

After They Killed Our Father

A Refugee from the Killing Fields
Reunites with the Sister She Left Behind

Loung Ung



Mainstream Publishing *ebooks*



Praise for *After They Killed Our Father*

'I encourage everyone to read this deeply moving and very important book. Equal to the strength of the book is the woman who wrote it. She is a voice for her people and they are lucky to have her'

- Angelina Jolie, Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations
High Commission for Refugees

'This is a strong story simply told. Ung helps us understand what happens when a family is torn apart by politics, adversity and war. Change the names of the characters, give them another country of origin and this story of dislocation becomes a tragedy millions of immigrants have lived through but seldom talk about . . . Ung's story is a compelling and inspirational one that touches universal chords'

- *Washington Post Book World*

'Both stories - Loung's, told in her own voice, and Chou's, narrated in the third person - are inherently fascinating and are recounted with a vividness and immediacy that makes them even more so . . . Written with an engaging vigour and directness, [*After They Killed Our Father*] is an unforgettable portrait of resilience and largeness of spirit'

- *Los Angeles Times*

'At once elegiac and clear-eyed, this moving volume is a tribute to the path not taken'

- *Vogue*

'Honest and eloquent . . . A moving reminder of human resiliency and the power of family bonds'

- *Newsweek*

'Deeply stirring . . . heartbreaking and not less than brilliant'

- *Miami Herald*

'[Ung] captured my heart . . . [*After They Killed Our Father*] is captivating, deep and delightful'

- *Chicago Tribune*

'[*After They Killed Our Father*] is a tender, searing journey of two sisters, two worlds, two destinies. It is about the long-term consequences of war - how it changes everything, annihilates, uproots and separates families. And it is about how humans triumph, building lives wherever they land and finding their way back to each other'

- Eve Ensler, author of *The Vagina Monologues*

'The genocide and subjugation of millions of Cambodians under the Khmer Rouge have been well documented . . . [*After They Killed Our Father*] is a reminder that each of those terrible losses was suffered individually . . . While [Ung] writes convincingly of terror, death and loss - her account of the death of a young cousin in Cambodia is heartbreaking - even more fresh and perceptive are her observations of everyday life. When she looks in the mirror she craves to see her family members, dead and alive, but "we do not have a single picture of them and my face is now the only image I have to remember them by". [A] fiercely honest and affecting memoir'

- *Seattle Times*

'Remarkable . . . [*After They Killed Our Father*] is part adventure, part history and in large part love story about family. The Ungs' tenacity and enduring kindness testify to the very best of human nature. After surviving "the worst kind of inhumanity", the Ungs remain human'

- *Cleveland Plain Dealer*

'Ung brings third and first world disparities into discomfoting focus and gracefully dramatises the metaphorical joining together of her haunted past and her current identity as a privileged Cambodian-American. When the narrative fuses at the sisters' long-awaited reunion, their clasping of hands throws wide the floodgates to tamped-down memories - a cathartic release that readers will gratefully share'

- *Booklist*

'This book is alternately heart-wrenching and heart-warming, as it follows the parallel lives of Loung Ung and her closest sister, Chou, during the fifteen years it took them to reunite'

- *Publishers Weekly*

'Many recent books have told the tale of genocide and survival, but, in [*After They Killed Our Father*], Loung Ung has given us a book as unusual as it is heartbreaking - the story of a family torn in two after genocide . . . Loung has managed to follow *First They Killed My Father* with a book every bit as gripping and important, and she has given us a unique glimpse into America's melting pot - a melting pot born of indescribable suffering but brimming with irrepressible life'

- Samantha Power, author of *A Problem From Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*

'Vivid prose . . . Ung imparts freshness to a fairly familiar immigrant's tale . . . A moving story of transition, transformation and reunion'

- *Kirkus Reviews*

'Loung Ung's [*After They Killed Our Father*] is a rich narrative that explores the ravages of war and the strength

of family bonds . . . Powerful and moving . . . [*After They Killed Our Father*] is far too relevant to our own time'

- Amnesty International

'[*After They Killed Our Father*] is a painful yet lyrical story of the lengths to which one family will go to protect its own. Ung offers a devastating look at the global effects of political oppression. Yet for all the sadness in her personal story, [*After They Killed Our Father*] is also a soaring tale of human spirit'

- *BookPage*

'As piercing and poignant as its title, [*After They Killed Our Father*] is the remarkable account of two sisters divided by history and riven by tragedy, and the journey which made one an American who would not forget her homeland, or the kin she left behind. It is we who are lucky that Loung Ung is such a gifted writer and that she has chosen to share her story'

- Richard North Patterson, author of *Balance of Power*

AFTER THEY KILLED OUR FATHER

A Refugee from the Killing Fields
Reunites with the Sister She Left Behind

Loung Ung



MAINSTREAM
PUBLISHING
EDINBURGH AND LONDON

To the Khmer people - for theirs are not only the voices of war but testimonies of love, family, beauty, humour, strength and courage.

To Ma and Pa, you are my angels. To my sisters Keav and Geak, I will forever remember you. To my brothers Meng, Khouy and Kim, and sister Chou, thank you for inspiring me to live my life with dignity and grace. My deep gratitude to my sister-in-law Eang Tan, who nurtured and raised me, and to Huy-Eng, Morm and Pheng: thank you for a lovely and amazing new generation of Ungs.

Acknowledgements

To Bobby Muller, my boss, mentor and friend: Bruce Springsteen's description of you is right on - you are a 'cool rocking daddy'! To my hero Senator Patrick Leahy, thank you for making this world a better place for all of us. Mark Perry, you are a great teacher. Tim Rieser, you are a true prince. And Emmylou Harris - who not only sings like an angel but has a heart of one - thank you for all your support with VVAF.

To my wonderful agent Gail Ross at Gail Ross Literary Agency, my fantastic editor Gail Winston at HarperCollins, and the talented Christine Walsh and always cool Katherine Hill, thank you for all your support and encouragement. To the super team of George Greenfield and Beth Quitman at Creativewell, Inc., thank you for helping me to spread the word about the Khmer Rouge. Finally, my deep gratitude to the absolutely fabulous Jenna Free - my reader, teacher and cheerleader. There would be no *After They Killed Our Father* without you all.

I am also blessed to have so many amazing people in my life both in Cambodia and America, without whom I would not be who I am today. A special thank you Lynn and Gordon, for giving life to such wonderful people. My love to all of the Priemers, because there is no bad apple in the bunch. To the Costellos, the Lucentis, the Willises, the Aleiskys, the Bunkers, Beverly Knapp, Ellis Severence and all my friends and teachers in Vermont - all of you helped to heal the hate and hurt out of this war child. To my friends

Nicole Bagley, Wendy Appel, Michael Appel, Roberta Baskin, Joanne Moore, Tom Wright, Ly Carbonneau, Beth Poole, Rachel Snyder, Colleen Lanzaretta, Carol Butler, Erin McClintic, Chivy Sok, Kelly Cullins, John Shore, Noel Salwan, Sam McNulty, Paul Heald, Ken Asin, Mike Thornton, Lynn Smith, Jeannie Boone, Jess and Sheri Kraus, Chet Atkins, Terry and Jo-Harvey Allen, Bob Stiller, Youk Chhang, Heidi Randall and many others - you all inspire me to be a better person. To Maria and Tori, I love you infinity. And most of all to my husband Mark - I'm a happier person because you've kept me laughing all these years.

To the wonderful communities at Saint Michael's College and Essex Junction, Vermont - a place where the beauty of the foliage is matched only by the kindness of the people.

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PREFACE

From 1975 to 1979 – through execution, starvation, disease and forced labour – the Khmer Rouge systematically killed an estimated two million Cambodians, almost a fourth of the country's population. Among the victims were my parents, two sisters and many other relatives. *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers* (Mainstream Publishing, 2001) tells the story of survival, my own and my family's. *First* was also born out of my need to tell the world about the Cambodian genocide.

As a child I did not know about the Khmer Rouge, nor did I care anything about them. I was born in 1970 to an upper-middle-class Cambodian-Chinese family in Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia. Until the age of five, my life revolved around my six siblings, school, fried crickets, chicken fights and talking back to my parents. When Pol Pot's communist Khmer Rouge stormed into the city on 17 April 1975, my charmed life came to an end. On that day, Cambodia became a prison and all its citizens prisoners.

Along with millions of other Cambodians, my family was forced to evacuate the city, leaving behind our home and all our belongings. For three years, eight months and twenty-one days, we were made to live in villages more akin to labour camps, where every day was a Monday and every Monday was a workday, no matter if you were six or sixty. Inside our prison, our former life – religion, school, music, clocks, radio, movies and TV – was banned. Rules and laws were enacted to control our travels, friendships and relationships, familial or otherwise. The Khmer Rouge

dictated how we could dress, speak, live, work, sleep and eat.

From dawn until dusk, we dug trenches, built dams and grew crops. As our stomachs ballooned from hunger, the Khmer Rouge soldiers with their guns guarded the fields to prevent us from stealing. No matter how hard we worked, we were never rationed enough food to eat. We were always hungry and on the verge of starvation. To survive, we ate anything that was edible, and many things that should never have been eaten, from rotten leaves and fruits fallen on the ground to the roots we dug up. Rats, turtles and snakes caught in our traps were not wasted, as we ate their brains, tails, hides and blood. If we had free time, we spent it roaming the fields hunting for grasshoppers, beetles and crickets.

The Khmer Rouge government, or Angkar, sought to create a pure utopian agrarian society and to achieve this they believed they had to eliminate threats and traitors, real, perceived or imagined. So the Angkar sent their soldiers out to hunt down former teachers, doctors, lawyers, architects, civil servants, politicians, police officers, singers, actors and other leaders and had them executed en masse. Then they sent more soldiers out, and this time they gathered the wives and children of these traitors. With my father being a former high-ranking military officer, we knew we were not going to remain safe for long.

When the soldiers came for my father, I had already lost my fourteen-year-old sister Keav to food poisoning. As my father walked into the sunset with the soldiers, I did not pray for the gods to spare his life, to help him escape or even to return him to me. I prayed only that his death be quick and painless. I was seven years old. Knowing that we were in danger, my mother sent us away to live in a children's work camp. By the time the soldiers came for her and my four-year old sister Geak, I was done with praying and plunged deep into my rage and hate.

At the age of eight, I was an orphan so lost, hurt and full of rage that I was pulled out of the children's work camp and placed in a child soldier's training camp. While children in other parts of the world went to school to learn and make friends, I was taught to hate and hurt. While others played hide-and-seek with their friends, I was counting under my breath - waiting for the bombs to hit our shelter. The shrapnel from one bomb pierced my girlfriend Pithy's head. I had to brush bits of her brains off my sleeve and shut down my emotions to survive. Even when the bombs were quiet, there were still dangers lurking in the fields, trees and bushes. I was lucky to escape them all - from poisonous snakes, diseases, landmines and bullets to an attempted rape by a Vietnamese soldier. As I struggled to survive on my own, I asked the gods why no one cared.

In *First They Killed My Father*, my war story ended in 1979 with the Vietnamese penetrating Cambodia and defeating the Khmer Rouge army. Slowly afterward, my four surviving siblings and I were reunited and, shortly after that, we made our way back to the village where our family and relatives still lived. Then in 1980, in search of a better future for our family, my brother Meng and his wife Eang decided to make the dangerous journey out of Cambodia to Thailand. Sadly, Meng could borrow enough gold to take only one of his siblings with him - and he chose me because I was the youngest.

When it was time to leave, my extended family stood in the middle of our red dusty village to say their goodbyes. My sister Chou and I held hands in silence. I was ten and she was twelve. Though we were still children, our war-torn hearts were grown and bonded over the deaths of our parents and our other sisters. Kindred spirits, we were each other's best friend, protector and provider.

As Meng pedalled me away on his bicycle, breaking Chou's hold of my hand, I turned my back to her. I knew she would not leave until we were out of her sight. My last

image of Bat Deng was of Chou, her lips quivering and her face crumpled as tears streamed down her cheeks. Her face stayed with me all through the trip to my new world. I swore I would return in five years to see her.

Meng, my sister-in-law Eang and I left behind Chou and my brothers Kim and Khouy for Vietnam, where we joined the thousands of other boat people being smuggled into Thailand. After six months in a refugee camp, we were eventually resettled in Vermont through the sponsorship of the Holy Family Church in Essex Junction.

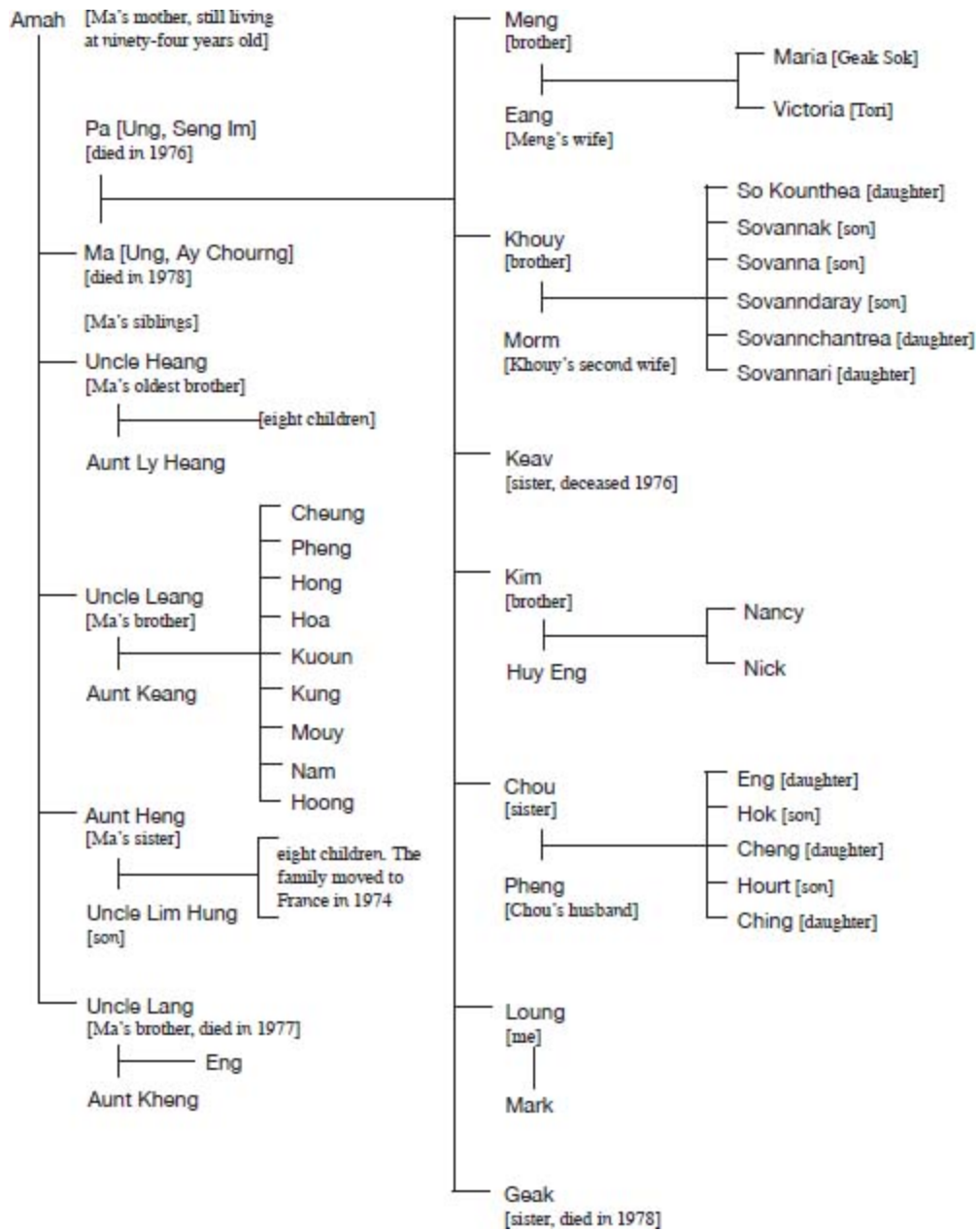
It would be fifteen years before I would be reunited with my sister again in 1995. Fifteen years of her living in a squalid village with no electricity or running water. Fifteen years of me in the US, living the American dream. It is my obsession with these fifteen years that has taken me back to Cambodia over twenty times.

In the years since our first reunion, Chou and I have spent many hours talking and sharing our lives with each other. As we continued to share our joys and sorrows, we decided to write our stories so that future generations of Ungs will know of our love and bonds. As the author, I have had to translate Chou's Khmer and Chinese words to tell her story in English. Admittedly, this involved interpreting not just her words but often their meanings as well. As I was not there to witness Chou's life, this book is my best attempt to piece together her story from our numerous conversations, interviews with family members and neighbours, and our many literal and emotional walks down the memory lanes of our childhoods. The challenges of writing our separate lives into book form were made even more difficult because our memories of events and time wax and wane with each passing moon. In America, I was helped by the many date books, journals, diaries, homework assignments, clocks, calendars and the sources that I kept to mark the passages of my life. In the village, Chou did not possess such items. Instead, time for her flows from one day to another, from

one harvest season to the next, distinguished only by the rising sun, fallen stars and the birth of a new generation of Ungs. And thus I was left with having to give the best 'guesstimate' to the time and events that marked her life. Though inaccuracies in dates and time may exist in this book, the events that touched our lives and people who have healed our hearts are true. Here are our stories: mine as I remember it and Chou's as she told it to me.

After They Killed Our Father begins where *First They Killed My Father* left off and follows both my life in America and Chou's in Cambodia. In telling our stories, *After They Killed Our Father* brings us back to the caring people who went out of their way to find us and to extend a helping hand, whether it was a kind word spoken to me as a child or a morsel of food that sustained Chou for one more day. It has been a pleasure for me to reconnect with many of the people in this book. However, to protect their privacy, I have taken the liberty of changing their names, except for those who chose for me not to. I am thankful to all of them, for all of their efforts and encouragement gave Chou and me the chance not only to survive the war but also to thrive in peace.

The Ung Family Tree



PART I

Worlds Apart

1

Welcome to America

10 June 1980

My excitement is so strong, I feel like there are bugs crawling around in my pants, making me squirm in my seat. We are flying across the ocean to resettle in our new home in America, after having spent two months living in a houseboat in Vietnam and five months in a refugee camp in Thailand.

‘We must make a good impression, Loung, so comb your hair and clean your face,’ Eang orders me as the plane’s engine drones out her voice. ‘We don’t want to look as if we’ve just gotten off the boat.’ Her face looms in front of me, her nails working furiously in their attempts to pick crusty sleepy seeds out of the corners of my eyes.

‘Stop, you’re pulling out my eyelashes! I’ll clean my own face before you blind me.’ I take the wet rag from Eang’s hand.

I quickly wipe my face and wet the cruds on my lids before gently removing them. Then I turn the rag over to the clean side and smooth down my hair as Eang looks on disapprovingly. Ignoring her scowl, I ball up the rag, run it over my front teeth and scrub hard. When I’m finished, I wrap the rag around my pointing finger, put it in my mouth and proceed to scrape food residue off my back teeth.

'All finished and clean,' I chime innocently.

'I do have a toothbrush for you in my bag.' Her anger is barely contained in her voice.

'There just wasn't time . . . and you said you wanted me clean.'

'Humph.'

Eang has been my sister-in-law for a year and generally I don't mind her, but I just can't stand it when she tells me what to do. Unfortunately for me, Eang likes to tell me what to do a lot, so we end up fighting all the time. Like two monkeys, we make so much noise when we fight that my brother Meng has to step in and tell us to shut up. After he intervenes, I usually stomp off somewhere by myself to sulk over how unfair it is that he takes her side. From my hiding place, I listen as she continues to argue with him about how they need to raise me with discipline and show me who has the upper hand or I'll grow up wrong. At first, I didn't understand what she meant by 'wrong' and imagined I would grow up crooked or twisted like some old tree trunk. I pictured my arms and legs all gnarly, with giant sharp claws replacing my fingers and toes. I imagined chasing after Eang and other people I didn't like, my claws snapping at their behinds.

But no, that would be too much fun and, besides, Eang is bent on raising me 'right'. To create a 'right' Loung, Eang tells Meng, they will have to kick out the tomboy and teach me the manners of a proper young lady, which means no talking back to adults, fighting, screaming, running around, eating with my mouth open, playing in skirts, talking to boys, laughing out loud, dancing for no reason, sitting Buddha-style, sleeping with my legs splayed apart - the list goes on and on. And then there is the other list of what a proper girl is supposed to do, which includes sitting quietly, cooking, cleaning, sewing and babysitting - all of which I have absolutely no interest in doing.

I admit I wouldn't fight Eang so hard if she followed her own list. At twenty-four, Eang is one year older than Meng. This little fact caused quite a stir when they married a year ago in our village in Cambodia. It also doesn't help that Eang is very loud and outspoken. Even at my age, I'd noticed that many unmarried women in the village would act like little fluttering yellow chicks, quiet, soft, furry and cute. But once married, they'd become fierce mother hens, squawking and squeaking about with their wings spread out and their beaks pecking, especially when marking their territory or protecting their children. Eang, with her loudness and strong opinions, was unlike any unmarried woman I'd ever spied on. The other villagers gossiped that Meng should marry a young wife who could give him many sons. At her advanced age, Eang was already thought of as a spinster and too old for Meng, a well-educated and handsome man from a respected family. But neither one cared too much for what the villagers said and allowed our aunts and uncles to arrange their marriage. Meng needed a wife to help him care for his siblings and Eang needed a husband to help her survive the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge war, Cambodia's poverty and increasing banditries. And even though they got married because of those needs, I do think they love each other. Like the two sides of the ying and yang symbol, together they form a nice circle. Whereas Meng is normally reserved and quiet, Eang makes him laugh and talk. And when Eang gets too emotional and crazy, Meng calms and steadies her.

'Thank you for the rag,' I smile sweetly, handing it back to Eang.

'Did you see what she did, Meng?' Eang crunches her face in disgust as she rolls up the wet rag and puts it in her bag. On my other side, Meng is quiet as he pulls a white shirt from a clear plastic bag and hands it over to his wife. The shirt gleams in Eang's hands, crisp and new. When Meng found out we were coming to America, he took all the

money we had and bought us all new white shirts. He wanted us to enter America looking fresh and unused despite our scraggy hair and thin limbs. Eang kept the shirts in a plastic bag so they would stay fresh and unwrinkled for this very special occasion.

At twenty-three, Meng wears a sombre expression that makes him look many years older. The Meng I remember from before the war was gentle, with a ready smile and an easygoing manner. This new Meng seems to have left his sense of humour in Cambodia when we waved goodbye to Chou, Kim and Khouy nine months ago. Now, only deep sighs escape his lips. At the refugee camp, there were many times when I was in our hut, lost in my world of words and picture books, when suddenly I would hear this long intake of breath, followed by a rushing exhale. I knew then that Meng was hovering somewhere nearby and I would turn to find him looking at me with his long face and sagging shoulders.

When I ask Meng why we had to leave our family behind, he sighs and tells me I'm too young to understand. My face burns red by his put-offs. I may be too young to understand many things, but I am old enough to miss Khouy's voice threatening to kick anyone's bottom who dares mess with his family. No matter how far we leave them behind, I still miss Chou's hand clasped warmly in mine, and Kim's fingers scratching his ribs in manic imitation of a monkey, kung fu style. I am young, but sometimes when I would float alone in the ocean near the refugee camp, I'd feel old and tired. I'd sink to the bottom of the ocean, staring up at Ma, Geak and Keav's faces shimmering on the water's surface. Other times, as I bobbed up and down, I'd imagine my tears being carried by the waves into the deep sea. In the middle of the ocean, my tears would transform into anger and hate, and the ocean would return them to me, crashing them against the rocky shoreline with vengeance.

At night at the refugee camp, I would gaze at the full moon and try to bring forth Pa's face. I'd whisper his name into the wind and see him as he was before the war, when his face was still round and his eyes flashed brightly like the stars. With my arms around myself, I'd dream of Pa holding me, his body full and soft and healthy. I'd imagine his fingers caressing my hair and cheeks, his touch as gentle as the breeze. But before long, Pa's face would wither away until he was only a skeleton of his former moon-self.

If Meng also could see Pa's face in the moon, he didn't tell me. I don't know how or when it started, but Meng and I somehow have found ourselves in a place where we don't talk about the war anymore. It's not as though we sat down one day and decided not to talk about it; it happened so gradually we barely noticed it. At first he asked me questions I was not ready to answer and I would ask him for answers he could not explain, until eventually the questions and talking just stopped. There are times that I still want him to tell me more about Pa and Ma and what kinds of people they were before I was born. But I do not ask because I cannot bear to watch his face light up at the memory of them, only to see it dim and darken when he remembers they are no longer with us.

When Meng and I do talk, we speak about our present and future. Of my past, Meng says only that he thinks I am ten years old, but he is not sure. He shares that when he was a boy, Pa and Ma were so poor that they sent him to live with our aunts and uncles in the village. He says that each time he visited home, there was another little brother or sister to greet him until in the end there were seven of us. He tells me that what papers or records we had of our births, the Khmer Rouge destroyed when they entered the city on 17 April 1975. Without the papers, Ma and Pa were our only memories of our entrance into the world but now they're gone, too. In Thailand, when Meng was required to pick a new birthday for me in order to fill out the refugee papers,

he chose 17 April – the day the Khmer Rouge took over the country. With a few strokes of his pen, he made sure I will never forget Cambodia.

In the time that I've lived with Meng and Eang, it is clear to me that Meng's thoughts are always focused on Cambodia and our family there. We have no way to send or receive word, so we do not know if Khouy, Kim and Chou are still with us. In the Ung clan, Pa was the first-born son in his family, and since Meng was Pa's first-born son, he now holds the title role not only as the head of our family but also as the eldest brother to all the Ungs of our generation. Meng wears this title with pride and constantly worries about the well-being of the younger Ungs and how he can be a good role model. Before leaving Cambodia, Meng painted a bright picture of our future to our aunts and uncles to justify our leaving for America. Once en route and on the boat, however, Meng's eyes brimmed with tears and his face fell.

On the plane, I climb on my seat and turn around to wave at my friend Li Cho, seated a few rows behind me. Only a year younger than me, Li is part of the seven-person Cho family also on their way to make a home in Vermont. Because Meng and Eang mostly kept to themselves at the Lam Sing Refugee Camp, they did not know the Chos before today. However, Li and I met the first night I arrived there. Behind the walled prison fence of the refugee camp and in the midst of the porous thatched-roof huts, Li and I explored our temporary homes together and became friends. We shared our secrets by the ocean while spying on grown-up women and making fun of their large breasts. Li told me she was born in Cambodia to a Chinese father and a Vietnamese mother. Her mother and her father passed away when Li was young and now she lives with her adult brothers, sisters and nephews. Fully clothed and with our sweaty hands clasped tightly together, Li and I would run into the ocean and talk about how much we wished we could buy a bottle of Coke and a bowl of noodles. I would tell her about how

my father would hold my fried crickets for me at the movies, and she would tell me how her father used to read to her.

As the plane rocks and sways, Li looks green from motion sickness. Li's small body slumps over in her seat as her sister Tee pats her fine black hair. Even in sickness, Li is pretty with her large eyes and a small chin. Watching her, I remember a time when I thought I was pretty, too. It seems unreal that only five years ago in Phnom Penh, Ma and her friends would coo and pinch my cheeks when I entered the room wearing a new dress or a bow in my hair. They would comment on my full lips, large almond eyes and wavy hair. To this, I'd smile and extend my hands until they emptied their purses of candies and money, before Ma shooed me away.

I turn back to look at Li. 'Poor Li,' I think. She has been sick and throwing up the entire plane trip. Awake, she is a sweet and mild-mannered girl, exactly the kind of girl Eang wishes I would be. With that thought, I sit down in my seat and open another bag of peanuts. Though Li cannot keep her food down, my stomach has no such trouble and like a good friend, I happily volunteer to eat her food.

As our plane begins its descent, the soft fluffy clouds part and open the world below to me. I lean over Meng to peer out the window and catch my first glimpse of my new home. Scanning the land, I am disappointed to see only mountains, trees and water. I guess we are still too high up to see the tall shiny buildings. My hands grip the armrest tightly and I daydream about the America I hope I'm going to. In their attempts to prepare us for life in the USA, the refugee workers would show us Hollywood movies, where each plot took place in a large, noisy city with big, long cars racing down crowded streets. On the big screen, Americans are loud-talking, fast-moving people with red, blond, brown or black hair, weaving in and out of traffic wearing heels or roller-skates. In my seat, I imagine myself walking among these people and living an exciting new life far from

Cambodia. These images set my heart racing with anticipation until Eang's nagging voice brings me out of my reverie. Eang brushes her hand over the front of my shirt and complains about the falling crumbs. Meng hurriedly primps his hair with a small black plastic comb just as the captain announces we are landing.

On the ground, my hands lock in Meng and Eang's, and we enter the airport lobby to bursts of flashes and loud whispers. Bright lights blind and scare me, and I lose contact with Li as she and her family are swallowed up by the crowd. With white spots swimming in my retinas, I shield my eyes with my forearm and take a step backward. The room falls silent as the throngs of pale strangers shift their feet and strain their necks to take their first peek at us. From behind Meng, I focus on one woman whose long white neck reminds me of a defrocked chicken, all skinny and leathery. Next to her, another woman stares at us from a face so sharp and angular that I name her 'chicken face'. Behind 'chicken face' stands a man with round cheeks and a big nose whom I identify as 'pig cheeks'. Surrounding them are more people I can only distinguish with my special nicknames: lizard nose, rabbit eyes, horse teeth, cow lips and cricket legs.

'Welcome!' a man calls out and walks toward us. His body is sturdy like a tree trunk and he towers one head taller than Meng as they shake hands.

After him, one tall person after another gathers around us. Making use of his English classes in Phnom Penh before the war, Meng smiles widely and answers questions as he pumps everyone's hand with vigour and energy. Standing beside him, Eang takes people's hands limply and nods her head. Not wanting to be crushed, I step out of the crowd and stand alone until a red-haired woman walks up to me. Remembering to show her my respect, I bow to greet her; at the same moment, she extends her hand and hits me

square on the forehead. The cameras stop flashing and the room grows quiet as I stand there rubbing my forehead. From his corner, I hear Meng laugh and assure everyone I'm OK. A few seconds later, the room erupts into laughter. Instead of casting my eyes on the floor, I stare at the crowd with anger until Eang tells me to smile. Weakly, I curl my lips upward for the crowd. Suddenly, the red-haired lady steps forward again and hands me a brown teddy bear as more cameras flash to capture the moment. In that instant, I realise that I've buttoned my shirt wrong, leaving my white shirttail jagged and crooked, and me looking like I've just got off the boat.

In the car, Meng talks with our sponsors, Michael and Cindy Vicenti. As Meng speaks, Michael nods his head while Cindy answers with a series of 'uh-huhs'. Behind her, I stifle a laugh at her silly sound and pretend to cough. Sensing Eang's warning eyes burning the back of my head, I stare out the window and watch the world go by. Outside, the scenery moves at a slow speed as short grass is replaced by thick shrubs and trees. Every once in a while, the rolling hills are dotted with small houses and running dogs. There are no tall shiny buildings in sight.

After twenty minutes, the Vicentis pull their car into the driveway of a small, two-storey apartment building. The building looks old and dreary with white paint flaking off its front like dead skin. And right next to it, on the other side of the driveway, is a large cemetery where, inside, the summer wind blows gently on the trees and makes the branches sway and the leaves dance as if possessed by spirits. My skin warms at the sight of the cold grey stones jutting out from the earth like jagged teeth. Beneath the stones, I imagine decomposed bodies trapped in dirt, waiting for nightfall before they can escape.

'You're home,' the Vicentis announce.

Meng tells Eang and me to get out of the car as I direct a steely gaze at the back of Michael's head.

'Eang,' I grab her hand, 'it's bad luck to live next to a cemetery. The ghosts will not leave us alone!'

'The ghosts here cannot speak Khmer,' she says. 'They'll make no trouble for us.'

'But . . .' I refuse to give up. 'What if there is a common language all the dead use?' Before I can continue, Eang orders me to be quiet and motions for me to hurry. Glancing back tentatively at the cemetery, I slowly follow the adults into the apartment.

The Vicentis climb the stairs to the second-storey apartment and wait for Meng, Eang and me to catch up. While the adults talk, I take in the layout of our apartment. With rooms connecting in a long row, our new home feels like a train, and its narrow rooms look like boxcars. To the left of the stairs, Meng and Eang's room resembles a square tan box furnished with a simple wood dresser and a queen-sized bed. Walking up to its one window, I am glad to see that it faces the parking lot. To the right of the stairs, the kitchen is filled with all the modern amenities - a stove, oven and refrigerator. In the middle of the room sit a small metal rectangular table and four matching chairs. Next to the kitchen, the bathroom is clean from the top of its ceiling to the white-yellow linoleum tiled floor. A few steps forward take me into the dining room.

'This will be your room,' Cindy tells me cheerily.

With my hands clasped together in front of me, I turn in a full circle to inspect my room. A frown forms on my face when I notice that the walls are not made of actual wood but a glued-on brown paper designed to look like fake wood. I have never seen such wall coverings before and reach out to slide my hand over its slippery surface. Suddenly I think of Chou living in a wooden hut in Cambodia. In an instant, I feel heavy and drag myself to the corner of the room where there is a small walk-in closet. Though I spy hinges on the

frame, for some reason there is no door for the closet. My room is empty except for a small twin bed against the wall. I walk over and sit on the bed, testing its bounce with my weight while gazing quizzically at the drawings on my sheet. The drawings appear to be of girl and boy mice, ducks, dogs, elephants and other animals, each playing or holding a musical instrument. All the characters are dressed in red, white and blue costumes and are smiling broadly. Covering my mouth with my hands, I giggle at the animals.

'Those are cartoon characters,' Cindy offers. 'See, they're at a circus.'

'*Gao-ut taa ay?*' I ask Meng what she says.

With Meng as our interpreter, Cindy then goes on to tell me their names and that they belong to the Disney family. Tracing my finger over the mouse's large round ears and the duck's protruding fat beak, I smile and think what fun it would be to belong to such a family. When I imagine myself dancing and playing with these funny creatures, my insides swirl and unexpectedly giggles burst forth out of my mouth. As another chortle breaks to the surface, I think of Chou, who always thought it was silly that I remember people by giving them animal names and characteristics. I wish Chou were here with me so I could show her this great new world where animals do look like people.

I get off my bed, cross my room and enter through another large doorway into the living room. With its three bay windows, the living room is bright and attractive. Filling up the space is a couch and chair set, both covered in tropical floral prints. Standing in front of the middle window, I flatten my hands on the glass and stare at the traffic below before heading back to my room. It occurs to me that, with no doors separating my room from the kitchen or the living room, there will be no sleeping in late for me with early riser Eang. I drop my shoulders in resignation and walk back to my room, then cringe at what I see - my window looks directly onto the cemetery.

'I am home,' I whisper. I have travelled so very far and for so long to reach America and now the journey is over! I close my eyes and breathe a sigh of relief, expecting feelings of calm and contentment to flow into my body.

'I'm home!' I tell myself urgently, but the world remains strange to me.

I lie in bed with my arms wrapped around my belly and glance out the window at the dark sky. Outside, the wind sleeps and the air travels quietly as if they, too, are afraid to disturb the spirits. It is a silence that I find unnatural; in Cambodia, night is always accompanied by the shrill mating songs of crickets. I turn my face to the wall and pull the blanket over my head. Eyes closed, I wait for sleep to come and make me unconscious until the time when the living can reclaim the world. But instead of sleep, the mouse and the duck dance on my sheets in their full circus regalia and top hats. Beside them, their female counterparts twirl their batons and parade to tunes I cannot hear. Soon the other Disney family characters begin to come to life, but I blink them away and force them back into the cloth.

The clock on the wall says it's 11 p.m. This is bad news. It is now close to the dark hours - the hours when spirits and ghosts roam the world and walk among the living. A long time ago, Kim told me never to be awake from 12 a.m. to 5 a.m., but I couldn't help it. He warned that if I needed to pee, then I should do my business quickly and quietly and get back to bed. He said the more noise or movements I made, the more I would attract the spirits and ghosts. And once that happens, they won't let me go. Kim didn't tell me what he meant by the ghosts not letting me go. He never finished his story but preferred to let the ending form a life of its own in my mind. I used to get so mad at him for this that I would chase him, my arms swinging karate chops at him. Thinking about Kim makes my heart feel tight, as if too many things are being pushed into it.