ZOYA PHAN

LITTLE DAUGHTER

A Memoir of Survival in Burma and the West

Chapter One

THE ALMOST-DYING

When I was two years old I died and came back to life again. It was my first brush with death and, sadly, there were to be many more. One morning my mother discovered me lying unconscious in our bamboo hut. I already had a high fever, and she had hoped that overnight I would have slept it off. But I was always a sickly child, and now she feared that she had lost me.

She covered me in a damp cloth, scooped me into her arms, and ran as fast as her legs would carry her to the village clinic. This was a small bamboo hut just near our house. There was one nurse running the clinic and my mother hoped and prayed that the nurse would be there, and not out treating someone.

She rushed inside in a dread of panic. Luckily, the nurse was in, but she took one look at the little unconscious bundle that was me and declared that it was hopeless.

'I'm afraid your daughter is dead,' she said. 'I'm sorry, I can't help her.'

My mother was beside herself. She refused to believe that I was

gone. For years she had served as a soldier in the jungles. She was tough, and she refused to believe that I was dead.

'No way!' she cried. 'No way has my Little Daughter died, just like that. No way!'

She scooped me up again, and decided to try for the neighbouring village, to see if the nurse there might help. There was only a faint path through the jungle, but she was sure she could find her way. What made it all the more difficult was that she was already nine months pregnant with my little brother.

She left my older sister, Bwa Bwa, in the care of my big brother, Say Say, and headed out alone. It was the dry season and the Mu Yu Klo River, which ran past our village, was low, and so my mother was able to wade across. For forty minutes she fought her way through the jungle, until finally she burst into the clearing of Pwe Baw Lu village. She rushed across to the clinic, tears streaming down her face as she ran.

The nurse there was far more sympathetic. She examined me closely and declared that I was in a deep, fever-induced coma. She put me on a drip and gave me the few drugs that she had in an effort to calm the fever. Then she told my mother to be patient. I was still breathing and there was always a chance that I might come out of this alive and well.

After three days on the drip my fever started to come down. A little later on that third day I regained consciousness. My mother was sitting right beside me as I opened my eyes. She couldn't believe that I had come back to life again. None of the nurses were present, for it was Christmas Eve and they had gone to a party at the village school.

My mother gazed at me in wonder, but then she realized with a shock that my eyes weren't right. One was looking at the sky, the other down at the earth. She was convinced that I was brain-damaged. The shock sent her into labour, and the nurses had to rush back from the Christmas party to help her deliver the baby. And that's how my little brother came into the world.

My mother decided to name him Slone Phan – Shining Stone – because he brought light into the darkness of my almost-dying.

Slone and I stayed in the clinic for a few more days. My mother was with us, trying to keep us both happy. The nurses helped her, and she was so grateful for their assistance, especially the one who had saved me. But she was angry with the nurse in our village – the one who had said that I was dead. That nurse was young and inexperienced, she said, and didn't know how to do her job properly.

As children do, I recovered quickly from my almost-dying, but my eyes remained all askew. Some weeks later when my father came home he took one look at me and exclaimed, 'Oh, my Little Daughter, still so beautiful – even though you have *ta klay meh*!'

My father was only joking, but in Karen culture calling someone *ta klay meh* – 'wonky eyes' – is very rude. It is considered really ugly to have crooked eyes. From then on my sister and elder brother were always making jokes about my *ta klay meh* appearance.

My friends didn't go as far as calling me *ta klay meh*. But they would laugh at me whenever my eyes went crooked, which they did especially when they got tired. I would get very annoyed. My vision would swim, things becoming all twisted and blurred. At its worst I would be seeing a cup or a bowl of food, but my eyes would appear as if they were looking in another direction completely.

Whenever I was teased like that my mother would try to reassure me: 'Little Daughter, you're still very beautiful, despite your funny eyes.'

Over time I learned to get used to it. I learned how to bring my eyes back to normal by looking down at the ground, and then slowly bringing them up again. Luckily, the older I got the less wonky they became, and by the time I was in my teens they were almost back to normal.

In the culture of my people, the Karen, families don't usually have surnames. Children have only the one name that they were given by their parents, and there is no name passed down through the generations. A person's name can be made up of more than

one Karen word, and it almost always means something. For example, one of my best friends at school was called Tee Ser Paw – 'sweet water flower' in our Karen language.

But when my father left his home village and came to join the Karen resistance, he broke away from that tradition. He abandoned the one name that his parents had given him, and chose a resistance name instead. Resistance fighters did this largely to protect their families back home from reprisals by the Burmese military regime.

My father chose the name Mahn Sha Lah Phan – Mr Star Moon Bright. He chose 'star' and 'moon' because he believed the heavens were the light of the future; and 'Phan' because he believed that future would be a bright one – for the Karen, and for all the people of Burma.

When my father was young there was a Karen leader called Mahn Phan Shaung – Mr Bright Unity. He was a great military commander and resistance fighter, and he was my father's role model. He believed in freedom for the Karen people and human rights and democracy for all. My father chose to take 'Phan' as his own 'surname' – to keep this man's spirit alive. When we were born he passed that name on to us, to sustain his memory through future generations.

I called my father 'Pah' – which is 'Daddy' in our language. My mother was 'Moe' – 'Mummy'. My older brother was called Say Say, which means 'silver silver'. But I called him 'Joh Joh', Karen for 'older brother'. My older sister was called Bwa Bwa – 'white white' in Karen. My parents called her this because she was snowy white when born. But I always called her 'Nor', which means 'older sister'. And of course Bwa Bwa would call me 'Day Mu', which means 'younger sister'.

When my little brother, Slone Phan, came along, I called him 'Day Kwa', which means 'younger brother'. Whenever Slone called out 'Nor! Nor!' – older sister, older sister – both Bwa Bwa and I would come running, as we wouldn't know which of us he was after.

My father was a loving, gentle man and I was very close to him. Out of all my siblings, mine was the only birth at which he was present. He managed to stay with the family for six months when I was born, and I think that in part explains the special bond between us.

He was of average height, slim but strong. He had brown eyes framed by laughter lines and black hair. He would be clean-shaven whenever possible, and he'd use a cut-throat razor to shave. He always seemed to be dressed the same: a checked shirt, rolled up at the sleeves, with a Karen longyi – a *Hteh Ku* – wrapped around his waist.

The longyi is a length of Karen material worn about the waist like a kilt. It is a multipurpose piece of clothing. In the rainy season it could be hitched up to form a pair of 'shorts' for wading through the floods, and it doubled as a towel and even a makeshift blanket.

Like most people in the resistance my parents had precious little money. So my father wore plastic flip-flops, the unofficial footwear of the Karen resistance. For ages one of his flip-flops was broken at the toe; he repaired it by fashioning a thong out of bamboo rope.

One day when I was little my father tried to teach me to swim in the mighty Thu Mweh Klo River. Few Karen can swim, and it's not something that comes naturally to us. My older brother and sister were screaming and laughing with joy, but I was crying because of my fear of the water.

My father tried to soothe me: 'Little Daughter, don't worry, you are with me right here in my arms. Don't worry, Little Daughter, you're safe.'

Still I screamed, but after a while I did let go of my fear and stopped clinging to him so tightly. I allowed my father to pull me along, with my legs kicking through the clear, fast-flowing water. I soon forgot my worries.

Once I had learned to swim properly I used to love playing in the river and resting on the riverside beach. Say Say would climb

on top of one of the giant water buffaloes, which wallowed in the shallows, and start dancing on their horns. These huge, placid creatures are used by the Karen to pull carts, or to plough their fields.

At dusk Say Say would grab some nets and take me on a fishing trip. He'd cast them into the river and leave them out overnight. Very early in the morning he'd wake me and we'd go to see if we'd caught anything. Usually, the nets would be full of little tilapia fish and we'd carry them home to show my father. My mother would curry the fish, or mix them with water spinach to make a delicious stew.

But these happy times with my father were few and far between. Mostly, he was away on his resistance work. He was absent for ten months of the year or more. I didn't have the time to play with him or to get to know him properly, and sometimes it felt as if he was a stranger. When he returned, Say Say, Bwa Bwa and I would have all but forgotten him. But I'd always be the first to go to him, and soon I'd be following him around everywhere.

When it came time for my father to go away again my mother would have to trick us into letting him leave. She would take us to play with the animals under the house, so he could sneak away without us knowing. Without a goodbye he would just be gone. If she hadn't done that we would never have let him leave.

'Don't go!' we'd have cried. 'Don't go, Daddy! Please don't go!'

At times I wondered why my father was absent so much. I resented it, and I used to ask myself – *why*? Why was he so rarely with us? Why?

My little brother, Slone Phan, didn't take very kindly to my father's absence. One day when Slone was around three years old, my father returned from a long period away. But Slone didn't know who this strange man was. He started to beat my father with a bamboo rope, to make him leave the house.

My mother tried to stop him. 'That's your father! Your father! Stop it! Stop it!'

Eventually, she had to take the rope away. It was the only way to make Slone stop. My father laughed and laughed, but inside I think he felt very sad. It must have been so hurtful realizing that his children didn't know him, or recognize him, or feel he was their father even.

In spite of his absence, my father tried to show his care for us in many ways. Whenever he came home he would bring us something that he'd crafted with his own hands: a woven bamboo hat; spoons, forks and bowls made out of wood; maybe even a carved toy. These we would cherish as our most precious possessions.

Every day that he was home my father would show his love for us by grabbing us and kissing us on the cheek. He might reach out and catch us for a hug and a kiss at any time, sometimes five times a day. I used to complain about his stubbly face, but in reality I adored his kisses.

My father wasn't particularly handsome, but he was very intelligent, and he had a great sense of humour. He'd gone to university in Burma's capital city, Rangoon, and graduated in history. We had few university graduates in the Karen resistance, and in my mother's eyes this made him extra-special.

My mother was tall for a Karen woman, almost as tall as my father. She'd wear a red Karen longyi – and red must have been her favourite colour, for she wore it every day. She had straight jet-black hair, which she kept clipped up on her head in a bun. She would only let it down when she washed it, when she'd leave it free to dry.

I used to marvel at her hair. When she let it down it fell in a glistening, glossy waterfall right to the small of her back.

My mother's complexion was a little darker than my father's; I had inherited his lighter colouring. Every day she would wear Tha Na Kah – a traditional Karen face cream – on her cheeks. She used to make the Tha Na Kah from the bark of the Tha Maw Glay – the tamarind tree.

She would take a smooth-worn stone and roll a length of bark backwards and forwards on it, adding a little water as she did so.

Gradually, the bark would dissolve into a light yellow paste – the Tha Na Kah cream. She would rub it on to her cheeks using a circular motion, until it left a little yellow sun on each one.

We Karen believe that Tha Na Kah makes a woman look beautiful, and it also protects our skin from the sun. My mother would rub Tha Na Kah on to my cheeks, arms and legs, to keep me cool in the hot season. And when she grew old and less capable, we children would do the same for her.

My mother was considered to be a real beauty. She was also unusual, in that she was so much more than 'just' a housewife. In the past she had been a renowned resistance fighter, commanding a company of women soldiers, and after that she had continued working for the struggle.

From my earliest memories my mother worked in the information department of the Karen resistance. She had to use an old manual typewriter as there were no computers. With my father away so much, she had no one to help look after the children. I'd go with my brothers and sister to her bamboo-walled office, and we'd play quietly whilst she banged away on that ancient typewriter.

My eldest brother, Say Say, was adopted. He had a pointed face, whereas my mother and father had rounded features, more like my own. He came to our family when he was about ten, and I was just four months old. He was considered one of the most kind and helpful people in our village. If anyone asked Say Say, he would be sure to assist them.

Whilst my father was a serious man, he was also quick to see the funny side of things. Whenever we were unhappy he would tell us funny stories, in an attempt to cheer us up. But for difficult matters he would be serious, and iron-willed in his intentions. Say Say followed the more earnest side of my father, and he was conscientious and hard-working.

With my father away so much, Say Say helped my mother with the chores. And when both my parents were away on their resistance work, Say Say took over. He would wash, cook and clean for

the three of us, as if he was our mother and our father. And he would carry me everywhere he went strapped in a longyi on his back.

One day when I was little my father told me the story of how Say Say had come to be with us. My father was talking to my mother about his work in the Kler Lwee Htu district, from where he had just returned. It was far distant from us, and much closer to the front line where the Burmese military were attacking our villages. I knew this was the area that Say Say had come from, so I pricked up my ears.

The Burmese regime had a notorious policy called the 'Four Cuts', which was designed to crush the Karen. The Four Cuts policy was brutally simple: it would cut off all supplies, information, recruits and food to the Karen resistance.

The policy was beginning to bite deep. Whole villages in the Kler Lwee Htu district were on the brink of famine. Burmese troops had destroyed their crops, and burned their food stores down. Starving families were reduced to eating the flesh of banana trees.

When my father had returned home this time I'd noticed that he looked exhausted and drawn. I'd watched as he devoured the leftovers from the previous meal. My mother had told him that she was making a fresh curry for him, but my father had insisted on eating every last scrap of the leftovers. There was no food where he had just come from, he said, and people there were being forced to eat putrid, rotten rice.

The Four Cuts policy was hurting people terribly, he explained. I tried hard to listen, but as a small child I couldn't understand everything he told us. I knew my people were starving to death; I also knew there was an enemy doing this to us, and that they were human, just like us. But I was scared and I didn't want to think about it.

In an effort to reassure myself I'd whisper: 'Well, we've got food, and it's a long way away . . .'

I could see that my father was suffering, but I tried to close my

mind to that. We were all closer to our mother at this time, for the simple reason that she was around. I'd grow close to my father when he was with us, but hurt, and distant, when he left.

The Four Cuts policy had driven families to ever more desperate measures. One day a man who worked for the resistance had approached my father. Over their time spent working together they had grown to like and respect each other. He told my father that he had seven children, and that he wanted one at least to get a proper education. But the Four Cuts policy had destroyed all the schools in the area.

He asked my father to take one of his older sons, Say Say, and give him an education in our home village. My mother and father only had one child at this time – my older sister, Bwa Bwa – and my father felt a deep sympathy for his friend. He agreed to take Say Say as one of his own children, and so Say Say became my parents' adopted son.

Once a year Say Say's parents would try to visit, if they could afford the time to make the long journey. Whenever they did they were so happy and proud to see how well their son was doing in his studies at school.

When Say Say came to live with us he started attending the village junior school. He was a 10-year-old boy in Year One, and most of the other children were half his age. But Say Say didn't mind. He was happy just to get an education, and he studied hard and tried to make up for lost time.

When I was four years old Say Say started taking me to school with him, so I could be looked after. The schoolroom was little more than a bamboo-walled hut with open windows, and rows of rough wooden desks. There were no childcare facilities in the village, so whilst Say Say studied hard I would play quietly at his feet. By now Say Say was in his fourth year, and people used to joke that I was barely four years old, but already in Year Four!

My favourite game was making mud pies on the classroom's earthen floor. I'd start with a mound of earth, prod a hole in the

middle and spit into it – and that was my cooking pot. I'd stir the contents around, imagining that I had my favourite food – pork curry – bubbling away in there. When it came time to go home I'd be covered in mud, but I didn't mind. I loved playing mud pies in Say Say's class.

Say Say came from an isolated jungle village, and he understood the nature of the forest – its moods, its promise and its dangers. Whenever my siblings and I went to the jungle without Say Say, invariably we'd get lost. We'd leave from one side of the village and return from another, never knowing where we'd been. But Say Say had a sixth sense – he always knew the way home.

My sister, Bwa Bwa, took after my mother in looks, being taller than me. But emotionally, she was like my father. She cared about everyone, was touched by their suffering, and felt their pain in her own heart. People said that I was my father's favourite, but Bwa Bwa was his firstborn child. He was away on the front line when she was born, yet his love for her bloomed in his heart. Even before he had set eyes on Bwa Bwa he used to smile at the very thought of her existence.

Bwa Bwa's hair was jet-black and die-straight, like mine, but my father used to like us to cut it in a bob. Bwa Bwa was fine with that, but not me. Her lips were thinner than mine, and her face rounder, but people used to say that Bwa Bwa and I were equally pretty. She was very clever, and was always at the top of her class. I looked up to my sister, and it was her example that I wanted to equal at school.

My sister had been born the wrong way round, feet-first. It was a difficult birth for my mother, and her next child miscarried. For the first six months of her pregnancy with me I barely moved, and my mother feared that she would miscarry again, or that I would be stillborn. As it was, I was a very frail baby – as exemplified by my almost-dying. I would faint easily and my heart was weak. Sometimes, my mother would beat Bwa Bwa if she was naughty, but never me. She was too fearful of causing me a heart attack.

My little brother, Slone Phan, followed me in frailty. He was the spitting image of my father in looks, but he was such a small child. Compared to his friends, he was tiny. Most Karen have a sharp, teasing sense of humour, and we nicknamed him 'Maung Bala' – 'Muscle Man'. It's a nickname that has stuck; even today, people still call him Muscle Man.

Slone Phan was thin and small, but he was totally fearless. He seemed to compensate for his size with his temper. He was always angry. At times he would lie down and bash his forehead on the ground repeatedly. If he couldn't get my mother's attention he'd keep smashing away, making a loud slamming noise. We'd get so worried.

His friends soon learned to respect his temper, and mostly they followed his lead. He was the boss of his gang because of his bravery. If they were to climb a tree, Slone would dictate which one they climbed. He'd be first up, directing the others to various branches, and ordering them which fruit to pick.

I was Slone Phan's big sister, and I loved having a little brother. The day he was born, as told to me by my mother, was unforgettable. He came out of my mother's womb complete with a strange kind of skullcap. The whole of the top of his head was covered in a 'hat' of white, hairless skin. Everyone in the village came to gaze at baby Slone, as no one had seen such a thing before.

Gently, my mother peeled away the skin cap, revealing a head of soft, fluffy, jet-black hair. My mother carefully folded up that skin cap, and kept it safe. In our animist belief system someone born with such a distinctive feature is blessed – it signifies that they have a special future ahead of them.

My mother and father were born animists. This is a traditional belief system that assigns things in nature – trees, rivers, mountains, the sky and stars – souls and a consciousness. My parents came from a village that was mixed animist, Buddhist and Christian. It was typical for Karen people of differing religions to live happily side by side.

My parents rarely explained to us the nature of animist beliefs: instead, they preferred to show by example. There were no set scriptures or prayers, and no holy book: it was all about an individual's personal relationship with the spirits of the universe. Karen animists believe that everything on earth – a tree, a plant, a river, a mountain – has a spirit. If a boy drowns in the river, we believe that the river spirit must be angry. You have to make an offering to the river spirit, and ask for forgiveness.

My father marked the day of my birth with a traditional animist ceremony. The name of our village, Per He Lu, means 'Mountain of Teak'. Above it rears a dark hill cloaked in teak trees. My father took my umbilical cord and proceeded to climb, and when he reached the very top he searched for the biggest tree. Karen animists believe the bigger the tree the more powerful the spirit that resides there.

He buried my umbilical cord under an ancient giant of a tree, and then he prayed for his Little Daughter. He prayed to the tree spirit on the mountaintop, because it is high and has vision and can see into the future. He prayed that when I grew up I would be strong, and that I would help my country and my people. My father was only able to do this for me, as he was absent for Bwa Bwa and Slone's births.

Whenever we had visitors he used to tell this story. 'And with my Little Daughter, when she was born I took her umbilical cord and climbed Teak Mountain—'

I'm sure my brothers and sister must have got sick and tired of hearing about it all the time!

I knew I was special to my father in another way, too. My name, 'Zoya', is not a Karen name. People were always asking how I had come by such an unusual name. My father would explain that the original Zoya was a Russian partisan who had fought against the Nazis in the Second World War, and been captured and executed. And she was the Zoya that he had named me after.

But none of this meant much to me when I was little. I wasn't really interested in that Zoya: I was interested in me. And I had no

idea where Russia was, who the Nazis were, and what the war had been about. It was only years later that I would understand just how prophetic it was for my father to have named me 'Zoya'.

For he had named me after who and what I was to become.