



Running shoes

Sophy lived in a land where it was nearly almost hot and sunny. And when it finally rained, it rained for days and nights without end.

One terrible hot day, Sophy squinted her eyes against the blinding sun.

The air was still. Suddenly a noise like bees swarming from a tree grew louder and louder. The pig began snorting. The chicken cackled.

Sophy sat up straight like a bamboo shoot.

Must be the number man's jeep, she thought, as she rubbed her eyes.

Once a year a man came from the city in a jeep. The village people called him the number man. The number man counted the number of people in the village for the government. After making the rounds, the number man stopped at Sophy's house.

"How many people live here?" he asked.

"Two" Sophy answered. "My mother and I."

"Let's see, that comes to one hundred fifty-four people in the village. Last year there were..." The number man stopped. He'd heard in the village that Sophy's father died because there was no doctor or hospital near the village.

Sophy stared at the man's shoes.

"Ah, you have never seen running shoes before?"

Sophy blushed. She thought about her secret wish. Her wish felt far, far away like a hawk lazily soaring in circles upward in a blue sky. Deep in her heart she knew if she had a pair of shoes like the number man, her wish would come true.

"Walk with me to the side of the river," the number man said.

"Stick your feet into the soft clay... now step out." Sophy liked the warm feeling of mud squishing between her toes.

The number man took a stick from his pocket with lots of numbers. He measured Sophy's footprints.

Then the number man rubbed his chin as he mumbled number to himself. "Let's see... after thirty nights, you will receive a surprise."

Sophy counted the nights until a post van drove through the village, dropping off a package by her door. She held her breath as she tore open the package. "Running shoes," Sophy yelled. She carefully put on each shoe. "Now my wish will come true."

"What wish?" her mother asked.

"Mother, I wish to go to school."

"But the school is eight kilometers away over horrible roads."

"Yes, but now I have running shoes," Sophy said, as she bounced up and down.

A smile slowly came over Sophy's mother's face. She remembered how Sophy's father took out a small blackboard the size of a lotus leaf. Under the shade of a coconut tree, he wrote Sophy a few marks on the blackboard he called words. "This mark is your name and this is the name of our village," he taught her.

"You may go to school," Sophy's mother said.

The next day before the sun rose, Sophy ate a bowl of rice and a little salt fish. Then she set off through the rice fields, running.

The shoes protected her feet from the sharp red rocks. She sailed through the air the way a small flat stone skips over water.

She jumped over little streams and ran over a road through the jungle where only one car a month passed. Sophy ran faster and faster, until finally she saw the oneroom schoolhouse.

Children's sandals were lined up outside the door. Sophy hurriedly untied her running shoes, placed them by the door and walked barefoot into the schoolroom.

"My name is Sophy. I want to learn how to read and write."

The class, which was all boys, giggled.

"Quiet," the teacher said. "Come, you are welcome here. Where did you come from?"

"Andong Kralong."

The teacher gasped. "That's eight kilometers away..."

"Yes, miss, but I have running shoes!"

The boys covered their teeth as they laughed. Little tears ran from Sophy's eyes. "I want to learn how to read."

"But, you are a girl," one boy whispered.

Sophy pulled all her courage together like a green snake ready to strike. She waited for the right time to speak.

After school Sophy tied on her shoes with three knots in each shoe. She looked over the boys and said, "If you think you are so smart, then try to catch me."

Boys pushed and shoved each other out of the way.

They ran after Sophy.

The following morning, Sophy woke before the cockerel's first call. Her head start allowed her to arrive at school before there were any sandals lined up at the door. When the boys paraded into the classroom, they smiled shyly.

They remembered how Sophy won the race.

From that day, Sophy learned many subjects taught at the one-room schoolhouse.

One morning, a year later, Sophy sat with her mother as a cloud of dust suddenly rose over the hill.

The pig began snorting. The chickens cackled.

It was the number man coming in his red jeep.

In that moment the first sprinkle of rain made little circles grow ever larger in the river. Monsoon was beginning. Sophy looked up at the gathering clouds and thought she would be cooler in her daily race to school.

The number man counted everyone in the village. At the end of the day he arrived at Sophy's house.

The number man looked down at Sophy's bare feet.

"Where are your running shoes?" he asked. Sophy smiled and put her hands on her hips, saying, "I only wear my running shoes when I go to school."

They both laughed.

"I have something for you this time," Sophy said. "Follow me."

They walked to the side of the river.

Sophy looked down and said shyly, "one day I want to help my people build a school and..."

"What?" the number man asked.

"I want to be a teacher," Sophy said.

She held a bamboo stick with her two hands and scratched words into the clay:

THANK YOU FOR THE RUNNING SHOES.

NOW I CAN READ AND WRITE.

Everything was so quiet the number man could hear the sound of the stream bubbling around the stones.