



Source: Michael Slackman, 'Ahmadinejad gives Bush a long lecture on Christian values', *New York Times* in *Sydney Morning Herald* online, 11/05/06.

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### Hoa's Rain

I loved the monsoon in Cambodia. The rains would arrive in May after the earth had just about laid its bare hands out in surrender from the heat. The first downpours would always catch us unaware. The poorly-built drains would overflow and within the hour a temporary ocean spread around the streets. It took me sometime to get used to this daily occurrence and there I would be, stuck on the back of a motodop, alongside the many mangy dogs learning how to swim, children running amok, un-budging buffalo being swiped by their frustrated owners.

The Friday night this happened, it had rained for four hours straight. I didn't mind the rain, sitting and watching it provided me with a feeling of calm and solace in a country where it was often difficult to find a sense of peace. At 7 o'clock, when it had finished, my housemate from downstairs, Gunnar, came up to invite me out for dinner. I resisted. I was tired and the week had been a difficult one. Vuthy one of my staff, had been caught stealing a small box of paracetamol, which he said was for his wife's ongoing headaches. Annabel, the control freak programme manager had pulled him in front of the entire team of 50 and reprimanded him in the tone of a teacher. Although I loved aid work, in moments like those it also disheartened me.

'Come on Ana, you need to change perspective, have a drink, relax, it will do you good.'

I relented. Gunnar was persistent and I was hungry. I liked him; he had become my surrogate brother in a time where I desperately needed some form of family. Two years earlier, at the age of 30 I was orphaned, my mother, father and sister had died in a car accident, on the way to visit me for Christmas holidays. My sister Cvetka had been my best friend. Thinking that doing work where I could help others, but not get as attached as I did with my own family, I set off to both satisfy a life-long urge to work in the field as well as forget my grief.

After dinner, Gunnar wanted to walk down to a nearby hotel for a drink. I remember it being very dark and reasonably cool as the earlier rains had left behind some light wind. We weren't saying anything, Gunnar having got used to my silences. And it was then, in this space of both quiet and darkness that she appeared. She must have been no older than eight years old, yet perhaps she was a lot older because the poor diet often stunted children's growth. My first reaction was to wait for her open hand, asking for a little money, but she didn't. Instead, she just smiled. What I noticed almost immediately was that her step was in perfect harmony with mine. As if we had just begun a game of follow my step and were trying to see how long it would last.

'Look at her will you,' said Gunnar 'she looks like she has

just come back from the beach with her bag across her shoulder, her bare feet and yellow sun dress on'.

He was right. Although her clothes were old and torn, she looked anything but desperate. Her wide smile was like a walking sun, brightening our path. And that's what she did, as she walked with us, she kept smiling and both Gunnar and I began to smile along with her. She laughed a little, but said nothing, wanted nothing, she just kept on smiling.

It was then it happened. As we kept walking, the heaviness that had surrounded me for so long seemed to begin to lift with each step we took. As I looked over at the little girl, a feeling of transcendence took over me, and instead of her being just another street urchin that I would meet in my daily life in this poor, but precious country, she was something else. For a moment I forgot who I was, instead I felt this girl could have been my daughter, I her mother and as we continued walking, I felt something even more special, that although she could be my child, we could also be the very best of friends. I had never had any impulses of wanting children and after my family died I silently decided that it was definitely not an option. Those moments with the little girl pleasantly shook up my painful convictions.

'What is your name?' I asked her.

'Hoa. It means flower in Vietnamese.'

'Ahh, I had a younger sister, her name was flower in another language.' I laughed and then turned to say something to Gunnar. I remember him saying something to me in return, the both of us laughing, but by the time I turned back to the little girl she had disappeared into the night.

'Where is she, she was just here?' I asked, confused.

The wide street was empty. Both of us looked at each other in disbelief.

We looked around, but she was nowhere. After a few moments, we kept on walking.

'Something has happened to you.' said Gunnar 'your whole face has lit up.'

'I wonder if I'll see her again?'

'Somehow, I think you will.'

A few months after that night, I met my now partner. Two years later we had a little girl we named Jasmine. She is a mysterious child and came to us as a surprise, but what's uncanny is that she wants for so little and seems to survive on smiles alone.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Mira Cuturilo.*