



COLE THOMPSON

It Takes A Village To Please My Mother

KATHRYN KEFAUVER GOLDBERG

No one measured the temperature in Vientiane, Laos. Everybody already knew it was hot. The afternoon I left to meet my mother at the airport, it was hot enough that the engine of the *tuk-tuk* I'd hailed — a boxy cab of wood and metal welded to a motorbike — heaved clouds of gray smoke and, with a swift hiss, erupted into flame. The driver, his expression blank, puffed a cigarette and crossed two lanes of traffic to park in a dry, cracked gully.

While he swatted the engine with an oily rag, I thought of my mother standing alone in the dusty warehouse that was Wattay Airport — and of my failing her before her seven-day visit even began. There isn't a word for "late" in Lao, so I struggled to convey the urgency of the situation to the distracted driver without botching the language.

"I cannot go slowly," I said in Lao.

"*Bo pen nyang*," he said — Don't worry. Or, It is nothing.

My friend Phet had teased me for leaving only an hour early. Sixty minutes was barely a unit of time there. After nine months in Vientiane, I'd almost adjusted to the perpetual delays and roundabout transit, but this parental visit had regressed me through time, making me feel like the clock-conscious foreigner I'd thought I'd left behind.

I handed the driver the agreed-upon fare and hailed another *tuk-tuk*. Rattling toward the airport once more, I remembered my first trip into Vientiane on this road: The grit and chaos. The roar of motorbikes and cars. The bicycles and trucks milling every which way. The dust swirling over the sepia-toned land. The buildings slouching in decay. Roadside shops sat empty while people slept in chairs, in the shade of a *tuk-tuk*, or on mattressless beds in open rooms. At the edge of the road, where the rush of traffic met the crumbling sidewalk, an ox lumbered against the weight of a cart almost toppling with melons, and a man carried two dozen straw brooms lashed to his back.

Laos was suddenly new to me again as I imagined it through my mother's eyes, acclimated for the entirety of her fifty-four years to Chevy Chase, Maryland, with brief intervals in Europe. My mother was not an adventurous traveler. She'd talked for decades about a cockroach that had once scurried across her foot in my aunt's cabin.

"Don't take her more than three hours from a hamburger," the same aunt had warned me.

At the airport Lao families wore their finest silk to greet their loved ones. A few feet from where I waited for my mother, one such reunion unfolded: a round Lao woman in pink polyester pants surrounded by five people in traditional clothes, at least two of them sobbing. I wanted to be more like my friend Phet, who didn't have a separate, less pleasant personality that emerged in the presence of family. She and her frail, gray-haired mother slept in the same room, under one blanket, on a mat on the tile floor. Phet spent hours with her

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— Ed.

mother, fetching water, preparing soup, and dispensing pills without the slightest trace of impatience, even when the older woman railed.

"The old ones," Phet said, "are sometimes this way."

Suddenly my own mother stood before me, her black hair just touching the collar of a white blouse made of high-tech, sweat-wicking fabric; her dark eyes, beneath straight brows like mine, not quite meeting my gaze. The elastic strap of a money belt bulged at her waist, which had thickened only slightly over the years. She wore a red backpack, pressed khaki pants with four kinds of pockets, and new-looking hiking boots that seemed to slow her gait. *There's no jungle in Vientiane*, I'd already told her numerous times. *It's a city.*

Ours is not a hugging family, but I encircled her and her backpack with my arms, inhaling her scent of Chanel and mild sweat.

She pulled back. "I met a nice man on the plane. A diplomat."

"That's great," I said.

"I could see you with someone like that."

I pressed my lips together.

"He's a bit older. Doesn't live far away — Phnom Penh I think."

"Let me take your bag," I said.

"Careful."

"Jesus, do you have cement in here?"

"That's my brand-new Apple G4."

After my parents' divorce, my mother had bonded to our home computer, one of the first Apple IIe's, as if it were a slick new member of the family. Unlike me, her unruly daughter, the computer did exactly as it was told. That Apple saw her through the transition from housewife to graduate student to speech therapist. Throughout my adolescence the Macs became brighter and easier to use while our relationship became more troubled and complex.

"Don't worry about taking care of me," my mother liked to say every year as her birthday approached. "You've already trained me not to expect anything." This because once, right after the divorce, my father had taken my sister and me to the beach on her birthday week. Other times, after family gatherings or social events, she would assign letter grades to our performance as daughters on the ride home. I hoped that in Laos I might finally score higher than a C.

As I cradled her Mac and grabbed her other bag, an enormous suitcase on wheels, she unzipped the outermost pocket of the backpack, extracted a pale-green compact, and walked next to me, inspecting her nose and cheeks. At the curb I bargained with a *tuk-tuk* driver as if my life hinged on the extra seven cents.

The entire ride to the village where I was staying, my mother barely spoke. She clung to an overhead bar with one hand and covered her lipsticked mouth with the other.

"That's where I work," I shouted over the roar of the engine as we passed Communist Party headquarters.

"I can't hear you."

"I work there! That's where I teach!"

"Stop straining your vocal cords. You need to use your breath more efficiently."

"I'm not straining."

"Yes, you are."

"I'm not."

"You're yelling," she said.

The driver turned onto the unpaved road to the village center. My house was the last in a row of small, Western-looking structures of wood and stucco. It was relatively plush by local standards, with two bedrooms and a porch shaded by mango, lemon, and rambutan trees. Beyond my window the lane converged on a vast rice paddy, and most of my Lao neighbors lived beside this sea of green in ramshackle one-room houses on stilts.

"What do you think?" I asked my mother.

"About what?" she said.

"About the house."

"It's a house," she said.

"I have my own lemon tree." I gestured to it as if presenting a game-show prize. I'd confessed to Phet that the sight of citrus fruit growing on trees still amazed me, and perhaps I expected my mother to be similarly impressed. Instead she stared at the waist-high mound of rotting garbage in the lane, into which a wandering goat plunged its mangy head. A rooster on top of the pile squawked angrily at the goat. "That's our alarm clock," I said.

Across the lane my friend Chantala emerged from a one-room stilt house that leaned slightly to the left.

"Mahmah!" she said, jogging down the rickety stairs, "*Sabaidi!*"

Chantala bowed to my mother, raising her hands in prayer position high in front of her face, as one would for a monk or elder. My mother nodded vaguely in reply, eyeing a water buffalo in the rice paddy.

"She's afraid of the buffalo," I explained in Lao.

Chantala grasped my mother's shoulder reassuringly. "*Bo yan, bo yan.*" Do not fear. "We take care of you, Mahmah."

My mother swayed, squinting against the sun and smiling in Chantala's direction.

"She's tired," I said to Chantala, and I steered my mother inside. She looked over her shoulder at the buffalo, which was as still as carved obsidian except for the doleful swaying of its tail.

Inside, my mother entered the bedroom and asked, "How do you turn on the light?"

"Look, a light switch. On. Off. Just like America." I checked my watch. Less than an hour had passed. "I'm going to lie down," I said. I crossed the hall and stretched out on the bed in the room across from my mother's.

"How do you work the shower?" she called from the bathroom.

"You turn the knobs," I shouted, plunging lower into the pillow as my self-esteem also sank. I imagined Phet looking with a stern expression at my refusal to assist my mother. With a moan I hauled myself up to help.

Later I unfolded a mosquito net over my mother's bed while she unpacked four *MacAddict* magazines and a cornucopia of camping accessories: an elastic clothesline, an iodine dropper, a headlamp, miniature bottles of bug repellent, a plastic compass, packets of drugs, and a first-aid kit with a red cross on top.

"We're not going on safari," I said.

I seized the one item I'd requested: a University of Michigan baseball cap. I'd asked for the nicest one she could find in navy blue and gold — a gift for Phet.

One night at Phet's house I'd looked through her photos, which she kept neatly stacked on the cardboard boxes that doubled as her tables and dressers. In one picture a teenage Phet posed next to a young Thai man. They weren't touching, but they stood flirtatiously close, shoulders sliding inward.

Phet had sighed at the photo. "He is a Thai rock star. I liked him so much. I tried to get him to give me that hat, but he liked it too much too." Phet sounded out the syllables, "Michigan."

"That's where I went to university," I said.

Phet's coveting a Michigan baseball cap redeemed everything I'd found distasteful about the students who avidly wore U of M clothing. I associated those hats with frat boys in T-shirts that read, "I drank till I puked at Phi Gamma Delta" and sorority girls who participated in English classes for the sole purpose of garnering recommendations for law school. My sense of superiority to them had lingered for years, long after they'd graduated and gotten steady jobs while I'd flailed about, directionless. The hat seemed exotic to me now, too.

Each day of her visit my mother and I shared a table in an air-conditioned bakery, glassed off from the heat, the dust, and the din of traffic. Everyone knew the bakery was run by Canadian missionaries trying to convert the citizens of this Buddhist, communist country, hiding Jesus behind glazed cookies and kiwi pie. Still, it was the only place to get tuna-and-tomato sandwiches and therefore a favorite spot for expats, military, and development people. I'd taken my mother to several noodle shops, but she'd insisted that the water, and therefore the broth, might not be clean. I'd pursed my lips as she'd doused her soup with iodine.

After lunch we trudged from temple to temple, monument to monument, and market to market while my mother took pictures. Our last stop was the Morning Market, a sprawling, open-air warehouse with rows of shop stalls selling everything from cheap Thai radios to ground lemur bone. I watched the wood-slatted floors for spiders while my mother rummaged through the silks and carvings.

"Mom," I said, "don't take out all your money in public, OK?"

"Why not?" she asked, holding a wad of American dollars.

"That's like millions of dollars in Laos."

She looked around. The market was nearly deserted. An ancient-looking woman slept on a table, her head resting on a stack of bright fabric. My mother shrugged. "It seems safe to me."

(end of excerpt)