

A TRUE STORY OF SURVIVAL, BRAVERY, AND ESCAPE
FROM THE CAMBODIAN GENOCIDE

under the naga tail

MAE BUNSENG TAING

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First Edition

*To Eng Ngo Taing and Roberta Alice Dow,
the greatest and grandest mothers of all time.*



Preface

JAMES TAING

My conviction to write my father's story began after a trip to his former homeland of Cambodia. I was studying abroad in Singapore, but there amid the island's westernized Asian shopping centers and sparkling glass buildings, I felt burdened by my recent experiences in Cambodia, and doubly burdened by the knowledge of what that country used to be. At one time, Cambodia was far ahead of Singapore in its state of advancement.

Then the devastations of civil war began in 1968.

I thought about what my Cambodian father and the country of Cambodia itself could have become if genocide had not consumed the nation. It was perpetrated at the hands of a megalomaniac named Pol Pot, the Cambodian "leader" who inflicted mass murders on his own people. He was especially hard on those who wore eyeglasses; it mattered not whether glasses indicated inferior eyesight or brainy intellectualism, he objected to both conditions. In the name of social transformation, he also targeted students, intellectuals, teachers, writers, artists, businessmen, lawyers, and doctors.

Anyone who might be guilty of independent thought.

My father was a teenager when he was swept up in all this. In the years since his escape, he locked away many traumatic memories. Growing up in his household, I learned small bits and pieces of this story, but it was only enough to spark a deep need to know more about the man who raised me. Finally, after years of pestering from me, he began to tell me how it all happened.

When I shared his stories with friends, they were awestruck by the depth of determination behind his struggle to escape tyranny from that murderous regime. It brought them closer to grasping the sheer scale of senseless brutality, meaningless suffering, and unimaginable death within that country.

However, every time I told of his long journey, I came away dissatisfied. It felt hollow for me to allow such experiences to be confined to a fleeting conversation. I knew the ephemeral nature of memory doomed this story to be forgotten. What if my father or our family members could no longer tell it? After all, I knew the value of the stories to me, my other family members, and close friends who heard them. Forgetting those accounts would have bankrupted me of the ability to be shaped and inspired by them.

That same collective memory is available to many others, if they are given the chance to absorb the knowledge. As Elie Wiesel put it regarding the Jewish Holocaust, giving up the responsibility to remember would be to consign the victims to a second death, this time from the collective memory of society. It would be a denial of reality, as if all those inexcusable crimes never happened. As if the element of human nature which allowed them to occur had left us.

And so, if this pattern of collective forgetting repeated itself, would I be partly responsible because I had been silent? It was a challenge to my personal character.

If I did not care, how could I expect caring from anyone else?

Thus my passion for this story, a deep need to offer something vital to the world. The story provides an inspiration to thrive in our current lives, and to boldly recognize that every one of us bears the power of an indomitable human will. In each of us exists a spirit that can break free from the imprisonment of fear and hurt; a tenacity to overcome whatever hardships are given.

These memories are living things, because the dark side of human nature behind them has not changed. Any look at your daily news will confirm that. The common thread between everyone in this story and the rest of us is our shared human nature, in both its light and dark forms.

This story, told in my father's voice, is an appeal to the better angels of our nature. My desire is for it to strengthen you, as it has me, against the darker demons we all carry and the darker times many of us will face.



Sihong – eldest child and woman of the family. She was a shrewd businesswoman and owned a small delivery service that carried their clients' packages from Thailand to Cambodia.

Sihun – second-eldest child; and married her husband Wensun in 1966. In the early days of their marriage they sold items such as candy and canned goods before they had enough to build a house of their own.

Tai – third born and eldest son. He once saved enough to start a cigarette venture with two of his other friends, and at one point customers made the long trip to Poipet for their cigarette brand.

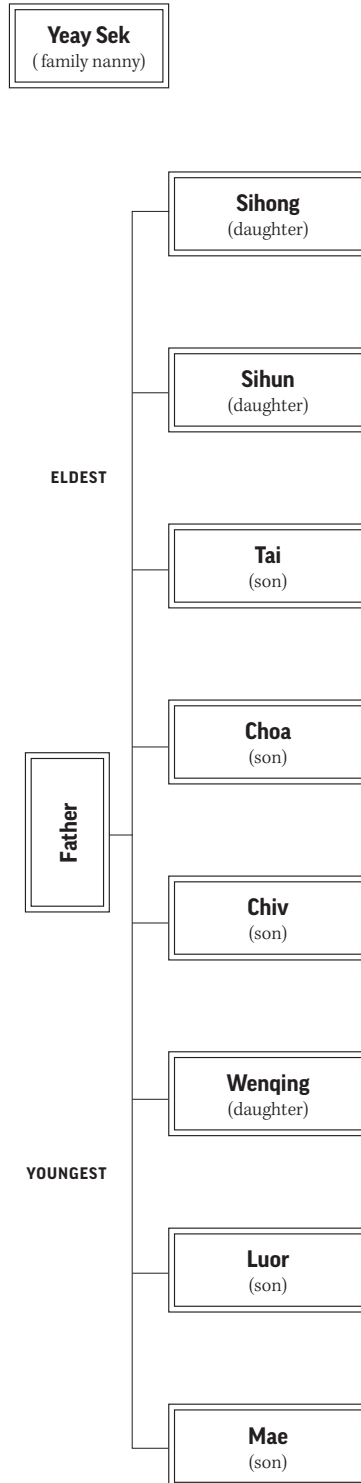
Choa – younger twin brother of Tai, but resemblance ended there. Unlike Tai, who always kept his eyes out for his next business idea, Choa enjoyed an easier pace of life driving a taxi cab and spending time with friends.

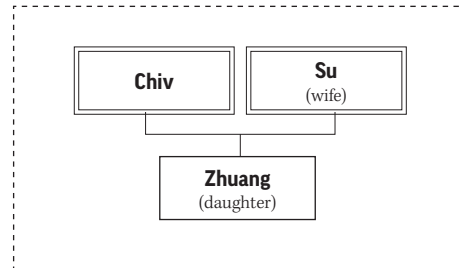
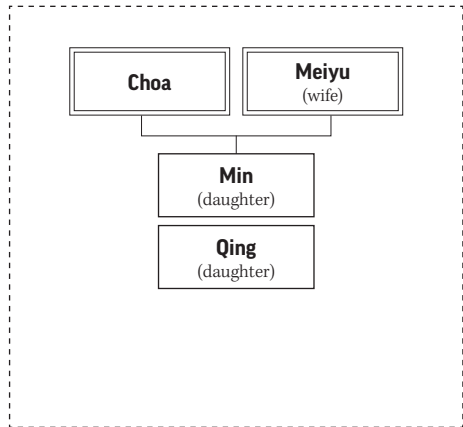
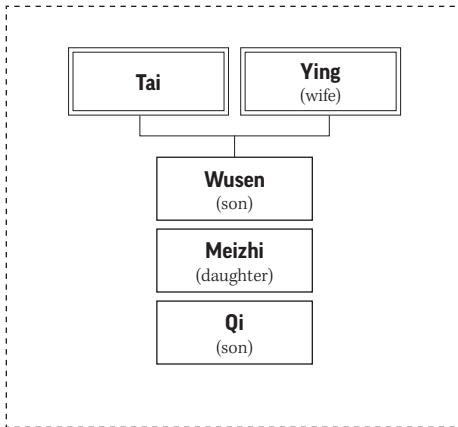
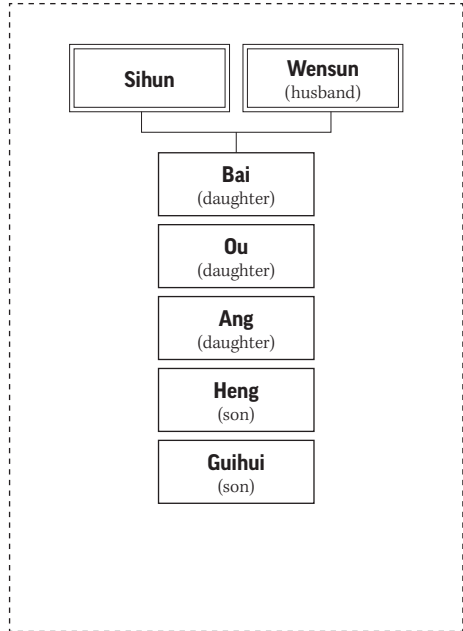
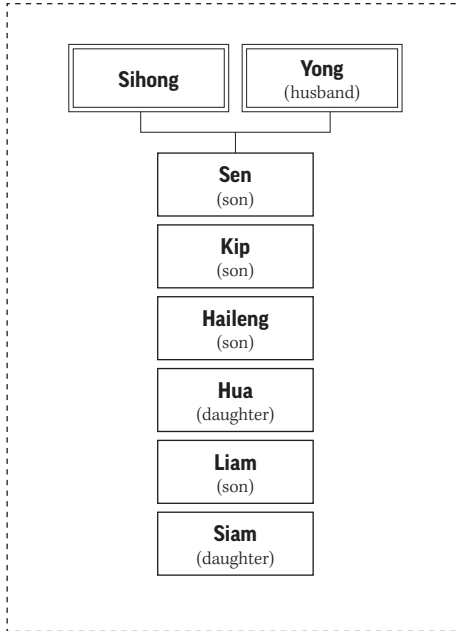
Chiv – the third-eldest son, he had many friends who joined the freedom fighters in the civil war. He sympathized the most with their struggle to restore the king's power and authority, as much of Cambodia did. He sold freshly hatched baby ducks for a living; married his wife in 1970.

Wenqing – the sixth child and third daughter, who fondly enjoyed sewing at home more than anything else.

Luor – the seventh child of the family and fourth son. He worked with Sihong in her parcel-delivery business.

Mae – the youngest of eight and fifth son.







Author's Note

Nagas are legendary multi-headed serpents that control the rains, and therefore are symbolically the guardians of prosperity and treasures in the Kingdom of the Cambodians. Cambodians say that they are “Born from the Naga,” descendants of this divine bloodline, tapping into the spirit that irrigates the rivers and seas, alongside the rainbows that bridge earth to heaven. They hold the key to the crossing from the world of man into the abode of the gods.

Nagas mostly live in the deepest underworld, far under the land, and therefore in some tellings if Nagas are not treated with reverence, they are believed to bring about natural catastrophe in the form of floods, famine, and even drought.

This power to bring calamity is depicted in a popular mythology, Samudra Manthana, one of the more central Hindu stories that is carved into the famous ancient Cambodian temples of Angkor Wat and Preah Vihear. According to the legend, a pact is formed at the beginning of the universe between the gods and the demons to obtain the nectar of immortality. In order to do so, Vasuki, the King of the

Nagas, is enlisted to be used as a rope to extract the Water of Life from the seas. However, as the gods pull from the tail and demons pull from his head, mishap occurs that jeopardizes all of creation. The enormously long Vasuki spews forth a terrible choking poison, Halahala, that begins to contaminate the ocean beneath him. If it had not been for the act of a prominent god to valiantly drink up the flood of venom himself, disaster would have engulfed the world of the gods and humans underneath the Naga.

In the aftermath, the gods and demons were able to work together again and use the gigantic Vasuki to retrieve from the cosmic oceans fourteen impressive treasures, including a cow of plenty; celestial dancers called *apsara*; *Kalpavriksha*, the wish-fulfilling tree; and the hard-sought *amrita*, the elixir of immortality. Also born out of this so-called churning primeval ocean was the moon, immediately nearly blinding the gods with his bright, glittering body. This mystical god rode wondrously on his lunar chariot across the night skies.

From this point on, the creation of the moon blessed humanity with magical light to traverse the dark.





PART I



Red Thunder



PART I – RED THUNDER

- | | | |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| A Roka Kaong | E Tuol Krasaing | I Sisophon |
| B Poipet | F Phnom Kamping Puoy | 5 National Highway 5 |
| C Koub Touch | G Captured by the Khmer Rouge | |
| D Nikom Kandal and Chrouy Sdau | H Concentration Camp | |

Chapter 1

Apollo

MAE TAING

Apollo was there. I pretended that if I looked closely enough, I could see its wobbling shadow roving on the moon. The moon shone bright like burning silver, and its uneven surface was brittle and speckled. I had a hard time seeing how the moon had been touched by human hands.

It was inconceivable for the Cambodian people, too, as they had long worshipped the moon. In our culture, the moon was Heaven's most adored lantern, largest and brightest, floating high in the black curtain of the skies. Apollo had to be a big bullet, carrying wingless pilots and riders, shot upward in the air—in the riot of lit fireworks.

I was an eleven-year-old Chinese Cambodian boy on the day the Apollo mission successfully landed astronauts on the moon. I had first learned about the Apollo rocket program in class, which was unusual because my schooling was mostly devoted to math and Chinese. Father had enrolled me in Mandarin Language School where there was no science, history, or art; just Mandarin. He was strict in

keeping our mother tongue alive in us, and we were not allowed to speak Khmer at home.

At school, the mandatory uniform was knee-length blue trousers, bright white short-sleeved shirts, and Maoist pins, which were prominently displayed on our uniforms.

My teacher was a tall, pretty woman with beautiful black hair and a youthful voice. Yet even as a teacher she was more stuck on her own interests than on caring for the needs of her students.

We students had to stand behind our desks each morning before class to recite from the Red Book, *The Quotations of Mao Zedong*. Our teacher was born of a Chinese family, as I was, but she was also passionate about Mao, requiring us to carry his book anyplace we went. For encouragement, we were assured that if we closely followed Mao's teachings, we could be granted the prestigious privilege of wearing a red band and a red Communist Pioneer tie over our collar. This gave one lucky recipient the responsibility of watching over his classmates during recess and policing the walking lines to and from class.

Teacher protested about the unfairness in America, claiming they enslaved Blacks to labor for the Whites, that the country and its people always trampled on the poor, and that their government allowed for corrupt gambling wagers on whether a person lives or dies. They call it "insurance," she told us, and the rich sell it to the poor.

"The rich live above the ground," she declared. "The poor live underneath the ground. But Mao is fair and just. He wants people to live equally. No rich or poor. No social oppressors or classes. Everyone shall be the same."

She proceeded to ask us to commit everything to Chairman Mao.

"One thousand years! One thousand years for Mao Zedong!!" I rehearsed with the class.

"Be a good soldier!" we sang in Mandarin. "Fight with the

Americans. Devote your mind! Sacrifice your life! Don't be afraid of the Americans! They are only paper tigers!"

Yet in class, when I recited curses and blasphemies against America, my heart did not truly hate the country. I thought, *How can I hate an entire country without even knowing where it is?* I never saw it, or any American people. The fact was, deep down, I admired America. It was the only country to accomplish reaching the moon. And from the day the Americans landed there, my imagination had run wild with wonder and marvel.

For countless generations, the moon was a deity associated with an ample harvest for plants and crops and therefore of high reverence to Cambodians. After news of the Apollo 11 landing was proclaimed with a single radio declaration, Cambodians worshipped the moon with greater intensity, erecting incense shrines outside their huts and placing second offerings of fruits and moon-shaped cakes in the evening fields. The eternal moon was nearer to them. They could almost hold it in their hands and feel it with their hearts.

Vendors began selling white T-shirts with the Apollo 11 spaceship printed on the front—one with Apollo 11, shaped as a bullet, standing upright in flight, and another with a man in a white space suit. The vendors sold out at a record pace with each restock, as every single kid in town wanted Apollo space T-shirts. I wore mine everywhere, even beneath my uniform when I went to school.

* * *

Consumed by wanderlust, I often thought of Apollo and all the other places to visit after the moon. *How long would it take to sail to the edge of the sun? What would it be like to peer into a diamond star?* I even pictured myself riding my own silver bullet to the sun. Life seemed

limitless. At the time, I had yet to even experience what it was like to sit in a plane.

At the time of the moon landing, these stirring daydreams lingered even stronger. Apollo seemed to me to signal a certain newness was arriving with this next generation. That intuition became more potent once I heard my family decided to make a move to a new province.

The civil war between Lon Nol's army and the so-called freedom fighters had affected our family business in Roka Kaong, so we moved to be with my eldest sister, Sihong. She lived in Poipet, Cambodia's most northwestern city. Given the distance, Poipet's economy was well outside the fighting.

Cambodia stood in a delicate balance. It was hard to believe how fragile the scales were between peace and war.

Revolution was on its way.

* * *

Although I had known since I was little that I was meant to do business like the rest of my sisters and brothers, there was an incident when I was sixteen in Poipet that taught me that the ways of running a shop would soon change dramatically because of the civil war.

Three weeks into the month of February 1975, someone shouted, "Hurry up! The guards are here!" Border guards were coming to confiscate our merchandise. They did this from time to time, since some of our items were sold without paying border tariffs. Immediately, the entire street was in a frenzy, with shopkeepers taking down their storefront awnings and hiding their wares. I pushed all the full crates into the back of my home and when I came back out, a Lon Nol soldier appeared in front of the store.

He wore the conventional outfit of a soldier: a bill cap, a khaki green

jacket with the sleeves rolled up, and an insignia patch on his arm. He looked at me coldly and said, "I need sixty ten-kilo bags of sugar. I cannot take it myself. You will need to bring it to the train for me." It was a wildly large demand, the equivalent of 1,320 pounds of sugar. The most I had ever sold was fifty bags.

"I need sugar, sixty bags," he said again.

"I will only do thirty bags," I countered. Although I would have rather not done any business with him at all, I had a lot of sugar left over. In the past few weeks, the civil war had affected the number of customers who came to Poipet by train, and rats were eating into my sitting inventory.

He looked slighted, but he agreed and reassured me he would pay once I brought it all to the train. He departed toward the station, an M16 assault rifle slung over his back. Since he was armed, I followed through on his demand.

My helper, Kane, drew up his rickshaw, and we loaded the carriage with thirty bags before we drove to the station. There, we turned into the circular entryway and parked right in front of the two-story building, below the station's big wall-mounted clock.

The soldier already stood in the third freight car before the end of the train, and he gave a signal to the both of us. I hauled three bags, heavy as lead, and handed each off to the soldier. Each bag must have been only a few pounds below my weight, which was the most I could carry. Passengers filed past us, piling into rust-colored cars. Kane and I made five trips, back and forth, hefting each bag to the soldier. When the whistle blared, Kane handed me the last of the bags for the soldier.

"Sir, that is all of them," I told him. "Now you have to pay me." The soldier took the bags and turned his back to me, piling and ordering the packages. His strapped pistol jiggled up and down with his waist.

“I might not have enough money on me,” he said weakly. “I can come tomorrow and pay you.”

“Pay me now!” I was furious. “We had an agreement!” The passengers on the roof all looked at me in one motion. “You said you would pay me once I delivered all the bags to the train!”

The whistle blew a final loud shrill, and before faltering and lunging forward, the wheels shivered. At the last moment, the soldier went into his green satchel and handed me a brown bag. I opened the bag and quickly counted the money in it, but it was nothing close to what the sugar cost. Before I looked up, the last of the train’s freight cars pulled ahead, gaining speed. That’s when I started running.

“You didn’t pay me enough!” I shouted as I ran along. The train continued to gain speed, so I had to run faster. The end of the station platform approached, where a stone slab sloped down level to the ground. I raced down the slope and ran hard to reach the freight car he was in.

“Heyy!! Heey!! You didn’t pay me enough!” I screamed. I felt the eyes of onlookers while he wearily turned around, hands poised on his hips.

“I know where you live. I’ll pay you the rest when I come back in a few days.”

The train gained speed. Hurriedly, I grabbed the bar of the freight door and leapt onto the steel stirrup steps. I stood halfway on the ledge, my other leg dangling in the air. The train quickened. I was stuck. The car was crammed with people all the way to the door.

A kind Cambodian passenger reached down and put his hand out for me. I grabbed ahold, hopped into the freight car, and wedged myself between the crowd of people and the soldier. The soldier cried out in surprise amid the murmurs and whispers of the other passengers.

Taking some comfort from all the people surrounding me, I pulled my shoulders back to draw a deep breath and hollered, “Pay me now!!”

The soldier's eyes fidgeted back and forth, panning around the passengers, who eyed him disdainfully. Without a word, he reached for his military satchel, opened the flap, and began leafing through his pack. He pulled out a stack of money. I took the stack and counted it right in front of him. It was a heck of a lot of riels and the stack took several more recounts. And still it was not the right amount.

"That's all I have. I will pay you next time I come and see you."

Figures, I thought. *At least I got most of the money.* The train's whistle signaled it was pulling into a station. New passengers at the platform edge forced themselves into the car, pinning me in a crushing wave, pushing me toward the back. I sawed and elbowed my way through the crowd, hugging the stack of money in my arms.

The train whistle gave a cheerless blow, its stacks of smog blemishing the clear blue sky. I was the only passenger who exited. It was a desolate backcountry populated with vendors who seemed like they had no business being there. I grew nervous from carrying all the money on me, so I rolled the brick of cash under my buttoned shirt and tucked it beneath my waistband for security. I did not know where I was, but I could tell my home was far up the highway.

Across the platform, I saw a few vendors selling home-cooked snacks and malted drinks. I went to a stall and interrupted a vendor fanning away flies, more flies than customers. I asked where the closest town was. His hand shot up and pointed somewhere in the vast scrubland. I asked if he could drive me to Poipet and he pointed in the direction where the train had come from, gesturing as a question.

I nodded.

The man dismissed me with a wave of his hand. I wandered to another stall and this time asked how much it was to take me to Poipet.

"No one dares to travel at night," the owner said. "It is too dangerous." But he gave a price that was high, demanding triple the normal

rate for traveling there and back at night. I accepted it and he led me to his motorcycle with a triangular rickshaw mounted in the back, while his family stayed to manage his shop.

We were alone in the expanse of the dry countryside. Nothing much else was there except for a few poor hedges, parched bushes, and scraggly trees. The deep throbbing of the motorcycle echoed in the isolated countryside.

Cruising along the straightaway, my eyes fell upon a dark lip blocking the road ahead. It grew larger the closer we got, and then abruptly it appeared to be a deadly hill cutting across the highway.

The brash driver suddenly swerved onto the rough shoulder of the road, causing me to pop from my seat. I gaped at the sight of anti-tank trenches, carved deep enough for anyone to hide in. As the vendor drove back onto the smooth pavement, I stared at the dune while it withdrew farther away and became a speck. A shudder went through me.

Throughout the entire trip, we came upon more black dunes hunched like grave mounds over the roads, forcing the driver to retreat to the loose gravel shoulder. Having never ventured outside of Poipet, this was the first I had seen of the trenches. This was the reason Poipet was cut off from supplies and transportation to the city. The freedom fighters dug up the road and attacked the vehicles that were stuck, stealing their supplies to prevent them from reaching the hands of the Lon Nol government. Even though the freedom fighters were doing noble work to reunify the country for the king, I was still scared because the fighting was getting nearer.

I heaved a sigh of relief when I saw the stark city appear. The sun began to recede; shadows crept up to the sky. On the roadside, a woman poured out a dingy pail of water. Canvas awnings to storefronts were taken down.

When I arrived at my house, it was empty. Father was gone. I saw

only a portrait of my late mother on the wall, and a golden altar sitting beneath it on the floor. I went back outside and saw Kane around the corner closing down my shop.

“Your father went to the train station to look for you,” Kane told me. “He asked me to clean up.”

From afar, the tents in the bazaar were also being taken down. When I walked to the train station, I saw Father standing solemnly outside the closed security grills. He was gazing up at the big station clock and the darkening sky.

Father gave me a long, steady look.

“Mae,” he said. “It was dangerous to get on a train with a soldier!” But he was not saying so to scold me. He went on, “It was a very brave thing of you to do.” Seldom did Father commend me, and while that was all he said, it was all I needed to hear.

Until that day, I was considered too young and inexperienced to have done such a thing. But I had showed that the business was now mine to run.

In the days since Mother passed away, Father spent more time at the family’s ranch, a few miles from Poipet. He was retired now and had decided to hire some workers to help him maintain the property. Half the week was spent there and the other half in Poipet. When he was in Poipet, he spent much of his daily time reading imported *Kung Sheung* newspapers.

I was the youngest in the family and still lived with Father. All my brothers and sisters had married and were in homes of their own in the neighborhood. Originally it was just Mother and me who ran the shop. Mother used to cook sweet buns and Cambodian tapioca-banana pudding for me to put out in the mornings, as well as cut watermelon and other Chinese desserts. Sometimes we took turns and she handled the shop, while I took the sweet goods to the train station and sold them

to the people there. Travelers loved her dessert pies and bought them by the dozen. As the last born of eight, I was closest to Mother. I cared about her so much. She was the one who started teaching me how to run a shop. Her greatest desire for me was to start my own business.

When Mother passed away, Father must have felt sorry for me. He gave me one and a half million Cambodian riels and told me, "Here. Go run your business shop."

I had started with space on the side of Sihong's home. All the money I earned was mine to keep, and that was how I got my business going.

Qingming, meaning "Tomb-Sweeping Day," arrived in April, and I planned to bring sweet buns to offer Mother, just like the ones she cooked, so she had enough to eat in the afterlife. This would be the first year we celebrated the Qingming Festival at the ranch. Although she had died the year before, we did not celebrate Qingming for her. People do not worship ancestors who recently passed, in the belief that it will bring bad luck. Only the Chinese people in Cambodia celebrated Qingming.

Everyone in the family planned to go to the ranch to spend a couple of days to visit her, and sweep and pull weeds around the tomb. We would also feed her with pails of water over her grave and then place chopsticks, tea, sweet buns, roast suckling pigs, dumplings, fruits, and pudding dessert on the grave steps. Then gifts of incense, gold foil, and paper money would be burned before the tomb for her to buy comfort in Heaven.

* * *

Two weeks before the Qingming Festival, there was an incident at the shop. The early morning brought new customers lining up at my stall. They all wanted live rabbits, which were a new trend, however, I had no idea how to get them.

Suddenly, the busy peace of the morning was broken by an outburst of weeping and a woman's terrified wail from nearby. The customers looked back at a thin, slovenly woman crying on her knees before my sister, Sihong. The poor-looking woman gripped on to her, clasping her hands and crying inconsolably. I wondered what had happened to her. *Did she lose a loved one?*

Sihong took the woman into her home for the night, where she began pouring out her story, and that of thousands like her. She had lived in a village within a southeastern province of Cambodia, near the border of Vietnam, when it was taken over by the freedom fighters. She urged us not to believe that the freedom fighters had good intentions, nor were these men simply racketeers. They had no leadership and formed no group allegiances, doing as they pleased. These vicious men took people for prisoners to force into harsh labor and exterminated the unwanted ones. "They murder people left and right," she wept, giant tears spilling from her eyes. "They destroy what they can. Even children . . . little boys and girls. Monsters . . . barbaric monsters . . . that's what they are!"

She told of hundreds of people like her, who had been chased into the jungles of Cambodia to hide. They were pursued, and once located, eliminated. She was a runaway and made the perilous trek north, alongside heavy fighting from the war, and lived as a fugitive in Phnom Penh before she reached Poipet. The woman had heard from others in town that Sihong was capable of helping her get out of the country. It was true. Our father had always been willing to help, even if you were not family, and in that regard my sister took after him.

For the next morning, Sihong arranged for one of her workers to take the refugee woman through the forests into Thailand by foot. This path ran through thin game trails that slender foxes appeared from and went panting by. Only smugglers like Sihong's worker knew of

it. I went with Sihong in a separate vehicle to Thailand to ensure the woman had safely crossed. Before the woman left ahead of us, we gave her working garments and a shroud to cover her face.

We drove through the customs checkpoint at the border and worked our way to the location where we had agreed to meet. When we arrived, we were pleased to see the woman standing at the precise spot where Sihong's worker said they would come out of the jungle. We gave the refugee woman food items, water, and other provisions to take along and asked her where she would be going. She said she planned to look for her friends in Bangkok, although she had no idea where they were. She was just glad to be out of Cambodia.

She warned us, "Beware, you must leave! Stay at your peril! Please believe me. They are cruel, bad-hearted savages. If you don't leave the country, you will be sorry. They will grab everything you own."

We listened attentively and forced a half smile without a word. We tried our hardest to understand her stories of abduction and imprisonment, but none of us had ever seen behavior like that. It was hard to believe people could do such things. The freedom fighters were defending the honor of the king.

We decided she was desperate for our pity so we would help her get out of the country. She was a good actor who had convinced herself of her own imaginings. We still felt secure, without a desire to sell everything and start from scratch again in a foreign land. We had been in Cambodia for so long, we simply could not believe our lives would be endangered.

"Have a safe journey," we said as she walked on a path that curled through the trees. It seemed as if we were making the right choice, the wise choice.

If we only knew.

