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a daughter of cambodia remembers

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L O U N G G U N G

Author of *Lucky Child: A Daughter of Cambodia Reunites with the Sister She Left Behind*

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first  
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remembers

LOUNG UNG

**In memory of the two million people who perished under the Khmer Rouge regime.**

*This book is dedicated to my father, Ung; Seng Im, who always believed in me; my mother, Ung; Ay Choung, who always loved me.*

*To my sisters Keav, Chou, and Geak because sisters are forever; my brother Kim, who taught me about courage; my brother Khouy, for contributing more than one hundred pages of our family history and details of our lives under the Khmer Rouge, many of which I incorporated into this book; to my brother Meng and sister-in-law Eang Muy Tan, who raised me (quite well) in America.*

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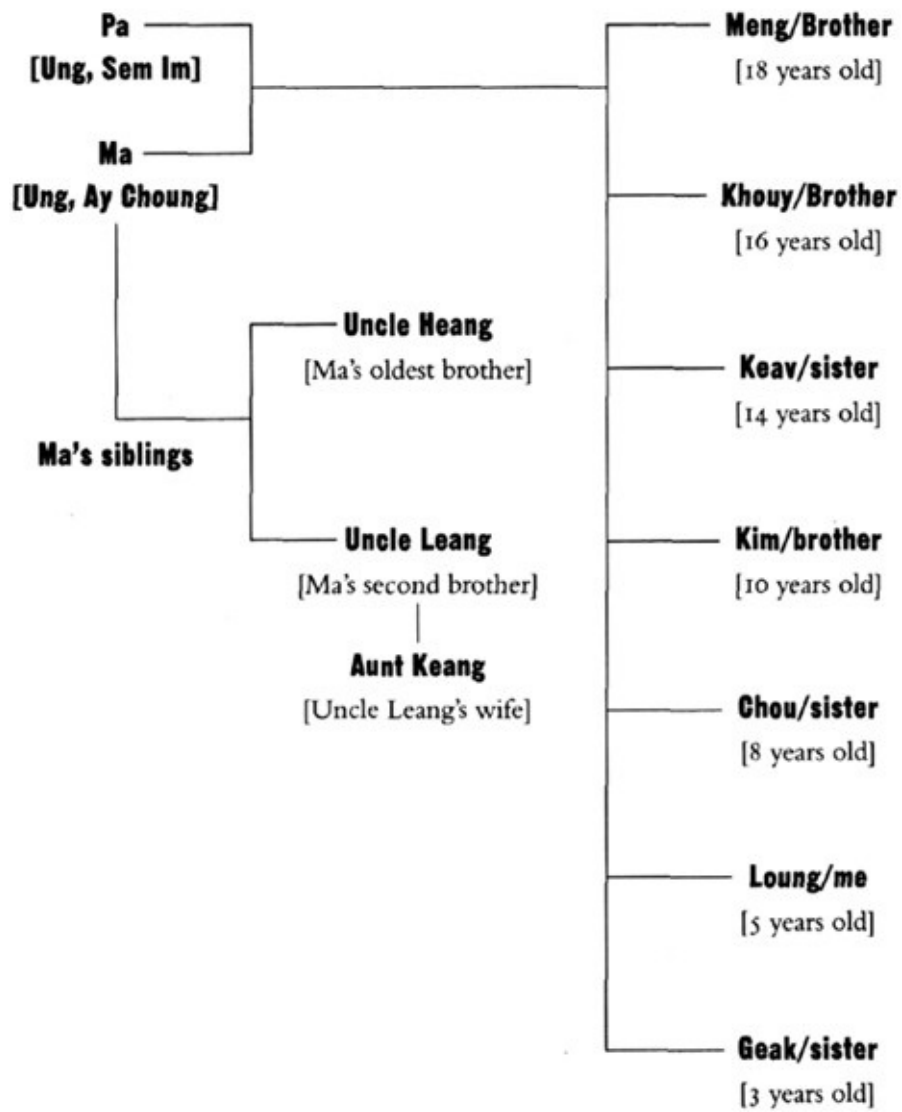
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## author's note

**From 1975 to 1979—through execution, starvation, disease, and forced labor—the Khmer Rouge systematically killed an estimated two million Cambodians, almost a fourth of the country's population.**

**This is a story of survival: my own and my family's. Though these events constitute my experience, my story mirrors that of millions of Cambodians. If you had been living in Cambodia during this period, this would be your story too.**

family chart 1975





## phnom penh

### April 1975

Phnom Penh city wakes early to take advantage of the cool morning breeze before the sun breaks through the haze and invades the country with sweltering heat. Already at 6 A.M. people in Phnom Penh are rushing and bumping into each other on dusty, narrow side streets. Waiters and waitresses in black-and-white uniforms swing open shop doors as the aroma of noodle soup greets waiting customers. Street vendors push food carts piled with steamed dumplings, smoked beef teriyaki sticks, and roasted peanuts along the sidewalks and begin to set up for another day of business. Children in colorful T-shirts and shorts kick soccer balls on sidewalks with their bare feet, ignoring the grunts and screams of the food cart owners. The wide boulevards sing with the buzz of motorcycle engines, squeaky bicycles, and, for those wealthy enough to afford them, small cars. By midday, as temperatures climb to over a hundred degrees, the streets grow quiet again. People rush home to seek relief from the heat, have lunch, take cold showers, and nap before returning to work at 2 P.M.

My family lives on a third-floor apartment in the middle of Phnom Penh, so I am used to the traffic and the noise. We don't have traffic lights on our streets; instead, policemen stand on raised metal boxes, in the middle of the intersections directing traffic. Yet the city always seems to be one big traffic jam. My favorite way to get around with Ma is the cyclo because the driver can maneuver it in the heaviest traffic. A cyclo resembles a big wheelchair attached to the front of a bicycle. You just take a seat and pay the driver to wheel you around wherever you want to go. Even though we own two cars and a truck, when Ma takes me to the market we often go in a cyclo because we get to our destination faster. Sitting on her lap I bounce and laugh as the driver pedals through the congested city streets.

This morning, I am stuck at a noodle shop a block from our apartment in this big chair. I'd much rather be playing hopscotch with my friends. Big chairs always make me want to jump on them. I hate the way my feet just hang in the air and dangle. Today, Ma has already warned me twice not to climb and stand on the chair. I settle for simply swinging my legs back and forth beneath the table.

Ma and Pa enjoy taking us to a noodle shop in the morning before Pa goes off to work. As usual, the place is filled with people having breakfast. The clang and clatter of spoons against the bottom of bowls, the slurping of hot tea and soup, the smell of garlic, cilantro, ginger, and beef broth in the air make my stomach rumble with hunger. Across from us, a man uses chopsticks to shovel noodles into his mouth. Next to him, a girl dips a piece of chicken into a small saucer of hoisin sauce while her mother cleans her teeth with a toothpick. Noodle soup is a traditional breakfast for Cambodians and Chinese. We usually have this, or for a special treat, French bread with iced coffee.

"Sit still," Ma says as she reaches down to stop my leg midswing, but I end up kicking her hand. Ma gives me a stern look and a swift slap on my leg.

"Don't you ever sit still? You are five years old. You are the most troublesome child. Why can't you be like your sisters? How will you ever grow up to be a proper young lady?" Ma sighs. Of course I have heard all this before.

It must be hard for her to have a daughter who does not act like a girl, to be so beautiful and have a daughter like me. Among her women friends, Ma is admired for her height, slender build, and porcelain white skin. I often overhear them talking about her beautiful face when they think she cannot hear. Because I'm a child, they feel free to say whatever they want in front of me, believing I cannot understand. So while they're ignoring me, they comment on her perfectly arched eyebrows; almond-shaped eyes; tall, straight Western nose; and oval face. At 5'6", Ma is an amazon among Cambodian women. Ma says she's so tall because she's all Chinese. She says that some day my Chinese side will also make me tall. I hope so, because now when I stand I'm only as tall as Ma's hips.

"Princess Monineath of Cambodia, now she is famous for being proper," Ma continues. "It is said that she walks so quietly that no one ever hears her approaching. She smiles without ever showing her teeth. She talks to men without looking directly in their eyes. What a gracious lady she is." Ma looks at me and shakes her head.

"Hmm ..." is my reply, taking a loud swig of Coca-Cola from the small bottle. Ma says I stomp around like a cow dying of thirst. She's tried many times to