



Excerpt from:

# SOJOURNS of the SOUL

*One Woman's Journey around the World and into Her Truth*

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By Dana Micucci

Taken from Chapter Two:

## **The Heart of Angkor** *Surrender*

Each day, Bob and I and the other conservators return to the conservation house in Siem Reap for lunch. We dine in a modest room at a long table on delicious grilled fish, rice and vegetables with a subtle sweet and sour flavor, which the Cambodian cooks prepare in an adjacent open-air kitchen that also happens to accommodate three toilets! (I try not to think about this.) I enjoy conversing with Isabel, a French architect, Juan, a charismatic stone specialist from Guatemala, and Nala and Sophea, two bright young Cambodian architects. It feels good to be part of a community, after focusing so much on my work and being alone at the bungalow each night. Sometimes we eat dinner together, too, after which Bob and Norma, a generous, good-natured woman who looks after me with a quiet maternal charm, invite me to their apartment upstairs for a nightcap. We relax on the veranda with a few beers and talk and laugh about our travels. The nights are humid and extremely dark, infused with the sweet scent of jasmine and illumined only by the distant glimmer of starlight.

After lunch one afternoon, Nala, Sophea, and I take a walk along the dirt road near the conservation house. Recent graduates of Cambodia's School of Architecture, they are petite, attractive, and clever. Sophea is slightly taller and more reserved than Nala, who asks me many questions about life in America. Their English is excellent, and they have radiant smiles. Of course, I'm also eager to learn from them. Though they were just children during the Khmer Rouge's reign, they still remember the chaos and destruction. Sophea's father, a doctor, died in the genocide, as did many of their relatives.

"I worry so much," Nala says. "The situation here is still not stable. I'm afraid everything will be taken away from us again." Her face tightens with anxiety. Sophea nods in agreement, her eyes tearing.

"I'm sorry." I don't know what else to say, realizing that any attempt at consolation must seem empty and inadequate.

Sophea links her arm in mine. "Don't worry." She smiles lovingly.

"I wouldn't blame you for not liking us very much," I say, ashamed.

"Who, you mean the Americans?" Nala asks.

"Yes, all of us who contributed to what happened."

"Oh, no, we like the foreigners," Sophea says.

"Cambodians think they are good people," Nala chimes in, without the slightest trace of resentment.

I'm surprised by this unexpected show of compassion and forgiveness.

"C'mon," Nala grasps my other arm. "Let's go to the temple!" She points down the street to a whitewashed bell-shaped structure crowned with a tapering spire.

"But what about the Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot?" I ask. "How can you forgive them?"

“What’s done is done,” says Sophea, waving her hand as if banishing forever all painful memories. She meets my eyes with a sparkling smile.

“Married?” Nala asks.

“No, not yet.” I’m surprised yet tickled by her instant familiarity.

“Good. Neither are we,” Sophea says.

“Men. Too much trouble!” Nala giggles.

“But you must have a boyfriend.” I glance at each of them. “You’re both beautiful.”

“No boyfriends,” Sophea states flatly.

“Not good to have a boyfriend unless you want to marry,” Nala adds.

“I understand. So you are true feminists,” I tease. Then I realize that this word likely does not exist in the Khmer language, so I explain it.

They nod in agreement, and we burst out laughing as we walk arm in arm to the stupa. Once inside, we light some incense sticks and place them before the Buddha statue, which is surrounded with additional offerings of colorful flowers and fruits.

“We came last week,” Nala whispers, as she and Sophea bow their heads in prayer. “When our friend died.”

“Hepatitis,” Sophea adds solemnly. “We all passed around a candle and blew the flame toward her ashes in a jar.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Because we are blowing in her spirit for her next life,” Nala replies.

“We don’t believe life ever ends,” Sophea reflects. “Unless you become enlightened and don’t have to reincarnate.” In Cambodia, I have been continually reminded of the fine line between life and death. At times, the two have seemed almost indistinguishable.

The following morning, we all take an excursion to Rolous, one of the oldest temple sites at Angkor, dating to the ninth century. It is less intact than the others and further afield. We are planning to spend the day there, and Norma has packed a picnic lunch. Though I'm excited about the adventure, I have never been so anxious about a casual drive through the countryside. For about an hour we bump along in the scorching heat in a big pick-up truck. The dirt roads are particularly rough as we head into what seems like an infinite no man's land of dry, lifeless fields. We pass several military checkpoints and bunkers with machine guns pointed toward the road. I shudder as a tank rolls past. Again, the reality of this lawless, war-scarred country weighs heavily. And again, I wonder what I am doing in such a strange, inhospitable place. I remain slightly on edge the rest of the day, as we wander about the ruins inspecting the preservation work.