A person in a blue shirt is seen from behind, carrying a large, round, woven basket on their back. They are walking through a field of young green plants, likely corn. The background shows a dense forest or mountain range under a bright sky.

## SYNOPSIS

In a remote mountain village, two Hmong siblings, **YONG** and **NENG**, are responsible for grooming a bull into a prizefighter that will earn the family money and honor. Although the two have a close relationship, they couldn't be more different. Yong left school after their mother's death to take care of the family; she is very protective of her younger brother. Neng, on the other hand, laments his duties and yearns for city life. Other than raising the bull, the two spend most of their days harvesting corn. Neng doesn't work very hard, but he keeps Yong entertained with his singing.

Neng didn't get a government scholarship when he finished his high school, so he wants to take another exam in the city. He asks his father to sell the bull to help with expenses, but his father vehemently refuses. Neng is hurt and doesn't feel supported. He goes to the city without saying goodbye to his father.

Yong marries a local boy, **YEH**, and together they take care of Yong's ailing father, **KAXIONG**. Taking the advice of a Shaman, Yeh travels to distant villages to look for herbs for his father-in-law. He hears whispers of mountains that are filled with gold. His family needs the money and discusses this possibility with Yong. She doesn't like the idea, but reluctantly allows Yeh to take part in these digs. He is inexperienced, but determined. Tragedy strikes when one of the holes he's working in collapses. He is badly wounded. A pregnant Yong now cares for an ailing father and an injured husband while Neng is studying in the city.

Not long after, Kaxiong passes away without Neng's knowledge. The two haven't spoken since Neng left. Yong travels to the city to inform her brother. She finds the big city strange and overwhelming. After locating Neng, she finds out that Neng has entered a singing contest where he's made the final round. The prize is money and a shot at a new lucrative career. However, Yong needs to rush back home because their relatives have already arrived for the funeral. Neng can't leave in the middle of the final round because he's signed a contract that prevents him from leaving the show. However, he's worried about his sister traveling alone in an unfamiliar city.

The obligation of a funeral awaits, as does the promise of a new future. The bull also awaits a final fight.



## TREATMENT

**NENG**, a 19-year-old Hmong man, and **YONG**, a 21-year-old Hmong woman, are on a bus. They look indifferent and exhausted as they sit opposite each other. They are not talking. Yong gets carsick and vomits throughout the journey. Other passengers turn away, cover their noses, and look disgusted. Neng hands plastic bags, an inhaler, and a bottle of water to her. Two soldiers carrying guns guard the bus and passengers.

When the bus passes a newly built road where the attack of a Chinese passenger bus took place in the previous week, other passengers start to chat about the incident. Although there is no official confirmation of who carried out the attack, people have been speculating that it must be Hmong insurgents who shoot and rob passenger buses. Neng looks agitated but does not say anything while Yong is too exhausted or is not aware of the situation to pay attention to the speculative gossip.

The bus slows down when two soldiers with guns on the road give a stop signal. All passengers keep quiet and lower themselves with fear. When the bus reaches the soldiers, a bus assistant hands them bottles of water and packs of cigarettes. The passengers are relieved. The bus continues, passing Hmong villages on the roadside. Some kids in uniforms go to school. Some kids carry heavy stuff (grass, firewood...) on their backs. Some walk with their big bulls. Neng and Yong observe lives on the road, looking sad and tired.

[FLASHBACK]

On a remote mountain, 16-year-old Yong and 14-year-old Neng, harvest with their father, **KAXIONG**. The siblings sing a Hmong song together. Neng picks a tree leaf and blows it to make a musical sound. Once a basket is full of corn, they pour it into a sack. Once several sacks are filled, they carry them to a hut built to store corn. Neng has difficulty lifting it so Yong carries the heavy sack instead while he carries the empty ones. In the small hut, Yong prepares lunch while Neng feeds pigs and chickens. Kaxiong cuts grass for a small bull. Yong serves her father and brother before she sits down and eats. After lunch, Neng learns how to play a musical instrument called a 'queej' (a flute-like instrument made of bamboo) from his father while Yong washes dishes and cleans up. She watches them and smiles.

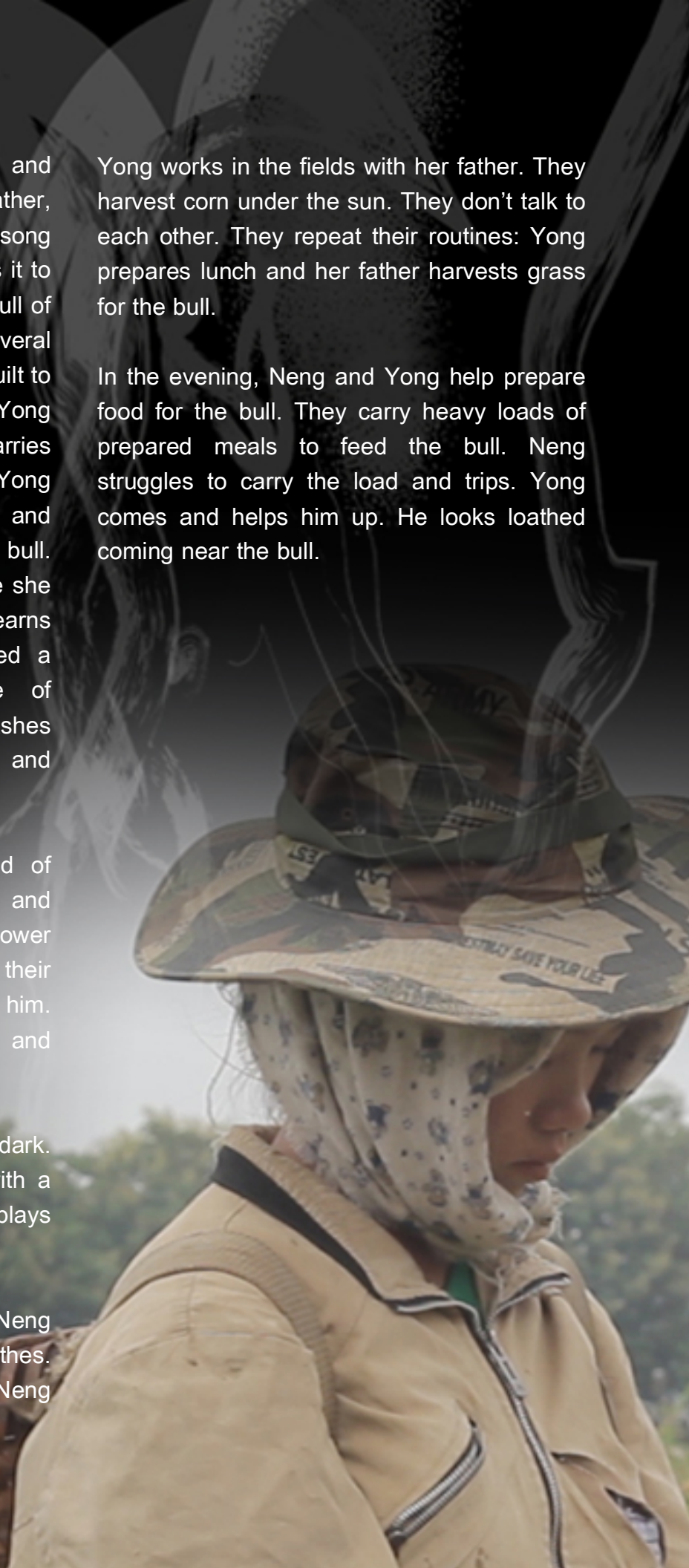
They walk home carrying a heavy load of pumpkins, cucumbers, vegetables, and firewood. Halfway home, Neng walks slower and slower. He is far behind Yong and their father. Yong looks back and walks toward him. She takes out some of the load from him and puts it into her basket.

By the time they reach home, it's almost dark. Yong attends to the bull. She feeds it with a special meal prepared for it. Neng plays outside the house with his friends.

The next day, the two siblings dress up. Neng is in a school uniform; Yong in torn clothes. They walk to school together but only Neng enters the school.

Yong works in the fields with her father. They harvest corn under the sun. They don't talk to each other. They repeat their routines: Yong prepares lunch and her father harvests grass for the bull.

In the evening, Neng and Yong help prepare food for the bull. They carry heavy loads of prepared meals to feed the bull. Neng struggles to carry the load and trips. Yong comes and helps him up. He looks loathed coming near the bull.



Time passes. The green mountain turns gold as corns ripen. They harvest and sell corn to a middleman in the village. The family looks very happy. Later, Kaxiong takes two children to see a bull-fighting match in a nearby village. People gather and cheer. After the fight, the people surround the owner of the winning bull and congratulate him. The defeated owner walks off quietly. Neng notices the bulls bleeding. He is saddened by the scene but Kaxiong tells his children to raise their bull well so that one day, they can bring it there to fight too. Yong acknowledges her father's wish while Neng doesn't seem to appreciate it.

The next day, two siblings get up early to travel far away from the village to collect special grass on a mountain for their bull. Neng still looks very sleepy and doesn't want to go but has no choice. Yong volunteers to carry all the stuff so he can walk freely. Still, he looks grumpy and walks slowly behind.

During the weekends, Neng helps Yong and their father in the field. The siblings tease each other as usual while harvesting corn. Yong helps Neng carry sacks of corn to the hut. Neng plays 'qeej'. He seems to get better and better at it.

The family walks home. Yong and their father carry most of the stuff then suddenly, Kaxiong collapses and falls unconscious. Yong and Neng rushes to check their father. They scream for help.

Back in the village, neighbors gather at their house. Kaxiong is barely conscious. Villagers urge him to go to a hospital in town but he refuses. Later, a shaman arrives and performs a ritual to cure Kaxiong's illness. Yong and Neng look worried.

Years pass. Yong is now 20. During Hmong New Year, Yong and Neng dress in colorful Hmong costumes that Yong made. They travel to a nearby village to celebrate with others. A bull-fighting match is in progress as they arrive. With nothing else to do, they stay and watch. While watching the match, a young man, **YEH**, 21, approaches Yong. He tries to flirt with her. She looks very shy but doesn't turn him away.





Few months later, Yeh and Yong get married. Yong moves out to live with Yeh's family. Neng now has to take care of the mature bull. He hates the routine of searching for grass and preparing meals for the bull. Their father's health continues to deteriorate. Since he refuses to visit a hospital, the shaman comes to perform an occasional ritual.

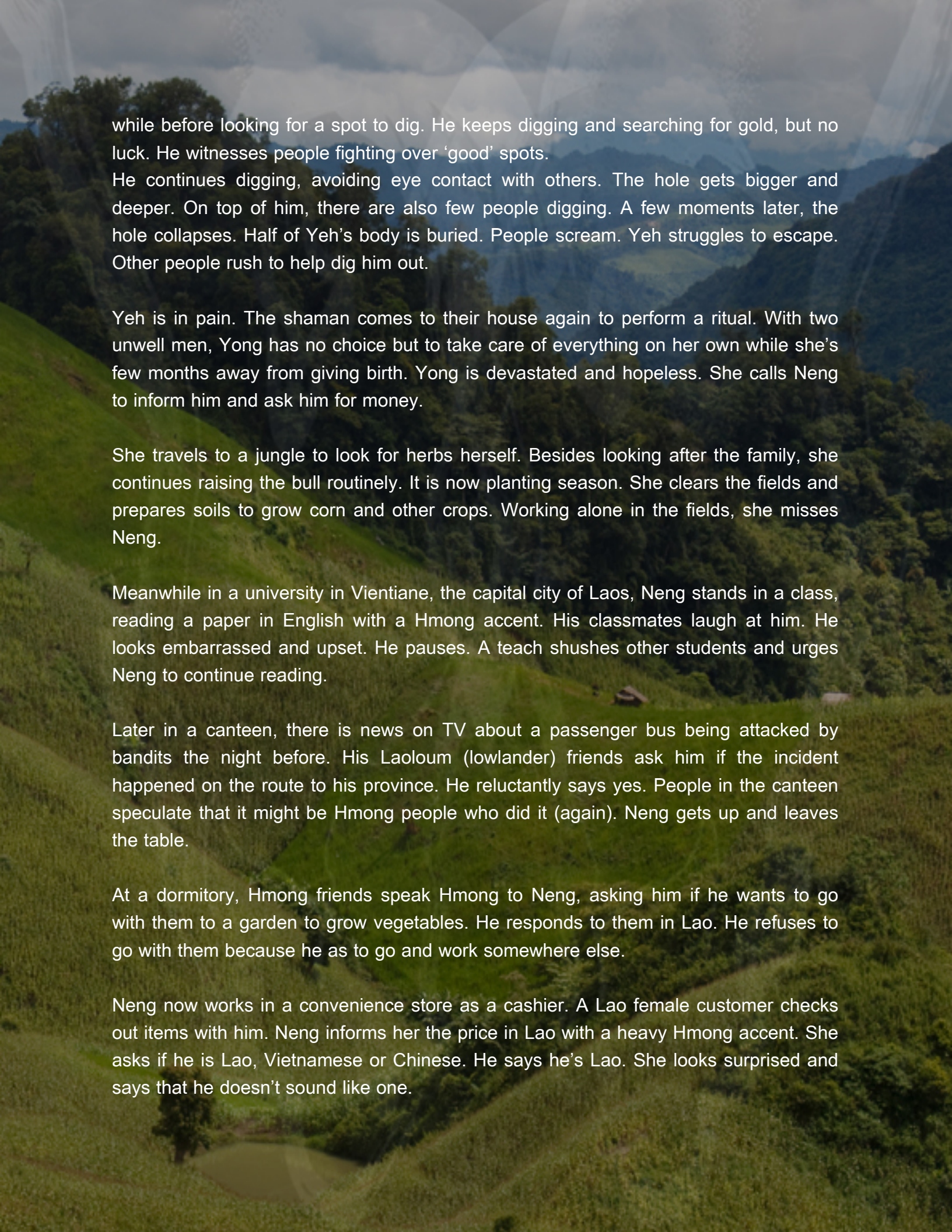
When Neng didn't receive the government scholarship, he wants to try another exam in order to study in a capital city. But his father can't afford to send him for the exam. His father wants him to give up his study plan and work in the fields instead. Neng tries to convince his father to sell the bull but he refuses. They get into a big argument. Neng is upset. He runs to Yong and Yeh for help. From there on, the father and son relationship suffers dramatically. They don't talk to each other anymore.

On the day Neng leaves for the city, he doesn't even say goodbye to his father. Only Yong, who is now pregnant, and Yeh come and see Neng off.

After Neng moves to the city, Yong and Yeh move to live with Kaxiong to take care of him, work in the fields, and raise the bull.

The shaman continues to come but Kaxiong doesn't seem to get better. Yeh has to look for new herbs in another village. He travels to villages near and far. In one of villages, he overhears villagers talking about a newly found field on a mountain that is embedded with gold. Some villagers secretly travel to that mountain to excavate the gold. These expeditions have been going on few months without the knowledge of the local authorities. Some villagers get lucky and become rich overnight. Yeh is curious and hopeful. He returns home with the herbs and tells Yong about the gold mountain. He wants to join the others. Yong protests. She is worried that something might happen to him or authorities might catch him but he insists on going as the price of corn continually decreases and there is no alternative way to earn a decent living.

The next day, he joins other villagers to secretly go to the mountain. At the site, he is surprised to see a lot of people digging soil and carrying it out. He observes others for a



while before looking for a spot to dig. He keeps digging and searching for gold, but no luck. He witnesses people fighting over 'good' spots.

He continues digging, avoiding eye contact with others. The hole gets bigger and deeper. On top of him, there are also few people digging. A few moments later, the hole collapses. Half of Yeh's body is buried. People scream. Yeh struggles to escape. Other people rush to help dig him out.

Yeh is in pain. The shaman comes to their house again to perform a ritual. With two unwell men, Yong has no choice but to take care of everything on her own while she's few months away from giving birth. Yong is devastated and hopeless. She calls Neng to inform him and ask him for money.

She travels to a jungle to look for herbs herself. Besides looking after the family, she continues raising the bull routinely. It is now planting season. She clears the fields and prepares soils to grow corn and other crops. Working alone in the fields, she misses Neng.

Meanwhile in a university in Vientiane, the capital city of Laos, Neng stands in a class, reading a paper in English with a Hmong accent. His classmates laugh at him. He looks embarrassed and upset. He pauses. A teach shushes other students and urges Neng to continue reading.

Later in a canteen, there is news on TV about a passenger bus being attacked by bandits the night before. His Laoloum (lowlander) friends ask him if the incident happened on the route to his province. He reluctantly says yes. People in the canteen speculate that it might be Hmong people who did it (again). Neng gets up and leaves the table.

At a dormitory, Hmong friends speak Hmong to Neng, asking him if he wants to go with them to a garden to grow vegetables. He responds to them in Lao. He refuses to go with them because he as to go and work somewhere else.

Neng now works in a convenience store as a cashier. A Lao female customer checks out items with him. Neng informs her the price in Lao with a heavy Hmong accent. She asks if he is Lao, Vietnamese or Chinese. He says he's Lao. She looks surprised and says that he doesn't sound like one.

# *raising* A BEAST

The next day, Neng is by himself. He reads and speaks Lao with difficulty and it makes him really frustrated. He receives a call from his sister. She tells him that the family needs money again. He asks her to wait as he just started in his new job.

He goes back to practicing Lao until some students walk by. He closes the book and pretends to play with his phone.

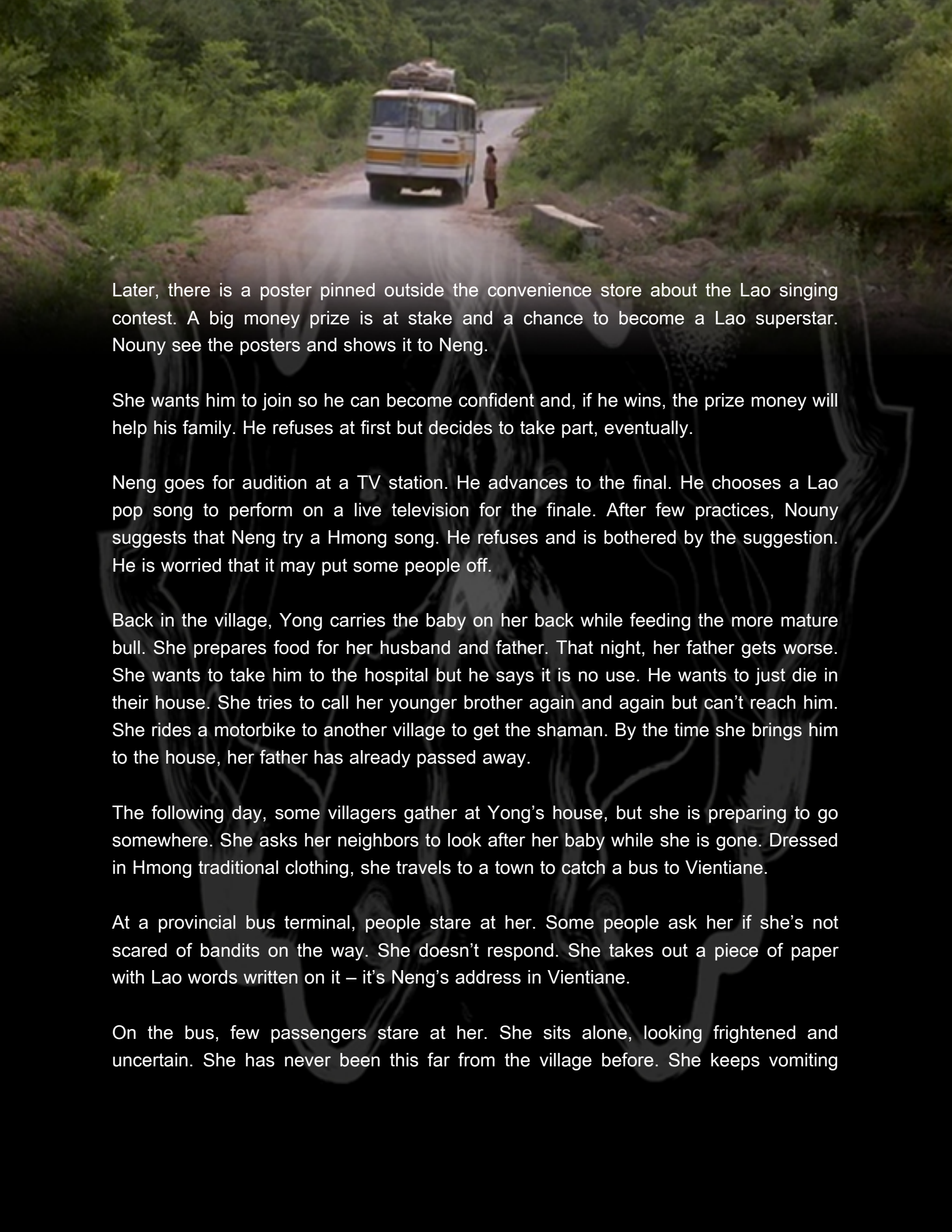
At work, a customer asks for an item in the store. Neng tries to locate it but isn't successful, as he doesn't really understand what the customer wants. The customer is getting furious. He looks for the item himself. Once he finds it, he gets mad at Neng. He blames Neng for not being knowledgeable about the projects in the store. Neng is apologetic. Another staff, **NOUNY**, comes and helps to settle things down. She apologizes on behalf of Neng.

After that incident, Neng and Nouny start to talk. He learns that she is from another province as well and has been working in the store for a while now. She finished high school but because her family couldn't financially support her education anymore, she decided to come to the city and look for work. When she first moved to the city, people in her community thought she was in Vientiane to be a prostitute. Her parents wanted her to go home to work in the fields. But she refused and reassured them that she was not what other people thought of her. When she started working at the convenience store, she struggled and got scolded a lot too. So she understands what Neng is going through.

Neng and Nouny start to come to work together. Nouny drives her motorbike to pick him at his dormitory and then he drives. His dorm mates start to tease him about Nouny being his girlfriend. He doesn't seem to mind.

While Neng is in class, he receives a call from his sister asking for money again. She just gave birth to a girl. She now won't be able to work much. She needs money for food and to hire people to work in the fields and cut grass to feed the bull. He says he will try to figure something out.

In the store, Neng receives a call again from Yong. This time, he gets annoyed, rejects the call and turns off the phone. Later he changes his number.



Later, there is a poster pinned outside the convenience store about the Lao singing contest. A big money prize is at stake and a chance to become a Lao superstar. Nouny see the posters and shows it to Neng.

She wants him to join so he can become confident and, if he wins, the prize money will help his family. He refuses at first but decides to take part, eventually.

Neng goes for audition at a TV station. He advances to the final. He chooses a Lao pop song to perform on a live television for the finale. After few practices, Nouny suggests that Neng try a Hmong song. He refuses and is bothered by the suggestion. He is worried that it may put some people off.

Back in the village, Yong carries the baby on her back while feeding the more mature bull. She prepares food for her husband and father. That night, her father gets worse. She wants to take him to the hospital but he says it is no use. He wants to just die in their house. She tries to call her younger brother again and again but can't reach him. She rides a motorbike to another village to get the shaman. By the time she brings him to the house, her father has already passed away.

The following day, some villagers gather at Yong's house, but she is preparing to go somewhere. She asks her neighbors to look after her baby while she is gone. Dressed in Hmong traditional clothing, she travels to a town to catch a bus to Vientiane.

At a provincial bus terminal, people stare at her. Some people ask her if she's not scared of bandits on the way. She doesn't respond. She takes out a piece of paper with Lao words written on it – it's Neng's address in Vientiane.

On the bus, few passengers stare at her. She sits alone, looking frightened and uncertain. She has never been this far from the village before. She keeps vomiting



through the travel. Other passengers glare at her, shake their heads, and cover their noses. She stays awake the entire journey.

She finally arrives in a bus terminal in Vientiane. She slowly gets off the bus. A *Tuk Tuk* (a three-wheel vehicle) driver drags Yong's belongings onto his vehicle with a sign that reads *Dong Dok* (a name of the university in Vientiane). She looks exhausted and perplexed. People ask her a lot of questions but she doesn't respond. She only utters a word "Dong Dok" (where Neng is believed to stay and study) to the driver. Other passengers on the *Tuk Tuk* give her a dirty look. She shows the driver the address. The driver asks her to just get on the *Tuk Tuk*. At this point, other passengers yell at her for not reading the big sign that clearly indicates where *Tuk Tuk* is headed.

After arriving in front of a *Dong Dok* dormitory, she sits there until a group of Hmong students recognize the Hmong clothes that she's wearing and offer to help her. They take her to Neng's dormitory but he is not there. She sits and waits at the balcony. She waits until the nightfall. Finally, Neng arrives. He looks very surprised to see her.

Upon learning about his father's death, Neng is shaken. Yong wants him to return home immediately so the ceremony can commence and their father can be buried, but Neng is still busy with the contest. He has to perform in the final because he has signed the contract with the organizers. If he leaves the show, he will be fined, hugely. Yong has to wait few more days before he can go home. He calls Nouny to ask for a place for his sister to stay temporarily.

The next day, they go shopping to buy new clothes for Neng. Neng is embarrassed by his sister's awkward behavior in public. She can't even take an escalator. Later, he takes her to a restaurant but she can't eat very much. She wants to use a toilet but doesn't dare to ask. He has to ask for her and take her to the toilet. He looks annoyed.

The following day is the final day of the contest. Neng asks Nouny to take his sister to a beauty salon and buy "regular" Lao clothes for her. He requests that Yong not dress in Hmong attire to his show. In the salon, Yong is transformed into a beautiful woman. She can't even recognize herself. Nouny tries to cheer her up and give her a compliment but Yong's eyes still very sad.



Then, Yong receives a call from her husband. He asks her to come home immediately because all her relatives have already arrived in the house for the funeral. Yong asks Nouny to take her to the bus terminal quickly. Nouny wants to take her to see Neng to say goodbye but Yong doesn't want to disturb him while he is preparing for the show. Nouny tries to contact Neng but can't reach him. She is obliged to take Yong to the bus terminal.

Later back stage, Nouny rushes to inform Neng about his sister. She gives him the Hmong clothes that Yong made for him but did not have a chance to give herself. He looks at the clothes and the memories about his sister come back – Yong helped him carry heavy stuff, piggybacked him, made clothes for him. He is snapped back to the present by a loud call from an emcee. He looks reluctant about whether he should leave or continue with the show, then the emcee calls him again to get on stage to perform. When he performs the Lao song, audience starts to giggle. His voice shakes and gets softer and softer. He feels alone on stage. He stops his performance halfway through and rushes off the stage. He and Nouny take a motorbike and rush to the bus terminal in a panic. He searches for his sister everywhere. He approaches a terminal employee and learns that all buses bound for Xiengkhouang (Neng's province) and all northern provinces are not allowed to leave the station tonight due to security concerns. He resumes searching for his sister and finally finds her sleeping in a corner. He pauses, looks at her, and starts to cry.

[END OF FLASHBACK]

A small bus weaves through the corn fields and arrives at the village. Kids flock to see who the arriving passengers are.

Yong walks quickly towards the house while Neng is lagging behind, looking nervous. He sees his house filled with people from afar. Cries and sobs can be heard. An old man calls out to Neng. Later, he is surrounded by old men. One of them is the village chief, **YEALY**. He informs Neng of the funeral procedures and who are responsible for what duties. Since Neng is good at playing 'queej', he is assigned to play it to help guide his father's spirit back to its ancestral home.

Yong is with Yeh and their baby, and surrounded by elder women who try to comfort her. People keep coming to pay tribute to Kaxiong's body for the last time. Later, a group of men gather outside the house. Neng stands before them with Yealy behind him, telling him what to say to the group. Neng thanks them for their time and gracious tributes. He then kneels down in deference to the elders.

Kaxiong's body is carried to a burial site. Neng plays the queej with the other men. The ritual is performed and the body is buried.

After the burial ritual, Neng asks Yealy if a bullfighting match can be organized to honor his father. Yealy approves.

At a school football fields, few bulls are led in for the fight. People gather to watch. Neng leads his bull to the field. He watches the fight and cries while villagers are cheering. His bull chases another bull away and wins the match.

Later, Neng takes his bull to a sacrifice site. The bull is tied to a tree. Neng is told by Yealy that the Hmong believe that the sacrificed animal will lead the deceased on their next journey. A man assigned to slaughter the bull raises an axe and is about to execute it but Neng asks if he can do it. Yealy signals him to go ahead. He pauses and stares at the bull for a while. He closes his eyes before raising the axe and kills the bull.

