

STANDING GROUND

By Kay Danes

Excerpt from page 68....



At night I'd crept from the room down the darkened hallway to the first door on the left, beside the stairwell. It was a disgusting 'bathroom' if one could even call it that. The once pale blue tiles stank of urine and shit. The thought of putting my bare feet on those tiles made the bile rise in my throat.

'My God,' I cried and covered my mouth with my hands to stop myself from dry-retching.

Slowly I stripped naked hoping the tiny brass latch would hold the door firmly shut. I felt completely vulnerable as I stood in the middle of the tiny room. My eyes scoured left and right, up and down, searching every hole and crack, hoping that no one was watching me. My heart pounded. My hands shook. I reached down for the tiny pale and plunged it into the dirty cement trough full of water. I splashed the water across the tiles and over the Asian squat toilet before I carefully stepped and hovered over it to pee. My eyes darted to the door praying no one would come in. I showered quickly but afterwards had nothing to dry myself with, so I just patted my skin dry as best I could. I dressed even more quickly than usual in a pair of dark green trousers and black top, fresh bra and panties from my suitcase and rinsed my underwear from the day before. The door creaked as I pulled it slowly towards me and waited momentarily hoping that no one was outside. I couldn't hear anyone. I swallowed and wetted my dry lips briefly, taking a deep calming breath before I stepped into the hall. It was empty.

I stood still for what seemed an eternity but was in fact only seconds, forcing myself to swallow the saliva building in my mouth and with it the fear that threatened to consume me. Tentatively I stepped towards the door across the dimly lit hall. My hand shook as I placed it on the brown paint chipped door knob, turning it ever so slowly. My eyes darted down the hall. The door was locked.

Slowly I tried the remaining doors in the hall but none of them opened.

'Kerry...are you there?' I whispered but got no response.

It slowly occurred to me that perhaps he had been moved. After all, they surely would have posted a guard on my floor to prevent my feeble attempts of finding him.

What a nightmare it was. With no idea where my husband was, the only thing left to do was to allow the embassy to evacuate our children to safety until the matter could be resolved. It was a hell of a thing to expect my 11-year-old daughter to take her 7-year-old brother across two countries alone but the embassy insisted it was for the best.

On December 24, 2000, I hugged my children goodbye, kissed them gently on each cheek and prayed they would remain safe on their return journey to my parents in Australia.

Sahra didn't want to leave. She wanted to stay with me. That's what I wanted too but I couldn't be sure what was going to happen next. I had no right to be selfish. Reluctantly Sahra agreed to take Nathan back to Australia.

'We'll be right behind you love...we just need to sort out this mess,' I said.

I hugged my daughter and my son and kissed them repeatedly not knowing when I would see them again. I was afraid not only for me but for them. I tried telling them that everything would be fine, but how could I know?

'I love you two,' I called to them as the tuk-tuk departed.

'I love you, Mum,' cried Nathan as he waved frantically.

'I love you, Mum,' called Sahra.

Saying goodbye was the hardest thing I'd ever done in my life. The dust swirled behind them, my tears blurred my vision. My children kept waving until they vanished into the distance.

'Wait! Come back!'

But I never voiced those words as tears flooded my eyes and rolled unashamedly down my cheeks. I didn't care if the officer standing beside me saw my heart break. My children were gone and everything inside me screamed outrage that I couldn't go with them. Forcing Sahra and Nathan out of my life was more gut wrenching than any pain I could imagine. The Australian Embassy officer told me it was the only way to protect them but when I returned to the room on the third floor, I felt overcome. I cried like never before. Unbeknownst to any of us, the worst was yet to come.



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Most developing countries have dreadful human rights standards but I was never really concerned by such things. I didn't really care if people went to prison; after all, they deserved to be there didn't they?



Green mildew grew up the four walls of the tiny washroom built into our cell. I closed the wooden door behind me, separating me from my cellmates. Standing alone inside a 3 foot square washroom I felt nothing but misery. I looked up at an exposed electrical wire that hung a foot from the ceiling above and attached to a single light bulb. Was there a hidden camera inside the small hole just left of where the electrical wire poked through the plastered ceiling or was it my imagination that got me thinking I was being watched?

The filthy walls felt as if they were closing in on me. A squat-style toilet lay directly in front of me and just to its right, a gaping drain hole opened to a sewage pit below. I stared into it wondering what terrible things lurked beneath my feet. I turned to a small concrete water trough and peered into its dark green depths. Nervously I dipped my fingertips a few inches in and felt the temperature of the water wasn't any cooler than the temperature of the tiny washroom. My eyes were then drawn to a plastic red pail that sat on the edge of the water trough.

I calculated the number of uses for this little red pail. I would, as Mon said, use it to douche the sweat from my body numerous times a day and night, pour water into my cupped hand to rinse my mouth after brushing my teeth when eventually I got a toothbrush, fill the bucket I didn't have to wash my clothes I didn't have and looking back at the squat-style toilet, obviously to use instead of the notably absent toilet paper.

Mon continued to tell me that I would get used to the conditions eventually but I couldn't think how that was even possible. It didn't seem right that any human should be detained in such squalor but Mon said many people in Laos and Thailand live their lives every day in squalor, even if they are not prisoners.

Along the grimy walls an occasional nail dug into a tiny piece of wood that looked as if it had been glued to the wall. Someone's nylon underwear hung off the nail. Another makeshift hook sat a few feet along and again, a women's bra and underwear hung off the nail. I saw an unused hook and assumed it would be mine.

Slowly I stepped my bare feet onto the raised concrete square and carefully avoided the squat style toilet. I dropped the flip-flops I'd borrowed from Mon to the floor and as I stepped into them I began peeling off my t-shirt. She said I'd feel better after a shower, even if it was just a douching with that little red pail. I carefully hung my white bra and panties along with my black short-sleeved t-shirt and dark green trousers on the hook. I stood silent and naked, alone and more frightened than ever. Then it gradually dawned on me that anyone could bash their way through the flimsy wooden door that separated me from my cellmates? How safe was I in this tiny room with my borrowed green flip flops gripping the dirty concrete floor? It reminded me of the washroom on the third floor of the immigration building and I felt just as vulnerable.

Two black plastic buckets stood in the corner of the room. One was used to wash our clothes. The other, I had no idea, but its lid was all that separated me from whatever was thrashing around inside. I screamed the first time I heard it. My cellmates laughed. They yelled that it was one of several disgusting grey catfish that had survived the sewage infested ponds outside our cells. One of the prisoners had managed to get it from the police pond and into their bucket undetected. The catfish was the least of my concerns. I bent to scoop some water from the small concrete trough, into the red pail that I gripped tightly with my right hand. As I did, I felt overwhelmed by all the emotions of the last 48 hours and my heart filled with incredible sadness.

'Why is this happening?' I cried silently.

I tipped water over my head, over my back, over my front and bit down hard on my bottom lip, allowing the tears to fall freely down my cheeks. I cried and I cried but not a sound passed by my lips. I didn't want anyone to hear my anguish or to have to explain to them how scared I was. My eyes welled with so many tears that when I raised them to the ceiling I could no longer see the dirty stains above or the electrical wire hanging beyond my reach. The tears kept welling and spilling all over my face and it was impossible to know the difference between them and the water I poured over my face to wash them away. My whole body ached with an incredible pain beyond all sorrow and when I thought of my children waving me goodbye, I cried even more. I had no idea how long I stood in the 'bathroom' praying this was all just a dream and that I would soon wake up. When I dried myself with a towel one of the women had loaned me, I put my clothes back on and tried to come to terms with the fact that I wasn't dreaming. I was living a nightmare and somehow I had to force myself to accept that reality.

Laos was so hot at this time of year. The heat in the cells became thicker than the air that we breathed. Mon told me that my underwear would be dry by morning and so I just left them hanging in the bathroom on the makeshift hook.

When nightfall came it brought very little relief and my childhood fear of the dark came back to torment me. When my father converted to Christianity I was told that evil spirits wander the earth in search of unrepentant souls. As a child, I feared the night and lay in my bed praying as hard as I could that Satan wouldn't come for me. In the quietness of Phonthong, I lay shoulder to shoulder and toe to toe with five other women. Each of us was allocated roughly 25 inches by 70 inches of wooden floor space. It was cramped considering that I am 5 feet 6 inches tall. I shut my eyes and tried not to think. Occasionally throughout the night, I woke startled by unfamiliar noises and fearing the presence of those who had died in Phonthong.

'Sssh, go sleep,' Mon whispered beside me. 'No afraid,' she soothed.

I eventually slept through sheer exhaustion but when morning came I felt as if I'd been trampled by a herd of elephants. When I told Mon, she laughed and said that even though Laos was the land of a million elephants, they never came to Phonthong. My back ached, my sides hurt and everything else felt bruised from the hard floorboards and yet, my friend made me smile, albeit fleetingly.



There were 100 prisoners in Phonthong and most of them were male. They had been detained for various reasons and some for no reason at all. There were those detained for economic crimes, cheating the government or violent crimes and two Vietnamese brothers had been caught trafficking heroin from Vietnam to Laos. There were wealthy foreign investors who certainly didn't look like wealthy foreign investors anymore.



There were political prisoners who had been detained because their ideas did not match those of the Lao Government. Mostly they just wanted freedom from oppression, torture and arbitrary detainment. They weren't much different from Kerry and I, except in a communist state you are not entitled to free thinking for free speech. They wanted to change all that.

Some prisoners were locked inside their cells for more than a year. It's hard to imagine what that is like unless you go sit in a sauna for a few hours. Then if you can get to the point when you can't take any more, when you have to get out of that of small space that threatens to suffocate you, and when you can't get out and you feel trapped and panic sets in, then perhaps you might understand a little about being confined in a Phonthong prison cell. I came to understand very quickly that feeling of losing all your dignity. Women who had nothing begged other women who had little, to help them. Those who had nothing suffered terribly.

'Madam when you get embassy visit please ask them for some Whisper,' one Chinese girl begged. 'I have nothing. I just use a couple of rags and must wash everyday.'

I was appalled that these women didn't even have basic sanitary items. As Mon explained, 'Whisper' was a brand of sanitary napkins most popular in Laos for menstruating females, as was 'OB' which westerners more commonly referred to as 'tampons', but nothing was available in Phonthong Prison.

Mon said being a woman in Phonthong was more difficult than being a man because, as women, we needed to take greater care with personal hygiene to avoid infections which were common. Most of the women didn't have any 'whisper' but some, like Mon, who at least had an embassy in Laos, had the chance of getting some. She said that being a foreigner, particularly an Australian or American, meant there was an even greater chance of getting vital necessities. She said that was why everyone was thrilled when Kerry and I were brought to Phonthong. I suppose I would have appreciated their views had I not been so preoccupied with my own dilemma.

Frustration tormented me as curious eyes followed my every move. Not that I could go anywhere. Prisoners watched me constantly, every day, every moment. I wanted to scream at them to leave me alone! To give me some peace!

'Go away, Marvin,' Mon said to the dark-skinned man peering at me through the bars. He was shirtless, dirty and covered in scars. Thick blue smoke billowed from his yellow stained teeth. I had no idea what he was mumbling.

'He crazy,' Mon explained. 'He like to cut himself and put the nail under his skin to make pain.'

My eyes were drawn to all the tiny scars and welts that covered his arms.

'One time he push a very big nail up his penis,' said Mon. 'Go Marvin,' she barked at him and slowly he moved along down the veranda.

Mon's lovely face took on a frown as she rubbed her knees, her long dark hair pulled back into a pony-tail. Muscular paresis was common amongst prisoners because of the poor diet and restricted movement. Mon said it became even worse if they blocked your legs because it was virtually impossible to go to the toilet or wash.

Within a very short time I saw prisoners taken to the interrogation room and watched as their legs were put into wooden blocks. The police got the trustees to hold the prisoner's legs straight out in front while they slid a heavy wooden block under the ankles. The inside edge had two half circles cut out. Another heavy wooden block would be placed on the front of the ankles, aligned with the first wooden block. On either end of the blocks they would screw two steel bolts and tension these to hold the two wooden blocks in place. Somehow the prisoner was expected to get to their feet. Often they'd be dragged back to their cell because it was impossible to move. The blocks weighed up to 30 pounds depending on the size of the prisoner and the punishment the officer wanted to inflict. One thing was for sure, the wooden blocks prevented a prisoner from moving from A to B. One fall and it was easy to break a bone. The police also used the wooden blocks to inflict pain during interrogation. I saw them press down on the blocks with their feet. The pain coursing through the prisoner's ankles must have been excruciating. I was forced like everyone else to listen to the agony of their screams. There was nothing anyone could do to stop the torture.

The Red Cross did nothing, the international community said nothing, and at that moment I hated Kofi Annan. The UN secretary-general may have been extremely committed to the founding principles of the United Nations but he too did nothing to stop the torture in Laos. Why was that? On the 7th of December 2000, the Lao Government signed the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights [ICCPR]. In doing so, it embraced the principles espoused in the ICCPR and signaled to the international community its willingness and intention to implement the philosophy articulated in the ICCPR. The rights in those articles are fundamental human rights.

For a few moments I sat staring out the barred windows wondering what the point of signing UN agreements was if there was no enforcement of them or any accountability for those like Laos that clearly violated them after publicly agreeing to uphold them. Looking around me I saw so many violations of the UN mandates Lao signed.



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