

"Not only dust, even mud will no longer stick to your shoes!" added a third.

"How about the electricity?" asked a fourth.

"Once the road is paved, electricity will surely come soon!" was the answer.

"You have to prepare!"

"Prepare what?"

"Prepare to increase your daughter's dowry!"

The construction workers gathered at the communal square and set up camp. The children flocked to see the modern equipment they had never seen before. They were not willing to go home even after sunset. Ainoy, Sompheng's son, was in the group, standing beside the tractor, watching and touching it with particular excitement.

"Ainoy! Let's go home, it's already dark!" Sompheng called to her son.

She had come to take Ainoy home. Damdy, a young, active and cheerful driver who was talking to Ainoy, turned around to see where the voice came from. And he could not help asking the person he saw, "Is Ainoy your younger brother?"

Sompheng did not answer. But her face turned red.

"Mum, I'd like to have a ride on the tractor," cried Ainoy.

"No! You need to have your bath, it's already dark, you know!"

She held on to Ainoy's arms.

"Ainoy, do come back again tomorrow!" Damdy told Sompheng's son, as he stood and watched the mother and son leave. He had some doubts. He could not believe that such a young woman could have a five-year-old son!

The road in the village gradually improved. The noise from the tractors, trucks and sweepers was heard from morning to night. The bumpy and muddy road became smoother and wider than before. The villagers became friendlier with the construction workers, and the road, previously silent and dust-laden, came to life in a most extraordinary way. In the evening the workers gathered and relaxed, drinking traditional Lao alcohol with snacks. The girls who never used to make themselves up appeared more beautiful with red lips.

One night after having dinner, Sompheng sat rolling cotton on the verandah. She contemplated the full moon and immersed herself in the loneliness and quiet. Ainoy was already asleep by his grandmother.

Sompheng was the most beautiful woman in this village. All the young men who lived in the same village and in the neighborhood fell in love with her and wanted her for their life partner. They were eventually disappointed when a very rich man in the logging industry came to the village and won her hand in marriage. Accompanying him was a procession of heavy trucks with electric chainsaws and tractors with cranes. The transportation of logs continued for several months. The road became heavily damaged. A year later, a rumour about Sompheng's husband circulated in the village. Allegedly, he was already married and a father to many children before he met Sompheng. This news spread around and finally, her husband had to leave the village, never to come back again. The last logging truck went without bidding farewell. After that, there was nothing left of the forest, not even tree stumps and roots. The mud, silence and remorse in the hearts of the poor villagers were the only things that remained. Sompheng, who was by then pregnant, cried by herself at night. Still, she had to take care of her parents. She had to be strong for the sake of her innocent baby. When she gave birth to Ainoy, she loved him like the pupils of her own eyes.

A dog barked. The roll of cotton fell out of Sompheng's hand as if reminding her to get over her past. Damdy suddenly appeared.

"I thought you would have already slept!" Damdy began as he sat down.

"I thought I would go to sleep," Sompheng replied with a light smile, still rolling cotton.

"Is Ainoy sleeping?" asked Damdy.

"Yes, grandmother took him to sleep," Sompheng explained.

They lapsed into silence. The atmosphere was so quiet that one could hear the coconut leaves rustling outside.

"Sompheng, why are you so quiet?" asked Damdy.

"No reason," answered Sompheng.

"How long do you intend to live your life this way?"

"Perhaps longer than the road that you are constructing now," answered Sompheng, smiling.

"Oh yes, the road is yet to be completed... but if you don't mind, I'll leave my heart here with you and wait for your answer," said Damdy.

Sompheng continued to roll cotton balls patiently and calmly as she was in no hurry to answer him.

"Is it because I am only a simple construction worker?" Damdy proposed.

"No, that is not important to me," Sompheng interrupted.

"Then, why is my offer not accepted?" Damdy asked.

"I am afraid of making the same mistake the second time in my life!"

Damdy understood her words very well and knew that only he could remedy the pain and bitterness of Sompheng's heart. The night passed very quickly. The crowing rooster reminded Damdy that it was time for him to go back to camp. Before leaving, he told Sompheng, "On the road of my life, I have been traveling a very long way. I hope this home can be the refuge for my heart."

Both smiled sweetly to make room for each other's hope. Damdy disappeared into the darkness. Sompheng went to bed. She laid her head down on the pillow she often used to wipe her tears. But now, she smiled with hope in the warmth of the night.