

He pulled out a deck of cards from his pocket and asked, "Do you want to play pi lang guy? Like how grandpa plays with Pet Ong and Thom Now?"

A smile formed on Sarn's lips.

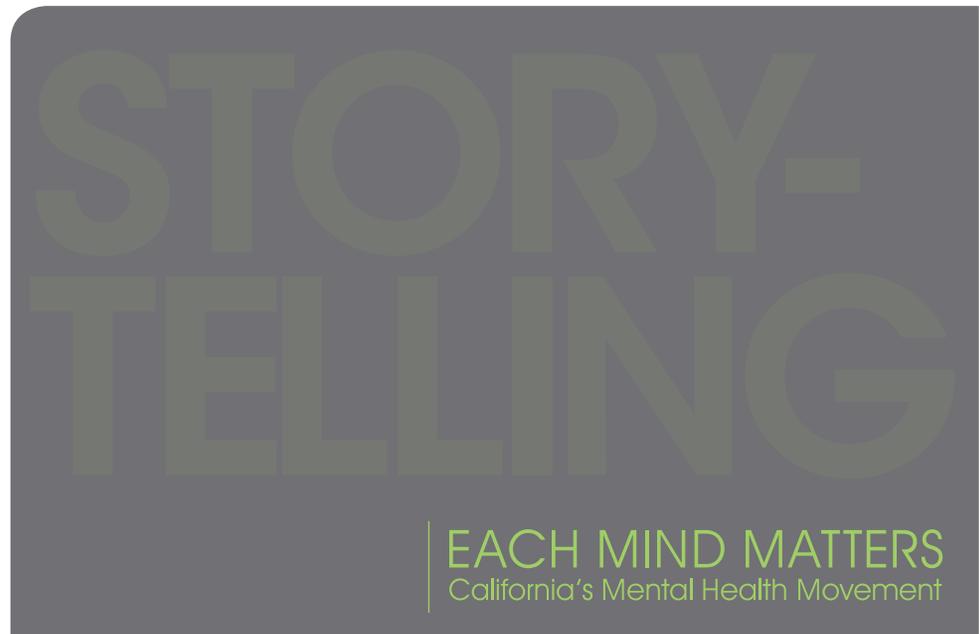
"You know how to play that too?" Sarn asked, surprised. "I thought I was the only kid that knew how to play that!"

"Nope," Nai said, "Get ready to lose all of your money!"

"Not unless I take all of yours first!" Sarn happily said.

After ten rounds of playing, Nai was exhausted from losing. On the other hand, Sarn was laughing jovially as he collected his prize money. Sarn looked at Nai and said, "Thank you for being nice to me even though I took all of your money."

Both boys laughed. Life doesn't suck as much as I thought it did, Sarn thought. Having a mental problem doesn't suck after all. I mean, I beat Nai and took all of his money! Sarn looked out at the window and saw the clouds fade away, letting the sun illuminate the skies.



## JUST LIKE EVERYONE ELSE

by Annabela Saechou

Sarn is a ten-year-old boy living in California with his mother, father, and grandpa. He is the only one in his family suffering with a mental illness, autism to be exact. His parents and grandpa have been and continued trying to find ways to help Sarn live a happier life.

It was a cloudy Sunday morning. Sarn's grandpa called a shaman to dispel all of the evil forces and cure his beloved grandson. This time, his grandpa bought not one but two pigs to sacrifice to the gods. There were lots of relatives present that day. Everyone was doing something to contribute. The men chatted away while butchering meat on wooden boards with giant knives, preparing the meat for the women who would then cook with all different kinds of ingredients serving traditional dishes for everyone after the ceremony. The kids were all inside of the toy room. Sarn's grandpa sought out Sarn's father to ask where Sarn was.



"He needs to get his forehead marked so he can be cured," Sarn's grandpa said.

Sarn's dad immediately started searching for his son. He searched outside, and then he started to search the bedrooms. When he looked in his room, he saw his wife sitting on their bed, crying.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Everything!" Sarn's mom replied, "Everything is wrong. Why do the gods hate us so much? Why isn't Sarn getting better?"

"He is slowly get-"

"This is the tenth time we've done siep-mienh, and nothing happened. He's not getting any better. He's Autistic for crying out loud! He already lost a lot of his muscle tone. He is in pain all of the time. He always has rashes. He gets seizures, and he has sleep problems. Face it, we can't make a difference in his life," Sarn's mom cried.

"Yes we can! We're going to accept him and be there for him every step of the way. He is going to get better! The siep-mienhs might not help him, but I know there are treatments that he can do to get better. We'll schedule an appointment to see his doctor and see what kind of treatments would be right for him. He will get better, trust me. We will all be able to go on trips and he will be the smart and popular boy that everyone likes. Just because he isn't functioning at a satisfactory level emotionally and behaviorally doesn't mean that he will never be able to be mentally healthy," Sarn's dad said. "I have to find Sarn quickly or else dad is going to lecture me in front of all of the relatives!"

"He's in the toy room," Sarn's mom said.

When Sarn's dad went across the hallway to the toy room, he suddenly heard a voice.

"Watch out guys! He's weird. Don't stand next to him or else you will be weird too," a boy's voice said.

Angered, Sarn's dad opened the door and looked at the group of his nieces and nephews huddled around Sarn. Sarn hung his head, looking at the ground. Others may think that Sarn was being rude or didn't care, but actually it's because of his Autism.

"What do you think you are doing?!" Sarn's dad yelled, "Open your eyes and look at Sarn. He is a boy just like you. He has a head and a body like all of you! Just because he isn't mentally healthy, just because he isn't able to do "normal" things like you, he should be different? Because he is not on a sports team and because he is in Special Ed classes, that gives you a reason to make fun of him? Because he has sensory and communication problems, he isn't allowed to have friends? What he needs are friends! He needs to know that he isn't alone."

The group of kids all deserted the room, leaving Sarn and his father alone. Sarn's father wrapped his warm arms around Sarn.

"No one likes me. They all think I'm weird," Sarn cried.

"It's just because they don't know how awesome you are, kiddo! Let's hurry up and go find Ong before he yells at the both of us!" Sarn's dad replied.

After getting his forehead marked, Sarn went back to his room to hide from everyone. He could sense all of the elder relatives staring at him, pitying him as if he was completely helpless. He quickened his pace from the living room to his room, and as he tried to close his door behind him, something blocked the door from closing- a hand. Sarn turned to the door and saw a boy standing there. It was his cousin Nai.

"What do you want?" Sarn asked.

"I want to say sorry. I'm sorry for laughing at you earlier. What Kao said about you seemed right, so I went along with it. But after your dad yelled at us, I realized that you are just like everyone else. I'm sorry," Nai confessed.