

The Nature of Life

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As I took a deep breath, the stench of Death greeted me. Some of us were sitting, some standing, but we were all silently sobbing. We had gathered in room 144 that Friday morning in June, hoping against hope that this would not be our final visit with my mother. My father stood looking out the hospital window unable to meet my mother's desperate gaze and unable to confront yet another loss. A close friend's whispered prayers were barely audible over my mother's final gasps for air. I held her weak, cold hands as she lay there trying to look at all of her children, knowing it would be the final time. These were the same hands that held us children and comforted us during the Khmer Rouge era and later, through the many obstacles we would face in America. These were the hands we desperately tried to hold onto for security as children, and even as adults. However, with each passing moment, I felt her hands grow weaker and colder until The Spirits finally beckoned for her and took her from her misery. The smells, the sounds, the scene, the sensations are forever etched into my memory.

My mother dreamt of a big house with a big backyard. She wanted to have her own garden complete with a koi pond. She aspired to grow every beautiful flower she saw and plant all the trees she loved. However, her biggest dream was to see all six of her children don a graduation gown, cross the stage, shake hands with the dean and receive their college degree. She knew that in America she would have the opportunity to do and see all of this.

My family was ill equipped for American life as they arrived in the United States as refugees from Cambodia in 1982. By the time my parents reached the United States soil, they had suffered the loss of two of their children, burying them behind, but their memories still living. Four of my sisters also had to suffer the detriment of the Khmer Rouge and struggle to survive through their starvation while haunted by the sounds of pain. They sought a new beginning in America.

My parents were in a foreign land surrounded by a foreign language with little possessions of their own. They were constantly bombarded with America's advanced technology; objects like the toilet were novel and took some time to adjust to. My family also fell victim to one of many of America's "get rich quick" schemes. They were allured by the temptation of receiving thousands of dollars just by opening the top to a soda. However, my parents soon became savvy to American life, but still proceeded cautiously through these first few years.

Learning to drive, learning to shop, and learning the language was all part of learning to live in America. It took my father four trips to the DMV to acquire his driver's license, but it took my mother only one trip to the market to acquire the proper bargaining techniques. They both learned to speak the language through different mediums. True to their nature, my father learned through his schooling in the Buddhist monastery in Cambodia and from books in the United States while my mother learned through interaction with people at the store and through watching the television. They were both learning about living in America.

Not unlike most parents, my parents wanted us to concentrate in school and succeed. My parents never acquired professions in America because they were perpetually worried that their children would not adjust to this new country and, as a result, turn to street life as happened to many other refugees from Cambodia. They believed that the key to success in this new country was education, something they, themselves, were not able to adequately attain in their homeland. America provided that opportunity they did not have and my parents wanted their children to reap the benefits of this educational system.

Graduating from colleges from all over the coast of California with degrees varying from Psychology and Business to Film and Communications, my four sisters fulfilled my parents' every expectation. My mother was also well on her way to fulfilling her other dreams as well. We had bought my parents a big house with a big yard. The roses were in full bloom, the corn stalks were flourishing, the banana trees were beginning to bear fruit and the koi pond was on its way to completion. There were only two more left to graduate.

My brother and I are number five and six, respectively, in our family. We are also the only two American born. We watched as our sisters attempted to master the English language and toiled through their calculus, Shakespeare, and Thoreau and then watched as my parents beamed as they received their hard earned degree. As my brother and I ascended the academic ladder, we saw my sisters start to plant their family trees and put down roots with their successful careers and growing families. My brother concentrated his studies on film and media in Santa Cruz while I studied Psychology in Davis, on track to graduating early. We were poised and ready to fulfill my mother's desire and my father's wishes.

Unfortunately, my mother passed away before seeing my brother cross the stage this past June and before seeing me shake hands with the dean this coming December. It is ironic that a source of life could also be a source of death. In the refugee camps of Cambodia, my mother nursed the children of strangers while trying to feed her own, helping everyone to stay alive. However, it was these same breasts that led to her passing. Twenty two years after coming to America as a refugee, she passed away from breast cancer.

"If you're going to do something, do it right," my mother always used to say to her children. It is this philosophy that has led us to our success in America. We have become leaders and innovators in our universities and professions through the application of my father's wisdom and my mother's constant encouragement. I, along with my siblings, dedicate all of our educational and professional accomplishments to our parents. We look to their strength, perseverance, compassion, and insight as our inspiration to triumph over Life's obstacles. As I write this, it has been one year, one month and four days since The Spirits took her away, but she will always know where to find us because she made a home for us in an unfamiliar land.