

## Obscure Way

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By Pen Chhorn

At the beginning of 2006, I started to ponder my future deeply. It was all the text message New Year's wishes that I received on my phone--wishing me success, wealth, honor, and patriotic feeling--that lead me to think beyond the courses I had taken at the University. I started asking myself the following questions: How can I maintain good health? What kind of work would bring me more income? How can I gain respect? Which way should I love my country?

I could never come up with satisfactory answers to the above questions. I am aware of my limitations, but I cannot stop thinking. To this end, I try to stop my thoughts from obsessing about these questions and decide to pick a good person as a role model, to follow his footsteps in order to lead myself to success.

I started reading philosophy books. I have learned a little bit about philosopher's lives in both Western and Asian countries. I read about Mahatma Gandhi, the Indian philosopher who promotes non-violence; Nicolo Machiavelli, the Italian political philosopher; Confucius, a Chinese philosopher; and the Greek philosopher Aristotle. Through reading the biographies and masterpieces of all of these great men, my mind has slipped out of Khmer society. I fully appreciate the wisdom of great men who are followed by the world's people. At the same time I feel ashamed for dreaming beyond reality, but I cannot prevent myself from thinking that way. I try to switch my mind off, allowing time to pass by.

Today I meet my friend. I share all my thoughts with her. She gives me a simple answer: "You don't need to pick a great man as your role model. You can simply pick a Cambodian who is prominent, holds a good position, and is wealthy, such as medical doctors, movie stars, idol singers etc...Whomever you admire, follow them. Then you will be successful."

After a brief exchange of ideas, I leave her. Engaged with her comments, I realize that what she said is true and right. In Cambodia there must be honored and wealthy men. No doubt. I believe I will be able to find a role model. I try to figure out the way to discover a good person. I am certain that no books in the library have been written about these Cambodians yet.

My eagerness to strengthen myself as a better student causes my mind to wander; finally it brings me back to someone close at hand, my neighbor. This man owns a big villa surrounded by a cement fence and topped by barbed wire. At the front door, there is a sign "Beware of Dog" and a twenty-four-hour guard.

I have often chatted with the guard of this villa, Uncle Sakrava. He knows that I am a student. He always chats with me about various issues: life, politics, corruption, the past and the future of the country, his own past and the international news. We have sometimes talked late into the night.

Today, the cool, early February weather has come along with Chinese New Year. The music of the Lion Dance begins along the street and in the house where the dancers are performing. Uncle Sakrava is not busy since the owner of the villa went to their family's native village to celebrate Chinese New Year. Smiling, he calls to me. "Hey Teacher, aren't you going to celebrate Chinese New Year like everybody else?"

"No, Uncle," I answer through my window.

"You have light skin. Why don't you observe Chinese customs?"

I do not answer but go down to see him in person. Uncle Sakrava brings out all kinds of food--Chinese soup, Beijing Duck, Stir Fry Duck, Special Roast Pork, Chicken Drunkard--puts them on a cement table and asks me to join him: "Come on Teacher, don't be shy."

I have never had this kind of food before. The dishes are tasty.

"I thought you had Chinese blood." Uncle Sakrava is pinning me down.

"Never been, I'm pure Khmer. Just look at me and you would know."

"Let's eat." Uncle Sakrava pushes me to eat. "Forget about the bloodline. We can just pretend to be Chinese for one day. In our country, right now, people intermingle; some of our people get drunk before the Chinese. Look at grandma Sao's house..." He points to the house across the street. "It is quiet. She stopped selling Cambodian noodles and went out for a ceremony somewhere. I can't find anything for breakfast. Let's drink our first glass, teacher." He lifts up his glass to toast with me; his glass touches mine with a clinking sound. He then picks up a piece of meat with some chopsticks, puts it in his mouth and chews with a crunchy sound. He asks: "Teacher, how about the present situation of our country? Can we be developed the same way as Japan or the United States?"

I am not able to answer these questions. I haven't thought that far yet. I just came to the city a few months ago. I haven't really adjusted to city life yet or been able to understand all of these social issues.

"So, forget that," he says. "Just pay attention to your studies. As for me, I am aware of my own situation. I will never have a brilliant future. I will barely survive. The little money I make is just enough to send to my wife in the village. Look Teacher!" He rolls his shirt up for me to see a scar from a stomach wound he received as the result of fighting with the Khmer Rouge at the border. "After fighting and defending the country, I am now ending up as the guard at a wealthy man's house."

He finishes his second glass of beer and adds: "What can we do, our society has changed rapidly."

I observe that Uncle Sakrava's face has turned red and he has become more talkative. I want to stop him from talking or want to get away; but I feel that it is inappropriate to behave that way, so I am trying to be patient and so continue listening to him.

He talks about himself: "Nowadays, I feel hopeless since I have no knowledge, no skills. When I grew up, I was trained to be an electrician, and then I got into the Army to serve the country. When I fought in the battlefield, I barely escaped death, and when the country was at peace, my salary was not enough to raise my children. I decided to get out of the Army to

take what I could for work. I tell you this story, because I see you are still young, and I count you as my own child."

"Thank you, I also consider you as my parent," I answer.

"Heuw!" He takes a deep breath. "Speaking to you, I am relieved. Don't mind me much." He refills his glass and continues: "Our country has been facing difficulty for a long time. If we continue in this situation, how can our country progress like other countries?"

"I am part of the younger generation. I don't see any difference between the past and present society in our country. Can you share with me?"

"Sure!" He gulps half his glass of beer. "I have lived through a few regimes. The Khmer Rouge was the worst one. The other two regimes were not so good, but at least people had enough food to eat. They had reasonable salaries, not like our present regime where teachers have to be motorcycle-taxi drivers. They do it as a side job just to survive. We are now like birds in cages. We can only read or watch news that they want us to know in the paper or on TV."

"I don't understand you, Uncle."

"Simple. I just want to tell you that everything belongs to a different group. I can start with the newspaper. Everyday a different person is praised. You may have heard about corruption. Should they have the opportunity, they grasp it quickly. We human beings need to survive; we wish to be rich, especially the teachers. Forgive me if I am affecting your feelings."

We both raise our glasses and cheer up. He continues talking: "Teacher, Don't take me seriously. I am kind of drunk. Should I make no sense, ignore it. Forgive me." He raises his hands respectfully in prayer.

I raise my hands in response and assure him, saying: "Don't mention it, I don't mind."

Uncle Sakrava continues: "I speak about what I know. Don't you know? The owner of this house is a big shot who people, including myself, trust. He is from abroad and has obtained a higher degree. He is patriotic, coming to help the country by trying to serve people patiently. Until now, I have worked for him over three terms of office. He still maintains a good reputation among politicians. It is not easy to earn such a good name. What is going on with him? I don't know much. I tell you. In our present society, you can't do anything much without money. I am sure you know that in the old times our forest, our timber, was simply for our people--to build their houses and to use for firewood. It was not a disaster like it is now. Public buildings have been sold. Commune offices also have been sold to businessmen. Nephew!" He switches from calling me Teacher to Nephew. "Some of those in good positions are fortunate. I guess both of us are unlucky. You seem to have a good sense of sincerity. Let's have one more glass. If you can't, don't push yourself. You may get drunk."

"Yes, Uncle. I actually cannot drink much beer. I just want to keep you company and listen to your thoughts. I am fond of listening to you. You know much about social problems and seem to have a clear analysis."

"Don't believe much of what I say. I am speaking off the top of my head. I have never attended the University. Speaking of social problems, we all know about them and can discuss the issues equally. So far I haven't heard your opinions yet. You may belong to a certain group. Should I touch upon your interests, don't call the police to arrest me. I am old." He touches my shoulders lightly.

"There is nothing. Don't ever think that way. I am simply a student. I just got into the University. By listening to you, I feel like I have gone through the University for five years. I haven't heard anybody tell me this much."

"Hey! Have some fruit." He hands me a plate of fruit and then continues: "If you study at school and ignore society's problems, you won't be able to catch up with social trends."

"Thank you, Uncle, for giving me advice. It is true that knowledge from school won't be enough to promote a better life. The owner of this villa has plenty of food. He must be nice. Is he in the group that you have mentioned?"

"Hey, Teacher. I have not included the owner of this house in what I told you." He is trying to be defensive. "The corrupt people I've been talking about come from what I've heard other people say. There..." He points to a man on a motorcycle. "...if you want to know the truth, ask him. That motorcycle-taxi driver came and told me about those corrupt people during his free time. He would know how much each government position costs. Teacher, you should not believe all of these rumors. You just analyze what you hear and make your own judgment."

"It's okay. If you say so, I believe you. If the owner of this villa weren't a good person, you wouldn't have been able to work for him this long since you are an idealist."

Uncle Sakrava nods his head and says: "You are smart, Teacher...I am an idealist, I admit."

Uncle Sakrava seems to be having a personal crisis. Listening to him, I can tell he has a lot of anger about society. He hates his daily life and doesn't seem to be satisfied with what he has, even though he makes one hundred dollars a month from this job that helps to support his family in the village. He doesn't have much education, but he does have profound ideas, making it difficult to understand him.

He asks to be excused for a moment to feed his boss's dogs, German Shepherds, in the kennel. He says to the dogs: "Let's eat. If you don't, you will be skinny and your master will blame me. After eating, you should go to sleep. Don't bark. You may disturb our neighbors. While serving your master, I have to serve you, too..."

He throws a piece of meat to them. They fight for it, making a scary noise. He moans: "You dogs are lucky. You have become a wealthy, big shot's dogs; you get to sleep and eat easily. You even have a doctor to treat you regularly. I have to collect your poop--smelly poop."

I don't much like to hear his complaints regarding the dogs' poop. When he gets back to me, I try to switch the subject, inquiring about people in this villa instead.

"Uncle! Does everyone in this house have a job? How much does each of them make? How can they maintain this big house? How can each of them own a car?"

"Hum!" Uncle Sakrava clears his throat and says: "They are holding jobs and do business at the same time. Don't you know? The lady of the house is doing real estate business and timber business. She owns five factories and invests in an import-export business. The man, the owner of the house, holds a high position in government. His son is on the police force. His youngest daughter is working for an NGO. All of them are capable. This is why their family is prospering."

After an additional big gulp of beer, he continues: "The lady owns 17 houses to rent, but this family does not brag about their wealth. All the children in this house hold higher degrees--a Ph.D. or Doctorate degree. Think about that, Teacher! We can't even find a job, but they are complaining about being too busy, tired, and having no time for a vacation abroad."

I really like listening to Uncle Sakrava, but it is also really late at night. I decide to tell him that I have to go. He is reluctant to see me leave, saying: "You leave me by myself. I will be bored, but I will see you later."

I say goodbye and leave him.

Tonight is a pleasant evening. A soft breeze wafts through my window, carrying along the sweet fragrance of the Kdang Gnea flowers. Suddenly, the sound of firecrackers breaks out everywhere. The smell of gunpowder penetrates my room, reminding me of a time when the country was at war.

Time flies. I am also keeping myself busy. Everyday, I try to read books, such as novels, or poems, history and philosophy. I check the Internet to dig for the information I need to research social issues as Uncle Sakrava has advised. What I read the most are articles about corruption; the poor educational system; sewing factory issues; demonstrations for equal rights and freedom of expression; salary increases, especially for teachers; poverty in remote areas; the Khmer Rouge trial; sex trafficking; border issues; and the move-star scandals. There are so many negative social issues; even monks don't get respect from the general public. As for the international news, I read about the war in the Middle East; nuclear proliferation in Iran; the bird flu; military rule in Burma; the Thai government's problem with their Southern provinces; demonstrations to oust Thaksin in Thailand and Arroyo in the Philippines. Domestic and international news may cause headaches for all the leaders involved.

At this point, my thoughts sympathetically return to my villagers who live far away from the modern world. All they have to worry about is their daily lives, praying for enough rain, hoping that the goddess of rain provides mercy. All their attention is on farming. That is why they have not prospered. On the other hand, people in the city, where there is a civilized life style, are working to seek opportunities to improve their intellectual ability and to compete for a better position in life.

Some of my villagers, who have the opportunity to live abroad, still don't care much about their education. My poor villagers! When people from outside come to take their land away and

sell it to someone else, no one dares to complain. If my villagers, both the docile and the cruel ones, should have a small land conflict, they provoke a life-and-death confrontation.

I've had the opportunity to come to the city to attend the University; but, I wonder, will I be able to catch up with the fortunate people whom I've just been talking about. I still have some unanswered questions in my mind: How can I earn money? How can I get a powerful position? How long should it take?

I finally realize that if I pile up all of these questions mentally, I may fall into a hopeless situation and won't be able to pursue my studies at the University. My view: life is a difficult task. What we wish to attain, to embrace, always slips through our fingers. It is not easy to bring our vision to actuality.

I have come to my own conclusion that effort needs to be made for whatever we may want. I am aware that my mind is unorganized. It jumps around here and there. This time, my mind switches to thinking about Corolla, a beautiful girl at the University. I haven't seen her for a while. I miss her. I love her.

Why do I love her? I again cannot give the answer to my own question. My subconscious seems to tell me that I have fallen in love with the only girl who pays attention to me, who understands me, who knows what I'm up to.

Corolla is a generous person. She supports me when I'm down and even supports my ambition to be knowledgeable. The books I read are the presents that she gives me. Without her, my life would be hopeless. Corolla is truly beautiful. Whenever I think of her, my love increases. Corolla's beauty, attitude, and her relationship with me make my classmates jealous. The rumor about our relationship has spread among friends. This makes me shy away, and my feelings are torn apart between her and my lessons.

While sitting by myself on a bench under the tree at the University, I am struck by a voice: "What are you thinking? Though I've been walking toward you, you don't even call out to me."

"I'm thinking."

"Are you thinking of me?"

"Yes, I am thinking of you and my lessons." I can hardly speak since I'm so shy about being in love with her.

"Haven't you received any money from home? Why are you less cheerful than usual and appear so weak? All right, here is 100 dollars." She hands the money to me. I am reluctant about taking her money but cannot refuse.

Corolla adds, "This is your spending money. You don't need to pay me back. Don't worry. I don't want anything from you; I'm just trying to be helpful."

"Thank you very much," I say to her.

"Look! Even the police have become thieves." She hands me the newspaper.

"Read it and you'll know," I respond. "Don't judge them. Sometimes, we don't see their side. The Greek philosopher Socrates said that no one wants to be bad. The story of police becoming thieves is widely disseminated. Everybody knows. It is a repeated story."

"I think, our society won't be able to have any brilliant future," she replied. "Consider my family. At first they appeared to be good. Everyday, my mom advises me to work hard on my studies and to observe closely the code of women's conduct based on Cambodian customs. Sometimes, she points out some corrupted people and asks me not to follow in their footsteps. Even you, she advises me not to associate with you, saying that you are poor. My mom has been criticized by her own children for putting other people down."

"Let it be. We should stop talking about anything that disturbs us." I cut her short as I don't want to hear anything about her family. "People these days quickly take advantage of an opportunity. We are students. We should just pay attention to our studies."

"You talk like that, but you actually think a lot about everything. I'm telling you that everyone, even you and me, can distinguish between good and bad, black and white; but many times, we are dominated by money and government influence that makes us lose our conscience. Should you like to have a long lasting relationship with me, train yourself to be a conscious person. Today you criticize others for being corrupt and support demonstrations with burning tires to protest against the government. Can you assure me that you will be so pure when you get a job in the future? If not, you don't need to earn any degree from school."

I am struck by her words but decide not to respond, remembering a saying: "A man should know how to be a good loser; don't fight with a woman, and then you will succeed." I wonder why Corolla warns me that much? I try to be patient. Should I talk back, I might ruin our friendship. I have to be careful as I am now falling in love with her. I decide to put up with her so she just smiles and tells me not to think so much about politics.

We decide to part. Corolla walks away and I watch as she leaves. Her way of walking is so graceful that it doubles my love for her.

I talk to myself: "Ok, Corolla. You may not know that I am thinking of you. I truly love you--love you honestly." I'm in a trance because I miss my sweetheart; I'm longing for her.

Corolla's shadow flies away from my sight, but I am still longing for her. Her smile lingers in my mind, floating deeply in my heart. Before leaving, she told me not to think about social and political issues. I sense she may be afraid that I will go crazy. I am aware myself of that fact. When I recall her words, my mind starts thinking about social and political issues right away. I cannot restrain myself from thinking about all those issues, though I know that they are complicated.

I am a common person, a freshman at the University, young and weak. I find it very difficult to just think about these issues. I cannot imagine the kinds of difficulties that politicians must go through. I don't know how many times I will have to reread Machiavelli in order to understand Khmer society.

Oh my! Whenever I think about social problems, I get annoyed. Being annoyed this way probably disqualifies me from being an actor on the political scene. I am thinking to myself. My mind is lingering, and doesn't go any further. Since I've started courses at the University, my view of society is always negative.

This is the beginning of April. It tells me that Khmer New Year is coming soon. I am bored. To get out of this situation, I withdraw my own personal savings to seek pleasure for once...!

I go to a discothèque. Chenda, a girl who works at the bar, comes to join my table, making me feel happy. The bar is full of smoke. It is difficult for me. Most of the girls who work here are wearing sexy dresses. People at this place don't dance Khmer style. They do Western dances such as Bolero, Cha-Cha, Rock, and slow dance. They don't dance properly. They simply hug each other. Old people are fondly hugging the young girls. Chenda tells me that she doesn't know how to dance. She says she is working in this bar only for money.

Oh my! I am looking for fun, but running into a tragic situation. In this bar I am thinking a lot about the fate of the Cambodian girls who are working here, being looked down on by rich men. They, in fact, have no fun. Some old songs from the past make those dancers enjoy hugging each other.

I cannot stand it any longer. I decide to go home.

On my way back, I see a big casino. I feel a little eager to explore what might be happening inside so I swing by it.

Lord Buddha! Outside, the fancy building is showing itself off. Inside, people are collecting money from addicted gamblers. I happen to see Uncle Sakrava's boss in this place. He also comes here. I talk to his chauffer, and he tells me that his boss comes here to do money laundering. I don't understand this term and never had any sense of this act relating to illegality. I never wish to see this happening, but always seem to encounter such events. This is what I have come to think.

I get out of the casino and continue my wandering trip back home. I am struck by colorful lights glittering in front of me. For the sake of my curiosity, I again swing by the place. I see the sign "Karaoke, Fair Price." Coming here, I feel like trying out my voice. I see many beautiful girls in a big room who call me "handsome man."

"Hey! Handsome man, what kind of song do you want to sing?"

"Pagoda Kids," I request.

"We don't have any tragic songs, handsome man. Try a different one--a modern song."

"What is a good modern song that you have?" I ask.

"There are plenty of Preap Sovat and Midada's songs. Pick one."

"Hmm, I'd like you to play 'Little Hope,' a Sin Sisamut song. Do you have it?"

"Yes, still an old one, but I will play it for you."

While singing "Little Hope," Corolla's image appears in my mind. I think to myself that I would be happy if Corolla were singing with me.

"You, handsome man, are a good singer. If you want, I'll join you. I am more than happy to do so." A young girl has made this comment.

"Why do you call me handsome man?" I ask.

A girl named Aleap smiles and answers: "Because you are handsome. Since I've been working here, this is the first night that I've had a chance to sit by a decent young man like

you. The majority of our costumers are old and so, inappropriate. They come here not to sing but to hug these young girls. Their hands are always busy, touching here and there."

"If you disagree, how can they hug you?"

"I need money. So, I just let it go."

One other girl adds: "The other day I was not afraid of losing my job. I gave one Ph.D., or Doctor, a black eye."

"Ala, you are so nasty," Aleap somewhat blames her friend.

"Ala, I've heard they don't allow people to open Karaoke shops. Why do they let you do it here?" I ask.

"Brother. Some just say; some just do. Some Karaoke shops are open just for the high class. How can they close such a fun place?"

I admire Ala, who does not have any education but understands political issues. Should she have an education, she would be the best human resource for the country.

I sing and think about Ala and Aleap's future. Should the song be sadder, I might cry for her. I haven't exhausted my enjoyment yet, but it's already midnight. I say goodbye to Ala and Aleap.

"Handsome man, be careful on your way back. This late at night, you may run into a thief or get into a traffic accident. Do you hear me? Don't forget to come back. Don't forget me." Ala reminds me.

I don't really take Ala's words seriously as I feel the city is not that chaotic. I do not reply and take off on my motorcycle. I ride along singing as my mind is still at the Karaoke place. One car just ahead of me runs the red light and almost hits me. I am frightened by this incident. The car turns back toward me, making a sound like the street is being torn apart.

The person in the car opens the window and yells at me: "Do you want to die? Didn't you see my car?"

I try not to talk back, but I wonder: "Why am I at fault? The green light was clear to me."

The driver continues: "Your life is cheaper than my car. Next time, be careful or else you will die."

I feel astonished at hearing this. What happened to me is beyond my comprehension.

It is dawn. Why don't I hear the bread vendor's voice as I usually do every morning? I wake up feeling tight. I have a headache and can't even raise my hands. I question myself: Where am I? What is wrong with me?

Then I realize that I'm in the hospital. True! I remember that last night I was hit from behind. Oy! I am in so much pain. I recall now. Had I taken Ala's advice seriously, I might not have run into this accident. I learn that my story is in the newspaper. I am so ashamed. I try to console myself by putting blame on society, thinking that if everyone had a good education, our society would be orderly with no thieves or car accidents.

Corolla visits me in the hospital. I tell her the whole story of what happened to me last night. She blames me for being involved in such crazy acts. She says that I should not have

gone to a bar, Karaoke place or casino at all. I somewhat agree with her, but try to reason that they create those places for fun. That makes her very angry. I ask her: "What can I do? Any harmless fun that I can choose?"

"You are stupid," she says and walks away.

I am out of the hospital. I am happy to see Uncle Sakrava. He tells me he knew that I was robbed, according to the paper that he had read. He doesn't blame me, but advises me, saying: "Learn by doing, be thoughtful. For what happened to you, I consider you to be lucky. You have survived, un-crippled."

"You are right. Should I die, my parents in the village would be disappointed," I answer.

"Oh, Teacher. Do you plan to go home?"

"No, I've decided not to go. I would like to look for a job. I went out for one night and I lost so much money, including my motorcycle and my cell phone."

Uncle Sakrava asks me to substitute for him as the guard at the villa. He wants to visit his wife and children since he hasn't gone home for years. I agree to take his place, to at least make some money to sustain my studies.

Life as a guard is not easy. I cannot sleep peacefully since I'm so busy opening the door as soon as the owner of the house honks the horn. I have to feed the dogs, to sweep the front porch, to wash the car, and to mow the lawn. This first work experience has almost burnt me out.

This evening his Excellency, the owner of the house, has organized a New Year's party. Most invited guests are big shots who use very expensive cars. Their wives wear diamonds to show off and frequently call each other "in-law." Those big shots raise their glasses and cheer each other happily.

"Best wishes for the New Year," says the owner of the house.

The sound of clinking glasses continues as part of the good cheer. I hear everyone share his or her own story. They speak openly about the jobs that make good money and of the vacant positions made available due to the removal of some high-ranking government officials.

The party is over. The lady of the house asks her husband: "Why did you invite Mr. A to the party? He does not get along well with you."

"You don't understand. Politicians don't only associate with friends. I actually didn't want to invite him, but he is very close with the big boss. Whatever he says, the big boss agrees to. The other day, he proposed to remove Mr. B to be replaced by Mr. C, who quit our group, and the boss did it accordingly."

"You are a profound thinker," the lady of the house says.

"I'd really like to change my work for better money, but it costs too much. I should wait for the next term, because this term is almost over. Heu! Political business requires big capital," her husband explains.

"Honey! Help our children get official government positions. They've been back from studying abroad long enough."

"Allow them to save money, and then we can think about that. It won't be too late. Don't worry about them. They've obtained a Ph.D.; not bad."

I admire rich men, big shots. Each day, they try to figure out how to get a good position and how to make more money; though they have to bite the others. This reminds me of what one wise man said: "Human beings are like wolves."

As for me, I had renounced most of my pleasurable activities through the whole New Year working as a guard. I actually made less money than I'd spent for that one night at the bar, Karaoke place and casino.

Uncle Sakrava has returned with a sad face. He tells me that he is going to quit his job. He has asked for his last wages and will return to the village. He also tells me the sad story about his land being taken away by a powerful businessman and his two sons becoming gangsters in the village. He says that he had no fun while he was at home, using all his savings to pay off debts, and that he has received no military pension for two months.

Before we part, Uncle Sakrava advises me to work hard on my studies. He tells me that I should visit him at his village if I have time. I admit to him that I cannot help much in this situation. I have a deep sympathy for him. I decide to share part of the money I've earned from working as a guard and give it to him so he can use it as travel expenses to return home. We part sadly.

The effect of the New Year still lingers on. Students have gone back to school. I come to the University with an unpleasant feeling. I meet my classmates. They all talk about how much fun they had during the New Year.

Some of my friends suspect that I must have had much fun with Corolla. Some notice that I am pale. They say that I may have done something strange. They tease me. Then laughter breaks out as Corolla approaches. She stares at them and turns to greet me.

"How are your mom and dad? Have you gone to the village?"

"I don't know about my parents because I wasn't able to return home. I was busy with studies," I told her softly, just a short, unclear answer.

"Huh! Why were you studying during vacation?"

"I... I was working as a guard. I didn't go home." I told her honestly.

"If you were that desperate, why didn't you call me? You turned your phone off. I tried to call you many times, but couldn't get through."

"How could I turn my phone on if it was stolen," I thought to myself without answering her out loud.

I question her, "Anything else you want to ask me?" I am really upset. I don't feel like talking to anybody.

"Since you worked as a guard, you appear to be stronger than before."

"Don't be sarcastic," I say as we walk out of class. "I want to tell you..." I want to tell her that I love her, but I become tongue-tied since I'm afraid that she will be mad at me. Then, I change the subject: "I'm concerned that I won't be able to find a job after graduation."

"You may not find a job right away; but if you really want one, you should begin right now. You might start doing volunteer work to get some experience. There will be plenty of opportunities waiting for you. Like my fiancé, now he is the president of an import-export company. When he was a student, he volunteered for a long time without pay."

"Lord Buddha! She has a fiancé!" I thought stunned. I try to hide my feelings of love for her. I remain silent and expressionless. Corolla is a loving girl. I admire her fiancé for being so fortunate. It must be true love. It is justifiable that I shouldn't have the opportunity to live with her, because I have no solid ground, even my mind is not so organized. I actually should thank her for giving me advice. I have a gut feeling that I should seriously continue my studies. Corolla's views, the ones she has shared with me, have been useful.

"Oh dear, when did you get engaged?" I ask her feeling hurt.

"During New Year. I called you, but couldn't get through."

While we are talking, her fiancé comes to pick her up. Corolla speaks softly to me, "I have to say goodbye to you, Smart."

I raise my hand to wave goodbye, feeling nostalgic. She is the one who has taught me to love. I regret losing her, but I tell myself to be strong by believing that I will find another true love in my life. I should not be discouraged.

I've been living in the city and studying at the university for a while now. I have gained some knowledge of love, student life, and the truth about Khmer society. I view that society as being in darkness in the obscurity caused by a small group of people who are rich and hold high positions in government. I hardly see this group try to improve people's quality of life by creating jobs for them. Instead, they allow people to cross the border to a neighboring country to look for work. I observe clearly that the fortunate leaders are concerned only with their family and relatives to make sure that they are well off. To secure their position, they intimidate weak and poor people by creating unusual events or by acting to scare people. I believe everyone knows that leaders on the scene do things opposite to what they say.

I wish that, somehow, the leaders could have the same kind of experiences I have gone through. Then they would be able to shed light for the people, including myself, who are trying to build a future in the midst of an obscure way.