

Moon Bear

Gill Lewis

Ma, Pa, Tam, Mae and Sulee live in Laos, near the border with Vietnam, which was heavily bombed during the Vietnamese War. The family has recently been forced to move from their home in the forested mountains to join a small village of peasant farmers.

Maybe it was because another full moon had passed since we were moved from our old village, but it began to really feel as if this could be our home here. The chickens had settled into their new roosts and we didn't need to corral the pigs to stop them wandering any more. Ma had traded flower-cloth on the highway for lamp oil and new nets to fish the Mekong. I'd killed six white-bellied rats for the pot with my slingshot. Ma was pleased, as we couldn't hunt bush-meat from the forest. Our old life in the mountains became like a distant memory. It didn't seem real any more, more like part of a dream.

Mae and Sulee had been for lessons with the new teacher who came to teach in the shade beneath the spreading branches of the flame tree. I didn't go with them. I had to help Pa in the fields, to clear the weeds and stones and dig the irrigation channels for the rice. We didn't have much time before the rains came.

I slung the pick and shovel across my back and headed out to the fields. My feet scuffed the hot earth. My mouth felt dry. Everything felt dry. I imagined the throat of the earth waiting for the rain. I imagined rain pitting the dust, filling up the cracks and ditches and streambeds. It wouldn't be long. The monsoon was coming. I could feel it. The dust in the air sparkled with it. One day soon, the rains would come.



I passed other villagers bent double, their wide-brimmed hats keeping off the sun. Our field was the furthest away, set back into the corner of a low hill. Pa had worked hard to clear the stones although we'd have to wait for the rains to soften the earth before we could plough and level it. He said we would plant fruit trees on the hill. Maybe even keep some bees. Not the wild ones, like in the forest, but we'd keep them in wooden hives. Pa understood bees. They understood him too.

I found him marking out the irrigation channel along the border of our field. In the monsoon, we would rely on water from the hills, but General Chan had promised us a water pump for the dry season. It meant we would be able to grow other crops all year too.

Pa straightened up, pushing his hands into the small of his back. "We need the handcart too, Tam. We have to move these stones."

I laid the pick and shovel on the ground next to him. "I'll get it now."

Pa wiped the sweat from his face. "And a drink, Tam. Bring water when you come back."

I ran along our field edge and only stopped when I reached the low rise of the hill. I turned back to look at Pa. He was stooped to reach the pickaxe. He looked out of place here. In our old village, my father was the Bee Man. He walked tall in the forests. He talked to the bees. The bees told him everything. But here, without the forest, my father was just a farmer, just a man.

Sunlight flashed on the pickaxe as he swung it high above his head.

Maybe if the forest bees had been here, they could have warned him. Maybe the bees would have seen the rusted metal casing hidden untouched beneath forty years of mud and weeds.

But there were no forest bees.

I watched the pick swing in a slow arc and sink into the ground.

There was no warning.

None.

The ground exploded and lifted up into the sky.

Mud and earth and stone rained down.

And when the dust cleared,
my father
the Bee Man,
was gone.