

LINDSAY CLAYTON DAY

## NIM

NIM KICKS OPEN A WOODEN thatched door. A woman falls away, head smashing against a chair. Kun Thea pushes past, lifts a small Sony radio and throws it on the ground, stomping it with a booted heel. A woman in a grey nightdress with disheveled black hair trembles in a corner, two children huddled to her breast. The woman knocked down by the door lies dazed on the dirt floor, her dress over her knees, revealing thick dark legs.

“Where are your men?” Nim’s voice low and monotone.

“Away,” says the woman on the floor. “Selling fish in Tuek Phos. Please—” her voice trails, lip quivering. She gathers her dress, one hand moving gingerly over dark hair, searching for a wound.

“You lie,” he says simply. Nim picks up a blackened pot from a table. “Your husband is a doctor. We know it. Tell me where he is.”

“It’s the truth.” Legs wobbling beneath her, she reaches for the chair. “There is no doctor here, but—” In a swift motion the pot falls heavy against her face. Blood streams from her nose and over her dark lips, dripping onto the white cotton below. One of the children screams.

Nim hears sticks cracking and leaves rustling outside the walls. He turns his attention from the woman to the door, steadying his rifle, barrel waiting, though he knows he will not use it unless absolutely necessary. Bullets are scarce. A low moan from the woman with the children, her dark eyes fixed on the door, head turning back and forth. More snaps and the soft swooshing of brush being pushed by bodies.

“It’s him,” says Kun Thea. Nim nods.

“I’m unarmed,” says a man in broken Khmer. His accent is Vietnamese. “Please.” He pauses and coughs. “Leave us alone.”

Nim opens the broken door, thatched grass now snapped and jagged. The moon shines distant and pale on a tall man sweating heavily in the cool air, his face streaked with dirt.

“Enter,” Nim commands. He knows this is the man they seek—Untong Li, a Vietnamese physician who had lived in Phnom Penh before the evacuation. An enemy of the Khmer Rouge.

In a tired moment, Nim glances at the women and decides to leave them alive. It is rare that he makes such allowances. It defies orders. Widows are women made volatile—they become poisonous. They are a direct threat to the cause. Nim and Kun Thea drag the man to the woods, arms linked, legs flailing. He is exhausted. He uses all his remaining strength to beat the man to death. Kun Thea’s face glows in the moonlight, mouth upturned, watching. Nim kicks tiredly into Untong’s chest, resenting the look of satisfaction on Kun Thea’s face. He outranks him and so Nim must do the hard labour. A tired voice resounds in the recesses of his mind. *This man is no enemy. He’s a Vietnamese refugee.* He hums a low song, a distraction, and puts his mind elsewhere. *Or he’s Vietcong. No chances.* Not for the first time, he weighs his options and comes to the same conclusion. This is the thing that needs to be done. *And there is ma.* Always, there is ma.

Nim is five. He is small for his age, arms nimble twigs, legs spindly. He is pulling bones out of a fish carcass, knees digging into soft damp earth. Ma is next to him, cooking rice over the fire. He throws a bone at her, wanting attention. She smiles.

“Little Nim,” she says, her blue sarong swaying in the breeze. “Shall I tell you why you’re my only child?” Nim nods expectantly, pleased with his success. He settles into the grass and crosses his small legs.

“When you were just a baby, I left you in the grass while I went to fetch water. It wasn’t far, Nim, just a stone’s throw. Fifteen feet. I sang you a song to show you I was close, but you didn’t mind. Such a good boy, you just cooed and gurgled like a river. I bent to collect the water and when I turned back god took the air from my chest. He almost blinded me in his whiteness, Nim. It was a tiger as white as a cloud. I cried for him to leave you alone, but my knees trembled. And do you know what he said?” Nim nods, grinning. “He turned his giant white body towards me and said so plainly, ‘I’m going to eat this baby.’” Nim shivers, leaning into his ma. He has nightmares about this tiger, but he loves the story.

“‘Why?’ I cried to him. ‘You have a forest full of food! Leave my boy.’ But the tiger only sniffed the air around you, his snow white nose inhaling

your breath. ‘His blood is blessed,’ he growled to me. He salivated over you as I cried. I begged him to spare you.” Nim slips small pieces of fish into his mouth, but his eyes stay on ma. Even though he knows he is alive, he still worries each time that the story will somehow end differently.

“He eyed me with strange yellow globes, no whites beneath them,” she continued, her voice low and excited. “‘I see you love this boy,’ he said to me. I’ll spare him under one condition.’ I promised him anything. I offered myself,” she said. “And the white tiger said to me, ‘He must remain your only child. No other siblings must steal his food or your attention. You must keep this boy safe. If you fail, I will come reclaim what is mine.’” Nim stands, claps and eats another piece of fish, the pungent flavour making his stomach growl.

“Your only boy,” he repeats. Ma smiles and takes the rice from the fire and places the pot on the ground to cool. Nim would be almost ten before he learned of the sickle cell disease that nearly left his mother barren and he only learned out of necessity, when her burden of care became too great for his father to bear alone. Many years later, he sat beside her, offering soup. “So,” he said lightly, “I suppose there was no tiger?”

Ma looked at him, eyes milky. “Oh Nim,” she said. “You know you were my miracle.”

Nim is thirteen. He stands with feet planted in the cool river water. He tosses a hooked line into the deep stream and tugs. Chanda is close. He can smell her soap: powder and flowers. He glances and sees her white shirt clinging tightly to her thin body, small pointy mounds pushing against cotton. A hand moves involuntarily towards her. He stills it.

“Want to try?” he offers.

Chanda grins, her round face shining with damp sweat. Her black hair is thick and long, her are lips full.

“Okay.” She says it gingerly, straying from her normally assertive tone. She takes the line slowly, wrapping it around her wrist, gripping it tightly. Nim realizes she is afraid to lose his hook and line. He loves her more.

He told Chanda he will marry her the day he turns seventeen. Ma says he must be seventeen before he marries. Although his mother and father have the right to choose his bride, he believes they will choose Chanda. He wills it. At night when he lies damp and hot under his mosquito net in the small bed next to his parents he sends the message telepathically. *Choose*

*Chanda*. It distracts him from the other things he cannot think about lying so close to ma and pa, things like Chanda's small breasts, or the shape of her thighs under her green sarong. When he tells Chanda they will marry she only laughs and says we'll see.

While Nim and Chanda fish, they do not know that fuel air explosives are turning the ground inside out a few hundred miles north of where they stand. Neither ma nor pa know how many Vietcong are crawling over borders, nightmare visions of napalm hurrying their pace. They do not know that with those Vietcong come US missiles, chasing them like flies, buzzing, seeking, landing, exploding. They do not know that in the vacuums and wastelands of the exploded earth and desperate peoples another power will come to be, growing out of their collective voids like weeds.

Nim is sixteen. Some days he hardly recognizes his ma. Most mornings she lies in bed writhing in agony, clutching her stomach, her legs, her chest. Sometimes she is too tired to get up at all, so he and pa take care of all the household duties. Most of the families in their village have five kids to do the work Nim and pa do on their own. Nim works in a neighbouring rice field during the morning while pa stays at home. In the afternoons they pull weeds from the garden and care after their sows, chickens and the one lone steer. Sometimes, if Chanda finishes cooking for her brothers, she comes to help with the cooking and tends to ma. Nim now knows that they will choose Chanda because she is already part of the family. Still, they wait. The pull between them now like a rare earth magnet.

A few weeks before his seventeenth birthday Nim and pa stand in front of their house, eyes wide as hundreds of Cambodians march past, possessions heaped high on bending backs. Soon adults are passing from house to house, questioning, rumours spreading like disease. *It's only temporary. The Americans are threatening to bomb Phnom Penh. It's a safety protocol.* But over the next week Nim sees pa pacing silently, his dark face pulled into a glower. His brother, who worked as a doctor in Phnom Penh, says the evacuation is permanent. He says something has gone wrong with the Khmer Rouge resistance. His colleagues were dragged into the street and arrested. They disappeared. He escaped by hiding in a drawer in the morgue until the soldiers left.

“They are trying to purge this country,” he said, head shaking. “But of what, I do not know. I do know that foreigners are not safe. Especially not Chinese. I came here to tell you that.”

Uncle Sopath could not stay for long. He is heading for Thailand. He made the detour because ma is Chinese. “I think you should leave,” he says.

Pa is anxious. He doesn’t sleep. They plan to depart as soon as ma is feeling a little stronger. They pack what Nim and pa can carry. They send word to ma’s sister in Yunnan. They would use their savings to hire drivers and make the long trek to China. Nim begs to be allowed to marry Chanda so that she can come with them.

“It’s not safe,” he tells pa. “You know it isn’t.”

“Chanda is Cambodian,” says pa. “And she is a farmer’s daughter. They won’t harm her.”

Nim walks to find Chanda and takes her to the river. In the miles surrounding Nim and Chanda houses are raided, churches are destroyed, bullets pierce bodies with seemingly random intent, but where they stand the sound is the murmur of the river, the quickness of Nim’s breath. His stomach clenches and turns as he tells her. He can’t catch his breath in his chest. Chanda is calm. “Nim, just come back. I will wait. My father says things are not as bad as your father claims. I will wait for you.” She laughs, touching his arm. “But don’t you marry some Chinese girl in my place. Okay?”

As he walks on the dirt path back to his house, he feels calmer. If Chanda does not worry, then neither will he. The air is damp and warm. Mosquitoes bite the exposed skin on his arms and legs. *It’s like a vacation*, he thinks. *A trip to China*. He will have so many stories to tell.

He is home for only a few minutes before the sounds of screams and orders break the soft hum of crickets. Neither luck nor geography is on their side. Some living on the south side of the village have enough time to escape and hide in the thick forest west of the village. They live on the opposite side, where the road from the north crosses through. There is a pounding at the door. Nim stands next to ma, frozen. The door is kicked down before pa can reach it. Three men in green fatigues and carrying rifles push through the small entrance. Two are older, pa’s age, but one looks no older than Nim. They shout at them to lie on the floor, but ma cannot get out of bed. She is in pain and she is afraid. From the floor pa says, “She is sick. Please don’t harm her.”

One man begins to search their small house. “Money?” he shouts. “Weapons?” Pa shakes his head. The younger soldier looks at ma. He is small beneath his hat and jacket.

“She’s Chinese,” he says. They nod. The soldier who is the biggest and appears to be the oldest focuses on Nim.

“How old?” he demands. Nim tells him he is seventeen. “We have orders to kill people like your mother. Do you know that?” Nim only stares at him from his place on the floor. He feels panic rising in his chest.

“You join us and you fight well and we will spare your mother.” He holds a rifle pointed at ma on the bed. Nim can’t speak. “Yes or no?”

The deal is made. Nim barely hears ma’s cries. He takes no last look at pa. He gets up from the floor and walks towards the guards. The tall one grabs him by the arm and they leave the house.

Nim is twenty six. He is standing with his feet deep in soft, dark earth. The air smells of vegetation and mud. His arms are no longer twigs, but large and rounded with muscle. He is damp and smells of dank sweat. His hands are not clean. Most of his allies, his friends, have been pushed west by the Vietnamese. He left them hiding in the jungle, plotting their improbable return. He left in the night, knowing no one would spare any resources to come after him. While some of his commanders held onto the faint hope of resurgence, many knew their time was up. They knew the Viet Cong would find them. He walked southeast for days, memories burning in his brain like a rampant wildfire—unpredictable, savage, out of control.

Now tired and painfully hungry, he stands in the brush behind his house, which miraculously still stands. His village has been spared. How many villages like this has he destroyed? He chooses not to count. He watches as Chanda cooks rice over an open fire, her face still round, her hair still long and thick. When he first saw her he felt like crying. He trembled with relief and grief and shame. Now he tries to move towards her, but his feet are glued in the mud, his limbs uncooperative. So he stands still, stomach knotted, watching Chanda stir rice, tired eyes stinging and unbelieving.