

Chapter 1

Ghost-busting in Thailand

Lee awoke abruptly.

Dreams, two terrible dreams. The first was a mystery, the second, frightening. He tried to focus his eyes on the moonbeams filtering through his split-bamboo hut. His nostrils flared at the smell of the fire smoldering in the middle of the uneven dirt floor. He tossed on his woven mat, trying to sleep. It was useless. Just thinking about his dreams made his heart pound loudly. What could they mean?

Lee pushed himself off his mat and instinctively brushed off his loose clothing. He wore baggy black pants and a brightly embroidered jacket, the traditional attire of Hmong* hill tribes, who live near the Burmese border in northern Thailand. Around his neck hung a pure silver necklace, which all Hmong knew protected them from ghosts that might try to strangle them in their sleep.

He stared at the ghosthouse on the wall. The ghosthouse is a place for a ghost to stay. This one was constructed of paper with a corrugated fringe and many diamond-shaped cutouts decorating the middle. A shelf jutted out below the paper structure. On the shelf rested bowls of food and water from which a ghost could dine. A stick of incense glowed, its sweet smell contrasting with the embers of the fire that heated the hut.

“Don’t even touch the ghosthouse,” Lee’s mother used to warn, “or you’ll die.”

* Hmong is pronounced “mong.”

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Have I offended the ghosts? Lee wondered. One could never be sure without first talking to the witch doctor. Only the witch doctor could interpret dreams correctly.

Stepping through the door, Lee ducked under the elephant-grass roof. He chased down his prized hen, snatched it by its legs, and started toward the witch doctor's hut. The bird curled its head upright so as not to see the world upside down. It looked around casually, its body swinging gently with each new step of the worried Hmong.

The witch doctor opened the door slowly to Lee's timid knock. His tall bony body loomed larger than life. The purple daybreak reflected in his glassy eyes. His black hair hung in long strands down to his shoulders. He smiled a toothy grin at Lee. "Do you need my services?"

Lee hesitated. "I need you to talk to the ghosts. I'm afraid. I've had two terrible dreams, and I must know their meanings!"

The witch doctor's eyes passed from Lee to the dangling bird. "What's that?" he asked knowingly. For a fleeting moment Lee was afraid his offering was too small. But he spoke confidently, "A gift for you."

The old man took the offering and set it on the ground. The grateful fowl ran inside the hut. "What were the dreams?"

"In my first dream, my family and I hiked down the mountain to work in the fields. We arrived at the farm together, but when I looked around, my family was gone. I looked everywhere, but I was alone! Then I awoke." Lee wiped sweat off his brow.

"And the second?" the witch doctor prodded.

"In my second dream, I was in a strange field near a village that I've never seen before. A stranger approached me and asked, 'Do you need a house?' Before I could answer, 'No,' he declared, 'I've got the perfect house for you. It's very small. Just big enough for you to sleep in. And I have other homes for your family right next to yours.' " Lee felt faint. "Please ask the ghosts the interpretation."

"I don't have to ask. Many people share these dreams. The meaning is always the same." The witch doctor lit his water pipe. Water inside the bamboo tube gurgled as he sucked on the mouthpiece.

"What do they mean?" Lee begged.

The old man blew a cloud of smoke, remaining silent.

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“Tell me!” Lee demanded desperately.

“The meaning of the first dream is uncertain. When you arrive at the fields, you can’t find your family. You miss them. This has one of two meanings: either your family will die and you’ll miss them, or you’ll die and your family will miss you.”

“But I know the meaning of the second dream. In that dream you’re asked if you want a house. But it’s big enough only for you to sleep in. That house is your tomb. This dream says you and your family will die.”

Lee’s throat went dry. “What do I do now?”

“I suggest you go home and prepare to die.” The witch doctor averted his gaze. He had nothing more to say.

Lee’s shoulders drooped. His feet grew heavy as he slowly trudged home to report the news. “I’m too young to die. How can I tell my family?”

The Hmong family sat around a low hand-hewn table. His wife, Bee, served rice on a banana leaf with bowls of meat and vegetable soup. Each person used his fingers to pry off a cluster of rice from the pile and then spooned some soup.

Lee swallowed hard. “I had two bad dreams last night.” He reached for more rice then drew his hand back nervously. “I asked the witch doctor for the interpretation.”

“What did he say?” Bee asked.

“The ghosts are angry. I don’t know why. We’re going to die!” There. He’d said it!

“Is there something we can do to appease the ghosts?” Lee’s wife sounded hopeful. “Maybe they’ll change their minds.”

“No. The witch doctor said we’re to prepare to die.”

“I don’t want to die!” Bee protested.

“Neither do I,” Lee sighed sadly. “But the ghosts say we’ll die.”

“So we will die.” His wife nodded matter-of-factly.

Some days later, Yang, Lee’s sister, complained of being hot, although the day was cool. Sweat beaded on her forehead and trickled down her cheeks. Yang was being burned up by an unseen fire. She could only lie motionless and moan. Lee knew the ghosts had struck.

Lee’s wife found a branch with dead leaves and tied it to the doorpost. This told the neighbors, “If you visit our family, you might get sick and die!”

Only one man dared visit the hut—Pastor Sae Saeyang, the son of the witch

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doctor, who had rejected ghosts for Jesus.*

“Is someone sick?” the pastor asked.

“My sister is dying,” Lee said. “The ghosts said in dreams that our family will die.”

“Do you believe the ghosts?”

Lee nodded. “The ghosts are always right. If they say we die, we die.”

“You’re right. Ghosts have some power, but Christ is more powerful than ghosts!”

“I don’t believe in Christ. I’m a ghost worshiper!”

“If you’ll let me take the ghosthouse out of your house, and if you’ll become a Christian, your sister will get well. Your family won’t die. The ghosts cannot harm a Christian—”

Lee slammed the door in the pastor’s face.

Yang’s breathing became irregular. Each new breath was a frantic search for more air. And then her breathing stopped.

Lee built a bamboo stretcher for carrying his sister to the village death house. In the death house, a drummer beat out a rhythm and a pipe player blew on his bamboo pipes. Lee’s eyes followed the pipe player, who was circling a bamboo column. Lee knew the ritual well—he had seen it countless times before. But today was different. This was his sister.

He glanced at the ghosthouse. *Why do I worship the ghosts? What do they do for me?* he asked himself. *They’ve killed my sister. They’ll kill us all soon!*

The music stopped. Lee tied his sister to the stretcher and splashed sacred red dye on her forehead. *Who will die next?* he wondered. Lee and his friends formed a parade and carried the body away for burial.

Some months later, Lee awoke with a fever. Sweat poured down his forehead, stinging his eyes. His brain felt like burning coals. “I’m sick,” he announced.

His wife squatted beside him, wiping his sweat away and crying. He knew he was dying.

Is Christ more powerful than ghosts? I was a fool not to give my sister a chance. His mind reeled with his thoughts. But I was afraid I’d die if the pastor touched the ghosthouse. Yang might be alive today if I’d listened to the pastor.

He turned feverish eyes toward his wife. “Do you think Pastor Sae would

* Stanley M. Maxwell witnessed this story while working in Thailand. He lived among the Hmong in 1983. Pastor Sae Saeyang was his roommate.

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come again after what I did?” he asked. “Please ask him to come. Tell him I apologize for slamming the door in his face. He’s my only hope!”

“I’ll go!” Bee hurriedly obeyed her husband’s dying wish.

Pastor Sae’s smile faded when he saw how sick Lee had become. “May I do something for you?”

“The ghosts were right. I’m dying.”

“Christ can heal you. The ghosts promise you death; Christ promises you life,” the pastor encouraged.

“Take the ghosthouse out of my house!” Lee whispered hoarsely.

Pastor Sae’s eyes sparkled. “Everyone come around the fire,” he ordered.

Everyone moved to the center of the house except Lee, who was too weak. Pastor Sae looked from face to face. “Do you agree to become Christian?”

Everyone nodded solemnly. Lee wondered what the ghosts would do.

Pastor Sae continued. “Let’s pray. I know, Jesus, that You’re more powerful than ghosts. I thank You for this family who has decided to become Your children today. Bless them. Don’t allow the ghosts to kill them. Please live here. Make their home Your home. In Christ’s name, Amen.”

Pastor Sae got up. He tore the ghosthouse off the wall. The family held each other tightly as the pastor rolled up the ghosthouse and touched the tip to the fire until the paper burst into a blaze. “Ghosts, leave this house!” he called loudly. “You can’t live here anymore; this is a *Christian* house now!” Turning, the pastor walked out the door with the flaming ghosthouse in hand and set it on the ground.

Ghosts hate fire, Lee reminded himself.

Pastor Sae reentered the hut. “Do you have anything else that relates to the ghosts here?” he asked, eyeing their necklaces.

The family quickly took off their necklaces and handed them to the pastor. Lee was sure unseen hands would choke out his life. But nothing happened.

The pastor shook the necklaces over the fire and said, “Ghosts, leave these necklaces,” and set them beside the ashes of the ghosthouse.

Pastor Sae looked around the hut. “Anything else?”

Bee produced a dirty burlap pouch with two gourds and a bone-shaped stick inside. The pastor waved the bag over the fire. “Ghosts, leave these things.” He walked outside and set the bag of gourds beside the necklaces and the ashes of the ghosthouse.

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Pastor Sae asked about the branch.

Lee watched his wife untie the branch of dead leaves from the doorpost. He thought, *This pastor really believes I'll get well.*

Pastor Sae shook the branch over the flames. "Ghosts, I'm going to shake you out of this branch!" He went outside, still shaking the branch, and set it beside the bag of gourds, the necklaces, and the ashes of the ghosthouse.

The family joined him outside, looking at the symbols of ghost protection. Lee gratefully took back the pure silver necklaces. They were valuable. But Pastor Sae kept the worthless branch of dead leaves and the bag of gourds.

The pastor left the hut. Still shaking the branch, he shouted, "Goodbye, ghosts! Christ is more powerful than ghosts!"

Lee's family didn't die. Today, many years later, they are happy Christians, free from the ghosts' power. Lee knows Christ *is* more powerful than ghosts.