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Hidden Sorrow, Lasting Joy: The Forgotten Women of the Persecuted Church

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K'SUP NRI

TRAGIC ENDING, NEW BEGINNING

I will never forget her face. Sweet and childlike, K'Sup Nri seemed fragile, even at first glance. Her smile was a little shy; her manner gentle. K'Sup Nri's beauty personified many of the qualities that endeared me to her people. I couldn't have imagined, the sunny afternoon we met, the tragedy that awaited her.

The air was crisp, and the sun shone that January day in 1973. My infant son, Mark, had just awakened from his nap, and Marjan, his older sister, was getting restless. "I think you two would be happier if we all took a nice walk," I informed them. And out we went.

Less than a month before, our family had packed up, left Holland, and arrived in the beautiful city of Dalat, located in the central highlands of Vietnam. As missionaries serving with the Christian and Missionary Alliance (CAMA) our first task was to try to master the difficult Vietnamese language. My husband, Johan, had already started language study. Because Mark was just a month old when we arrived, I was not yet able to attend school. But I was eager to learn Vietnamese, so I started taking lessons at home with a private tutor and tried to practice whenever I got the chance.

Life was delightful for us those first weeks in Vietnam. During our Bible-college years in England, Johan and I had lived with twelve boys in a school residence. Afterward, we had stayed with our parents while making preparations to go overseas. For the first time since our wedding in 1970, we had a house all to ourselves. It was like a dream come true.

And we couldn't have imagined a more picturesque place to live. Dalat was a scenic mountain resort that was once the home of

CHAPTER

Record my lament;
list my tears on your
scroll are they not
in your record?

Psalm 56:8

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Dalat School, where missionary kids from all over southeast Asia had lived and studied. The Vietnam War forced the school to relocate to Malaysia, and the campus, now called Villa Alliance, was a conference center. We had made our home in one of the holiday cottages. The climate was wonderful—much cooler than the sweltering coastal plains—and the view of the mountainous countryside was breathtaking.

As soon as the children and I went outside that day, a friendly group of neighboring children appeared. Their older sister was taking care of them, and my two little blonds quickly caught their attention. Like typical kids, they skipped and chattered and laughed as we all made our way around the compound.

We were returning to our house when a tribal woman came walking toward us. It was the first time I met K'Sup Nri.

I was immediately aware of her natural poise and charm. Her long black skirt, which wrapped gracefully around her waist, told me that she belonged to one of the many ethnic minority groups of the Vietnamese highlands. K'Sup Nri was instantly attracted to my children, and she and I began to communicate. I was still learning the most basic Vietnamese words, so we relied heavily on hand motions. Not many words were needed for me to understand that she was expecting her first baby and that she was ecstatic about it.

Later on, our missionary colleagues told me more about her. She and her husband, "Dieu," belonged to the Stieng, a primitive tribe who lived in dense jungle among the rolling rubber plantations northwest of Saigon, along the Cambodian border. They came from the area around An Loc, the provincial capital. Heavy fighting had caused them and many of their ethnic minority group to flee; a resettlement camp had been set up for the refugees about an hour's drive from Dalat.

Besides helping Ralph and Lorraine Hauper, Wycliffe missionaries who were translating the Bible into the Stieng vernacular, K'Sup Nri worked with her husband, the young pastor of the newly-converted Stieng Christians. At that time their tribe was experiencing an exciting spiritual revival, and they were really excited about the way the Lord was using them.

The living conditions in the couple's resettlement camp were far from good, especially during the rainy season. When monsoons

turned the roads into sticky red mud, only four-wheel drive vehicles could reach the rows of tents. But when it wasn't raining, Johan and I loved nothing more than loading up our Jeep on Sunday mornings and worshiping with the Stieng people. Never mind the drive with two very small children, this was what we had come to Vietnam for—to see the gospel do its transforming work in the lives of men and women.

After one particular worship service, we all trailed into the woods to attend a baptismal meeting. Dieu, the only Stieng pastor at the time, baptized several new believers. I can still picture Dieu standing in that stream, up to his knees in water, his face shining in the hot sun. And K'Sup Nri was a portrait of happiness as she watched her husband perform the baptism. Her lovely smile radiated joy and love toward him and their people. Great joy filled our hearts, too. Back home in Holland, our youth group had often sung, "All over the world, the Spirit is moving." Now with our own eyes we were seeing that the words of the song were true.

After returning from the baptism, we enjoyed chicken curry and lively conversation in the fellowship's makeshift, army-green refugee tent. Curious locals crowded around to examine the strange-looking foreigners. The thick, blond hair on Johan's arms was a great attraction, and everyone seemed to want to pinch our babies' white skin. Even though we didn't especially enjoy being such a novelty, we knew that it was just one more aspect of living in Vietnam. And what we were experiencing was well worth our long journey—the Lord was clearly at work among these people. What better incentive to help us face another week of language study?

Weeks later, after we finished our language training, we were assigned to work in the coastal town of Quinhon. There we continued to hear good things about the Stieng people and the mighty work that God was doing in their lives. But it wasn't long before a major interruption distracted us from K'Sup Nri, Dieu, and our other Vietnamese friends. We had been in Vietnam for less than two and a half years, falling in love with the people and sharing in their spiritual joys and sorrows. Now we were forced to rivet our attention on our own predicament.

AN UNWELCOME INTERRUPTION

The Communist takeover in 1975 caught virtually all the Western missionaries in Vietnam by surprise. While our family was attending a regional conference in Danang, in the northern part of South Vietnam, a Communist attack was suddenly launched from the North. This campaign would eventually lead the Communist troops to victory.

First we heard that five CAMA missionaries and a family in the highland city of Banmethuot working with Wycliffe Bible Translators had been captured. After a few days all radio contact with them was lost.²

Then, even more ominous for us, we heard that Quinhon, where we were living, was no longer safe. After some hasty discussions, we decided that Johan should return alone to pick up a few of our possessions, pay the rent and the household helper, and then return to Danang. The children and I would stay behind.

While Johan was in Quinhon, the situation in Vietnam rapidly deteriorated. He was informed that it was impossible for him to get back to us in Danang. In fact, for a time he was stranded in Quinhon. After many stressful hours in the Quinhon airport, an Air America pilot came to his rescue and flew him to Saigon.

Meanwhile, I remained in Danang with Mark and Marjan. While I waited for word about Johan, two CAMA mission leaders arrived in Saigon from the United States. They ordered all of the missionaries associated with CAMA to evacuate to Saigon. Seven years earlier, during the Tet offensive of 1968, six of our missionaries had been killed in Banmethuot.³ The organization did not want to risk any more lives.

How would I ever get our children and myself to Saigon? Danang was full of refugees, and everybody was trying to get to the same place. I felt frightened and alone, longing for Johan to return and walk through this frightening experience with me. One sleepless night, after much tossing and turning, I wearily sat up in

²The full story of these missionaries has been told by James and Marti Hefley in their book *Prisoners of Hope* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Christian Publications Inc.).

³James C. Hefley, *By Life or by Death* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1969).

bed and picked up a book that was lying on my bedroom table. When I opened it, the first words I read were "I will provide!" Tears stung my eyes. I recognized God's voice, and peace settled upon me like a warm blanket. At last I slept.

A couple of days later the children and I were finally able to board a plane to Saigon. An hour later we found ourselves in the arms of my overjoyed husband. Johan had been waiting night and day at the airport. He had met every plane arriving from Danang to see if we were on it. At last we all were together again.

After a week in Saigon we were given orders to leave Vietnam. We were heartsick at the news, but there was nothing we could do. In consultation with the leaders of the Evangelical Church of Vietnam (the Tin Lanh church), CAMA's leadership had decided that it would be better for everyone concerned if all the Western missionaries left the country. The last thing we wanted to do was jeopardize the lives of the pastors and other Christians we had worked with, so we did as we were told. Besides, families with small children were more a bother than a blessing at such a time.

So, after many emotional good-byes, we found ourselves back home in Holland. Dressed in summer clothes and sandals, we arrived at Schiphol airport in freezing winter weather. Our families, whom we had been able to call just before leaving Saigon, were thrilled to see us. But our hearts were heavy. Our lifelong dream of a missionary career seemed to have ended, abruptly and perhaps forever.

It had especially hurt us to leave our Vietnamese brothers and sisters behind. What would happen to them? Sometimes K'Sup Nri's radiant smile crossed my mind, and when I thought about her I prayed, wondering about her husband and her new baby. The history of Christian suffering in Communist countries like Russia and China, did not promise a rosy future for the believers we had left behind in Vietnam.

In July 1975 our sense of foreboding about the fate of the Vietnamese church proved all too accurate. We heard reports that, along with several other pastors, Dieu had been arrested. Before long the reports were verified.

Little by little facts trickled out. For over a year Dieu had been kept in solitary confinement, his legs immobilized in stocks. Then,

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in April 1977 he was transported to a prison in the north of the country, where he remained for eleven years.

Meanwhile, the Stieng refugee camp near Bao Loc had been demolished, and the residents were forced to return to their native villages. Fortunately, a small group of Stieng young people were able to flee to Denmark. They kept us informed whenever there was any news about Dieu. Occasionally someone who had been imprisoned with him was released and provided an update. We were grateful to hear that Dieu continued to serve the Lord in his “reeducation camp.” In fact, after his release we learned that he had led forty-four of his fellow prisoners to Christ and had baptized thirty-two of them in the woods during their lunch breaks.

DESPAIR, DECEPTION, AND DEATH

Before our sudden departure, the Lord seemed to be telling us that we should not give up on Vietnam, even though it would soon become a “closed” country. After a few months of looking into other options in Holland and praying for guidance, Johan joined Open Doors with Brother Andrew. Before long, Johan was traveling around the world with Brother Andrew, sharing the needs of the Suffering Church with churches in the West. He challenged people to pray for those who had been imprisoned for their Christian faith. Brother Andrew always became much more interested in a country after its doors were closed to conventional missionary service. Such countries were destinations where no one else dared to go. In 1975 Vietnam fit that category.

Since Vietnam was so close to Johan’s heart, he never failed to share the needs of the Christians in Vietnam. Prayer, we were all convinced, was what the Christians in that country needed—especially those in prison. So we prayed for Dieu and many others like him, but none of us knew what was happening to his young wife and their two little children.

When we finally did hear, it was too late.

Once Dieu and his brother were led away as captives, K’Sup Nri and her son were sent back to the village where she was born.

And not long after Dieu's incarceration began, K'Sup Nri gave birth to their second child, a beautiful little girl.

K'Sup Nri lived with her parents, but her loneliness was overwhelming. Her childlike appearance was no illusion. She had been a teenage bride—not much more than a child when she and Dieu had married—and she had always relied heavily upon her strong, capable husband. Now he was gone. To make matters worse, K'Sup Nri had virtually no spiritual support. All the Stieng churches were closed, and the Christians were scattered and forbidden to meet.

For years K'Sup Nri had to work very hard in the fields to provide food for her little ones. Life was incredibly hard. She longed for her husband. Where was he? Was he still alive? How were his captors treating him? No word or letter ever came. She wanted to visit him, but visits to prisoners—even by their wives—were not permitted. K'Sup Nri was crushed.

All the while, Communist cadres were pressuring K'Sup Nri and other Christians to give up their faith. Confused and isolated, the young woman would lie awake at night, remembering the past and worrying about the future.

K'Sup Nri's memories carried her back to the happier times she and her beloved husband had shared in Bao Loc. She envisioned the wonderful gatherings when all the Christians sang praises to God together and hoped to recapture some of the lyrics that had once lifted her heart. She tried to recollect the sound of her husband's voice as he explained passages from the Bible or prayed with her. In reality, she could not even remember his face very well.

In the tribal churches all the Christians would often pray out loud together. Sound would then fill the building like a sweet perfume rising to the Lord. Now all K'Sup Nri could hear when she prayed was her own voice. How she wished her husband were there to help her understand what was happening. She had learned from him that God was almighty, always able and willing to help. Where was Dieu's God now? She knew she needed help, but who could she turn to? The missionaries were gone. The tribal Christians were spread out all over the region. Who could possibly understand what she was going through?

As the children grew, they began to ask about their father. She

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tried to explain what had happened to him, but to her children, Dieu was a stranger, a character in an oft-repeated story. K'Sup Nri prayed persistently, but her prayers seemed to go nowhere. Then, after years of uncertainty, her worst fears were realized. Authorities came to her home and informed her that her husband had died in prison.

From that moment on K'Sup Nri's emotional life fell apart. It had been seven years since her husband had been taken away, and her sense of isolation was almost unbearable. Now that she had received word of his death, the very foundations of K'Sup Nri's life were fractured.

All that she had believed in had failed her. She had trusted God with a child's faith to keep her husband alive, but her prayers had been denied. She had tried to instill a love for Dieu in his children's hearts, but how could they love someone they didn't know? She had worked night and day to keep her family fed and sheltered, and her body ached as deeply as her mind and spirit.

"God, I need a husband!" she cried out. "I can't go on like this!"

Grief and spiritual confusion overwhelmed K'Sup Nri. Her faith had eroded into doubt; her doubt had become despair. And at this very time, when she couldn't have been more vulnerable, a young Communist officer entered the scene. He was about her age, and he was attracted to her beauty. He befriended K'Sup Nri, he listened to her, he expressed his concern. Understandably, she responded to him.

Of course the young Communist was not a Christian, and he was nothing like Dieu in any other way. But he was interested in her, and perhaps, she told herself, he was the answer to her many prayers for help. For a few months she resisted a serious relationship. She still felt emotionally attached to her children's father, but what good was that? At one time she would have asked God for wisdom, but her broken heart told her that God wouldn't answer anyway. So eventually, when the officer asked her to marry him, K'Sup Nri overcame her reluctance and gave in. At least now, she thought, she and her children would be taken care of, and she would once again have a strong shoulder to lean on. Before long the two were married.

K'SUP NRI

For a little while life seemed good. K'Sup Nri's exhausting efforts to survive were relieved. Gradually she began to enjoy life again, even learning to laugh with her children once more. Then, a few months after the wedding, a neighbor came to visit, bringing along a strange rumor.

A prisoner who had been recently released was telling people that Dieu had not died after all. His brother Men was the one who had passed away. Trembling with fear, K'Sup Nri started asking questions of anyone and everyone who might know something about her first husband. The more she inquired, the more certain she was that the rumor was true. Finally, she heard for herself confirmation from the man who had been released from prison just a short time before. Yes, he assured her, Dieu was still alive, faithfully serving the Lord in his place of incarceration.

K'Sup Nri's desperation was indescribable. Regret and remorse gripped her with icy hands; hopelessness began to strangle her. To her horror, she realized that she had been lied to—the Communist authorities had intentionally deceived her. *How could I have been such a fool?* she asked herself mercilessly. Even worse, she began to suspect—and not without reason—that the authorities had also engineered her marriage to the young officer. It had all been part of their plot to destroy her husband's life and marriage. They had succeeded, and in K'Sup Nri's view, there was no one to blame but herself.

After so many years of overpowering struggle of every kind—physical, mental and spiritual—K'Sup Nri now found herself utterly without reason to live. She simply could not find the strength to face the future. By that time her faith had grown too weak to save her. Her despair condemned her. One desperate night, unable to face another day, she poisoned herself. She was found dead the next morning.

IF ONLY WE HAD KNOWN

For weeks after I heard the tragic end of K'Sup Nri's story, I searched my soul. I couldn't stop thinking about this beautiful young woman—my friend, my fellow servant of Jesus. And I felt

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guilty. Had I prayed for her enough? What would have happened if Christians all over the world had prayed for her as fervently as they had prayed for her husband? Johan and others had faithfully asked for prayers for Dieu, but no one knew about K'Sup Nri's circumstances until after the worst had happened. Might she have been helped if only we had known of her struggle and interceded on her behalf?

Looking back on K'Sup Nri's story from beginning to end, I am determined to do whatever I can to make sure that women like her are not forgotten. There are hundreds of men imprisoned for their faith around the world today, and many of them have left behind wives and family. This raises some profound questions:

Who are these women?

What are they going through?

What do they face while their husbands are in prison?

Who cares for them and prays for them?

The Lord has kept K'Sup Nri's tears in his bottle. He has seen her hurt and felt her pain. And who are we to judge her desperate actions? But I want to believe that K'Sup Nri's life was not lived in vain. I want the tragic ending of her life to bring forth a new beginning in yours and in mine. I want to know that her death is serving a profound purpose—awakening Christians around the world to the ongoing tragedy of persecuted Christians and inspiring us to respond in prayer and support.