

ALIVE

IN THE

KILLING FIELDS



**SURVIVING THE KHMER ROUGE
GENOCIDE**

by Nawuth Keat with Martha E. Kendall

ALIVE IN THE KILLING FIELDS

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This book is dedicated to the men, women, and children who lost their lives under the Khmer Rouge

-N.K. and M.E.K.

I want to thank my teacher and friend, Martha Kendall, for offering to write my story down.

—*Nawuth Keat*

I would like to acknowledge the loving support of my family, the fine work of National Geographic editor Priyanka Lamichhane, and especially the courage of Nawuth Keat who re-lived the tragedies recounted in this book as he told them to me.

—*Martha E. Kendall*

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PHOTOGRAPHIC INSERT

Nawuth (NAH-wooth) Keat was a student in my World Literature course at San Jose City College. He seldom spoke in class. So I was surprised on the last day when he said, “I’d like to share my story with you.”

Nawuth described his childhood in war-torn Cambodia, his family’s tragedies, the constant hunger, and his dangerous escape. I looked around the classroom and saw that I was not the only listener who had been moved to tears.

“Nawuth, would you like me to write your story down for you?” I asked.

“Yes,” he answered simply.

Since then Nawuth and I have spent many hours working together. His English is rough. My role is to gather his memories and write them down clearly in English. The words are mine, but the story is his.

Sometimes the going got tough. As Nawuth reviewed the manuscript, he was taken back to his painful past.

I asked, “Are you sure you want to continue with this project?”

“I want people to know the truth about what happened,” he said.

Here is Nawuth’s truth.

MARTHA E. KENDALL

“YOU’RE LUCKY”

Gunshots!

I bolted awake. My parents yelled, and we all jumped from our beds. The dogs barked.

“We have to get out of here!” my parents said.

Still in our pajamas, we darted outside.

“Run to my mother’s,” my father said. She lived next door, and we hurried to her house. We heard gunfire close by, right in the neighborhood.

We got our grandmother, and together all ran toward an old rice barn across the street. But the gunshots came so close to us that we couldn’t make it to the barn. Instead, we dove into a ditch—my mother, the baby, my grandmother, my younger brothers, my aunt and uncle, our babysitter, and me. I was nine years old.

The ditch was too shallow to hide us, but in the darkness, I hoped we’d be overlooked. My father ducked behind some bamboo about a hundred feet away.

My heart pounded. I heard screams, explosions, howling animals, and the fiery roar of grass-roofed houses burning.

My mother had always told us, “The Khmer Rouge (Kuh-mair Roozh) might come at any time to raid our village. Their leader, a man named Pol Pot, says he and the Communists want to make everyone in Cambodia equal, but that’s just talk. It is an excuse they use to help them gain power. Banding together in big gangs, they kill people and steal money, gold jewelry, and guns.”

Now they had come: the Khmer Rouge, the Red People. They were mostly poor and uneducated peasants, thieves, drunks, and fugitives.

My mother was so afraid of them; she rarely let us sleep at home. Most nights my father took us to the home of my mother’s parents, about five miles away. To get there, they drove motorcycles, pulling us kids in trailers behind them. My mother said, “It’s safer there, because it’s a larger town.” But on this night we had stayed home to prepare food for the next day’s holiday feast, the Cambodian Thanksgiving.

Our town had no electricity, so the Khmer Rouge tried to light up the street by starting fires anywhere they could. They threw burning matches into our house, but it did not ignite. Then they used a trick to fool anyone who was hiding in the shadows. They yelled in no particular direction, “Hey, you, stand still! If you move, we’ll shoot!”

My grandmother fell for it. Terrified, afraid the family had been seen, she cried out, “Please don’t shoot. We have done nothing. These are innocent children.”

A Khmer Rouge ran to the ditch where we huddled. My grandmother begged, “Take our gold and money. Please just leave us alone.”

Then my uncle stood up. The Khmer Rouge demanded, “Where’s the gun you bought last week?”

My uncle told him the truth, “I didn’t buy any gun.”

The Khmer Rouge raised his M-16 rifle and shot my uncle in the chest. Fired from that close range, the bullet careened through my uncle’s body, and blood spewed out behind him. He fell dead on the ground.

My grandmother screamed. “Don’t kill us,” she begged. The killer sprayed her with bullets, and

the rest of my family, too.

~~An M-16 bullet makes a small hole when it enters a human body. After it tears its way through the flesh, it exits, leaving a gaping hole the size of a fist.~~

I was shot three times. I lay limp in the ditch. It was filled with my family's blood. When a Khmer Rouge kicked my head one way, I let my head flop. He kicked it the opposite way, and I let it flop again. "If he knows I'm still alive," I thought, "he'll shoot me." Another Khmer Rouge kicked me again. They must have thought I was dead, so they didn't waste another bullet on me. A few minutes later, they were gone.

My youngest brother, barely five years old, was crying, and I tried to calm him. Hackly said nothing. He looked like he was in shock. My mother had held my little sister to her breast, hoping to keep her quiet as we squatted in the ditch. Now they were both silent. A single bullet pierced my little sister and then my mother's heart. With my right hand, I felt my baby sister's face. I found only a hole where her cheek should have been.

My mother was dead. My baby sister was dead. My grandmother was dead. My aunt and uncle were dead. My babysitter was dead.

I tried to get up, but my legs wouldn't work. I kept falling down into the bloody ditch. My left arm was so swollen I couldn't bend it. Two bullets had hit my elbow. Another had torn through my left hip.

My father heard the slaughter from his hiding place. Helpless, he stood in the dark, unable to see where to aim his gun or throw a grenade without killing us. He never told me what went through his mind that night. I never asked.

When the Khmer Rouge ran through the village, they had tossed grenades and burning matches through the houses. One of the grenades exploded inside a house near ours, killing all but one young boy, whose body was covered with shrapnel. Someone with a trailer behind his motorcycle took that boy and me to get medical help. Dad stayed at the scene of the massacre, trying to deal with the chaos that had just struck. On the way to the hospital, the boy next to me died.

My country is poor. At the hospital, there were no beds or good medicines. I lay on a piece of metal. The doctor told me, "You're lucky. If the bullet had hit an inch closer to your abdomen, your liver would have been destroyed."

I flinched when his assistant dabbed at the dried splotches of blood—my family's and my own—that covered me from my face to my feet. My arm hurt so much. I was scared, and I was alone. Then the doctor treated my bullet wounds. When he stitched them, with no painkiller, I cried, and then I screamed until I passed out.

The doctor later told me, "I did my best to put your smashed elbow back together. I made the cast hold your arm in a slightly bent position, so the elbow will set in a natural-looking angle. But I'm sorry, it will never flex normally again."

The bullet wounds slowly began to heal, but my misery was just beginning.

FROM STUDENT TO SLAVE

I was born in Cambodia in 1964, the fifth of eight children. In those days, most families were big. My brothers and sisters and I were each about a year and a half apart. I had two older sisters, Chanya and Chantha, and two older brothers, Lee and Bunna (pronounced “BOOna”). My younger brothers were Hackly and Chanty, and our baby sister was Chantu. But we hardly ever used our formal names. Instead of calling me by my real name, Bunpah, everybody used my nickname “Mop” which meant “healthy baby.”

My father was a successful rice farmer, one of the most prosperous in our little village of Salatrave. Most people lived in small, grass-roofed huts, but our two-story house was made of brick, and it had a tile roof. My father had built it on a large lot on the highest ground in the town. That location was important because it ensured that our house did not flood during the rainy season. We also had a tractor and a motorcycle, much more than other families owned. Our prosperity probably put us in extra danger from the Khmer Rouge. My father hired seasonal help during the rice harvest, and he also had one full-time worker who drove our tractor. That employee, named Zhen, often came to work drunk, and my father warned him he had to stop drinking. Zhen didn’t change, so my father fired him. He ran away and joined the Khmer Rouge. With them, Zhen didn’t have to worry about trying to make an honest living. Instead, he could get money by robbing and killing other people.

I do not know if Zhen encouraged the Khmer Rouge to target my family on that terrible night in 1973. But whether a family was singled out or not, no one was safe.

My older brothers and sister Chantha lived in the city of Battambang (BAHT-am-bong), and my oldest sister Chanya lived in the city of Pursat (Pa-SAHT). If they had been with us when the Khmer Rouge attacked, they might have been murdered too.

“Mop,” my father said to me, “I’m going to send Hackly and Chanty to stay with Chantha where they will be safer.”

“What about me?”

“I will take you to Pursat to live with Chanya. She can take care of you until your wounds heal. Then you can join Chantha and your little brothers in Battambang.”

Cambodian children are very polite. I didn’t question why he made his decisions. But I did ask, “Dad, what are you going to do?”

“I’ll keep the farm going,” he said.

I still couldn’t understand what I had just experienced. It was too awful to be true. No matter how much my wounds hurt, my heart hurt even more. How could my mother be dead? And my baby sister? My grandparents, too, and my uncle and aunt? It didn’t seem real. And now my father was sending me away.

Chanya, her husband, and their baby welcomed me into their home in Pursat, which is about 10 miles (16 km) southeast of Salatrave, but I didn’t feel happy to be there. I didn’t feel happy about anything. But as the days and weeks passed, a routine developed. Thanks to Chanya’s husband being a police officer, he had many professional friends. One of them was a doctor who came to the house to give me shots a couple of times a week to help prevent infection. He changed the dressing on my wounds and put my arm in a sling.

Chanya was kind to take me in, but she did not have my mother's sweet temperament. When we were kids all living at home, as the oldest one, she used to boss us younger kids around. Sometimes she spanked me. During the months I stayed with her in Pursat, she was very strict, and she yelled at me a lot. In the mornings, my gunshot wounds ached the most, but Chanya never let me stay in bed. If I said my arm hurt, she still made me get up early and drag myself to school.

I was glad when my wounds healed enough that I could go to Battambang. When my father picked me up from Chanya's, he said I was to help Chantha with my younger brothers. Chantha and I had always gotten along well. She was about four years older than I was, and she had a kind, gentle nature. She never complained or got mad. She was an excellent student, too.

I was already familiar with Battambang, which is about 12 miles (19 km) northwest of Salatrave. Before the Khmer Rouge came, I spent weekdays in Battambang going to school. That is because Salatrave was so small that it did not have a good school. Battambang was large, second in size only to the capital, Phnom Penh. After I finished kindergarten in Salatrave, my parents sent me to Battambang to study. My older brothers Lee and Bunna preferred to stay home and work on the farm, but my parents encouraged me to go to school. Chantha went, too. We lived in Battambang during the week with my uncle and his family. Every day I went to public elementary school. Then, after school let out in the late afternoon, I attended a private school for a couple of hours. I was allowed to go for free because the teacher was a friend of my father, and I was a good student. I saw kids who were not as fortunate as I hanging around the classroom door, eager to hear any wisdom the teacher might give. It was a privilege to be allowed a seat inside. The girls sat on one side of the classroom, the boys on the other. We were proud of our uniforms. We understood that education was important, and we worked hard. On Friday night, I would take the bus, which was like a small mini-van, back to Salatrave.

When the Khmer Rouge took over, everything changed. My uncle's family left Battambang, so my sister, Chantha, along with my brother Bunna, found a new place to live. Lee was staying by himself in Pursat.

When I moved in with Bunna and Chantha, Chantha tried to be a mother to my little brothers and me, but she was barely fifteen years old herself. She was busy with her own regular studies, and she spent a lot of time at her after-school classes. She was taking classes to help her prepare for a very hard exam that would determine whether she would be admitted to college. A smart man named Van Lan taught the prep classes. He was a few years older than Chantha, and he had been to college. Chantha liked studying with him.

I tried to concentrate on my schoolwork, but it was hard not to think about what had happened to my family. It made me especially sad to think of my mother, so I tried not to remember the terrible murders I'd witnessed. The best way to avoid the pain was to recite to myself, "Do not think about it. Do not think about it." But sometimes I couldn't help it. So when I thought about the past, I tried to focus on the good parts of our life before the Khmer Rouge came.

I remembered the fun of waiting for my mother's bus to come back to Salatrave from Battambang where she went for her weekly shopping trips. She always brought us candy and cookies. One time she brought me a special surprise—brand new plastic flip-flop sandals. I often went barefoot, so I was really excited. I loved those sandals.

We grew most of our own food, and my mother's weekly trips to Battambang supplied us with anything else we needed. But now and then my mother would send me to a house in the village to pick up something between her shopping trips. There were no stores. Everyone knew that certain items could be purchased from certain people, like pain pills from one family, or sugar or salt from others. If we wanted a snack, we could pick fruit from the trees. I especially liked guavas, which grew everywhere.

Every day my mother made us take a bath, but we didn't use bathtubs. Nobody had running water

at home. If we needed fresh water, it had to be carried from the well in the center of town. We took a big clay pot with us. ~~Because it is so hot in Cambodia, the water was always warm.~~ To bathe, my friends or brothers and I took turns pouring pots full of water over each other. Because nobody had shampoo, we washed our hair just like we washed our body, under the spray of poured water. Chanthol used clippers to trim my brothers' and my hair really close to our heads. We looked alike, bigger or smaller versions of each other depending on our ages.

We didn't have toilets, either. We used an outhouse. When I was little, I was always scared to go there by myself at night. Because there was no electricity, it was dark. Even though the outhouse was only 50 feet (15 m) away, the walk to it seemed much longer because in my imagination, giant monsters were hiding, waiting to get me.

We didn't always have to get the water from the well ourselves. My family could afford to hire teenagers to help us around the house. I was glad, because they did some of the chores, like getting the well water, washing clothes, sweeping the wooden floors in the house, and weeding our garden. In exchange for their work, my mom gave them food to take home to their families. Even with their help, my mom still had a lot of hard work to do. I remember her starting the cooking fire every day. She prepared the food over the flames, and the charcoal made our house really smoky. She was always rubbing her eyes, and mine stung, too.

Sometimes my mother would ask me to go with her to the rice field; "Mop, do you think you can walk all the way to the field with me? I want to re-seed a few sections."

"Yes, please, please, please!" I'd say.

What an adventure those special days were. For me, it was a rare treat to walk that far away from the house and to spend a whole day outside with my mother. I especially remember the fun I had on one of those trips during the rainy season. If I close my eyes, I can re-live the scene. I smelled the fresh moist air of the fields. The humidity made my skin feel extra soft. While Mom did the planting, I played in the mud nearby. I thought she would scold me for getting dirty, but she didn't. With my fingers and toes, I made patterns in the wet dirt. Then I collected rocks and arranged them in three piles, targets for clods of mud that I tossed at them. I backed farther and farther away, trying to improve my accuracy. Lots of times I flung the mud balls so hard that they fell apart even before they landed. When I hit the farthest target, I laughed. I'm good! When I felt too hot to stay in the sun any longer, I moved to the shade and wondered what to do. Then a bright green bird swooped in front of me. It was a bee-eater, a common sight in Salatrave. I wondered, "What would it be like to eat a bee? Wouldn't it sting you? And what would it be like to fly?" I pretended I could fly. I stretched out my arms and squawked at every bug I saw. Then I decided I'd eat some insects—but no bees—just to see what they tasted like. I caught a silver-colored insect with my hands, but its sparkly wings looked pretty and delicate. I didn't want to destroy them, so I opened my hand and let it go.

Mom said, "Mop, I'm done for the day. Let's walk back."

As we walked, I noticed tall wading birds in a rice field. They had red faces and long yellow legs. "What are those?" I asked.

"They're called lapwings," she said. "Some people say those birds sleep on their backs at night and stretch their long legs out straight to hold up the sky."

"Do you think that's true?" I asked.

"No," she said and laughed. "It's just a superstition."

"I don't believe it either," I said.

It seemed to me we walked a long ways. By the time we reached our house, I felt very worldly and important. When I got into bed that night, I raised my legs up toward the ceiling. I was glad I didn't have to do that all night long.

My mother was kind, but she made me behave, too. She scolded me when I got mad at my

brothers. I hated their teasing me whenever our neighbor Deenah and her family stopped by to visit. chased after them when they yelled, "Mop, here comes your wife!" Of course Deenah was not really my wife, but our marriage had been arranged. Nobody else in my family had an arranged marriage, but our mothers decided to arrange a marriage between Deenah and me because of a strange dream they each had. Just before Deenah and I were born, a couple that lived nearby passed away. Deenah's mother and my mother had an identical dream that the couple wanted to live with them. The mothers were so surprised by this that they decided their babies must have a special connection. This led to my mother's decision to name me "Bunpah." She thought the name seemed very grownup, in anticipation of my marriage. I never liked that name because the last thing I wanted to think about was getting married. Like most kids, I wanted to think about playing and having fun. Deenah was nice, but I was too young to care about girls.

My older brother Bunna and I often got scolded for arguing. I remember one time I knew I was going to be in trouble. To get away from my mother, I scrambled up a coconut palm as high as I could go. My mother came looking for me, and when she saw me up there, she was scared I would fall down and be killed. She went away so that I would come down before I got so tired that I would fall out of the tree. When I came down unhurt she was so relieved that she did not even punish me.

My friends and I made up simple games. We played with rubber bands and marbles. Any piece of litter on the street could become a toy. We did not have organized teams or ball games. My good friend, Whee, lived next door. Sometimes he would come sleep over at my house, and sometimes I would go to his. We laughed a lot. He was older than me. In the Cambodian language, younger people usually speak more politely to older people. But we agreed to treat each other as equals. After the Khmer Rouge came, everything changed. I don't know what happened to Whee's family.

Now that I was living in Battambang with Chantha, I missed Salatrave, and especially my father. The Khmer Rouge had burned down most of our village, but every weekend I still liked to go there. Chantha and my brothers stayed in Battambang, and I took a taxi to see Dad. A taxi was a trailer pulled behind a motorcycle. The ride was scary, and even though Bunna was older than me, he was too timid to make the trip. I was scared, too, but I went anyway. I felt less nervous after my father arranged to have the same taxi take me each week. Even though the Khmer Rouge had blown up half of our house, Dad still lived there. He raised chickens, grew rice, and kept a big vegetable garden.

At the end of one of my visits to see Dad he said, "You're a good boy, Mop. Take this rice and these eggs, and vegetables. If there is any left over, tell Chantha to give the extra to anyone who needs it." Then he loaded the food next to me in the taxi trailer. As the taxi pulled away, I looked back and saw him standing alone in front of our ruined house. I tried to smile at him, but I couldn't. He had told me I was a good boy. He usually did not talk much, and I was not accustomed to being praised. I wasn't sure if I was good or not. I was sure that I hated to leave him, but I had learned not to cry.

Back in Battambang, Chantha, my brothers, and I ate what Dad had supplied for us, and we shared it with the homeless children who begged on the streets. The Khmer Rouge had killed their parents and burned their houses, so many orphans in the city struggled to get enough to eat.

One weekend when I was at the farm with Dad, he said, "I have heard that the Khmer Rouge are gaining power. They are moving closer to the cities. Help me hitch the trailer to the tractor, and we'll drive it to Battambang."

As we rode along, my father said little. But I told him about Van Lan, who spent a lot of time with Chantha even when they weren't studying. He was starting to feel almost like a big brother to me and a smart one at that. He had read a lot of books, and I liked hearing him talk.

I was used to riding in the tractor in Salatrave, but when we got to Battambang, it felt funny to be driving a farm vehicle into the city. People glanced at us, but no one stared. I think many of them wished they had any kind of transportation at all. We were lucky.

“Chantha and Bunna,” Dad said, “if the Khmer Rouge come and you need to leave the city, load up as many of your belongings as you can fit into the trailer and return to Salatrave. You and your brothers can ride on the tractor.”

Chantha looked down and then asked quietly, “What about Van Lan?”

My father said, “Chantha, what about Van Lan?”

“We want to get married,” she said.

“I thought so,” he said. “Of course you should all be safe together.”

Chantha smiled slightly. This was not the way an engagement announcement was supposed to be made. Like most Cambodian girls, she had always looked forward to planning her wedding with the help of our mom, and savoring her beautiful day as a bride. As for my arranged marriage to Deenah, that idea was a thing of the past. Most of her family had been killed by the Khmer Rouge. Deenah survived, but I had no idea where she was. After the Khmer Rouge came, sorrow and uncertainty had taken over our lives. Our world had fallen apart, and we didn’t know what our new world would be like.

“Thank you for understanding,” she said to Dad.

Dad left the tractor and trailer with us, and he took a taxi back to the farm. Soon his prediction proved true.

We heard rumors that Pol Pot, the leader of the Khmer Rouge, thought city folk were too privileged and couldn’t be trusted. Pol Pot said farming was the only right way for everyone to live. In 1975 the Khmer Rouge streamed into Battambang and Phnom Penh. They didn’t talk about their philosophy. Instead, at gunpoint, they yelled, “Get out of here, or we’ll shoot! Now!” They were deadly serious. We could hear gunshots, and terrified children screaming. Van Lan said, “Mop, help me carry all the bags of rice that we have. Then choose any clothes you want to take.”

Chantha said, “I’ll get our clothes and help Hackly and Chanty with theirs.”

Van Lan said calmly, “We can do this. Bring everything to the tractor, and I’ll load it all up.”

Van Lan and I each carried two bags of rice out to the tractor. At age ten, I still wasn’t very strong, but fear gives you muscle power you didn’t know you had. The street was jammed with people lugging as much as they could manage on their backs and in their arms. A few had bicycles or taxis, but most people walked. I heard a little girl cry, “Mommy, where are we going?” I ran back into the house and grabbed a couple of shirts, a pair of shorts, and my pajamas. I put them in a sack and took them to Van Lan. Chantha brought out a larger sack, and Hackly and Chanty, looking scared, trailed behind her. Van Lan organized everything in the tractor, and we piled in.

We had it easier than most people, because we had transportation. When we recognized other families going to Salatrave, we added their belongings to ours on the tractor, and they walked alongside. We were all nervous. I was glad Van Lan was with us. He spoke slowly and acted confident in spite of the chaos in the street. He was barely 20 years old, but to me, he seemed like an adult.

The Khmer Rouge walked in the streets, yelling and waving their guns. “Thanks to our great leader Pol Pot, we have a new Cambodia! Call us ‘Angka.’” “Angka” meant “savior,” but we needed saving from these hoodlums.

“City ways are evil,” yelled another Khmer Rouge. “In the new Cambodia, everyone works for the common good. They don’t sit around in fancy offices. They grow rice. If you don’t like the new way, then you are the enemy. The enemy will not live!”

While throngs of people trudged out of the city, the Khmer Rouge started killing “the enemy.” They shot educated people, advanced students, civic and military leaders, old people, and anyone with money. The Khmer Rouge had no laws. There were no courts. If they did not like somebody, they killed him. If a bystander complained, he got shot too. We watched in horror, silently. Fortunately, the Khmer Rouge did not know Van Lan was a teacher. They simply did not notice him. We got out of the

city safely, but we had no idea what awaited us.

~~We returned to our village, Salatrave. But nobody was allowed to move into their old houses, or what was left of them. We had to build huts made of leaves, grass, and poles. Each family had a hut. The Khmer Rouge made us build them side by side, in long rows. Ours was at the end.~~

One day right after we got to Salatrave, my father said, “Chantha and Van Lan, you should have a beautiful wedding, full of celebration and joy. But it’s obvious that is not possible in these times.”

“I want to marry your daughter properly,” said Van Lan.

“I know,” said Dad, “that’s what we all want. I have a friend who can perform the ceremony. I’ll invite whatever family is able to come.”

The ceremony was simple and short. In our village, people usually celebrated a wedding by playing music on a battery-powered record player with a speaker so large that everyone in town could enjoy the music. Someone still had one of those players, and after the ceremony, hearing the traditional music made me feel good. Chantha and Van Lan grinned, and I did too.

“Mop, I am now your brother,” said Van Lan with a wink. That gave me the biggest reason to smile that I’d had in a long time. But I could tell the grown-ups were not as happy as you would expect at a wedding. We didn’t know what the future would bring.

Only a few days later, the Khmer Rouge brought their guns again and yelled, “Move, now!”

They made all of us leave the huts we had just built. In the next weeks, a pattern developed. Over and over again, they forced us to work in a field for a few days, and then set up a camp nearby to sleep in. Then they would make us move to another area and do the same thing again. I never asked why. I just did what I was told.

My father heard that the Khmer Rouge near Salatrave did not like him, and he understood what that meant—his murder. So he left us and hid in the jungle where the trees, shrubs, and vines grew so close together that it was easy to become lost. But he was really smart, and he quickly learned his way around. He brought two friends to the area where he was living, and together they fished and gathered honey at beehives he had found. Then the men took the fish and honey to people in Salatrave. Some of the Khmer Rouge were glad to have the food added to their supplies, so they accepted what my father’s friends brought them, and they did not go after my father in the jungle. I missed him so much.

The Khmer Rouge made us work in the fields every day. We did not get paid, and there were no days off. I had never worked in the fields before, but I did what the Khmer Rouge told me to do. I was just a kid, but that didn’t matter. I was a slave.

Everybody in Cambodia, even people who had never been farmers, knew that rice grows in shallow water. We built levees to keep the fields flooded. Sometimes we weeded the rice paddies. We made fertilizer out of tree bark and spread it in the fields. The other kids and I scared away birds that tried to eat the rice. At the end of the day, the Khmer Rouge made us set up our sleeping shacks.

One day when I was working in a rice field, I saw Zhen, the drunken employee my father had fired. Now, like the other Khmer Rouge men, he wore black. I pretended not to see him. When he got really close to me, he said in a mean voice, “Where is your father?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Yes you do,” he said. “Tell me.” He grabbed my arm and yanked me closer to him.

“I don’t know. I really don’t.” I looked down, the polite way for children to talk with adults.

“I’ll find him, you nasty brat,” he said. He shoved me away and strode off, sneering at us in the field.

Before the Khmer Rouge took over, he never would have been so mean to me. He worked for my father and was courteous to my whole family. Now Zhen was the boss with his rifle, black clothes, and show-off swagger.

Once when the Khmer Rouge made us walk to new fields, we marched past our old village. We

saw that our house and all our neighbors' houses had been flattened. Even if the Khmer Rouge decided to let us go home, I saw that I no longer had a home to go to.

After my father left for the jungle, the rest of my family still stayed together—Bunna, Chantha, Van Lan, my younger brothers and I. Lee was still living by himself in Pursat, and Chanya was still there, too, with her family. We cooked and ate our own food, away from other people. That arrangement lasted for only a few months. Then the Khmer Rouge took our little grill, cooking supplies, and food away from us. We were ordered to eat one meal a day with the group, but there was not enough food to go around. The Khmer Rouge said, “Now there may not be much food, but in the future there will be. If you work hard enough, you will have three full meals a day.”

To have three full meals a day became my dream.

When people do not have enough to eat, they get weak, they get sick, and they die. A lot of people died. We did not know what was going to happen to us. Would we be strong enough to survive? Would the Khmer Rouge decide to shoot us? Would our lives ever return to normal, or would we always be slaves who did nothing but grow rice, and hope for almost enough food to eat in return for our endless labor?

At night when I tried to fall asleep, my stomach growled with hunger. I tried to remember what was like to have plenty to eat. I thought about the Cambodian Thanksgiving when Mom prepared delicious, traditional food that I loved. I could picture her soaking the rice in water overnight. Then she put bacon or bananas on it, and wrapped it all in a banana leaf. The next day, she boiled it for a long time, until it cooked through. Sometimes we ate it with a fork, and sometimes we just peeled back the banana leaf and ate it with our hands. We did not have electricity or a refrigerator (nobody did), so we did not store food for long. I loved these rice pockets, and sometimes I hid some, hoping to save them for later. But the bugs, rats, or birds would always eat the food before I got back to it. How I wished I had that food now.

Cambodians do not celebrate birthdays, but we do love holidays, and food is always part of them. At our New Year's celebration, the family always got together for a big meal. I especially liked the fruit we would have for the party. It came from other regions of Cambodia, so we did not normally eat it. But for New Year's we would splurge and buy it. To get to the reunion, some relatives from far away came on motorcycles. Others came in taxis. People who lived fairly close came by cyclo, a kind of sofa on a bicycle. On the back, a man pedals a bicycle, and the “sofa” sits on his handlebars, which are supported by two wheels. I was scared whenever I rode in a cyclo, because if the rider ran into anything, I—sitting in front—would have been the human bumper! But now, we never rode in any vehicle at all. We just walked and worked. The Khmer Rouge even took our clothes. They left me with only one pair of shorts and a shirt, which soon became nothing but rags.

During the rainy season, the Khmer Rouge sent my brother Bunna, then 15 years old, far away to work with a *chalat* (zhaLOT). It was a group of boys and girls about his age or a few years older that would make small earthen dams for irrigation or build huts for the Khmer Rouge. They worked on each project for three or four months at a time, all day long. Like the other teenagers with him, Bunna always longed for his family. One time he ran away to see us. He traveled by day through the jungle. He stayed away from the main trails or roads where he might be seen. He crawled through the murky marshes where almost nobody went during the rainy season. He also traveled by night. He knew that the Khmer Rouge saw him, they would not bother to ask questions. They would consider him the enemy, and probably shoot him.

But one night, he just appeared!

“What are you doing here?” we asked in amazement.

“Shh!” he whispered. “I'm hungry. I haven't had enough to eat since I left the *chalat* four days ago.” It was wonderful to have him back, but we were scared all the time. So was he. His talent was i

drawing and painting, not doing brave deeds. Usually a timid person, he did not like to take chances. He hid in the jungle during the day while we worked in the rice fields, but after we got back and it was dark, he would join us. We had no lights except for small gas lamps, so no one could see him.

We did not ask Bunna to tell stories about what his life was like in the *chalat*. He did not ask about our work in the rice fields. All we had was the family—or what was left of us—being together. We managed to stay alive, day after day, but we had no hopes or dreams for the future. We had no freedom to control the present, much less next month or next year. We did not know if the rest of our lives would be like this—nothing but work, hunger, and fear, just waiting until we died. Sadness takes away your energy, your laughter, and your love of life. All we had was love for our family, and that's what made us want to survive.

After a few weeks, Bunna came to us and said, "I know this good luck cannot last forever. It's not safe for me to stay here with you." He was worried about what would happen if he were found with us when he was supposed to be with the *chalat*. Would the Khmer Rouge shoot us all? After a few weeks he sneaked back up to the work camp he had fled.

My father, still hiding out in the jungle, was desperate to see any of his children. My younger brothers were not strong enough to walk a long way, but I was. I think Dad asked his two friends who worked for him to get permission from the local Khmer Rouge boss to let them bring me with them. Maybe the Khmer Rouge were so glad to get the extra food supplied by my father that they didn't mind if I, just one little kid, was away from the fields for a while. I don't know what the Khmer Rouge thought. For me it was simple: I liked to be with Dad, and if the Khmer Rouge would let me join him, I would go.

THE JUNGLE

Dad rarely spoke. Instead, he showed me things.

He showed me how to catch wild chickens in the jungle, and any other birds we could get. We used fishing line. It was hard to find, and we used only as much as we needed to trap the birds. To make the trap, we laid a branch across a trail. We trimmed its leaves so that wandering chickens would notice only one easy route to follow as they walked along pecking for food on the ground. When they were channeled into the narrow spot we selected, they would step into a noose we had made. The string tightened around their feet, and at that moment, the tree branch we tied it to would swing up, pulling the bird with it. Every day I checked the traps. How I loved it when we had snared a bird!

Dad was a genius at finding turtle eggs. I would search and search for them, and then I'd say, "None here." Dad would shake his head, point to soft ground, dig a tiny bit, and pull up a handful of eggs. They were the most delicious food we had in the jungle.

He also showed me how to make popcorn. He dug a small hole and made a fire in it. The fire heated the dirt until it hardened. Then he put corn into the hole, and it popped, one kernel at a time. We caught each popping kernel. It was so much fun.

I spent many months with Dad in the jungle. We stayed in an abandoned hut next to a small pond. We ate fish from the pond, but Dad thought the water was not safe to drink, so we boiled it first. We lived so deep in the jungle, only his two helpers knew where we were. We saw nobody else.

In the morning, the birds made our only company. I loved to watch the colorful bee-eaters sail through the air, darting and swooping as they grabbed bees, wasps, and other insects. Larger birds soared gracefully above the pond and then dove down to grab fish for their breakfast. Woodpeckers high in the trees tapped the trunks in their search for insects. I could hear the calls of birds that I could not see because of the dense jungle. Their beautiful songs welcomed each dawn. I agreed with them that dawn was worth welcoming. Instead of the terrible sadness I felt when I slaved in the rice fields every day, I liked being with my father in a place that seemed far away from the Khmer Rouge.

Even though we spent all our time there together, Dad never told me any stories about my mother or about his life before the Khmer Rouge came. I will never know the reason. Maybe he thought I was too young to understand. He might have been too miserable himself to be able to talk with me about all that he had lost. He sat quietly and smoked cigarettes. Cambodian children are very respectful toward their parents. I understood that I should not ask him "why?"

Even though we seldom spoke, my mind was always working. I imagined us back at home, enjoying our normal life before the Khmer Rouge came. Dad was a kind, gentle person. He never yelled at me or spanked me. I remember him showing me his collection of antique rifles. I loved to stare at them and picture him using them. He told me that when he was a boy, one of his jobs was to herd cattle and to protect them from lions and other animals that used to be in the jungle. He carried a gun then, but the gun couldn't protect him from everything. One day a wild boar attacked him, and on his leg he still had the scar made by the boar's tusk. On the wall of our house, he displayed the stuffed head of a wild boar he had killed.

Dad told me the biggest rifle in his collection was an elephant gun. It was huge! He did not use it

to shoot elephants. Instead, he aimed it toward the sky. The loud noise would scare the elephants away. I smiled at the memory of how I used that gun once, but not to scare an elephant. Most of the kids in my village were my friends, but a few were jealous of our family because we were the richest in town. One time some bullies threw rocks at my younger brother and me. We were so mad, we ran to the house and took my Dad's old elephant gun down from the wall. We knew it did not work anymore but we carried it outside so the bullies could see it. Boy, did we laugh when they ran away, dropping their stones as they went. We felt as strong as elephants that day!

In the summer in Cambodia, it does not rain at all. Everything dries out, and the dirt cakes to a hard, cracked surface. The opposite happens in the winter. Then, there is too much water. When I was a little boy in Salatrave, I liked the flooding. My family's house was on high ground, so it never got wet. But across the road, some of the backyards flooded. The other kids and I waded in the water that made the familiar yards seem like strange lagoons. We pointed at fish swimming in ditches where only a few weeks before we had played hide-and-seek. We laughed to see fish swimming above low tree branches where we hung out on lazy afternoons in the dry season.

Now, living in the jungle, I didn't consider flooding to be a source of fun. Because the water covered almost everything, we could not find turtle eggs. It covered the grass and came up above our knees. To fish, we stretched a very thin vine just above the water's surface. Every few feet, we hung fishhooks from it, baited with worms or little frogs. After a couple of hours, we left the higher ground where the hut stood, and we waded through the water to see if we had had any luck. The line sagged a little bit if a fish had been caught. We could tell if we had caught a snake or eel because they made a whirlpool from swirling around in the flooded grasses. We ate whatever we caught.

Dad showed me how to make a monkey trap. Using the only tool he had, his machete, he cut a branch into four pieces, each about two feet long. He whittled the end of each one into a point. We pushed those into the ground to be the four corners of our trap. Then we twisted vines and sticks together to be the walls and top of our primitive cage. It had a little door that we pulled open with a vine attached to a twig we lay at an angle on the bottom of the trap. One end of the twig was on the ground, but the other end was lifted about an inch by the vine tied to the trap door. We baited the trap with a few grains of rice. We hoped that a monkey would climb through the door to get the rice. Then when the monkey stepped on the twig held up by the vine, the vine would slip off the end of the twig, and the door would close with the monkey caught inside.

We set three traps, each one on a different trail, not far from our camp. The jungle is so thick, nobody can walk through it unless there's a trail.

The first time I trapped a monkey, I was scared. I yelled for Dad to come. My yelling scared the monkey, too. He panicked and managed to squeeze between the sticks and scramble out of the trap. My father said to me, "Next time you find a trapped monkey, you have to be silent. You have to be brave. Can you do that?"

I looked down, ashamed of myself for letting the monkey get away. "I can do it," I said, but I wasn't sure if I really could.

The next time we trapped a monkey, I did not yell. I just ran to tell Dad. He came and showed me how to grab the monkey without letting it bite me. I learned how to tie the monkey up and take it back to our camp. But I always felt scared of monkeys, because some of them are really big, and they're very smart. I carried a knife to protect myself.

Before the Khmer Rouge took over, our family always ate normal food like beef, chicken, and fish. But in the jungle during the rainy season, we had the choice of starving to death, or eating any food that was available. Monkey meat could keep us alive. Eating monkeys was disgusting. But if we did not eat them, we would die.

Besides the monkeys, we lived on crickets, rats, snakes, and frogs. I killed snakes by beating on

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