

A young girl is sitting on the ground at night, her hands pressed against her face in a gesture of distress or despair. She is wearing a dark t-shirt and light-colored pants. The background is dark with blurred lights, suggesting an outdoor urban setting.

On Their Own

A story of
street children
in Thailand

Based on true events

Colin C. Bell

ON THEIR OWN - A STORY OF STREET CHILDREN IN THAILAND

1st edition ebook 2010

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ISBN 978-974-519-722-0

eISBN 978-616-7270-70-8

Published by

Internet: www.bangkokbooks.com

E-mail: info@bangkokbooks.com



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This book is dedicated to the people of Thailand and especially to all those, who work day-by-day to help street children and other under-privileged youth.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book would have not come into print without the support of my family and friends.

A special thank you to Heidi, Anna, Sarah, Ake, Sasi, Ferry, Meta, Keaw, Anne, Khun Kanjana, Khun Ubonwan, Khun Noppadon, Khun Chawat, Khun Prapai, Khun Jalongrat, Khun Boonchuay, Khun Pichai, Khun Pon, and Pi Ad. (You know who you are.)

A special thank you also to the people from Bangkok Book House for their professional help.

INTRO

It was in a school in a small town in America; most students were children of middle-class parents, and it was a good school—no body searches or weapons detectors.

The class was reading the essays they had written on the topic: “My Greatest Hero”. Janet was just finishing hers about the great American founding father, George Washington.

Ning, a teenager with Asian features, knew that she would be next. She felt a little nervous. She had well adjusted to life here, but not too many years ago she had lived a different life, in a different country.

A very different life.

It wouldn’t be easy to make them understand what it had been like and why he was such a hero.

When she heard her name she took her notes, got up, and went to the front.

“To help you know, who my greatest hero is,” she began, “I have to go back a few years and tell you about the life I once lived.”

And suddenly it was as if she had traveled back... And it all stood before her eyes as if it had been only yesterday.

THE BEGINNING OF A LONG JOURNEY

It all began when their mother got sick. Or maybe it all began when their father had left them. But that was many years before, and they had managed, Mother making sweet cakes in the early morning and selling them during the day. It wasn't much, but it was enough, and Nok and Ning had food, they had clothes, and they went to school.

Sometimes after school Nok would help with selling the sweet cakes, and then he would help Ning with her homework.

"Make me proud of you," their mother would always say, and Nok and Ning had tried their best in spite of their peers at school teasing them about their old school backpacks and making fun of Ning when her toes would show once again through the holes in her socks. They simply wore out too quickly and their family couldn't afford new ones every month.

Still, life hadn't been so bad.

But then mother had become sick. For a while she had kept making the sweet cakes and for a few days Nok had skipped school and sold the cakes, but the cart was heavy and people were a bit suspicious of a young boy selling sweet cakes during the day.

"Shouldn't you be in school?" they'd said.

And then things had gotten worse.

Their mother didn't get up from bed any more and would hardly eat. A doctor came, the one working for that charity Nok couldn't remember the name of. Then the community elder had come and had held a hushed conversation with their mother. But their small house had only one room and so Nok couldn't help but overhear some of it.

"What about the children?" "Where will they go?" "...any relatives..." "...orphanage..."

Not long after this their mother had talked to them.

“I will not be with you much longer,” she had said in her no-frills way. “Listen, when I’m dead—and I will be dead soon—don’t hang around here. Don’t wait for anybody to come. If you do they will bring you to the orphanage. I grew up in an orphanage; I don’t want you to live in one. They might beat you up; and there are bad characters in there that teach you to steal. Stop sobbing and listen!”

“I have a sister in the North-East. Up there on the shelf, there, in that teapot, is some money. It will be enough to get you there. You can take the train—it’ll be enough. When you get there ask for Sarinee. Tell her you’re Saowanee’s children. She will take care of you.”

“Now stop sobbing and bring me a pen and paper.”

And Nok went for pen and paper and Ning kept sobbing still, there was nothing she could do about it.

“Here,” their mother had said. “That’s her address. Don’t lose that. When you get to the village ask for Sarinee, you understand. I know you are good children. Your father left us, but we’ve done okay. Nok, you take care of your sister. Don’t leave her alone; do you hear me? When you do the right thing, things will be all right. You’ll see. Make your mother proud of you. Okay?—Now stop sobbing and let me rest.”

And Ning and Nok had kept sobbing very quietly, because they wanted their mother to be proud of them and act like real grown-ups, though they felt very small, now that they knew they would be on their own. And who knew what their aunt would be like.

Yet, it was all they had.

The next morning when they awoke it was very quiet. Too quiet. The laborious, snuffling noise of their mother’s breathing was missing and with an ominous feeling Nok went up to her bed. Hesitantly he reached out and touched her hand. It was cold. What he had dreadfully anticipated had become reality.

“Pack your things,” he whispered to his sister.

Quietly she went to get her backpack and stuffed in it a few things she called her own: a cheap watch with a flat battery, a necklace, some hairclips, and a ragged doll. She didn’t sob any longer, as she had all night until she fell asleep. In fearful anticipation, she had

lived through this moment many times throughout the night. Now that it had happened she simply went through the motions, numb from the pain.

Nok shed a few tears, but then suppressed that feeling he had of wanting to just let go and cry out loud.

“Make mother proud of you,” he remembered his mother’s words.

“For Ning’s sake I can’t just cry,” he told himself.

And so the two children both went quietly about their business, then quietly closed the door behind them, and left. Somebody would find their mother. The community would take care of the funeral.

It was late morning when they stood in the train station. Nok went up to the counter and waited in line.

“To Ubol,” he said when his turn came. “For two children.”

The ticket clerk glanced over his glasses.

“Third class?” he asked.

“What else is there?” Nok asked.

“There’s second class and second class air-conditioned, and then there’s first class.”

Nok pulled out the money he had and showed it to the clerk. The clerk creased his forehead.

“Well, that’s third class then,” he said. “Two children. By the way, are you traveling alone?”

“Oh no,” Nok said quickly, not sure if it was allowed for children to travel without a grown-up. “My aunt is there.”

The clerk took Nok’s money, counted out the change, and then pushed tickets and change through the ticket window.

“Next, please.”

Nok and Ning sat on the wooden bench of the third-class carriage and looked out the window. The sun was going down, its golden light brightening up the lush green plain stretching out in front of their eyes. Rice field after rice field, with little in between except an occasional farmhouse or village. This was the fruitful central plain, the rice bowl of the Kingdom, where farmers were able to raise a second crop late in the year.

“There must be plenty of food here,” Nok contemplated. “Shouldn’t be a problem to find a little food for a boy and a little girl like Ning and me.”

It was a cheerful thought.

The train ride was long and they’d get to their destination in the morning. Third class didn’t have any beds; besides, it was crowded. When nighttime came people would spread mats or newspapers on the floor and sleep there. Others would stretch out on the benches as much as this was possible, and try to sleep halfway sitting up.

“Where shall I sleep?” Ning asked.

“On the floor,” Nok answered.

But they had neither a mat nor newspaper.

“It’s dirty on the floor,” Ning replied. “And someone might step on me.”

“Then sleep in the luggage rack,” her brother said.

The luggage rack was a net of rope suspended on metal rods fastened to the wall.

It was meant as a joke, but before Nok could say another thing, Ning climbed up and began to make herself comfortable.

“It’s like a hammock,” she said. “Can you pass me my bag?”

So Nok gave her the bag and Ning took out her ragged doll and put her next to her on the rack. Then she put her backpack as a pillow under her head.

“Now stop sobbing and lie down,” Ning lectured her doll. “Tomorrow we will have a new home. Be brave and make me proud of you.”

And Nok knew that his sister was only talking to herself.

“Tomorrow we will have a new home,” Ning’s voice echoed through his mind.

That, too, was a cheerful thought.

THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

When Nok awoke it was light outside. He'd fallen asleep, slouched down on the wooden bench. His body was aching here and there and he stretched his arms and legs.

Looking outside he noticed the landscape had changed. Grey dust covered the ground and the foliage of the few trees was dusted with it as much as anything else.

Suddenly doubts began to fill his mind.

"Maybe there isn't enough food where we are going. Maybe there isn't any food there at all."

He had often heard about the poverty of this region.

Scanning for Ning he found her still sleeping in the luggage rack.

Then he searched for his bag. It had been right beside him last night, he remembered. Panic swept over him when he didn't find it on the bench. He stood up and glanced around. No sign of it anywhere. Finally he crouched down on his knees and looked under the benches. There it was; it had somehow fallen under the seats.

He opened it and checked his belongings. Everything was still there, he noticed with relief, even his wallet.

He opened the wallet. There should've been enough to get to the village of his mother's sister; enough to have some food once they arrived; enough to buy some water and some food for the way there.

There was nothing.

Now he was doubly discouraged. The land outside parched and dry, and no money to go anywhere—not even for a bite of food.

He berated himself for not guarding the money more carefully. He could've put the money in his socks, or his underwear.

His mother would be quite disappointed with him.

“Are we there yet?” a squeaky voice from above interrupted his gloom.

“Soon,” he mumbled without looking up. He felt too ashamed to face his sister.

Ning came clambering down.

“Hey, what’s the matter,” she asked. His gloom was so obvious that even his sister had noticed it.

“Someone stole our money,” he muttered in a funeral voice.

Ning fumbled in the pockets of her jeans.

“Here,” she said triumphantly, when she finally pulled her hand out. “I have some money.”

Nok looked at the coin in her hand.

“Ten Baht,” he said, creasing his forehead, “That won’t even buy us a plate of food.”

Now the clouds of gloom began to settle on Ning as well.

They both stared out the window, where a fiery sun was beginning to bake the already dry ground as if to make sure that not one drop of moisture remained.

“You should’ve...” Ning started to say, but Nok interrupted her before she could finish. “I know—you don’t have to say it.”

The train conductor passed by.

“Next station last station. Take your bags and luggage. Don’t leave anything on the train.”

Nok climbed on the bench and reached up to take down Ning’s backpack. He handed it to her along with the rag doll, and then grabbed his own pack, and tardily they shuffled to the door.

There were other people by the door already, eager to go out, so they had to wait at the end of the line.

Outside the dry, dusty landscape had given way to an equally dry and dusty panorama of buildings and houses. Slowly the train entered the station. Doors were opened and people jumped off the step. Some were greeted by family or friends, others quickly made their way to the exit and boarded some kind of local transport.

Soon Nok and Ning were the only ones standing forlorn on the deserted platform. One of the uniformed railway employees came by and asked them, “No one here to pick you up?”

Nok and Ning shook their heads.

“So, where are you going?”

Nok pulled out the paper from his pocket, the one where his mother had written the address of her sister.

The railway official read it and handed it back to Nok.

“There’s a *songteaw* outside. That’ll bring you there. What are you waiting for? You can’t stay here.”

Nok didn’t have the heart to tell him that they didn’t have any money, so they just went outside the station.

A *songteaw* is a modified pick-up truck open in the back with benches to sit on. It’s the usual local transport going out to the villages.

Obviously the *songteaw* had already left and the next one wasn’t about to go yet for a while.

“I’m hungry,” Ning said. Nok nodded and said nothing.

“I’m sorry,” she added after a moment.

“You don’t have to be sorry,” Nok answered.

Across the street he saw a vendor; a lady selling bowls of noodle soup. At that moment noodle soup appeared to Nok like a luxurious meal.

He took Ning across and asked the lady, “How much for a bowl?”

“Ten Baht,” the lady replied without taking further notice of the kids.

“One bowl, please,” Nok said. Ning handed him the coin.

“Can you give me a few bites, too?” she asked.

“It’s for you,” Nok said.

He took the bowl and sat it down on one of the fold up tables. Ning sat down on one of the stools and began slurping the soup down.

“What about you?” the lady behind the soup-cart blurted out.

“I’m not hungry,” Nok lied.

The lady didn’t say anything else, but a few moments later, another bowl of soup appeared in front of Nok.

“It’s two bowls for 10 Baht at this time of day,” the woman said quickly.

She watched him as he hungrily gulped down the food.

“No money, hey?” she asked then. “What happened? Your mother forgot to pick you up?”

“Mother’s dead,” Nok said quietly. “We’re going to stay with her sister. Somebody stole our money on the train.”

“Well, if I hadn’t seen you coming out of that station, I’d say you made that up,” she snorted.

Nok was so hungry that he finished before Ning.

When they had both finished he brought the bowls back to the vendor lady.

“Thank you,” he said.

The lady’s gruff face broke into a smile.

“It’s all right,” she said. “Where are you going anyway?”

Nok showed her the little slip of paper.

“Got money for that?” she asked him.

He shook his head.

She raised her head and shouted across the road, “Chai! Chai! Hey, wake up you lazy bastard.”

On the other side of the road a lean figure got up from lying on the seat in the back of the modified pick-up.

The lady kept shouting at him in the local vernacular the children could only partly understand; something about “take’m there”.

“He’ll bring you,” she said eventually, turning back to Nok and Ning. “Don’t worry, it won’t cost you.”

The two thanked her once again, gathered their bags and made their way across the road. They were about to clamber into the back of the vehicle, when the driver called from the front.

“Come and sit with me,” the man said. “And talk with me.”

As soon as they sat down, he began to talk.

“So what are your names? Uh, my name’s Chai. Actually Chatchai, but everyone calls me Chai, so Chai it is. Where are you from? Well, don’t have to tell me, doesn’t matter to me, where people come from. Anyway, I’m from Ban Hin. Never heard of it? It’s not far from here, down towards the border. Now I live here, but I still have a house in the village. Home, sweet home. And you know what?”

“My neighbor there he had this farm, full of chicken, and one day, one morning actually, he came out of his house to look at his chickens, and all his chickens were dead. Must be the chicken flu. You heard of the chicken flu? Of course, you’ve heard of the chicken flu, everybody heard about the chicken flu. Do you have chickens?”

Don't have to tell me, of course you have chickens, most everyone has chickens."

And on and on he went, never stopping long enough for the children to answer even one of his questions.

By and by the vehicle filled up with more people. Without stopping for a moment Chai prattled on, while the children listened with less than half an ear, the local dialect making it difficult to understand in any case.

Finally Chai pulled out and they were on their way. Passing the noodle cart Nok and Ning waved at the friendly vendor lady, who waved back at them. Nok felt better now. Maybe things would turn out all right after all.

The car Chai was driving was old and noisy. It made it all but impossible for Nok to understand what Chai was talking about. Whenever he posed a question, Nok would simply nod his head, without ever understanding the question. With the dazzling heat, the droning of the motor, and Chai's endless prattle, Ning had soon begun to doze off.

They had left the town behind and continued overland through villages, which in their dust and dryness looked all the same to Nok.

The ground and the fields were cracked and dry and whatever vegetation had remained, was yellowed or of rusty color. A few trees here and there, sparsely clad with leaves, were trying to cast a passing shadow without making an impact on the heat that was penetrating everything.

The air-conditioning on Chai's car had long given up its work and so he kept his window open. Whenever a car passed them a cloud of dust followed, covering their hair, face, and clothes and leaving a bitter, stale taste on Nok's tongue.

Chai countered it with swigs from his water bottle. The water had a peculiar yellowish hue and Nok wondered what it was laced with. He declined when Chai offered it to him to take a sip.

After about an hour Chai stopped the car at somewhat of a country market. He motioned for the children to get out and then disembarked himself.

"Are we there?" Nok asked.

Chai gesticulated with his finger in a way that Nok took to mean

“No”, but right away Chai grabbed him by the shoulder and brought him over to where another, even more dilapidated vehicle was waiting by the side of the road.

Chai talked to the driver; obviously they knew each other well.

“Oh, these poor kids. They come from a farm, somewhere in Bangkok. You know their mother was having this chicken farm, while their father is a mahout working with elephants in the jungle on the border to Burma. So, the father went missing, probably trampled on by elephants—happens all the time in the jungle. And one morning their mother is dead, the chickens, all their relatives, everything—probably chicken flu, you know. Like my neighbor.”

And on and on he went.

Ning looked quizzically at Nok, but Nok only made big eyes and shrugged his shoulders.

At the end the new driver agreed to take them. But before he had a chance to call them up to the front, Nok and Ning quickly scrambled into the back of the *songteaw*, where already a few old women had taken a seat.

This time the wait was short, but as the vehicle was beginning to leave, suddenly five schoolboys came running and jumped on.

“Shouldn’t you be in school?” an older woman croaked.

“Teacher’s sick,” one of the boys answered.

Nok and Ning tried to avoid looking at them, but soon realized that five pairs of eyes were staring at them.

One of the boys said something in the local dialect they didn’t understand.

Nok looked the boys over. Their school uniforms were as dirty as their own, their hair was cropped short, their faces sweaty and dusty, their eyes wary.

“Do you speak Thai?” Nok asked.

The boys laughed.

“Where are you from?” one of the boys said, imitating Nok’s way of speaking.

“Bangkok,” Nok answered.

The boy said something to his peers in the local dialect to which they all burst out laughing, until one of the elderly ladies barked at them. They settled down and continued to talk to each other, ignoring

Nok and Ning altogether.

“What did he say?” Ning wanted to know.

“I’m not sure,” Nok replied. “Something about buffaloes.”

Ning turned back to look out over the land. She had no idea where they were, but she was sure they had come to the end of the world and it was a long way from home.

ARRIVING AT THE VILLAGE

After another long while, when hardly anybody was left in the *songteaw*, the driver stopped on a stretch of road in the middle of nowhere. He pointed to the left where a little hillock went up and shouted something that neither Nok nor Ning could understand.

“He says, it’s over that hill, only one or two kilometers. Your village, go over that hill,” the little old lady that was still sitting in the back with the children explained.

Nok and Ning scrambled out of the car. They stood by the roadside with their backpacks, watching the rickety old vehicle disappear in a cloud of dust. The sun was glaring down from the sky and they hadn’t had any water since that bowl of noodles.

“Only one or two kilometers,” Ning sighed. Even one or two kilometers seemed a long way to her.

“Come on, let’s go,” Nok encouraged her. “It’s just over this hill.”

Slowly, like two little ants they began their way up the bare hill, over ground covered with grass that had dried up many days before, dust spraying their feet at every step.

They were about to reach the crest of the hill, when they suddenly heard barking ahead of them and a moment later over the top came a big dog, a dog at least as big as Nok. Nok and Ning were too tired to run and only stood there terrified, rooted to the ground.

The dog also simply stood there and kept barking and baring its teeth.

Then they heard a man’s voice and he sounded angry.

“I’m scared,” Ning whispered, but Nok didn’t say anything, as he didn’t want to admit that he was scared, too.

A moment later the man came over the incline.