

2018

Voices

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Voices

ANNA KENNEDY SHOCK

VOICES

by

Anna Kennedy Shock

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Sally McDonald Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford

May 2018

Approved by

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ABSTRACT

ANNA KENNEDY SHOCK: A Collection of Fictional Short Stories
(Under the direction of Elizabeth Spencer)

[“Voices” is a creative collection of fictional short stories based on perspectives from people residing in various locations worldwide. Research by way of historical documentaries, literature, and personal observation contributed to the completion of this project. Within this collection, multiple social justice issues are explored. These include but are not limited to the following: poverty, sex trafficking, educational opportunities, and malnourishment. Each individual story possesses its own set of characters, plot, and theme, but there are continuous thematic and structural consistencies throughout the collection. A few of these themes are desperation and survival, pain and suffering found in the human condition, and the significance of *place*. Interspersed between the fictional pieces are eight nonfictional, anecdotal micro-stories from the perspective of the author of the collection. These micro-stories are paired with various photographs taken by the author. These photographs display the settings where the fictional pieces occur.]

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“Art has the power to render sorrow beautiful, make loneliness a shared experience, and transform despair into hope...The magic of all art: the ability to both capture our pain and deliver us from it at the same time.”

Brene Brown

Introduction

My goal for *Voices* is to encourage story-telling and to inspire deep connection among individuals. Brene Brown says in her book, *Braving the Wilderness*, “The transformative power of art is in this sharing. Without connection or collective engagement, what we hear is simply a caged song of sorrow and despair; we find no liberation in it. It’s the sharing of art that whispers, ‘You’re not alone.’” Humans desire deep connections, and humans desire to feel heard and included and *not alone*. The stories in this collection give voices to those who have been unable to share their stories, and these stories, hopefully, will result in two things.

My hope is that this collection will create awareness for readers. As Americans, we have a different economic reality than much of the world. Roughly half of the world’s population lives on less than \$2.50 per day, and 11% of the world’s population are undernourished or hungry, according to statistics from the World Hunger Education Service based in Washington, D.C. in 2016. This hunger is a result of living in poverty, as well as living in places involved in conflict. I would argue that many Americans, in the face of our global wealth and privilege are unaware of the global distribution of resources, and that’s why I believe it is important and necessary for these truths to be made known.

Another reality for many individuals around the world is slavery. According to the recent statistics of the International Justice Mission, more than 40 million men, women, and children are currently enslaved around the world. At least two million of these are enslaved through sex trafficking, which is both unsettling and often unknown.

As inhabitants of the same planet, whether these realities directly affect us or not, it is important to be aware of these global issues. My hope is that this collection, *Voices*, sparks conversations about substantial issues such as global economic distribution and sex trafficking.

Another global issue acknowledged in *Voices* is education. Fifty million children around the globe do not have access to education. The reasons for this vary, but the Global Poverty Project attributes issues with education to the following: lack of school supplies, lack of funding, lack of physical buildings, and the expense of education. These issues, in addition to struggles within education systems worldwide, have lasting psychological and immediate professional effects on students. My collection of stories is born, in part, by bearing witness to these global maladies. For example, Hong Kong's school system is incredibly competitive. There are three different bands of schools, and the top tier are typically the only students that do well enough on the HKDSE (Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education) exam to be accepted into a university. Of those students, there is only one university seat available for every two students who pass the exam. A university education in Hong Kong is highly valued and desperately sought after, thus resulting in a negative quality of life for students. The immense pressure that students experience leads to depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts, in addition to other mental health issues.

The purpose for writing about students in Hong Kong, and people in other corners of the world, is so that more people will be aware, and so that the gap between unfamiliar cultures and people will be bridged, even if only momentarily. My stories take place

outside of America, but there is pain and brokenness and opportunity for connection and hope in the places I've written about, as well as all the places I haven't written about. These are shared human experiences, and they are not bound by location. We all feel pain. We all fail. We all desire intimacy. We all desire to be understood. We are united by these things, and my hope is for this collection to inspire more interaction and connection with those that are unlike us, whether in America or elsewhere.

My own experiences traveling abroad have provided me opportunities to make connections with people who live differently from me. My first venture out of the country was in January of 2015 when I traveled to Puerto Plata in the Dominican Republic on a short term mission trip with a group from the University of Mississippi. Over the course of the week, we did construction work, we volunteered at a church and organized a vacation Bible school of sorts, we played several games of soccer (or "futbol"), and we distributed food at a large trash dump. This was my first experience outside of the United States, and it opened my eyes to the reality of the varying living conditions in the world. When I returned home, I reflected on the week and discovered that I had several lingering questions about massive global issues, like poverty and evangelism in impoverished places. This was the beginning of my passion for international travel, and this was the inspiration for my stories, "A Blessing" and "Tortillas for Sale."

In the summer of 2016, I left the country for the second time. I went to Hong Kong for the summer to teach English to middle school students. This experience completely changed my worldview and my life. I was challenged in ways I'd never been

challenged before, and I grew as a result. Through this experience, I learned about Eastern cultures and holistic mindsets. I learned about the pressures to be successful that students in Hong Kong face. I learned about culture shock. I learned about navigating a big city. I learned about reverse culture shock. I learned about my passion for teaching and my passion for that portion of the globe.

In the summer of 2017, I went back to Southeast Asia for a second time. I went to Cambodia for a month to teach English to elementary students and university students, and I went back to Hong Kong for a month to teach English to middle school students again. At the end of the summer, I spent a week in Laos to debrief my time teaching. Over the course of that summer, I realized that my long-term career goal is to teach English as a second language somewhere in Asia. During the first week of the trip, a conversation with my team leader in Cambodia sparked the thought of long term work overseas, and as the summer wore on, with all its celebrations and challenges, I gradually fell deeper and deeper in love with the place I found myself. By the time I got to Laos at the end of the summer, I knew that my future plans had drastically shifted.

During this second summer, I also learned more about the culture and histories of Hong Kong, Cambodia, and Laos. One of the biggest takeaways from my experiences over those two months was the heightened awareness of the United States' impact on other countries and their histories. That awareness sparked the creation of my stories about the Vietnam War soldier; the Khmer Rouge, aka the Cambodian genocide; the Hong Kong student under pressure; the Hong Kong handover from Britain back to China; and the floating community that lives on a river in Cambodia.

In addition to being transformed and inspired by my travels, I found that studying literature helped me realize that creative writing was a way I could share my experiences. After traveling to Hong Kong and Cambodia during the summers of 2016 and 2017, I had so many stories locked away, and my creative writing classes gave me an outlet during the difficult days of reverse culture shock. Those days were full of tears over seemingly ridiculous things like having too many cereal options at Kroger and feeling nostalgic about crappy Nescafe instant coffee and missing white rice. The weeks that I struggled with re-entry were also full of overwhelming moments such as being unable to tune out all the English speakers around me or running into people I hadn't seen in a while and then trying to condense two months worth of memories into a two minute conversation. I struggled with knowing what was important enough to share with people when they asked how my summer was because it all seemed important to me. My creative writing classes gave me the opportunity to use words to paint pictures of Hong Kong cityscapes and Cambodian provinces for my classmates and to tell people about my students and the frustrating and hilarious things that they did each day. My creative writing classes also gave me the chance to hear my classmates' feedback about what details were necessary for my stories and what details were inconsequential. I took their feedback outside the classroom, and it helped me articulate my experience better when people asked about it.

When I returned home from teaching in Asia over the summer of 2017, I found a sacred space where I could share my stories, and I also found inspiration for this collection in one specific class—nonfiction environmental writing. The type of work studied in that class included factual information about the habitat in which a person finds

themselves, as well as how that intersects with an individual's personal experience. My writing topics for the seven stories in the collection have been researched, and my desire is that they will be informative to readers. Books such as *Raising Wild: Dispatches from a Home in the Wilderness* by Michael Branch, and *The Woman Who Watches over the World* by Linda Hogan, have descriptions that emphasize the deep significance of *place*. In these works, these authors portray places in ways that tell the stories of the land, the culture, and the people living in those areas. They describe the significance of physical locations, and they do so in beautifully-crafted language to enable the reader to experience the places as well.

In *Raising Wild*, Michael Branch describes a "storied landscape" as "one in which memorable associations have been forged between specific places and the meaningful experiences we've had in those places." My desire for this collection is to shed light on some of these storied landscapes and to reveal some of the experiences that could have occurred in places I've travelled. My hope is that readers will also get glimpses of Hong Kong, of Cambodia, of Central America and feel as though they have also been transported to these places, if just for a brief moment.

In addition to the environmental authors Branch and Hogan, much of my collection's content was inspired by the Ken Burns documentary series, "The Vietnam War." It is raw. It tells one large story about the Vietnam War using a collection of several personal reflections from soldiers, family members, civilians, and people from the United States and all over Southeast Asia. These episodes show complex emotions and historical, yet harsh, events. My stories are loosely based on historical events, and

though they are fictional, they are largely inspired by factual data. Just as there's a realness to Ken Burns's documentary series, there's a realness to this collection. The stories in my collection have not happened in reality, but they could. Some versions of these stories, stripped to the most basic of plot lines, are really happening to people right now. I want my collection to give voices to the experiences of people in varying places, and I want to expose the realities happening all around us. The topics I've chosen to write about are not limited to physical locations, but they are issues with humanity at large. All humans in the world have a voice, though many are not heard. As Linda Hogan says in *The Woman Who Watches Over the World*, "Opening the eyes is the job of storytellers, witnesses, and the keepers of accounts. The stories we know and tell are reservoirs of light and fire that brighten and illuminate the darkness of human night, the unseen." This collection is an opportunity for more voices to be heard and more eyes to be opened.

In addition to giving others voices, this collection has helped me find my own voice and process my experience teaching abroad. In *Raising Wild*, Michael Branch speaks about the writing process and says, "The struggle to make sense—perhaps even to make art—of a difficult experience is foundational to the work of any storyteller." As a storyteller, writing this collection has been an ongoing, and at times difficult, process of accepting the realities of history around the world and learning about how a great number of people have been affected by events completely out of their control. As I've been going through the process of creating these stories, I've also been emotionally processing what I've been learning through research and from my experiences teaching overseas.

As a traveler and a storyteller and a feeler and a teacher and a student of English, creative writing, sociology, and psychology, I have drawn from many sources to create this collection. Each area of study has contributed to my work, and as a result, I feel that this collection is multifaceted and can be read in a variety of ways. It could be read through the lens of literary analysis, noting symbolism, foreshadowing, and thematic similarities. It could be analyzed from a creative writing standpoint, observing figurative language and repetition and stylistic formatting decisions. It could be read with a sociological view, seeking out societal influences on real people around the world and looking at how the structural level of society impacts individuals' lives. This collection could also be read with psychological observation, and a reader could use it to exemplify underlying motivations for why humans universally act and react the ways that they do.

Because this is such a dynamic piece, and so many areas of study have contributed to its creation, it is difficult for me to limit its belonging to one specific place in literature. It could belong in a category related to spiritual seeking or geography along with Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard*, because both works have settings placed in countries in the same area of the world and to some extent include characters involved in spiritual quests. On the other hand, this collection could be grouped with other collections of short stories because, at the most basic level, that is exactly what it is. Another collection of fictional short stories that I've been influenced by is William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*. This collection is made up of interrelated narratives with characters and thematic components that carry over from one story to the next. The form of my own collection is somewhat similar in that the stories explore a variety of cultural

contexts and historical events. Though the characters in my stories do not carry over from one to the next, the cohesiveness of the collection should be evident thematically.

Novels such as William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* stylistically inspired my collection, and my collection could be categorized with that type of literature. *As I Lay Dying* is made up of minute chapters to complete a story that is told from multiple perspectives. Several characters contribute to the telling of Addie Bundren's death and the journey that her family takes to carry out her wishes after her passing. Through the multi-narrator form, the story has a unique twist and the story unfolds differently than if only one perspective had been told. Similarly, the goal of my entire collection is to use multiple perspectives and multiple stories based on people in various places in order to tell a larger story and to broach difficult questions and struggles of the world and the people that inhabit it. Though each of my stories in *Voices* has its own message and plot, they collectively represent the sameness that we all as human beings experience.

Additionally, a couple of my pieces—"Toy Bomb" and "The Cause"—are comprised of multiple narrators, which helps to depict a full image of the characters' circumstances.

The final genre in which *Voices* could find its home, and perhaps the most appropriate location for it, is historical fiction. Much of this collection uses reality as a platform for fictional characters to perform. All of the stories intertwine historical components with fictional conversations and people. The resources utilized in order to incorporate these historical components were the Ken Burns's documentary series, *The Vietnam War*, Craig Calhoun's *Neither Gods nor Emperors—Students and the Struggle for Democracy in China*, and the documentaries *Joshua: Teenager vs. Superpower* and

First They Killed My Father. This book and these documentaries added detailed information to the basic overview of historical information I gathered while teaching and traveling abroad, offering personal retellings of national wars and political protests.

I've written stories on behalf of my brothers and sisters around the globe who have experienced and are currently experiencing things such as war and political upheaval, and in doing so, I've been able to retell part of my own story. One way I've been able to do this is through the micro-stories and photographs dispersed between each short story in this collection. The photographs are pictures that I took while abroad, and my hope is that they will provide readers with tiny glimpses of the settings where many of the stories in this collection take place, as well as glimpses of the places that I have grown to love. The micro-stories that are paired with the photos were originally drafted in the private journals I kept over the summers when I traveled to Hong Kong and Cambodia in 2016 and 2017. These micro-stories are the most honest depictions of my summers overseas, and now that they have been publicized, it is easier for me to share other less-picturesque reflections and anecdotes from the summers. Deeper understanding and human connection have resulted from this honest sharing and storytelling.

Documentaries, history textbooks, environmental writing, fictional short stories, nonfiction pieces, museums, and personal experience have all contributed to this body of work, and I hope deeper understanding and human connection will be the fruit of it, too. The creation of this collection has helped me put words to the stories in my head and

make sense of the stories in my heart, and they've helped me give voices to people around the world through my collection.

Viola Davis, the famous Oscar-winning actress from various films such as *The Help* and *Fences*, once said, "There's an unspoken message that the only stories worth telling are the stories that end up in history books. That is not true. Every story matters... We are all worthy of telling our stories and having them heard. We all need to be seen and honored in the same way that we all need to breathe."

Week One



I don't want to do this. I don't want to fly halfway around the world. I don't want to be confined to a seat on a plane for fifteen hours. I don't want to live with eleven people I don't know. I don't want to teach twenty students who don't speak English. I don't know what to expect. I don't want to do this. But I'm doing it anyway.

Typhoon Season

I looked out the window of our classroom on the ninth floor, and I watched my English teacher and her friends dart from the inside of the McDonald's to the covering next to bus stop 85B, the one the foreign teachers waited at every day after school to take them back to where they stayed. I never really knew where they were staying. My teacher showed me a picture once, but the sign only said, "High Rock Retreat Center, Sha Tin." I don't know what a "retreat center" is, and my teacher didn't know how to explain it in simpler English words. I think it is sort of like a hotel, but I am not sure.

The teachers normally ate ice cream cones as they waited for the bus. But today they didn't. Probably because of the rain. It would most likely stop soon. It'd been raining for about an hour, which was a long stretch for this time of year.

My teacher's name is Miss Sarah. I like Miss Sarah because she plays games with our class instead of just lecturing about a bunch of boring stuff. English camp is not like normal school. I am very happy about that. It is only six weeks, though, which I am not happy about. School is miserable and very hard. English camp is also hard, but it is a lot more fun. I am sad because tomorrow is our last day of the camp, which means I won't get to see Miss Sarah after that. She goes back to America next week. I will miss her very much. She is always so nice and smiles at me every morning when I walk in the classroom, and she plays One Direction and Maroon 5 songs for us while we journal in class. Then before English camp is over every day, she tells all her students that we did a good job that day and that she loves us. I like that about her. She makes me feel smart,

and when I get English words wrong, she only corrects me and encourages me to try again. “In-coo-ray-j,” that is a word that Miss Sarah taught me last Wednesday. We played a game called “Around the World” with vocabulary words. The winner got a kinder egg, which is a chocolate candy with a prize inside. I didn’t win, but it was still fun.

“Jason, I know you didn’t win the game today, but I encourage you to try again tomorrow. I’m proud of you for participating today,” Miss Sarah told me before I left school that day. I think she likes me, because most of the other students don’t like to play her games. But I don’t know why. They are so much better than work.

Miss Sarah and the other teachers had been huddled together under the covering at the bus stop, trying to avoid the rain, but Mister Austin finally gave up and just stood in the downpour. His blue collared shirt was already soaked through anyway. Then the other teachers had more space under the little awning.

When I get English words wrong with my after school tutor, he gets very angry with me. Then he tells my parents about it, and they get angry with me, too, even though they aren’t fluent in English either. That’s why my parents sent me to English camp this year. They were hoping that I could get some last minute practice before I took the DSE last Monday.

The DSE is the big test that you take when you are seventeen and you finish secondary school. I just finished school the week before English camp started, so I took the test about a week ago. The DSE determines if you can go to University or not. It is

made up of three subject areas, one of which is English. Because I'm not very good at English, my parents were worried about how I'd do on the test. So they paid for me to come to the camp for the first time this year. It might have really helped me on the test if I'd been coming every summer like the rest of my classmates, but we didn't have money for me to come all six years. We didn't really have the money this year, but my parents desperately wanted me to do well on the test, so they saved up for a long time. And they remind me about that at home almost every night.

My parents work in a restaurant and normally get home before I get home from school. We live in one of the tall apartment buildings down the street from my school. It only takes me about ten minutes to walk there. Our apartment is halfway between my school and the mall where my parents work at Gong Cha. We live on the thirteenth floor, so I can see the big mall from the window. My parents leave for work before I leave for school. Then we eat dinner together after school, and they go back to the mall until it closes at night. At the beginning of English camp, I'd always walk into the apartment excitedly and ready to tell my mom and dad about Miss Sarah and the things we'd done that day. Then my parents started asking me why we were playing games instead of working all the time.

“Aiya!” they'd say, “we didn't save all our money for you to play games. We saved up so you would learn something.” or “Who is Miss Sarah? You need to be in a class with teachers who will teach you, not be your friend.” So after the first couple of days, I stopped telling them about English camp. We played games, but I felt like I was

still learning. Miss Sarah wasn't like normal teachers. She was my friend *and* she taught me lessons. I've learned so many new words over the last few weeks at camp.

Even with English camp, though, I don't think I did very well on the DSE. Which means I won't be able to go to University. And I won't be able to get a good job. Or maybe even a job at all. If I'm lucky, my parents might let me work with them at Gong Cha. Probably not though. I would still have to live with them, too. Not likely.

Bus 85B finally came. The teachers took two quick steps from the sidewalk to the bus in an attempt to stay as dry as possible. Despite all their efforts, from nine stories high I could see how wet the tops of their heads were. I still haven't figured out why they don't carry umbrellas with them all the time. Even though it's never for very long, it rains almost every day in Hong Kong during typhoon season. And it always starts so suddenly. The teachers didn't seem upset about being wet though. They all appeared to be laughing as they stepped onto the bus.

My dad wants me to be a doctor. My mom wants me to teach. I'm good at math, and she always says I would be a good math teacher. They want my life to be easier than theirs. They don't want me to have to work as much as they do to get by. But you have to go to University to do the things they want me to do. I don't know why your DSE score makes that decision for you. It doesn't make sense to me. I don't have to know English to teach math in a Hong Kong school where all the students speak Cantonese as their first language. Even so, my score on the DSE will tell me what my future will hold.

I was supposed to find out how I did on the test today. It scared me. I didn't want to go home and face the results. Or my parents. I knew I didn't do well. Or at least well enough. There were a few more hours of hope, though. My score was sent in the mail, which my parents probably already picked up. But I thought surely they wouldn't open it without me.

I walked out of classroom 915, into the hallway. I leapt up and sat on the ledge of the wall. I dialed my mom's phone number, and as the phone rang, I threw my legs over the wall to where they were hanging down over the street. I felt secure on the ledge—it was a little under a foot in width and my hand was firmly planted on the school-side of the wall as my legs hung loosely against the street-side. My friends and I did this sometimes after school, after all the teachers left. Nobody had ever fallen or gotten hurt. But we were always on the second, maybe third floor, never the ninth.

My mom didn't answer the first time.

I tried my dad next.

He answered.

“You failed.”

I was speechless. I didn't see that coming. I mean, I had known I hadn't done very well on the test, but I didn't think my parents would open my mail before I'd gotten home. I didn't know what to say.

After a few seconds of baffled silence, I realized I was angry. I was angry with my parents for opening my mail, but I think I'd been angry for a while even before today. With my parents, for putting so much pressure on me. With Hong Kong, for making such ridiculous rules to determine people's futures for them. With myself, for not doing better. I'd tried. But it wasn't enough. It was never enough.

"I'm sorry." Those were the only words I could really put together after the initial shock had worn off, and even then, they came out as a question. I knew that in failing the test, I had also failed my parents. That was the worst part about it all. Not that I couldn't go to University, but that I hadn't lived up to my parents expectations for me. I was angry with them, but I still wanted to make them proud. I wanted to give a purpose to the pressure they'd put me under. I wanted it to be worth it. And worth all the saving they'd done for English camp and tutoring. And worth Miss Sarah coming to Hong Kong to teach me. And worth all the hours of work I'd put in for so long. But I'd failed. I'd failed the test, and I'd failed all of us. I was ashamed.

My dad was silent on the other end of the line.

"Dad?"

"What?" he said.

"What do I do now?" I asked. I didn't really even know what the question meant. Only that I was looking for some kind of reassurance, or affirmation that I could come home and not be shunned. Mostly I just needed to hear that everything would be okay.

“Nothing,” my father responded.

“Should I come home?” I asked, even though I had nowhere to go if he said no. I heard rustling and hushed voices on the other end of the line. It took him longer than it should have to respond.

“We don’t care.” That meant my mother was there, too.

“Okay. I’m sorry. Bye,” I said, and again, it came out as if I was asking something.

The line clicked dead, and I thought about what I should do. Go home? I didn’t think I could stand in front of my parents. Go on a walk? It was still pouring. Jump? What was stopping me? I’d thought about it a thousand times after tutoring sessions. I’d sit at the desk in my living room, looking out the window, at the cars passing on the street below, wondering if I should do it, wondering what it would feel like. I’d always talked myself out of it, then, because I had hope that I could miraculously pass the test.

But that hope was gone. And Miss Sarah would be gone after tomorrow. My friends would all be moving to universities across the city. My parents didn’t care if I came home. I didn’t really want to work in a restaurant. It seemed like the easiest option.

So I did it. I decided to jump, and I counted to three.

“Yat, Yee, Saum...”

Week Two



“Welcome to S21—the largest prison during the Cambodian genocide. Please be respectful as you walk through the museum.”

It’s heavy here. My legs feel sluggish. My head feels cloudy. It’s hard to breathe. I search for words to give my teammates. I search for light. I find none. There is silence. There is darkness. There is heaviness. There is reality.

Claps of Thunder

The man convinced the guard to let him help his wife with the baby. She forced herself to be quiet during labor, for fear of being beaten. Her husband had been whipped because the night guards heard his chain move against the cement floors a few weeks prior. She was careful not to make a mess when she had the little boy. The inmates were forced to lick the waste away if they missed the metal bowl sitting on the floor of the small, rectangular cell. She assumed giving birth would be the same.

The father got to hold the baby, and his wife, and it was bliss in the middle of hell. For one day, they got to be a family. They even got to shower. The couple had somehow managed to be sitting directly in the line of the hose spewing water into the barred window. The water from the hose was warm, and it was ninety degrees outside, and in the hundreds in such crowded, insulated rooms, but the water was cleaner than the filth that had accumulated over the weeks since they'd been sprayed. They were soaked through—their clothes created puddles of dark, murky liquid on the floor around them. They sat in the puddles until being relocated back to their cells.

They'd been held in the same cells for the six months they'd been at Toul Sleng—an old school building that had been turned into a prison. The troops had marched through the street near their house earlier in the year, and the couple stayed inside, unnoticed as long as they could. Eventually they ran out of food though. Then they were discovered and forced into the back of a truck and were sent away with the next herd bound for Phnom Penh. Soon after arriving, the woman found out about the baby. She'd wept as she told her husband.

Once the couple had been led back to their cells after the shower, they were told that because of their infant, they were being moved to a new home. Tears had rolled down their faces when they had been called. They'd heard that others had been relocated to the province a month before, and they wondered when it would be their turn to leave the hell hole. At least there was greenery and space in the province. At S21 there were dirty buildings and bodies everywhere.

"The bus leaves at dusk," the security officer shouted into one of the rooms.

The couple wasn't alerted when the bus arrived, though. They had been locked in their cells shushing the baby since their shower. As the walls became a darker shade of grey and the light outside began to dim, the man wondered if the bus existed at all. No one had left their room. No chains had been rattled free. It had been quiet, except for the baby.

It had been dark for an hour or so when a man finally came. He was bigger than the rest of the people in the room. His skin had muscle underneath it. It didn't cling to bone like the skin of the men with shackles around their ankles. The officer retrieved the male first, then the female and infant.

"You didn't come when the bus came," he sneered. But they all knew there was no way for them to have come on their own. Not without being unlocked first.

"Now you'll have to walk to where the others are," the security officer told them.

Two guards walked behind the family on the rural dirt road. The group had walked a couple miles, but the mother and father were both so weak. Their pace had slowed.

“Keep up!” the guards shouted at the man every few minutes.

“Walk faster!” they demanded of the woman.

Occasionally the shouts were accompanied by shoves, causing the baby to cry, which instigated another round of disgruntled commands. They continued like that for another half mile or so. Until gunshots fired. The man heard a gargled scream, and saw his wife’s body collapse on the road. The baby rolling out of her arms. He bent down to reach for the baby, who was several feet in front of him, and he felt an odd sensation in his lower left calf. He slid his hand over the back of his leg. He came across a stream of warm liquid. He hadn’t even felt the bullet hit him. Another round of gunshots began. A chorus of booming thunder.

“Run! Run! They are killing me!” he heard in between thunder claps. He hesitated, and something hot hit his arm. Another stream began flowing. He dragged himself to the side of the road. He crouched behind a termite mound and turned to stare at the body dancing on the ground in the moonlight. He saw a smaller body off to the side, dancing in the dirt, too. His hand instinctively flinched upwards and his fist clenched, as if grabbing ahold of them would bring them to safety. Then he heard the footsteps. He quickly turned his back away from the mound and dropped to the ground, crawling as fast as his frail body would move him, weeping as he escaped through the rice field. He wondered how long he had before they hit him again, but it never happened. He heard a baby crying when the gunshots died down.

After that he was haunted by the ghost of his wife. She hadn't been properly buried. There was no ceremony, just as there was no ceremony for the others. Her soul would never be at peace, just as the others would never be at peace. She would remain a ghost. As would the baby, who never got to know a world outside the evils of the rouge. His little life was taken after a day, and his ghost would always be crying.

Week Three



I've been gone for six weeks. I'm exhausted. Cambodia was so hard. So heavy. So much poverty. Dammit. I miss my family. I miss people who know me. I hate my team. I miss rest. I miss being carefree. I just want to be with my mom. I just want to be home.

Tortillas for Sale

The flames fought to stay alive inside the rusty sink lying on the ground. Ivetta stared at the dying fire, her eyes beginning to burn from the smoke. She leaned down close to blow life into the embers, her cheek two inches from the sink. After three steady breaths, a few mouthfuls of black smoke, and a coughing fit, a few flames sparked. She needed to keep blowing, but the coughing wouldn't stop. She'd inhaled so much smoke.

"Ivetta, are you okay?" Flor said as she came around the corner. Ivetta shook her head wildly as she continued coughing. She pointed at the fire. Flor understood and hurriedly set her water jug on the ground by Ivetta's dirt-covered feet, took a few gasps of fresh air, and then knelt at the edge of the sink to keep the fire alive. Flor kicked Ivetta's broken tortilla press when she bent to the ground to revive the fire, causing a few puffs of dust to rise as the thick metal pieces hit the ground. The tortilla press had belonged to Ivetta's mother, and Ivetta had taken it from their house when she'd gotten married. Her mother had passed away a couple months before the marriage. Though the press was broken and the two discs weren't connected, it still served its purpose.

Ivetta's cough subsided after several minutes, and she began helping Flor with the fire, adding some small sticks first, and then a few larger ones. Ivetta needed more firewood. She was running out of thicker sticks, and without those larger pieces, her battle with the fire would continue. Without a steady fire, she couldn't make tortillas.

Ivetta had been coming to the outskirts of Guayaquil six days of the week for four years to sell tortillas on the street, much to the dismay of Diego, the man who controlled

the neighborhood. Their deal was that she could work on his streets, but she couldn't cause trouble. He could take as many tortillas as he wanted, too. She walked an hour from her home village each morning while it was still dark outside. She walked back at night, after the sun had already set, to greet her two sleepy children who'd been locked in the house all day with the leftover, burnt tortillas that hadn't sold. Once she'd tried to bring the kids with her, but the way Diego eyed her daughter made her nervous.

Xavier, who was seven, and Maria, five, never complained about being left at home. They didn't know any different. They were too young to remember the day they'd gone with her. They'd been receiving burnt tortillas since their father had left them four years earlier. When he was around and had a job at the brickyard near their village, Ivetta would stop at the market across from Flor's water stand every few days to get corn husks for the tortillas. She would also buy rice and beans for dinner and a few bananas and avocados for breakfast. Now, Ivetta worked tirelessly to get two or three bananas once a week.

Flor glanced at the diminishing pile of firewood. "I'll be back," she said as she handed Ivetta her water jug. She started back down the road the way she'd come, avoiding broken glass as she walked away in her thin rubber sandals. Before she rounded the corner she turned in Ivetta's direction and said, "Drink." Her expression was stern, but also amused. Ivetta obediently took a large gulp of water, and Flor nodded with a smirk on her ash-covered, sun-tanned face and turned away again.

Flor, a native of Guayaquil, was about twenty years older than nineteen-year-old Ivetta, and she often treated Ivetta as though she was one of her own. Flor had three

children to support with her water business. Her husband had died a few years back, but she did well for herself and the children. She was the only water vendor in the neighborhood. Flor went out of the way to provide Ivetta with water every day, at least once in the morning, once in the afternoon, and once before Ivetta started her long trek home.

On Saturdays, Ivetta spent the day at home with Maria and Xavier, making masa, the corn flour, for the coming week. She missed Flor's generosity most on those days. She would use her one gallon tin can to boil water to soak the corn before grinding it into powder. Ivetta and the children only had a single gallon of smokey drinking water to share between the three of them on those days. There were always tiny ashes floating in the water. Ivetta laughed and told her kids it "added extra flavor," but she really hated the taste of it.

It was mid afternoon and the sun was beating down hard. Sweat dripped from Ivetta's forehead down to her neck, soaking into her cheap navy blue blouse. Normally, the shirt hung on her frail frame, but when drenched in sweat, it held tightly to her skin, exposing her bony figure. She picked up Flor's milk jug filled with water and took another swig. She wanted to pour the whole gallon over her face to cool off her fire- and sun-burnt skin, but she knew better than to waste the clean water.

Flor came back around the corner with her eldest daughter, both toting an armful of logs. They dropped the sticks between Ivetta's stool and the sink. Ivetta felt relieved at the sight of the wood, but she also felt a weight added. Flor already gave her water every day. Now she was even more indebted to her friend.

“Thank you, Flor,” Ivetta said with a slight smile. “I’ll bring you tortillas when I finish these.”

“No rush,” Flor said as she brushed off her skirt and put a cardboard square on the ground to sit.

“Who’s watching your water stand?” Ivetta asked.

“Marisol is there with Juan,” Flor said.

Marisol was Flor’s oldest child at seventeen years, and Juan, who was eight, was her youngest. Flor often left Marisol in charge of the water stand to take breaks and walk around the neighborhood. Ivetta understood how hard it was to sit in one spot for such a long time. She wished she was lucky enough to have an extra pair of hands to help her.

“Where’s David?” Ivetta asked.

“Probably the scrap yard again. Most of the boys he hangs out with now go there a lot.” Flor sighed and fixed her gaze down the street. Ivetta added another stick to the fiery sink.

David was Flor’s middle child. He was fourteen. He’d suffered the most when his father died. He was eleven then, and he and his father had worked together every day doing construction in a nearby town. They walked together each morning and each afternoon, and they found comfort in the conversations and the silences shared on those walks. After his death, David started roaming the streets, first alone, and then with a gang of brothers. Ivetta recognized the brothers because they wore tight-fitting, dark-colored hats, even in the suffocating heat, and they constantly threw things and laughed at people. Flor didn’t like it, but she couldn’t control her son anymore. He was grown.

“I’m sorry,” Ivetta said, resting a hand on Flor’s shoulder.

“The boys give him food. So I don’t have to worry about that anymore.” Flor sighed again.

“That’s good,” Ivetta said, smiling softly.

She slid the tortillas across the piece of metal propped over the fire in the sink. They moved easily as she used her fingertips to slide them off the makeshift pan to flip them. After she flipped the last tortilla, her smallest finger on her right hand briefly skidded across the metal sheet. She stuck her pinky in her mouth, tasting the tortilla mix along with dirt and ash as she sucked her scorched finger. A minute passed. She pulled her finger out of her mouth and examined it. It had a red hot blotch covering its tip. It would blister.

Ivetta was an experienced tortilla-maker, but she sometimes got clumsy. Her forefingers and thumbs, calloused from so many years of the same process, were immune to the heat. Her other fingers were more sensitive.

“What happened?” Flor demanded. She’d been staring down the street, thinking of David, until she noticed Ivetta’s pained expression.

“Just a little burn.”

Flor looked concerned, but didn’t press.

A few minutes later the tortillas’ edges curved upwards, towards the sun. Ivetta slid them off the metal and onto her sole plastic plate. She’d had four when she started, which allowed her to make more tortillas to sell at one time, but the other three had been

stolen, lost, or broken over the years that she'd been traveling to the city. She couldn't justify buying more—the one was sufficient.

She stacked the nine palm-sized tortillas on the plate and began making more tortilla mix with the water from Flor's jug. She weaved her fingers in and out of the powder and water until it was one consistency throughout. Malleable, but cohesive. The moist mixture soothed her burning pinky. She knew it wouldn't last long though. Once the heat of the fire and the sun dried her hands out, which would take only a few minutes, the dried-out mixture on her blistered hand would intensify the pain. Ivetta was mostly used to her cracked and rough hands, but the days when burns and blisters appeared were terrible.

“Here are your tortillas,” Ivetta told Flor as she held out four of the fresh ones, alternating hands to keep the heat moving in the air rather than allowing it to settle on her palms.

“Thank you. I should probably get back to Marisol and Juan now,” Flor said, “I'll be back by later today.”

“Tell them I said hello,” Ivetta said as she watched Flor walk down the street, narrowly dodging Diego as he rounded the corner at the end of the street. His face was fixed in a constant scowl, and he glared at them as he passed.

Ivetta knew he was coming for tortillas. He halted in front of her feet with his arm extended. He didn't even look at her. Ivetta put three of the hot tortillas in Diego's hand. He examined them, then noticed the two tortillas hidden on the plastic plate under Ivetta's stool. His eyebrows furrowed.

She gave him the last two tortillas.

Ivetta had made twenty-four more good, and three charred, tortillas when Marisol rounded the corner of the street and approached Ivetta. Seventeen tortillas had sold.

Ivetta smiled tightly and held out two golden yellow tortillas to the girl.

“Hi, how are you?” Ivetta asked Marisol.

“Fine. How are the tortillas today?” Marisol said.

“Good. Not many people are buying today though.”

“I heard the pay from Diego went down again,” Marisol said with a shrug.

Ivetta simply nodded. She wondered where Marisol had gotten her information. Marisol had never worked a day in her life, other than watching her mother’s stand for a few minutes every once in a while. Flor’s business was one of the best in the area. She had no competition. There was one major pipeline in the neighborhood, and it ran right to Flor’s house on the edge of the street opposite the massage parlor. People had to drink water. Their options were to buy from Flor or walk several miles to the nearest river, which Ivetta could see from her secluded shack in the woods an hour away. People chose to buy from Flor. And since David had left the family to join the brothers, Flor only had to support herself and her two other children. Ivetta had two little ones to support as well, making a lot less money than her friend.

“Have you looked for a job recently, Marisol?” Ivetta asked, already knowing the answer.

“Why?” Marisol asked.

“Curious,” Ivetta shrugged.

“No, I haven’t,” Marisol defended.

“Why?” she demanded.

“I was much younger than you when I started my business with tortillas. Just something to think about,” Ivetta told her.

Marisol said nothing.

“You’ll be eighteen soon, right?” Ivetta asked.

“I don’t need a job,” Marisol said before walking away.

“Will you need a job when you have two kids to take care of? It’s only a matter of time before one of the men around here decides you’re too old to be innocent anymore.” Ivetta called quietly after her.

Marisol paused, but didn’t turn her head back to Ivetta before continuing down the road. Flor treated Marisol as a child, which worried Ivetta. She was much more inexperienced than Ivetta had been at seventeen. Ivetta remembered once when Marisol had gone to the market by herself and stayed for most of the morning, talking to one of the teenage boys working at a fruit stand. When Marisol got home that day, she told her mother about the boy’s father dying from work in one of the banana plantations. Flor didn’t let Marisol go to the market after that.

Ivetta glanced at her sleeping children in their tiny straw-roofed hut the next morning as she gathered her supplies. She put her tortilla press along with her metal pan and masa into a potato sack. It was ripped on one side, but if she held it a certain way,

nothing would fall through the hole. She kissed Maria and Xavier before setting out two cooled, though still smokey, cups of water that she'd boiled the night before and four leftover tortillas from the previous day. She hoped the kids wouldn't get too hungry while she was gone. She was careful not to wake them as she closed the door behind her and wrapped wires around the door and the exposed bamboo post in the wall. She knew they wouldn't be able to escape. And she assumed no one would find their little hut in all the greenery. No one from the village lived close to them. When she pulled the wire taut, she heard a whimper from inside the house. Maria had woken up.

“Mami! Mami!” she cried.

Ivetta leaned her forehead against the doorframe and closed her eyes.

“I'll be back tonight baby. Go back to sleep.”

She knew if she went back inside to console Maria, it would be that much harder to leave.

“Be quiet Maria! Mami? I want water.” Maria's crying had awoken Xavier.

“There's some in the pot next to the fire pit. I have to go now. Give your sister some water, too.”

“Mammmmi,” Ivetta heard Maria's voice cry.

“I love you. I'll bring sugar with me when I come back!” Ivetta said as she turned her back on the kids and the house. They called bananas “sugar” because they were so sweet.

As Ivetta approached the outer wall of metal shacks, she ducked her head to avoid some wires going into the roof of the massage parlor. The wires likely connected to a single lightbulb being propped up against a wall. She passed Diego. He was always getting massages it seemed. As Ivetta walked passed, she noticed that there was one less girl sitting on display in the long front window of the house. She wondered what had happened to her. Or who had happened to her. Most of the men that visited the place were like Diego. Violent.

Desperate for more food to take back to her children, she stopped briefly to ask Diego if there were any jobs that she could do for him. She asked him that most days as she entered the city, and the answer was usually no, but she asked anyway.

Diego approached her later that day. He was one of the few that day. A young woman had bought five tortillas to go with her family's arroz con leche for breakfast. The brothers had thrown money on the cardboard next to Ivetta's fire, and helped themselves to the plate of tortillas until Ivetta screamed at them to leave. One kid had traded a bottle of water for three tortillas. She wondered where the bottle had come from. Neither Flor nor Marisol had come to bring her water. She held the plate of tortillas out to Diego. She'd made enough to replace the full plate that the brothers had taken, so she knew she'd have some to sell, even after he took his share.

"My boys said you yelled at them," Diego said. He knocked the plate out of her hands in one swift, cruel motion. All of the good tortillas fell into the dirt beside her. Tears welled up in her eyes. She picked up a few of them to try to brush them off, but

dirt specks were clearly visible. They were ruined. No one would buy them. She wouldn't have enough money to buy masa and vegetables at the market. Maria and Xavier could only survive on corn tortillas for so long. Their bellies were already so swollen. They needed more than a single banana in a week. This week, they wouldn't even get that.

"I'm sorry, Diego, I'm sorry, they took all of my tortillas," she pleaded.

"You give them tortillas. Or you don't come here anymore," he said.

"Please. I need something else. I need money. Can't I do something else?" Ivetta asked, forgetting she'd already asked the same thing earlier that morning. Diego took his tortillas and rolled his eyes as he turned away. Before he got all the way down the road though, he turned back to Ivetta and walked towards her.

She didn't like the look on his face.

"There is something you can do. You can give me Flor's girl. One of the other girls got out of line last night..she's gone now." Diego's smile was tight, as if he was holding back laughter.

Ivetta was disgusted with herself for considering the offer. She knew it was terrible. She knew it was wrong. She knew it was a death sentence for Marisol.

But she needed more money. She needed food for Xavier and Maria. Marisol needed to learn how to work and support herself, too, and Flor needed to stop treating her like a child. She was a woman. She should act like one.

"What do I get?" Ivetta asked.

“I’ll give you enough money for a piece of fruit every day, and I might start paying you for tortillas if she performs well.”

Ivetta heard herself agree to the deal, so hungry for money and a guarantee for food. She didn’t fully think through what it would do to her friendship with Flor.

As he sauntered away from her with a smug smile on his face, Ivette stoked her fire back up with the few remaining sticks she had and began to mix more corn flour and the last of the boiled water she’d toted from home that morning. She’d pressed two tortillas into flat, even circles and thrown them on the pan above the fire when Flor came running at her, tears streaming down her flushed face. Ivette stood immediately.

“He took her. Diego took her! How could you do this?” Flor yelled.

Behind Flor, Ivette saw Diego walking with Marisol. His grasp was firm on her arm. She wouldn’t escape. On his other side was one of the men who always sat outside the massage parlor with the other girls, their faces all made up, with bright pink lipstick, and dark, shadowy eyelids. Ivette never knew where the make up came from.

“I think you made the right decision, Ivette,” Diego said, tossing an apple onto the ground next to her.

Flor’s anguished eyes following the apple to the ground before settling on Ivette’s eyes. Her stare demanded answers.

Ivetta tried to speak, but nothing made sense inside her head, and no words came out.

Tears streamed down both of their faces, leaving clean lines through the dust on their cheeks. Ivette reached her hand out to Flor, but let it hover in midair. Ivette wasn’t

sure she regretted what she'd done. But she hated knowing she'd caused the look on Flor's face. Flor slapped her, leaving a stinging crimson handprint on Ivetta's right cheek.

The next day when Ivetta walked into the city, she ducked below the wires, and a young, frightened girl's gaze caught her eye. She was sitting behind the window at the front of the parlor, pink lipstick smeared on both sides of her mouth, and a trail of black silently making its way down her cheeks.

Week Four



I was so excited to see her. And it was a beautiful, beautiful reunion. It was also an awkward reunion. There was no hugging. There was an uncomfortable pat on the shoulder. There were embarrassed smiles. But there were no words. Sally still knew no English. I still knew no Cantonese. We nodded. We giggled. We were excited. That was it.

The Cause

2015—Mother isn't doing well. It was tense before, but now that Aaron is gone, she doesn't speak. We are publicly ridiculed by some people in our building, and we are praised as if we are heroes by others. The older people glare at us as we wait in line at the bus stop across the street. The younger people smile at us and bow their heads when we walk by. My mother had nothing to do with it, but they know that the rest of us did.

“Mom,” I say, shaking her awake. I am leaving for school, but I want to make sure she has enough to eat while I am gone. I am going to work with Dad after school at the office. He is a doctor, and sometimes I work at the front desk of the clinic. I work almost every day now, since it happened, since Aaron was taken away, since Mother stopped speaking.

She doesn't respond, but she opens her eyes and looks me up and down before rolling back over, covering her face with her bedsheets.

“I'm going to school now. I'm working tonight. There's rice on the stove and vegetables on the counter. I bought more water when I was out this morning. Wing said hello. I saw him at the market. I'll see you later. Call me if you need me,” I say, knowing she won't call, but hoping she will.

I take a deep breath as I finish my morning monologue and walk out of the apartment. As I wait for the lift, I wonder if she will actually get out of bed to eat today. Yesterday I came to check on her during my lunch hour and she hadn't moved. When I tried to get her to eat something, she just stayed under the covers. But when I got home last night, the bowl of food was empty.

I check my phone before heading into class and see a text from Dad asking what time I'll be in today.

[To: Dad

Right after school. Are you checking mom during lunch today?]

Usually, me and Dad switch off days to eat lunch at home with Mom and to buy breakfast. Today I went to the market for breakfast, so he should be going home for lunch. But I want to be sure. Mother used to respond, not much, but she would nod, or say "yes" or "no." Now, she says nothing. She just stares.

My brother, a book publisher based in Hong Kong, disappeared a month ago. He was one of five. No one knows where they are, but many suspect the mainland government.

Mother blames me. I was part of the Scholarism group. I was involved in the protests. I stood in Civic Square. I fought against national education.

My mom was scared. She is Chinese. My dad told her to let me go, said it was a good cause. He is a Hong Konger, like me.

Three years later, I did it again. The protest was bigger then. I occupied the central district. I bought an umbrella. I camped in the streets. I was one of the 150 arrested when the bulldozers came through Mong Kok.

I was an angry Hong Konger. I didn't want the home I knew to be ripped away or for the mainland curriculum to "brainwash the country" like all the kids at school were saying they would. I wanted to be able to vote when I was of age. So I camped, and I fought. Then my brother disappeared.

Some say he was kidnapped because of the books. One book, specifically. The one about China's leader—the general secretary of the Communist party. His name is Xi Jinping. I never really knew what it was about, only that his name was mentioned often in the publishing house, and that there were women talked about too. I still think it was my fault. So does my mom.

“Don't go. They will not listen. It's a waste of time,” she told me. She was so adamant. I never understood. She'd been trying to convince me to give up on the occupation in central for weeks. The date for the movement to start quickly approached though, and I was committed. Assemblies were held nightly leading up to the day. I attended each one.

1989—There were people everywhere. Stepping on my toes. Bumping my shoulders. It was hot. The sun was invisible behind the smog. The sky was a suffocating sheet of grey haze. I stood next to my boyfriend, trying not to lose him in the crowd, and we held up signs reading, “FOR FREEDOM” and “POWER TO THE PEOPLE.” Sweat rolled down our bodies, mixing with the sweat of the people surrounding us.

We were twenty-two at the time, just graduated from a university in Beijing, planning our wedding. We'd joined the protests in Tiananmen Square in May, after Hu Yaobang's death. We weren't as dedicated as some; we went home to our beds at night. Still, we showed up almost every day for seven weeks.

Then that one day, June fourth, stopped it all. That was the day the soldiers rolled in on tanks, and started firing. That was the day I lost Wei.

He was standing next to me. We were waving our signs. We were shouting. Then suddenly we heard the trucks. We thought they would stop outside the Square, but they didn't. They tore through the crowd, and then I heard people screaming. The screams were short and shrill, and they came from different directions. People started running after that. Wei grabbed my hand, but after we'd taken only a few steps, he grunted and lost his grip. I turned around and saw a growing red stain on his shoulder. I knelt next to him, but I was quickly knocked over.

People were stepping on my hands, tripping over my feet, kneeing my head, forcibly moving me out of their paths. Wei just shook his head back and forth. His face was scrunched up, and his eyes were closed. His left hand was in a fist, collecting dirt on the ground, supporting his upper body. He tried to stand but he clutched his shirt, where it had been white just moments before, and he fell back to the ground. More people were getting hit around us, screaming and falling. He told me to go, and he released my hand, giving my arm a weak nudge.

"I'm coming right behind you," he said.

I knew he wasn't behind me, but I was too scared to look back once I started running.

2015—My mother was in Beijing during the democratic protests in mainland China in '89, but she was never involved, to my knowledge. She lived only a few blocks from Tiananmen and the Forbidden City, so she had to have seen it all, though. I

assumed that was why she never wanted me involved with Scholarism or Occupy Central.

My father was born in Hong Kong. He met my mother after she had graduated from a uni in Beijing and moved to Hong Kong. She said the job opportunities were more abundant here, and she started working in my dad's clinic as a nurse. They were married soon after, and my brother, Aaron, was born in '93. I came a few years later in '97.

Throughout our childhood, my parents got along fine for the most part. They sporadically argued about who would cook or clean after dinner, but once, when I was about six, they fought for weeks about visiting my grandparents in Beijing.

My dad was very close to his parents, and we saw them often. They lived on the peninsula, closer to mainland, about an hour away on the MTR. One day after church, we went to visit them for lunch. On the way home my dad asked my mom about going to see her parents sometime soon. They'd taken my brother when he was a baby, but my grandparents had never met me. My dad said they should, that they had a right to know their grandchildren. My mother refused. They spoke in hushed tones, trying not to attract attention on the MTR, though it was mostly empty because we were so far from the main stops like Mong Kok and Festival Walk. All four of us sat on the benches, rather than standing and holding the handles dangling from the top of the train-car.

"No. You remember last time. I won't go back," my mother said.

"We can bear them for a few days. They aren't that bad," my father encouraged.

"How can you want to go back after how they treated you?"

“Maybe it will be different this time.”

“I won’t go.”

My parents avoided the topic for the rest of that week. Meals were tense for a few days. They asked me and Aaron lots of questions—how school was going, what we were learning in our math classes, if we’d heard anything about rehearsals for the spring play that we had auditioned for earlier in the year. They didn’t address each other at all.

One night after dinner I walked into the hallway to take a shower, and my parents’ bedroom door was open.

“...have you ever tried?” I heard my dad ask as I was approaching the bathroom. My parents were standing a few feet apart, and both of their eyebrows were pulled down. My mom rolled her eyes, turning away from him, and then she caught my eye outside the door. She smiled with tight lips and closed the door. They must have discussed it more after that, because a few weeks later two old people showed up at dinner.

When we got to the restaurant to eat that Friday night, my mother asked for a table of six, instead of our usual four. Aaron and I trailed behind her and the waiter, wondering who was coming to eat with us, hoping it was someone from the office. Mom and Dad’s coworkers usually gave us kinder eggs or bueno bars when we saw them. Kinder eggs were my favorite because I liked the toy inside, but Aaron liked the chocolate bueno bars better. They were bigger than the eggs. We thought when Dad showed up, he would have some of the other doctors with him. We were disappointed when he didn’t.

“Do you remember the time we went to the Great Wall when you were little?” my mother asked Aaron once we sat down.

“Yes, that was the place with the slides right?” he responded.

“That’s the one. Do you remember the people you met on that trip? Your grandparents?”

“Not really. Did they go on the slides with us?”

“No, they missed that. We stayed with them though. In the apartment with the extra room? Me, you, and dad all slept in the same bed.”

“I kind of remember. It was like a party!”

“Well, the apartment belonged to your grandparents. My mom and dad. Your dad wanted them to meet Lee. They are coming here for the night.”

“Oh! Are they staying with us? Where will they sleep?” I asked.

“They will eat dinner with us tonight before they go to their hotel. They’ve only been to Hong Kong once—when we got married, and it was a short trip. We might go to the Peak with them tomorrow. Would you like that? We haven’t been there in a while.”

“Yes!” The Peak was one of our favorite spots overlooking the harbor, because at night there was a laser show, and all the buildings lit up in different colors.

My dad and grandparents arrived at the restaurant at the same time. My dad seemed at ease, relaxed as usual. The old couple with him looked uncomfortable. So stiff. So awkward.

Right before they got to the table, my mom leaned over to Aaron and me, who were sitting quietly watching the Korean music videos on the TV screen above us, and said, “Behave tonight! Or no Peak tomorrow!”

“May,” my grandfather said when he reached the table. My grandmother stood behind him, and smiled a little. My mom stood up, but they did not embrace. She simply nodded, and then they all sat.

“You remember Aaron. He’s much bigger now,” my dad said, looking at my brother, “And this is Lee. He just started primary school this year,” he said, motioning at me.

The dinner was painful. My mom stayed quiet for nearly the whole meal. My dad asked my grandfather how business was in Beijing.

“It’s okay. The economy has been better lately,” he responded.

“Why don’t you tell your grandparents about the play you two are going to be in!” my dad said to Aaron and me.

“It’s the Prince of Egypt. I’m going to be an Egyptian, but Aaron is going to be a slave,” I offered up.

My grandparents just looked at me. They nodded, but didn’t say anything else. Several times I caught my grandmother staring at my mom. They kind of looked alike, but I probably wouldn’t notice if I didn’t know they were mother and daughter.

We didn’t end up going to Victoria’s Peak the next day. My mom said my grandparents had to get back home for an emergency. I haven’t seen my grandparents since, and I haven’t heard them mentioned either.

1989—After I lost Wei, I lost part of myself. I lost my strength, my confidence, my defiance. I went back to my parents' house, asking them to forgive me, begging them to let me come stay with them.

“You have turned your back on our country, and you have turned your back on our family. No.”

I slept at a friend's house for a few days before leaving the city. I had a university degree, but no job. I had a little money saved up from working in university, but no income. I travelled as far South as possible, fleeing the familiar and suffocating place of my childhood. I reached the Hong Kong border and decided to cross on a whim.

I had no where else to go, but I'd heard life could be better across the border.

2015—A year before Aaron was taken, I was sleeping on the ground of a major highway in a make-shift tent. Thousands of others slept out there with me, in tents of their own. We called it, “The Village.” Aaron would have been out there too, but he had to work. He'd graduated from university and just started his job at the publishing company.

He saw the outcome of the advocacy for Scholarism take hold, and he regretted his lack of participation. The new president had removed the mandatory implementation of national education after months of student push-back. After that, Aaron's excitement grew. I watched his expression gradually shift when he'd ask me for updates each night when I got home, and his eyes, once critical and small, grew larger and brighter over the

course of those months. He came and sat with me in Civic Square after school a few times towards the end. When we'd walk home, I could sense the change in him. He wanted to know what the government officials said to us when they walked by. He wanted to know about the Scholarism meetings that happened after school.

“You can skip work just this once! You have to see it. There are so many people. We need more though. You know this is important,” I told him, trying to convince him to come downtown with me one day. I'd walked the whole mile to the publishing house and sprinted up the stairs to the second floor where his office was to try to get him to come. The bus routes were all messed up since the roads were being occupied. We'd been settled in the streets for about two weeks. It was still new and exciting. Getting to sleep on the concrete in a tent was hard, but waking up in the morning, next to hundreds of people, all fighting for the same thing made it worthwhile. I felt powerful, and purposeful, like I felt at the Scholarism meetings.

“You know I'd go if I could, but I have to stay here. Take an umbrella though, and be careful. I'll look for you on the news,” he'd joked.

About a month later, I talked to Aaron on the phone and tried to get him to join me again.

“We've been out here for a month and a half and you still haven't seen it,” I said, accusing him.

“I wish I could be there. I'm working a lot right now. I'm working for the same thing you are though,” he told me.

At the time, I didn't understand his comment. Then after he was taken, I wondered what he'd been trying to tell me.

By then, it wasn't as exciting anymore. I had permanent shadows under my eyes. It had rained nonstop for days. A typhoon was blowing through. Our pillows and blankets wet our bodies when we lay down at night, and the air inside the tents was hot. The sound of rain beating down on the tarp above my head made it almost impossible to sleep, even in my exhaustion. Those nights I doubted the cause. I doubted my contribution. I wondered if it was all worth it.

I missed going to school and having a normal routine. I missed showering. I really missed my mom. She didn't want me out there, so she didn't talk to me directly. Occasionally she sent water bottles and food with my dad when he came to stand for a few hours on the weekends, but she never came to see me.

She feared the future, but she feared protesting even more. She wanted universal suffrage, but she didn't want to fight for it. She hated that I did fight for it.

1989—I met Chan when I got to Hong Kong. I worked in his medical clinic as a nurse. Chan gave me hope. I saw light in him. I received kindness from him. I experienced his gentleness. He knew that I was new to the city. He asked me to go to fellowship with him. I hesitated and declined the invitation for several weeks, but I eventually agreed to go. When I finally did join him, I left fellowship with hope. The crowd was different from any crowd I'd ever been in. I felt free though I was surrounded by people. I felt joy though the leader talked about a man dying on a cross for me.

Chan wanted to meet my parents right away, but I refused. I made excuses as long as I could. He asked me about them when we went to dinner on Fridays. We would walk to the mall down the street after work together. For two months, he asked me about them, every Friday, without fail.

Finally, I told him that we didn't get along. I told him that I'd been involved in some of the protests, and I regretted it, and I'd moved on, but my parents hadn't.

Chan didn't ask me about them again, until several months later when he asked to marry me. He'd insisted that my parents come to the wedding. Chan sent them a letter, and I called them apologizing for my past, telling them I was back on track with my life, dating a good man, working in a doctor's office. Surprising me, they agreed to come. Even more surprisingly, they actually came.

I think my parents would have liked Chan if they'd gotten to know him—more than they had ever liked Wei, at least. Chan fought for what he believed in, like Wei, but he was gentler about it, and he fought for less controversial things.

Chan protested silently. He brought food to the people who stood in the streets. He didn't yell. He didn't draw attention to himself. He tried to blend in as much as he could, but he never did so if it went against his beliefs. The love I had for him grew quickly, and though there was still a gaping hole where Wei, my parents, and my life had been, I knew marrying Chan was what I needed to do. It was what I wanted to do too.

2015—During my lunch break at school, there are a group of the old Scholarism boys huddled around a table outside. One of them has a phone out, and they are watching

a video. It is technically against the rules to have phones out at school, even during lunch, but there aren't any teachers outside. I walk over to the table.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“Shhhh,” they all say in unison.

I try to peek my eyes over their shoulders to see what is so important that they won't speak to me. Then I see him. My brother's coworker. He disappeared at the same time Aaron did. He is making a statement—a confession about something.

I immediately call my dad and ask if he knows anything. He says he doesn't, but that he will find out. He says to stay calm because, “It doesn't mean anything about Aaron.”

He also tells me not to say anything to Mom about it. He says he will tell her when she needs to know. I think she needs to know now, but it is probably a good idea to let Dad tell her. She usually handles things better when they come from him.

On the way home from work later that night, I ask Dad what he's going to tell Mom, and when. He says he isn't quite sure yet, but that he will tell her this week sometime.

When we get home, though, we walk in the apartment to find Mom sitting in the living room. She sits on the couch, still wearing her pajamas, and her hair is lying limply, unwashed hanging down the sides of her face. But she left her bed, for the first time in weeks.

She doesn't respond to us as we walk through the kitchen, but when we stand in front of her, blocking the TV report where the video from earlier is playing, she looks at my dad and says, "Chan, Lee...Aaron."

I expect her to start crying, but I don't think she has any tears left. When she speaks, a tear leaves my eye and starts rolling down my cheek. Aaron is not back, but my mom is.

Week Five



I thought I knew how it was going to go. I thought I understood what it would be like. I was wrong. But I'm glad I was wrong. I got to experience it the way that they do. This is their normal. I was invited into their normal for a brief time. Their normal became my normal. I'm thankful for the abnormal normalcy.

A Blessing

Last week, the group that was here was nice to me. They offered me a sandwich and chips. I refused their offer the first few times, but they were more persistent than the other groups who had come before. I sat down to eat with them on the third day they were here, but then they started insulting my friends. They said my friends should be “doing more with their God-given gifts” and that they had “thrown their lives away.” The group didn’t know that the women they were talking about were my friends. They took me in when I had nowhere to go.

I looked around the group, wanting to ignore their words. I didn’t want to believe these people were so judgmental. They seemed so nice. Precious, the woman who found me on the street so many months ago and demanded that I come with her, didn’t trust anyone who walked into the run-down church on the edge of town. I finally understood why.

I set my sandwich down on the wooden bench in front of me, stood silently, and walked away. My stomach rumbled and I felt light-headed for a few minutes, but I kept walking toward the house where Precious was.

Once I reached the outside of the metal shack, I sat down on the street. Business was heavy. Unusual for midday. There wasn’t an open room inside for me to lie down in, so I sat purposelessly, leaning against the outside wall. I closed my eyes to block out the glaring sun.

“Hi,” I heard a hesitant voice say.

I opened my eyes to find one of the girls from the group standing in front of me. The one who had asked me to eat lunch with them so many times. She held my half-eaten sandwich in her left hand, her arm outstretched toward me.

“I’m sorry about what they said.”

“Me too.”

The girl sat with me for the rest of the day. It was mostly silent. The whole time she sat, she was tying clumps of thread together. Every once in a while she would look up at me, smile, and then go back to her knots. It was like she was checking to see if I was still next to her.

The next day she returned. I told her I wouldn’t go back to the church or to the group. So she just sat. Again. She was more talkative on the second day. She kept asking about the baby—who it belonged to, how far along I was, if any grandparents were involved, if I’d thought of a name yet. The questions were endless and agonizing.

So I answered her. I told her almost all of it. The girl seemed to be a little older than me, but she didn’t need to know everything that had happened. She wouldn’t understand. But I gave in. I told her my story. Then she left. Just like the rest of them.

I knew she would. But I didn’t know how badly it would hurt when she did. She’d spent so much time with me. She felt different than the others. She seemed like she cared. Like maybe she would at least try to keep in touch. She didn’t, though.

They always come for a few days, pestering us unceasingly—asking, “How can we pray for yall?” and “Do you want to learn about salvation?”, shouting “Dios te ama” as their trucks drive down the road, taking pictures with us, of us, all the while, offering

us cheap candy, trying to communicate with the minuscule amount of Spanish they know. Then they disappear, usually with tears streaming down their cheeks, sad that we're all going to hell, saying "Hasta luego mi amigo" as they hug us goodbye, but they never return. I wonder what they say about us when they go home. I wonder what the girl tells people about me.

Sometimes they leave the clothes they wear throughout the week they are here. The clothes they leave behind are usually filthy by the end of their stay. Still, I am glad they leave the clothes. I'll need more for the baby.

* * * * *

The day before the group left, the girl gave me the t-shirts she'd worn over the course of the week, apologizing because they probably wouldn't fit in my current condition, and she asked me for the thousandth time. So I finally told her.

My name is Blessing Attah. I became pregnant a year after I began selling my body. I was sixteen years old. When my parents found out I was pregnant, they told me to leave. My mother stood by the doorway in our house and handed me the blanket I'd been sleeping with since I was a child. It is blue, tattered, and just big enough to wrap around the top half of my body.

"For the baby," she said. I still sleep with the blanket now.

Precious Okudiri lets me stay with her and the others at night. We sleep two girls to a mattress on the floors of the back rooms. During the day, I try to find a job. I

usually cannot. So I wander up and down the streets around Precious's place by myself until the aching in my feet becomes unbearable. Then I find a dry spot on the ground to sit for a while.

Sometimes the priest from the church drops beef cakes on the ground next to me, pretending he doesn't notice me, and then he hurries away before anyone sees. I always wonder what he would do if I pulled the back of his white robe as he walked by. Would he keep walking and ignore my existence? Would he sit down next to me and ask me to come to church? Would he stomp on the beef cake and stop throwing them to me? Once I reached my hand out to give the robe a small tug, but I was too afraid and my hand quickly found its way back to my belly.

Sometimes Precious and the other women give me their leftover rice and beans for dinner. They always make sure to take off their silk working clothes before eating so the baby pink dresses won't get dirty. They usually put on t-shirts from their old lives before coming to work with Precious.

If I'm back before dinner time, I try not to pay attention to them eating. I don't want them to feel sorry for me, and I don't want to steal their food. But I am usually so hungry by the end of the day. They know, though, even without me telling them. When they reach out to give me the bowls of rice, they always tell me to change first "so business won't be hurt tomorrow." We always laugh as I take the bowl in my hands. Really, I only have to make sure the bottom of my skirt doesn't track mud onto the beds where we sleep and they work. In the beginning when I started staying with Precious, I

didn't think about it, and when one of the men came one day during his lunch break, he complained because it looked like someone had shit in the bed.

Precious moved the man to a different room, and when I got back that night, she told me to clean up better next time.

I wish I didn't have to think about the mud on the bottom of my skirt, and I wish I could walk down the street without feeling like my knees are going to buckle underneath me. I wish I didn't feel the baby kick every day. It would be easier to hate it. I wish I could eat with the girls like normal, earning money and fitting into my working dress like I used to.

The girl had tears in her eyes, but I continued anyway. She had asked so many times.

I don't know what I'm going to do with the baby once it's here. We will both have to eat. I will have to go back to work.

Week Six



It's the last week. It's been rough. But it hasn't been rough because of student behavior or failed lessons. It's been rough because I'm exhausted. It's been rough because I'm not ready to be done teaching. Because my heart has broken a little more each day this week because I know I have to say goodbye soon. Because I love my students, and it's hard to love them from the other side of the world.

Toy Bomb

Vietnam 1971—My name is George Mason. I was drafted in 1967. I didn't want to come to Vietnam, but it wasn't as bad as I expected. At least for the first bit.

I did well in training. I received praise from fellow trainees as well as our superiors. I moved up the ranks quickly. I became a pilot. I liked that job because I didn't have to look at a person's face while I killed them. I just had to keep flying the plane while the guys in the back let the bombs drop. My plane was one of many flying over the Ho Chi Minh Trail. We were instructed to hit anything that moved. Supposedly, all the people moving in that region were North Vietnamese trying to get down to the Southern capital.

We were eventually ordered to the ground though, because we'd hit too many of our own men.

My neighbor from home, Robert Fisher, was drafted six months before I was. He was assigned to the war on the ground. His squadron had been taking over a hill for weeks. Bullets flew everywhere, soldiers on both sides dropped dead all over the place. The more U.S. men died, the more they sent in to replace them. They would eventually tire out the North Vietnamese, and the hill would be ours. Then the next order would come through and the American troops would retreat, back to base camp. A few days later the enemy would be back on the hill.

Finally, the bombers were sent in, hoping to take out enough of the Vietnamese to put a stop to the ongoing battle. The fighting on the ground was still happening though,

and the American men were too close. Robert Fisher, my childhood playmate, was too close. The bombs took out just as many Americans as it had Vietnamese.

A few days after my plane was called down, I heard about Fisher. The situation eroded, and the next year, in 1968—I was captured. The Vietnamese came into camp during the night and took a handful of us. Most of the guys they took hadn't even been on the ground for a week.

They held guns to our heads, so we did what they said. I was held in one place for a while. I think it was called "The Zoo." They kept me locked in a room, without any disturbance, without any human contact, without food or water, for days at a time. My hands started shaking on the third day. I started talking to myself on the fourth day.

A man eventually brought me water. It was several more days before he brought me rice.

They unloaded more guys later that year. There was less space, so they started keeping two or three men in one room. We weren't allowed to talk, but we did sign some things with our hands when the door was closed. We learned each other's names, hometowns, ages, and assignments, all without speaking.

When we got roommates, they chained our feet to the walls. One of my roommate's ankles got infected. His shackles were too tight.

In December of 1970, they moved all of us. We were right outside Hanoi, but we didn't know it at the time. It was an upgrade when we were moved. Instead of rice, we got soup. We had to be careful not to eat the pebbles at the bottom of the bowls, but the change of flavor, and the taste of vegetables were an improvement.

It got worse after that though. They started asking questions. When we didn't give answers, we were punished.

They held machetes above our heads and forced us to kneel outside on piles of gravel. Our legs had to be horizontal, touching the rocks below, and our backs had to be straight. If someone answered a question, he was allowed to go back to his room. He would avert his gaze all the way back to the building, blood dripping down his shins, little gray shards falling out of his knees as he walked by the rest of us still on the rocks. They always limped a little on the way back.

I didn't blame them though. They'd held out as long as they could. I knew I'd break soon.

America 1971—The last we heard from George was in '68. We got a letter from him in September. It didn't say much. He said he was on the ground for a little while. He told us about Robert Fisher. He didn't say what happened, and Robert's parents weren't told either. The officer just said he died in battle.

“Dear Mom and Dad,

How are you doing? I'm still kicking. I'm on the ground for a few weeks. There's nothing for me to do in the air right now.

Oh, Fisher is gone. He died a few weeks ago. I just found out today. Tell his parents I said he gave it his best shot.

I miss you both. I love you. I'll write when I'm reassigned.

Love, G”

We are desperately hoping George is alive. There hasn't been an officer to tell us he isn't. We think that's a good sign, but the more days and weeks and months go by that we don't hear from him, the less hope we have.

America 1973—I step off the plane and see the commanding officers. They are smiling, and some of them have tears streaming down their faces. They are so relieved to have us back. We are on American soil. We are not going back. We were missing for so long. But now it's over, and the troops have been withdrawn.

I walk up the front porch steps at my parents' house. I still limp a little, but my pants cover the scars on my knees and ankles.

My parents met me at the airport, but none of us knew what to say. There was so much to say, but simultaneously nothing at all.

“George,” my mother had said, her voice shaking and tears leaking out of her eyes. She'd wrapped her arms around me, and my dad patted my back awkwardly. They wanted to ask why I was so skinny, I'm sure. They wanted to ask what the scars on my face were from, probably. They did not ask, though, and I am glad.

When I get to the doorway, I take a look around the living room. Everything looks the same as it had when I left. Untouched. The couch still has the coffee stain on the middle cushion. The radio still sits on the table next to the bookshelf. The same printed curtains hang down in front of the windows.

I sit on the couch before moving any farther into the house. It is too much to process at once. Everything at home is the same as when I left, but I feel like a different person.

“George, I want to show you something,” my dad says, slowly sitting next to me on the couch.

“We don’t want to overwhelm you, but we want you to see this,” my mom adds.

They hold out two metal bracelets in front of me. My name, rank, and the year “1968” are engraved on both of them.

“What’s this?” I ask.

“We got them made for you. A lot of people have them,” my dad says.

I try to understand, but I cannot. They have bracelets with my name on them, but it doesn’t make sense to me.

“We didn’t know how to support you. We did what we could. We remembered you.”

Laos 2009—Mom is making a fire to start cooking dinner, but she needs more sticks.

“Mai, I just need a few more, to get through the rest of dinner and breakfast tomorrow. Will you go get me some more?”

I tell my mom that Tava is supposed to meet me at his house when he gets home from school.

“I’m sure Tava will help you,” she says.

I'm too young to go to school, but Tava is already nine, so he goes during the day, for half of the year. We usually meet up when he gets done, and I'm usually done with my chores by then. Today I am not though.

Tava lives near us, close to the bank of the Mekong River. There are our two houses, and a handful others, but that's it. Not a ton of people live around here. The kids at school tell Tava it's because we are dangerous.

I see him approaching his house, and I shout at him telling him I have a mission for us.

A few minutes later Tava and I are walking up and down the riverbank together, and we find a few small sticks, but most of the ones near the water are soaked through. Those sticks smoke a lot, and they aren't good for cooking dinner.

"This is useless," Tava complains, "These are all too wet. These won't burn. We have to go somewhere else to look. Farther from the river."

"Where else can we go?" I ask. Normally, we stock up on dry wood on the sunny days, so then when it rains, gathering wood isn't such a nightmare. Today it is a nightmare. We spent so much time this week working in the garden, that we didn't get enough wood.

"Let's go," Tava says, turning away from the river.

"Where?" I ask. I'm intrigued, but skeptical. Tava is mischievous, and adventures with him are usually fun, but sometimes they don't turn out so well. Once he wanted to see how many chili peppers he could eat from the garden, straight from the bush, but he accidentally touched his eye after eating them. The white of his eye had red

lines running through it, and his cheek got all red and splotchy. He cried for an hour. He said the tears were involuntary, but his pained expression didn't help his case.

“The field,” he says matter-of-factly.

I stop as soon as he says the word. The field is off limits. I know that. He knows that. Everyone in the village knows that.

We don't know why we aren't allowed in the field, but we do know that we aren't. My mom told me that the ground would turn to lava and I'd burn up if I go to the field, but I've always wondered the real reason.

“Tava... we can't,” I tell him.

“Of course we can!” he says. I hesitate.

“Look, the kids at school keep saying there's a ghost there, from the war in Vietnam awhile back. I told them there wasn't. Now I have to go to the field to make sure I was right.”

“I don't want to go,” I tell him confidently. I like to go along with his gimmicks, but I know that my mom is serious about the field. She doesn't even go into it herself, and neither does my dad.

“Maiiiiiiiii,” Tava whines, “pleeeeeeasssse come with me,” he says. I look up at him and poke my lips out.

“No,” I say, mostly to myself.

“You mean you're going to leave your future husband to go out and find wood for his future mother-in-law all by himself?” he asks me, accusingly.

Tava and I are supposed to get married. Not anytime soon, but eventually. Our parents have had it worked out since I was born. Tava was three then, and since we are close in age, and our families work together in the village's garden, the decision seemed natural. I think marrying Tava will be good. He's my best friend.

"Fine. But you have to promise to get lots of sticks," I counter, rolling my eyes as I walk in front of him. Once I pass him, I break into a sprint, and start laughing. I'm excited to go to the field. I've secretly always wanted to go. Now, if I get in trouble for it, I can just blame Tava. My parents like him more than they like me anyways. They can't wait until we get married.

Once we reach the edge of the field, it is anticlimactic. There's just grass and dirt. Tava and I make a plan to split up once we get to the tree line. I'm supposed to look for wood on the right side of the field, and he's supposed to look for wood on the left side. Then we will meet in the middle.

I have several smaller sticks in my hands when I find a toy hidden in the grass.

It's a ball about the size of my hand. It's shiny and silver, and it has long triangles stretched out all over it. I've never seen one like this before, and it must weigh a couple pounds, which is good because it won't bounce away and be lost forever. I look up, searching for Tava. I spot him and want to throw the ball at him, but he's too far away. I'd never be able to throw it that far, so I tuck it nicely in the pocket of my dress as I continue looking for sticks.

I briefly wonder where it came from, whose it is. I guess someone else has been coming to the field recently too. I plan to ask mom and dad at dinner, again, why the field is so bad.

I see some bigger logs a few feet from where I found the ball, so I walk over to stack them up. When I bend down, my ball falls to the ground, and it rolls a couple feet to the left before everything is on fire and the ground is lava.

Laos 2016—I was sitting outside the house, getting dinner started when I heard the loud boom. The ground seemed to shake a little. My head jerked towards the field and knew what it was as soon as I heard it. We hadn't heard one go off in a while, but I knew. I immediately thought of Mai, as I always did when this happened, and my breathing quickened when I remembered she wasn't at home with me. I put a lid on the pot of rice and started running towards Tava's house. That was the direction she was headed the last time I saw her.

A few minutes later I saw Tava in the distance. I was relieved until I realized Mai wasn't with him.

She'd gone to the field, even though I told her never to go into the field. It was too far from home, and there were dangerous things there. I told her the ground would turn to lava. She was five then, and she seemed to believe it. I didn't want to scare her with details of what could actually happen. Now I wish I had scared her.

Then Tava wouldn't have had to come running down the road, his back burning from the explosion, telling us to come to the field. Telling us that they had been looking for firewood, but that after the explosion, he couldn't find Mai.

He couldn't find Mai because there was no body left to find. There was just a new hole in the ground.

Week Seven



I've cried every day. Transitions suck. There's one place I want to be. And that place is not Oxford, Mississippi. That place is a ridiculous city. One where I don't speak the native tongue. It's simultaneously a metropolis and a jungle. It's a place where the food makes me sick every. single. day. It's a place where I'm constantly overwhelmed. But it's the place where I feel most like myself. It's the place where I feel like I thrive. It's the place where all the things I'm good at and gifted with are brought to life and valued. I miss that place. I miss myself in that place.

Muddy Water and Dirty Hands

I stared at the muddy brown ripples the boat was making in the water as the small Cambodian boy massaged the tops of my shoulders. His little hands went back and forth, in chopping motions, coming down hard on my upper back. When he stopped, I gave him a dollar. His eyes widened and his teeth peeked out from behind his lips. Later I found out that locals usually give him the equivalent of ten cents. I smiled back at him before gazing out at the river again.

The tour guide had just announced we were almost to the village. A few minutes later I caught the first glimpse of life on the water. I saw one raft, and then another, and another. As we moved down the river, they grew in size. Rafts became canoes, canoes became motor boats, motor boats became houses, houses became schools. All floating atop the murky water below.

Each structure had clothes hanging from odd places off the sides of the boats. Ropes hung below the clothes, disappearing into the water. The guide informed us that the ropes held fishing traps. I felt my face contort as I wondered how the fish could survive in such a contaminated place. The creases in my forehead deepened as I thought about the people living on the boats eating those fish.

The school was the central location of the floating village. There were four or five floating classrooms, connected by metal rods and ropes, with tires dangling between each classroom to prevent damage to the structures. All the doors and windows were open so the air would move through. As we rode by, I could see rows of desks and chalkboards on the front walls.

The classrooms we passed on the river were similar to our own over the last few weeks. I was in Cambodia with a group of ten other college students teaching English to elementary students for the summer, and the only difference between our school and theirs was the water underneath their classrooms.

Skinny, black-haired children ran alongside us, past the classroom windows, jumping from one raft to the next, until they could go no farther. Floating stationary on the river, they excitedly waved out the windows as we left them behind.

That scene resurfaced as I got in my bed that night at the hotel. Exuberant faces, enthusiastic waves, and joyful screaming we couldn't understand. My team had seen other tourists taking pictures of the children as they floated by, but our cameras stayed in our bags. I tried to wrap my head around the images keeping me from sleep. The children's smiles. Their discolored clothes. Their bony arms. Their happy shouts. I lay in bed unable to sleep for hours. When I did finally sleep, my mind was filled with disturbing snapshots. Children falling into brown water, arms flailing, huge fish biting their feet, taking them under, not resurfacing.

The next morning I added another tally to the list of nightmares I'd had since being in Cambodia. That was number twenty-one. I'd only been gone for four weeks.

I rolled over in my bed and saw my roommate still sleeping, so I tried to be quiet as I moved about the room. I was supposed to FaceTime some friends from home before breakfast. I grabbed the same clothes I'd worn the day before, which smelled slightly of body odor and mildew, and began sweating immediately after putting them on my body.

I walked through the front doors of the lodging facility and my phone screen fogged up. I glanced at the sky and wondered if the rain would come in the morning rather than the evening, as it usually did. The sun was shining, but that was meaningless during monsoon season. It could be clear and cloudless and then be pouring within an hour in the rainy months.

As I sat outside waiting for my friends to call me, I stared at the large crack that divided the cement patio into two sections. It was long, spanning the distance from the parking lot to the front of the building—fifteen feet or so. The crack reminded me of the river from the day before. The water divided two countries, but it contained an entire population of people, unable to move from within the confines of the crack because they were not fully Cambodian or fully Vietnamese.

The community that lived on the water had fled to Cambodia during the 60s-70s, trying to escape the Vietnam War. After the war ended, they were forced out of Cambodian territory, but they were not allowed back into Vietnam. They simultaneously belonged to both places and to neither. They relocated to the river, the long and winding in-between that resembled the long and winding crack on the ground in front of me. I thought of my personal in-between state.

My heart was breaking in two. Part of it longed to be back home, back with my people, back with food that I liked to eat and that didn't make me sick, back with an idealistic view of the world. Part of my heart didn't want to leave Cambodia—the broken, resilient, beautiful country and students I was learning to love. I felt like I belonged to both places, but also to neither simultaneously.

My phone buzzed. The suffocating humidity seemed to get lighter as I talked to friends from home. They asked about the day-to-day life of my team, and they listened to all my stories about things they didn't understand. They updated me on all things American, and I began to feel not-so-disconnected from my normal life.

Then the breakfast bell rang. I ended the conversation and went to my usual seat at the breakfast table. Our meals were on a rotation, and that morning we had spicy rice noodles, watermelon, and Khmer coffee. This is iced coffee mixed with sweetened condensed milk, and it was one of my favorite parts of Cambodia.

After breakfast we stuffed our rain coats and teaching supplies into our backpacks and toted them in front of us to keep them safe. It had started raining by the time we started walking down the narrow alleyway from our hotel over to the main strip. We were teaching in Siem Reap, which is known for being touristy with lots of English-speakers and Western food and shopping options, but it still felt so unfamiliar most days.

The main strip in Siem Reap is the size of a four-lane road in America, but there are no traffic lanes, nor are there any traffic rules. Motos, tour buses, and tuk tuks sped by us as we approached the tuk tuks waiting to take us to school, just like they did every morning. Our team divided between the two carts, and we pulled out into the chaos of traffic. Motos drove around us, barely missing the sides of the vehicle, as we got a slow start with so many people weighing down the worn cart. I reminded myself not to pay too much attention to the traffic. I distracted myself by focusing on the drastic pickup of the rain. The floodgates had opened in a matter of minutes, but because it had only been

sprinkling when we'd gotten into the tuk tuk, the driver hadn't pulled the rain cover down.

From the main road, we drove down a few side streets before finally getting to the bumpy, curvy dirt road where our school was located.

Our school was made up of preschoolers up to fifth graders. My teammates and I were split between the grade school classes evenly, and I was teaching one of the third grade classes. Most of the students in our classes didn't have much money, and they wore the same uniform to school everyday. Many of them were alarmingly small in stature as well, and their uniforms hung loosely away from their bodies.

Huge puddles splashed muddy water onto our teaching clothes and shoes. We'd learned to anticipate the bumps, but this was the first day that it had been raining on our way to school. That was the first day I'd worn that week's teaching outfit, but it was quickly soaked through and discolored. I was mildly annoyed, but I tried to hide it. I knew how selfish and materialistic it would have sounded to voice my complaints aloud.

When we were almost to the school, my teammates and I started to panic because we'd only planned half a lesson for the morning. The other half was supposed to be spent playing group games outside. We frantically tried to look at our notebooks, without drenching them, as rain was falling sideways into the tuk tuk, leaving a layer of water droplets all over our bodies, teaching materials, clothes, and backpacks. My heart started beating faster and faster as I thought about walking into a classroom of third graders with no game plan. I didn't know how to teach fifteen new vocabulary words for three whole hours. Holding their attention and interest in vocab for an hour was a stretch, even when

I incorporated games. I could tell by the way my teammates were flipping through their notebooks that they were a bit flustered as well, but their demeanors were calm. They said we could all wing it. They said it would all be fine. I knew I couldn't wing it though. And I knew it wouldn't be fine for me.

I cannot do it. I am not equipped to handle this. I do not want to be here.

My teammates filed out of the tuk tuk, and I was the last one out. I told them I needed a minute. I fought back tears, said a desperate prayer, took a deep breath, and stared at the puddle across the road. It was the same color as the river from the day before. The kids in our classes were the same complexion. They had the same smiles, the same a-bit-too-big clothes, the same joyful spirits, the same enthusiasm.

I cannot do it, but I am going to do it. If they can show up to school every day and be excited, then I can wing it for one day and fake excitement and confidence for a few hours. It's only a few more weeks. I'll only be with these kids for a few more weeks.

I stretched my hour and a half lesson to two hours, but then I was stuck. I had no more material. I had no more ideas. I'd run out of simple animal-related vocabulary words to go over, and the kids already knew all the body parts, colors, numbers, and holidays I could think of. I caught the eye of one of the Khmer teachers observing me through the window, and my heart picked up speed. I turned to the chalkboard, closed my eyes, and after a deep breath said, "Okay class..."

I shut my eyes tighter wracking my brain for an activity to do next. Just then, one of my teammates peered into my classroom doorway and summoned me to the hallway.

“Excuse me, class. I’ll be right back!” I said with a relieved smile, walking towards Brittany.

“We’ve been struggling in the lower grades. The principal said we can take the kids to the auditorium to play games as long as half of the school participates. Does your class want to? We need at least one more class to come. Sam and a few others said they want to keep their classes in to teach.”

I was amazed at my teammates’ abilities to come up with complete lessons on the fly. That was a gift that I did not possess, and that day in Cambodia, I was envious of those that did.

“Yesss. We’ll be there in three minutes,” I told Brittany, visibly more relaxed than I’d been since we’d gotten off the tuk tuk that morning.

Once all the students and teachers had crowded into the empty auditorium to play games, Brittany and I exchanged frazzled glances as we realized we still didn’t have a plan. We intended to play amoeba tag when we were anticipating going outside; however, that requires running and holding hands, and the tile floor was slippery from tracking rain and mud inside. Duck duck goose was our typical go-to, but it is culturally inappropriate to sit on the floor where shoes have been, and we’d forgotten to get the students to take their shoes off before entering the auditorium.

The kids ran wild, jabbering and play fighting while the English teachers deliberated what game to play. While we talked, one of my teammates, Nicole, who was teaching fifth grade, plugged her phone into the speakers to play music. A group of girls started dancing when the song came on. Nicole noticed them and grabbed the

microphone, completely surprising the rest of us. Into the mic, she announced the first game we were all going to play—freeze dance. The rules were simple; when the music was playing, everyone was supposed to dance. When the music stopped, everyone was supposed to freeze.

Nicole never hesitated to make decisions for the group and take charge of the team. At times over the course of the summer, that was a bit unsettling, but at that moment, I was so thankful. I told her she was a genius before skipping over to dance with my students.

For the next hour, we danced and sang and celebrated and laughed. The third graders in my classroom snickered at me as I danced next to them. I taught them some new moves, and we all died laughing at the sassy boys in my class doing the shopping cart while the rest of us pretended to rock a baby. Justin Bieber’s “Baby” was one of the few English songs the kids knew.

The fourth graders in Nicole’s class acted like they were too cool to participate until she challenged one of her boys to a dance-off in the middle of the auditorium. A circle of people surrounded them as they took turns battling it out with their best dance moves. Nicole, in addition to her decisiveness, is also gifted in her bold and confident dancing abilities. After that, her fourth graders joined the party enthusiastically and danced with the rest of us.

A few of Brittany’s first graders let me join their circle for a few minutes, and then one of them grabbed my hand and started skipping around the room, dragging me behind her. Her palm was sweaty and lost a grasp on my hand when running around the

corner of the room, but with a high-pitched giggle and a toothless grin aimed up at me, she quickly retrieved my hand and we were on our way again.

When the music stopped, everyone froze. Then after a few seconds of looking around the room, noticing the weird postures of people's frozen, dancing bodies, the music would start back and the celebration would continue.

The auditorium was hot and the humidity locked inside was heavy, but there was a lightheartedness among the school. There was a carefreeness about the teachers and the students acting silly and dancing together. As I walked out of the room at the end of the day, I was encouraged. My thoughts didn't seem so cloudy. My shoulders didn't feel so heavy.

As we sped back through puddles on the way back to our hotel, sloshing water everywhere once again, I thought about the little girl whose name I never found out, with dirt under her finger-nails and shoes that were a little too big, smiling up at me, and running around the room with me. I thought about the ridiculous poses of my third grade boys reaching for something on the very tippy-top shelf of the grocery store, when the music would suddenly stop and they were forced to freeze mid-dance-move. I thought about the smiles encircling Nicole and her student as they tried to out-wobble each other. I thought about the damp and musty clothes I was wearing, and the river that so many people live on permanently, and the spicy noodles we'd eaten for breakfast, and the rain that led to our afternoon dance party, and I was thankful. I was thankful for the turnaround of the day, and I was thankful for the joy that Cambodia had brought me.

Week Eight



It doesn't feel real. They said yes. I get to go back. For the third year in a row. I get to go back to my favorite place in the world. I get to experience monsoon season again. I get to eat never-ending amounts of white rice. I get to use chopsticks everyday. I get to ride a double decker bus to school. I get to teach. I get to be with likeminded people. I get to see my students again. It doesn't feel real, and yet, it is real.

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