

Saravuth's Flight

A loud, sharp sound cracked like a whip through the air. The boy Saravuth, who had bent over to pick up a basket, thought it sounded like someone striking flint and steel to start a fire. He looked up to see what had caused the noise, but he suddenly felt dizzy, and the landscape spun around him. Reaching up to steady his head with his hand, Saravuth was surprised to feel blood on his forehead. Then he realized what the sound had been – not flint striking steel, but an axe striking his head so hard that it had cracked his skull. There was no pain yet – just the shock and the reeling.

The year was 1977. After occupying Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge had separated children from their families. Since the time he was eight years old, Saravuth had lived in a boot camp, where he worked as a slave laborer for twelve to sixteen hours a day in order to earn his daily meal of one small bowl of soup. Now, at age ten, he was like a veteran.

His older brother was standing just a few yards away when the camp leader struck Saravuth's head with the axe. Instinctively, the older boy ran up to hold his younger brother. "Stay focused!" he insisted. "Don't let yourself pass out! Count to yourself."

After just a minute or two, the camp leader pulled them apart. Any longer and they would have lost their food for the day. Such was the definition of generosity in the camp – being allowed a momentary embrace after a terrible shock without punishment. Saravuth's brother stepped away but continued to communicate his love to the injured boy through his eyes.

The camp leader did not think Saravuth would live long. Perhaps a day or so. "If you want," he said to the boy, "you can try to walk back to your village. Maybe you'll make it in time to see your mother before you die. But if you go," he warned, "know that you go at your own risk. There will be no one to protect you on the way."

Saravuth continued to press his bloodied hand against the wound on his head. He was given no bandage, no medical treatment. In just a T-shirt and boxers, he began the day's walk back to his village, hoping that he would survive long enough to make the journey home. He knew the village where his mother lived, but not the specific house.

Sometimes, at key points along the journey of our lives, we have unexpected but life-changing encounters. Unaware that he was on the threshold of such a meeting, Saravuth continued walking along. Though it had been a cruel day, the afternoon was suddenly interrupted by a gift. A man

appeared out of nowhere and began to tend to Saravuth's wound. Who was he? Saravuth wondered. A magical creature, like a changeling – an animal that can take on human form – or an angel, perhaps.

The Man-Changeling-Angel gave him a small glass of juice to drink. It was foul-tasting, and Saravuth winced as he swallowed it. Was it snake juice? Whatever it was, he suddenly began to feel better.

The Giver of Snake Juice surveyed Saravuth's head. "You will live," he assured the boy with confidence. "But as you grow," he explained, "the crack in your skull may get larger and give you headaches." And then he was gone.

When Saravuth found his home at the end of the day, he was welcomed by his mother's embrace. None of his six siblings were there, however – they were scattered across the area in various boot camps. Saravuth's father, a U.S.-trained policeman who had been honored by the former King of Cambodia, would soon be tortured and killed.

In the difficult days that followed, Saravuth's mother did her best to take care of him. She was so poor, though, that she could only feed him a few grains of rice per day. Saravuth was so hungry that he felt compelled to steal so that they could eat. In his misery, his spirit deflated, and he lost hope for living.

The healing of Saravuth's head wound was a bittersweet victory – it meant a mandatory return to the boot camp. There the boys were tortured with red ants and leeches. At night the camp leaders would poke nails up through the undersides of their mattresses to keep them sleep deprived. Although outwardly he showed no emotion, Saravuth shed tears inwardly when they tied up his brother and made a spectacle of him.

The year 1979 brought regime change to Cambodia – the Vietnamese invaded and defeated the Khmer Rouge. When the Vietnamese soldiers broke up the boot camps, both the camp leaders and prisoners alike ran for their lives. Saravuth and his brother, like their siblings in other camps, ran back to their mother's house.

Saravuth and his family recognized the pivotal moment that now faced them. Before the Khmer Rouge had separated the children from their parents, Saravuth's father had sternly instructed them, saying, "You must try to escape, or you will die." His father was dead now, but there was no deliberating. Only one path lay ahead of them – flight to Thailand. They would go and risk everything for a chance at freedom. To stay at home meant to be dead already.

Barefoot and taking nothing with them, they made the journey on foot to the Thai border. Saravuth carried his youngest sister on his back. But they were greeted in their weariness by hostility at the border. The Cambodian border patrol, made up mostly of Vietnamese militants, threatened to kill their whole family.

Obedying orders, Saravuth's family followed the border patrol on foot back into Cambodia. But, laden with the younger children, exhausted, and hungry, they could not keep up. The officials turned a corner and were out of sight, and Saravuth and his family took this small window of opportunity to

go back toward the border. This time, they fared better.

The border patrol officers routinely behaved like thieves rather than keepers of the law. They would often take everything travelers had and then kill them. Saravuth and his family, however, had absolutely nothing desirable to offer in the way of booty. Their only possessions were the ragged clothes they were wearing. And so, in a bizarre twist of fate, their destitution allowed for them to pass. As they did so, they heard gunshots. The people behind them had just been killed.

Not far ahead of them were six or seven UN trucks. A skirmish broke out between the Thai and Cambodian border officials, who were fighting over whose country this border area of "no man's land" belonged to. It was just another outbreak of a years'-long conflict.

"Run!" shouted the UN peacekeepers to Saravuth's family and some of the other refugees, motioning them to hurry toward the trucks while the officials were fighting amongst themselves. Saravuth felt the adrenaline rush as they dashed to the trucks and clambered in. It was too hard to think about those who didn't make it – easier to blame their deaths on Karma and forget.

For more than three years, Saravuth and his family lived in a Thai refugee camp called Kaoidang. They had escaped death in Cambodia only to be introduced to a new nightmare. The Thai military didn't like Cambodians, so Saravuth learned a new kind of "normal" – on a regular basis he felt the powerlessness of being forced to watch people raped and killed in front of him.

It was like a dream the day that Saravuth's family learned they had finally been granted refugee status in the United States. There were smiles, laughter, and tears. When the time came to board the bus with the other Cambodian refugees and head to the airport, the excitement was palpable.

Once in the airport, however, the feeling of disorientation began to creep in. "Where on earth will we be going?" the family wondered, as they tried to imagine what sort of new beginning might await them. Saravuth's family was directed to a plane headed for Salt Lake City.

Once on board, they were surprised to find that they were the only refugees on the flight. Everyone else looked clean and fresh, well-dressed and well-coifed, with money. Saravuth, on the other hand, could not remember his last shower. He was still dressed in his boxers and dirty T-shirt, his feet clad with someone else's old tennis shoes, and his hair overgrown.

As he and his family looked at their fellow passengers in first class, the feeling of shame flooded them. They wished they could cover themselves, fearing that others would find them disgusting and bothersome. The flight attendant offered them food, but thinking they would have to pay for it, they declined even though they were hungry.

In the Salt Lake City airport, they felt overwhelmed and lost. Still deeply ashamed, they wanted to hide themselves in the bathroom. If only it were possible to experience this new freedom in a vacuum, where no one else could see them.

The snow outside was beautiful, but Saravuth's T-shirt and boxers weren't adequate for the cold. Their sponsor stood ahead of them, holding warm jackets. Saravuth intuitively knew that the choice to walk toward this sponsor and accept their new life would come with a cost, a risk that had to be taken. Would their dignity survive the shame of being the destitute ones in this land of plenty? What would people think of them? Could they bear their stares?

They walked toward their sponsor and into her embrace. The risk had been taken. They received the coats gratefully and tried to endure the fact that they had nothing to give in return. It was a new journey now, not of flight but of rebuilding.

Today, Saravuth is 50 years old. His journey in the United States took him from Salt Lake City to Des Moines and finally to Oakland, California, where he finished high school and met and married his wife, another Cambodian refugee.

His adult life in Oakland, where urban poverty presents many refugees with new challenges, has not always been easy. He was shot in a hold-up at his store-front business and nearly died. After surviving what no one thought he could come through, he was renamed "Joe," after G.I. Joe. A few years later, he was hit while driving by a reckless driver. Joe's twisted car had to be sawn in two so that he could get out, but he walked away from the scene. His mother continues to wonder how he is still alive.

Joe now works with his wife Chandra at the Center for the Empowerment of Refugees and Immigrants, an organization in Oakland that serves refugees traumatized by genocide, war, and torture. Despite his story, Joe always appears cheerful, and he is glad to tell you his story, even the most painful parts. He will show you the deep scar on the right side of his forehead where he was struck with that axe some forty years ago.

Joe's childhood dream was to become like his father, a man with a kind heart. As a new refugee in the U.S., Joe wanted a new home and new friends, and to get back the time that was lost. Caring for his children, for the refugee community in Oakland, and for strangers like me, it seems he is living his dream.

And, he will always make sure you have something to eat.

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