

BOOK BONUS

# A HEALING FIRE

SOKREAKSA HIMM WATCHED HELPLESSLY

AS THE MURDEROUS KHMER ROUGE WIPED OUT  
MOST OF HIS FAMILY.  
DECADES LATER HE RETURNED  
TO CAMBODIA TO CONFRONT  
THE KILLERS

BY  
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## The End of Innocence

I GREW UP IN SIEM REAP, a pleasant town in northern Cambodia where mango, coconut, guava and papaya trees grew. Our house was about 150 metres from a small river that ran gently through the town, and I used to go swimming every afternoon. Sometimes my older brothers and I went fishing with my father.

With 11 brothers and sisters, I was part of a large, happy and united family. My parents were Buddhists, and they took us to worship in the pagoda from time to time. We were brought up with good moral values and discipline. My father encouraged us to aim for higher education. “Man who is without knowledge is always brought down by what he does not understand,” he would tell us.

I never thought the joy of those happy days would end so suddenly.

The Khmer Rouge came to power on April 17, 1975, when I was 11. A few days after, our family, like many others, was forced to leave our home. We were set to labouring in the countryside. Working hard from dawn to dusk, with very little to eat and nowhere comfortable to spend the night, we became exhausted, demoralised and filled with despair.

We lived under a regime of terror where the smallest act of disobedience to the Khmer Rouge agents, known as the *chlops*, brought death. The terrible conditions were also taking their toll on us. I watched helplessly as many

of my friends slowly died of starvation. Their families were too weak to carry their emaciated corpses to a grave, but eventually fellow villagers helped bury them.

A memory I cannot erase is when my younger brother, who was only ten, was wrongly accused of stealing some corn. The evil soldiers tied his hands behind his back and beat him mercilessly, kicking him so many times in the face that he was unrecognisable. When they repeated the same kind of torture on one of my older brothers, we all began to lose any hope of life.

I went out one November morning in 1977 to fetch some water and saw the *chlops* sharpening their knives and axes. I ran back and told my father. “Papa,” I said, “I’m afraid they are going to kill us this morning!” My father eyes opened wide. It was a sign of shock and despair. He did not speak but I could tell that, like me, he had become very desperate.

A teenage *chlop* came to our house with a message from the local Khmer Rouge leader. “The *angkar loeu* is inviting you to meet him in the shelter now,” he said to my father. I knew for sure that something terrible was about to happen to us.

“I will be there in a few minutes,” my father responded. “I need to get dressed first.”



The author (facing page) witnessed his family’s execution; The aftermath of 19 April 1975: A woman cries over a dead body (above); Khmer Rouge fighters in Phnom Penh (right)



After he got dressed he told me, “Reaksa, whatever happens to me today, I want you and your two older brothers to kill these people for me.”

With that, he went off. I trailed behind him to see what the *angkar loeu* would do. One of the *chlops* arrested my father and bound his arms behind his back. Another one told him, “You are the enemy of the *angkar loeu*. You served the American soldiers. We will destroy you today.”

I ran back to my younger brothers and sister and told them, “Papa has been arrested. They are going to kill us today. I don’t know what to do now!”

In all, there were six of us in the house, ranging in age from two to 13 years. My two older brothers were working with a youth mobile team and my mother and older sister were labouring in the fields.

The *chlops* dragged my father back

to the house and summoned us to come outside. They told us, “We will execute you because you are the enemy of the *angkar loeu*. Go with your father now!” They put us in an ox-cart and drove us from the village. The soldiers dragged my father along in front of the cart, forcing us to watch his humiliation.

AS WE PASSED THROUGH the jungle we saw other “new liberated” children with their fathers, some of whom we knew. All the other children looked frightened like me. I held onto my youngest brother but my arms would not stop trembling. I felt so weak.

About three kilometres from the village we came a stop. We waited as the *chlops* finished digging a trench that would be our grave. I climbed off the cart and carried my youngest brother to my father, who knelt to kiss him.

PHOTO COURTESY AUTHOR

PHOTOS AFP

Then he kissed the rest of the children.

I gave him a hug but he could not hug me in return because his arms were bound. "Reaksa, my heart is being torn to pieces," he said. "I have lived long enough, but you, your brothers and your sisters are too young to die."

My younger sister screamed, "Papa, please help me! I am scared, PAPA!" My father did not answer. He was a helpless man who was about to be killed.

The chlops, wearing black uniforms and handmade red Cambodian neckscarves, forced him to kneel in front of the trench. He turned his head to look at me. I saw them hack at his head with a hoe, and he fell into the grave with a terrible scream.

One of the evil chlops jumped into

the grave to finish him off. I did not want to look, but I could not close my eyes. The horrific scene filled my heart with a fire of rage that was intensified because I could do nothing to help him or the others. I thought I would die of suffocation before they killed me.

Then it was the turn of the children. They told us to kneel in front of the grave. A man called Mao hit me from behind and I fell on top of my father. He was not yet dead! I heard his last few breaths, then there was nothing.

My younger brothers, my sister and children from other families tumbled on top of me. Then the chlops turned to my baby brother. The first three times they struck him, he screamed loudly; they clubbed him once more and he went quiet.

I was still conscious but I could not move. The chlops jumped into the grave and started hacking wildly at us. In their frenzy, they mangled everybody with their hoes, but they missed me.

After they had finished, one of them said, "I think that one is not yet dead." I could not see who he was pointing at because I was lying face down on my father's body and was covered by the bodies of my brothers and others. One chlop pulled somebody off me and hit me with a hoe once more, but not hard enough to end my life.

They must have thought that I was truly dead. If I had moved my legs or hands, they would have finished me off, but I could not move because of the weight of dead bodies on top of me.

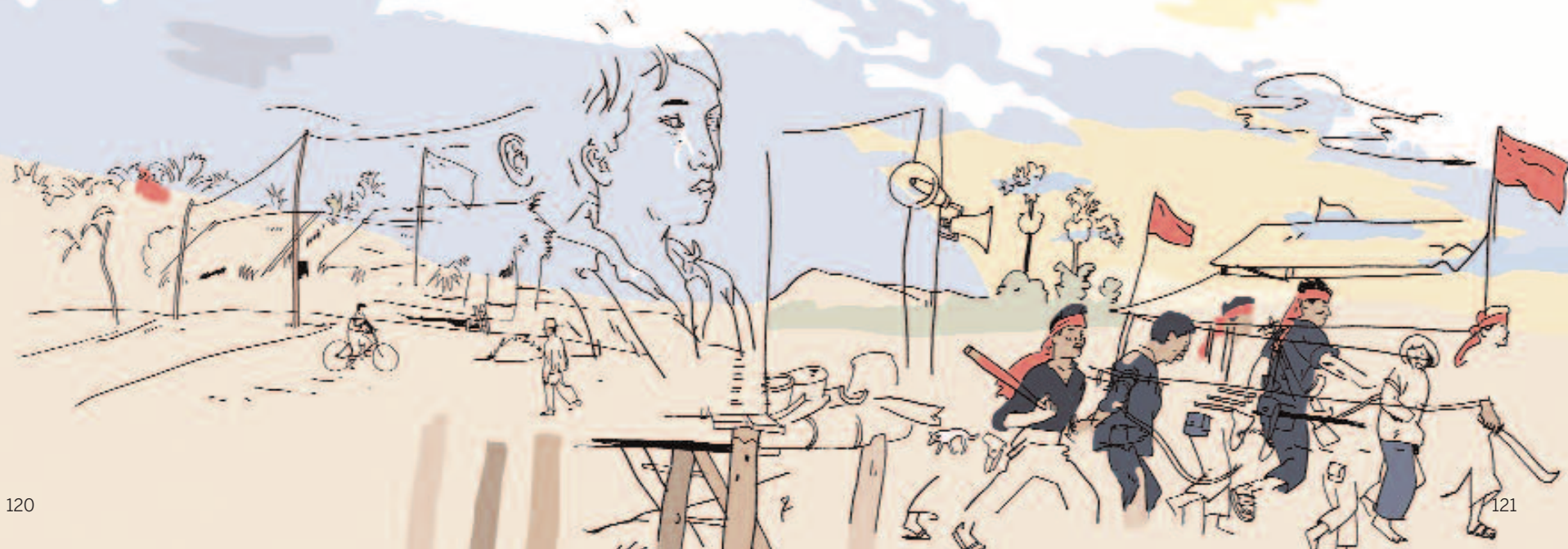
They began shovelling dirt into the

grave, but someone said, "Don't bury them now. There are some more *khmang* [enemies] to be destroyed." Assuming that everybody was dead, they went off to find other victims to feed to the earth.

## A Vow of Vengeance

FIVE MINUTES AFTER they'd gone I tried to get up. It took me almost half an hour to disentangle myself from the bodies because I was so weak. I checked on everybody in the family, but they were all dead. I sank down in despair, lying on top of the horribly mutilated bodies, waiting to be executed too. I cried and cried until I had no more tears.

I stayed there for about an hour, but nobody came. Finally, I climbed out





of the grave and took one last look at my family members lying dead in a pool of blood. I started to walk away, but after a few metres I saw the chlops appearing from the west and south, dragging other people towards the open grave. If I had waited at the grave for a few more minutes, the chlops would have captured me.

I found a hiding place in the woods so I could see who else they would kill. Suddenly, I saw my beloved mother and older sister stumbling towards the grave. Their faces were covered with scarves and they were crying bitterly. I wanted to yell so that my mother would turn around and I could see her once more, but when I opened my mouth no sound came out.

The chlops clubbed my mother, my sister and the others, and they fell into the grave. All I wished for at that moment was to tell my mother how much I loved her. I wished we had been able to say goodbye. At the same time, my heart burned with rage. I wanted to kill these murderers and save my mother and sister, but I was totally helpless. I couldn't even scream at them to come and kill me. I watched as the chlops carelessly filled the grave and left.

When the sun had almost set I crept out to the grave and pounded it with my hands and head. "Mak, please take me with you, take me with you," I called to my mother. "I don't want to live!" No-one answered.

Finally, I bowed before the grave and made three promises to my family: "Mother, father, brothers and sisters, as

long as I live, I will avenge your deaths. If not, I will become a monk, and if I cannot fulfil these two promises, I won't live in Cambodia any more."

I began to think about what I needed to do to survive. I hid in the jungle. After three days I was so tired and thirsty that I went back to the village, not caring what they did to me. To my utter astonishment the villagers – who had just recently accused me of being a khmang – welcomed me. They touched me in disbelief, calling me "the resurrected one" and "the only lucky one." They tied white threads onto my left hand and invited my soul and spirit to come back into me. They gave me a new shirt and fed me.

The villagers called a special meeting and agreed that I could live with a man named Mov, who said he would be my foster father. I had promised to kill the chlops one day, but now I was under the guardianship of a man who would block me from doing it. Vengeance was a sign of honour for me. Instead of being relieved and thankful, I was filled with confusion: How long would they continue to think I was special? Could I trust their word?

## Getting Out, Coming Back

BY EARLY 1979 the Khmer Rouge had been driven from power by the Vietnamese army. I went to Siem Reap to live with my only surviving sister, Sopheap Himm, who had survived because she wasn't living with us at the time. My three older brothers were not so lucky, each being killed at different

I sank down in despair, lying on top of the horribly mutilated bodies, waiting to be executed too.

## I cried and cried until I had no more tears

times in and around our village. Later I went to my aunt's family in another part of Siem Reap, went back to school and started a new life.

In 1983, I joined the police with one burning desire – to use this position to avenge my beloved family. My heart was full of anger, bitterness and an overwhelming passion to keep the promises I had made to my dead family. As a policeman, I carried a gun, so I would have the power to kill my enemies.

It turned out I could not do it. When I had an opportunity with one of my brother's murderers, some strange force came upon me. Although I had my finger on the trigger of the gun, I was unable to press it.

Life was unbearably miserable when I found that I could not fulfil my promises. In mid-1984, I fled across the Thai border to a refugee camp near the Thai border town of Aranyaprathet. I applied to go to America but the request was rejected. In an attempt to soothe my despair, I joined the Christian meetings in the camp and listened to their prayers. I wasn't

overly impressed because they didn't seem to have any answers to the questions I asked about suffering.

I then decided to apply for permission to live in Canada. After a long process, I arrived in Toronto in 1989 and was given accommodation at a centre run by World Vision. There were so many people at the centre who befriended me. They didn't blame my bad karma for all that happened to me, instead they showed me love. I made friends with a World Vision staff member named Chuck Ferguson, and he gave me a Bible to take to my room to read. He prayed with me and made me feel that there was a new life for me and never again would I feel alone.

A year later, I went to Tyndale University College in Toronto for my bachelor's degree, after which I went to Providence Theological Seminary in Manitoba for my master's degree. I graduated in 1996 and started a cleaning company in the Toronto suburb of North York. It did well and I settled down to my new life.

Feeling content, I slowly put the past behind me. Over the years, several people asked me if I ever considered going back to Cambodia. I told them emphatically, "No, never! Why should I want to return to a place with so many miserable memories?"

## The Road to Forgiveness

AFTER MANY YEARS of suppression and living with anger and denial, I began to learn that I was living a life that was filled only with darkness. The desire

for revenge meant that I was living with an unreal dream that one day I would be able to fulfil my promise of vengeance. I subconsciously became very good at embracing my pain. I nursed it in a special place in my heart and gave it great prominence in the scheme of my life. In fact, it was my top priority.

Years of longing to take revenge created a fantasy world in my head; it was a fantasy that helped me to survive day by day. I felt I had created an image of a prison in my head, and into that prison I put the images of my family's killers. In the 15 years since I had lost my family, every day I imagined butchering, axing, chopping and beating my family's killers in that prison.

When sadness ruled in my heart, I could see myself coming into the prison to torture the killers, just to tell them that I was very angry at what they had done to my family. I thought that I was the one in charge of this prison, but the truth was that it controlled me. I could not liberate myself from the bondage of the mental image I had created. I needed a liberator. Where could I find one?

Then, in 1998, I received a letter from World Vision USA indicating that there was a great need for good Christian teaching in Cambodia. As well, many Cambodians needed counselling to help them overcome the emotional scars inflicted by the Khmer Rouge. According to the letter, I was the most qualified person to do all these things. Would I seriously consider going back

to the land that had caused me so much pain and suffering?

**R**ECONCILIATION CAN never take place if forgiveness is not granted first. No-one can wake up one morning and decide to search for their family's killers and begin to build a relationship with them. I think it would be relatively easy to deliver a message of forgiveness to a distant offender, but coming face to face with them is an entirely different scenario, especially when the offence was so grave.

It took me years to consider reconciliation, and I always doubted whether it would ever be achieved. I was not sure what I would do and say if I met them. They murdered my family. But now I was beginning this journey towards reconciliation, and it was a scary prospect.

I wondered if they might kill me because they thought I had come to take revenge. My primary expectation from the trip was simply to meet them – I could only make my mission of forgiveness complete if we met. It's unusual for Cambodian people to say, "I'm sorry," so I didn't expect an apology. I wanted to tell them that I had come to cancel my revenge and set them free from me. They would not need to fear me because I no longer wished they were dead.

With my mind made up, I went back to Cambodia in May 1999. While visiting my sister on the outskirts of Siem Reap, many friends in high-ranking

After many years of suppression and living with anger and denial, I began to learn I was living a life filled only with darkness.

## I became very good at embracing my pain

positions offered to send soldiers with me when I travelled to Siem Reap, since former Khmer Rouge still lived there. I chose to bring two Cambodian pastors, Sokcheat and Narath.

The road to the village was in very poor condition; in fact, it was little more than a track for ox-carts. We arrived in the village about 10 am and I went to the house of Mov, my foster father. My foster mother, who was surprised to see me, said Mov was away for the day. Word soon went around the village and a number of people came to see me at my foster parents' house. There were many I didn't recognise, so I introduced myself to them.

I asked about the people who had been involved in killing my family. The villagers were shocked at such a question. Why had I come back to look for my family's killers after more than 20 years? I sensed that they were thinking I had come to take revenge.

No-one would tell me where the killers were, so I went to look for my

old friend Sak, with whom I worked in the fields during the Khmer Rouge period. He had been forced to join the Khmer Rouge soldiers, who ordered him and two other friends to catch fish by using bombs. A bomb was set off accidentally, killing both of the friends. Sak was blinded by the blast.

Sak said that four of the six people I was looking for had been killed during the Vietnamese invasion; only two men were alive. Mao, the man who struck me with a hoe, still lived in Siem Reap. The other, Ean, had moved to a neighbouring village.

## Confronting a Killer

I WENT TO MAO'S HOUSE, but he was working in the fields, so I asked a village man and Pastor Sokcheat to bring him to my foster father's house. "Please tell him not to worry, as my intentions are good," I told them. "I just want to meet him and forgive him."

While waiting for Mao, I spoke to a number of villagers and learned which men had been killed during the civil war. Many older people seemed to have forgotten what had happened to my family. At first they were afraid of speaking to me, but eventually they asked me where I had been for the last 25 years or so.

Mao was ploughing his rice paddy when Pastor Sokcheat and the villager approached him. He was shocked to hear that I had invited him to come and see me in the village. Despite his misgivings, he stopped working, left his cows to eat in the field and came



back to the village.

When he arrived, I could see he was putting on a brave face, but underneath he was fearful. I greeted him and invited him to sit down and have lunch with me. Several other people joined us, and I gave Mao some bread I had brought from home, trying to make him feel at ease.

Someone offered him some alcohol. He drank a little and began to talk to me. After finishing lunch, I took the initiative and asked him how he felt about meeting me. He just smiled.

I asked him, "Do you know where you hit me?"

"Yes, I do," he responded.

"Did you know how many people you killed that day?"

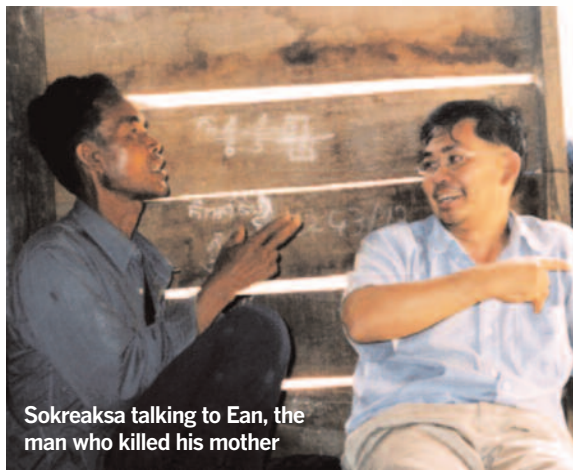
"No, I don't remember."

"There were 33 people, but only 32 died. I am the sole survivor."

I could tell that Mao was surprised, but he said nothing. He looked frightened. He could not look at my eyes.

"Let me tell you about my mission today," I said. "I have come here to set you free from the bondage of fear. I have brought gifts for you.

"Here is a *krama*," I said as I put a Cambodian scarf around his shoulders. "It is a symbol of my forgiveness for you. Here is a shirt I have brought for you as a symbol of my love for you."



Sokreaksa talking to Ean, the man who killed his mother

I found it very difficult to get the words out as I stood before the man who had killed my father. My throat choked with unspoken words and my heart ached with pain.

If you have a wound in your leg, you remove the plaster and cleanse the wound. It stings, but healing is taking place. Cleansing the wound is necessary for the healing process. Delivering the message of forgiveness to the man who had killed my father was extremely painful but it brought healing.

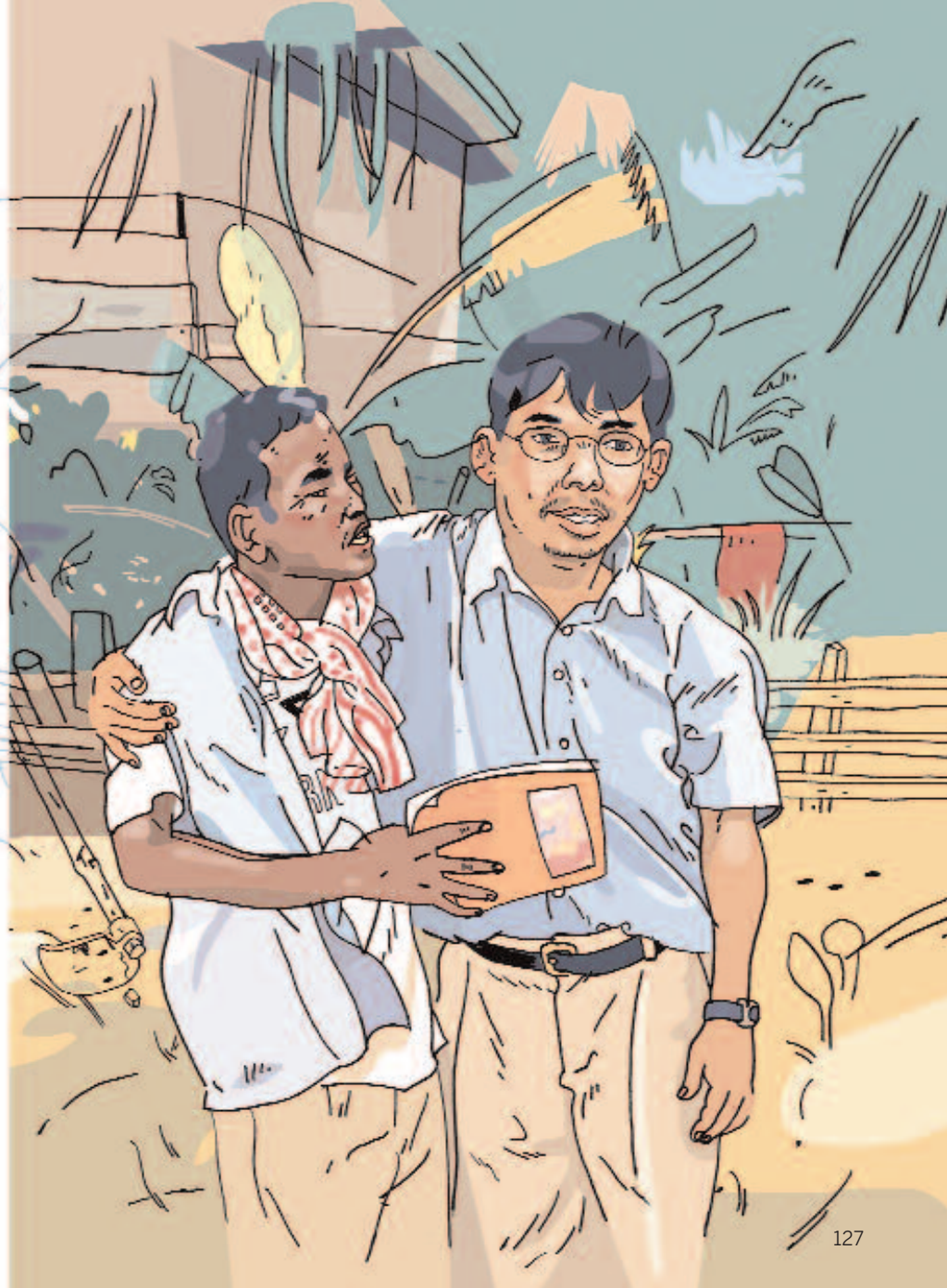
I asked Mao about his feelings, but he showed no emotion, no regret and no remorse over what he had done. He seemed dead inside, he had no feelings.

"How do you feel now that I have said I have forgiven you?" I asked.

"Thank you," was all Mao said.

After spending three hours with him, I gave Mao a hug and said, "By the grace of God, I can forgive you. I know that you did not intend to kill

PHOTO: BRENDA SLOGGETT; COURTESY AUTHOR



my family, but it was done under orders from the Khmer Rouge. What happened in the past is now cancelled and you may go in peace.”

Many people in the village were clearly stunned to see me giving Mao a hug. In Cambodian culture men rarely hug – it only happens if the two men have been extremely close for many years, and are meeting again or saying farewell. I had hugged the man who had killed my family, which didn't make sense to the villagers. They probably thought it was just an act – I was putting on a good show and would come back one day to finish Mao off.

I saw the former deputy village leader, Kmao, who had given the final order to Mao and his associates to kill my family, passing by, so I called him over to have a chat. He was also shocked to see me, having been told of my disappearance over 25 years earlier. In his astonishment, he too thought I had come with bad intentions. He was speechless and very nervous.

A group of people standing nearby told me, “He was the deputy village leader then, and he made all the decisions, good or bad,” and “He gave the orders to kill your family.”

These statements instilled a deeper fear within him and he shouted, “I didn't want to do it, but I was forced to! What could I do?” The crowd fell silent – what he said was true.

I bowed down and greeted him, and he did the same to me. As I came closer, putting my hand on his shoulder, I could hear his laboured breathing.

“What is wrong?” I asked kindly.

I found it very difficult to get the words out as I stood before the man who had killed my father. **My throat choked with unspoken words and my heart ached with pain**

“I can hardly breathe,” he replied

I could see that his body was trembling uncontrollably, so I tried to calm him down. “My mission today is to set you free from the debt you owe my family. I have come not to do anything harmful to you, but rather to forgive you. I have already forgiven Mao.”

He looked over at Mao and relaxed. I put a Cambodian scarf around his neck and said, “This is my symbol of forgiveness, and it cancels all the evil you did to my family. You may go in peace, and may God bless you.”

## Final Healing

BEFORE LEAVING SIEM REAP, I promised the villagers I would come back to help dig wells and build a school. I also told them that I would like to meet Ean, the man I saw killing my mother, and forgive him.

I found him several months later. When we arrived at his house, Ean was waiting for me. Ean was amazed to see

me, though he did not immediately recognise me.

In contrast to the others, Ean acknowledged his guilt: “I feel absolute regret for all I did. Indeed, I was forced to do things that have made me feel guilty for the rest of my life. You have to understand that I had no choice because if I had disobeyed orders, I too would have been killed. But no matter why I did it, it was wrong.”

I felt moved by what he said and delivered my message to him: “I have come today to forgive you.”

Ean responded bravely: “I would like to thank you so much that you are able to do this. Please forgive me for the terrible wrong I did to your family.”

As soon as I heard these words, my heart wept. I was deeply touched, and I felt as though my burning fire of pain,



A year after Sokreaksa went to forgive his family's killers, he arranged to have this school built

which had previously been quenched, now brought about healing and restored my inner joy. He was the first of the killers to admit to what he had done and to ask for forgiveness. This was the message I had longed to hear all my life.

PHOTO: BRENDA SLOGGETT; COURTESY: AUTHOR

## HOW OBLIGING

**As I doled out** a serving of seafood salad to a friend, something dawned on me. “Carol, you can't eat shellfish, can you?”

“Oh sure, I can eat shellfish,” she said. “It just makes me sick.”

*Robin Roberson*

**No need to ask** this gas station/mini mart in Colusa, California, to make their chicken nice and crispy. They're way ahead of you. The marquee outside reads:

DIESEL  
FRIED  
CHICKEN

*Sheila Schein*

