

THE MISSING MOM

Here's a nightmare: You set off on a simple trip, only to end up more than 1,000 miles away from everyone you've ever known, with no way to get home. It happened to a woman who became known as "Auntie Mon."

L ANGUAGE BARRIER

In 1982 Jaeyaena Beuraheng left her home in the Narathiwat Province of southern Thailand to take one of her regular shopping trips across the border in Malaysia. After she was done at the markets, Beuraheng, 51 years old and a mother of seven, accidentally boarded the wrong bus. She fell asleep. When she woke up, she found herself in Bangkok...700 miles north of her home. Unfortunately for Beuraheng, she couldn't speak Thai, and her Malay dialect, Yawi, is spoken by very few people in Bangkok. In fact, to the people in Bangkok whom she asked for directions, it sounded like the woman was speaking gibberish. Without the ability to read signs or ask directions, Beuraheng boarded another bus—one that she thought was headed south. Instead, it took her another 430 miles north and she ended up in the city of Chiang Mai. Beuraheng was now more than 1,100 miles from home, she didn't know where she was, and she'd run out of money.

Meanwhile, back in her hometown, Beuraheng's family told the authorities that their mother was missing and were informed that a woman matching her description had been hit by a train and killed. Beuraheng's son went to identify the body—which was difficult—but he said that it could have been her. So, believing their mother was dead, they stopped searching for her. Beuraheng was on her own. With no other options, she resorted to begging in the street to survive.

A SHELTERED LIFE

Five years later, Beuraheng, now 56, was arrested in a section of the city where begging was not allowed. The police couldn't understand the woman's words, so they took her to a homeless shelter in nearby Phitsanulok. The staff at the shelter had deduced that the woman was crazy. Still, she seemed nice, so there she

stayed. Mostly, Beuraheng sat in a chair and sang a song that no one could understand. They called her “Auntie Mon” because the song reminded them of the language spoken by the ethnic Mon people, who live on the Burma-Thailand border. They even brought in someone who could speak Mon to try and discern if that’s what it was, but it wasn’t. Everyone who tried to understand Auntie Mon only heard gibberish.

Twenty years passed.

THE POWER OF SONG

In 2007 three university students from Narathiwat were studying the homeless problem in Phitsanulok. As they were touring the shelter, one of the students asked about the old woman singing the song. “That’s Auntie Mon. We can’t understand her words, but we like the song,” said one of the staff workers. The student replied that he could—it was Yawi, a dialect spoken near his hometown. He approached her, smiled, and asked her for her name. It was the first time Beuraheng had understood anything that anyone had said in 25 years. Overjoyed, she told the students about her ordeal—how she took the wrong bus, how she ended up at the shelter, how much she missed being able to speak to anyone, and how much she missed her family.

HOME AT LAST

Beuraheng’s family was shocked to receive the news that their mother was alive. Her youngest son and eldest daughter traveled to the shelter to bring her home. She recognized her daughter, but not her son, who was just a small child when she last saw him. They flew back to Narathiwat...and took the *correct* bus home to their village. A two-day celebration ensued, during which Beuraheng—often crying tears of joy—told her amazing story to the press. “I didn’t tell anybody where I was going on that day, because I went there quite often. I thought I would die in Phitsanulok. I thought about running away many times, but then I worried I would not be able to make it home. I really missed my children.”

Beuraheng, now 76 years old, has a much larger family than when she left (there are many grandchildren). As in the shelter, she still spends much of her time sitting in her chair and singing her song. Only now, those around her can understand the words.