First They Killed My Father

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LOUNG UNG

Loung Ung was born to a middle-class family in Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, in 1970. A rambunctious and curious child, Ung lived a life of relative privilege with her parents and six siblings until the Khmer Rouge took over the country in 1975. Ung, then five years old, was forced to leave the city with her family and make a grueling journey to a distant rural village to work. Because Ung's father, Sem, had been a military police captain for the now deposed government, the Ungs sought to pass as peasant farmers to avoid persecution. Sem was eventually executed by Khmer Rouge soldiers. Upon his death, Ung's mother sent her remaining children to different work camps for their own protection. She and Ung's youngest sibling, Geak, were later killed by the Khmer Rouge. Orphaned and separated from her remaining siblings, Ung was forced to train as a child soldier until the Vietnamese defeated the Khmer Rouge in 1979. Ung's eldest brother, Meng, and his wife eventually smuggled her to a Thai refugee camp, where they were able to secure sponsorship from a church group and come to the United States in June of 1980. The three moved to Vermont, where Ung attended school while caring for Meng's two daughters. Ung earned a bachelor's degree in 1993 and served as the spokesperson for the Campaign for a Landmine Free World from 1997 to 2005. She now lives with her husband in Ohio, but has returned to Cambodia more than thirty times and given speeches throughout the world about her experience.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Cambodia gained independence from France in 1953, and became a monarchy under Prince Sihanouk. In 1962, political revolutionary Pol Pot became the leader of the Cambodian Communist Party, and formed the Khmer Rouge as a resistance movement against perceived monarchical corruption. Meanwhile, the United States bombed rural areas of Cambodia during the Vietnam War, destroying villages, further destabilizing the country, and increasing peasant support for the decidedly anti-capitalist Khmer Rouge. Backed by the U.S., Cambodian general Lon Nol overthrew Prince Sihanouk in a 1970 coup. The Khmer Rouge easily defeated the weak Lon Nol government, however, capturing the capital of Phnom Penh in 1975 and bringing an end to the country's five-year civil war. The new government renamed the country Democratic Kampuchea and forced hundreds of thousands of city-dwellers to resettle in rural collective farms, the first step in its attempt to create a self-sufficient, agrarian society. Deeply xenophobic, autocratic, and nationalistic, the Khmer Rouge banned anything suggestive of foreign influence—including Western medicine, technology, and religion—and engaged in a brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing against Cambodian minority groups. Khmer Rouge soldiers patrolled forced-labor camps, where people worked for up to eighteen hours a day on meager rations of rice and were killed for even slight infractions or suggestions of disloyalty. Soldiers infamously committed mass executions of those deemed—often arbitrarily—enemies of the state, including former government workers, doctors, teachers, the rich, and the educated. Nearly a quarter of the Cambodian population—an estimated two million people—died from starvation, disease, overwork, and executions over this period, now widely-regarded as state-sanctioned genocide. The Khmer Rouge held power until Vietnam invaded Cambodia and defeated its army in 1979.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Loung Ung's *Lucky Child: A Daughter of Cambodia Reunites with the Sister She Left Behind* begins where *First They Killed My Father* ends, telling the story of Ung's life in the United States while also telling about the life of her sister Chou in Cambodia. Completing the trilogy is *Lulu in the Sky: A Daughter of Cambodia Finds Love, Healing, and Double Happiness*, in which Ung discusses her journey to activism as well as the healing power of her relationship with her husband. Ung's works are arguably the most famous memoirs written about life under the Khmer Rouge, but hardly the only ones. *Survival in the Killing Fields* is the story of Cambodian doctor and refugee Haing Ngor, who also won an Academy Award for playing Cambodian journalist Dith Pran in the 1984 film *The Killing Fields*. *When Broken Glass Floats* was written by Chanrithy Him, who, like Ung, was a child during Pol Pot's regime and recounts the horrors faced by her family of twelve. Though former child soldier Ishmael Beah's acclaimed memoir *A Long Way Gone* takes places in Sierra Leone, Beah's story echoes the attempts of the Khmer Rouge to numb children tlike Ung to violence and teach them to commit atrocities. Adam Johnson's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Orphan Master's Son* also tackles similar themes of propaganda, forced labor, and dictatorship in Kim Jong-Il's North Korea.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *First They Killed My Father: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers*
- **When Written:** The late 1990s
- **Where Written:** United States

- **When Published:** 2000
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** Cambodia from 1975 to 1980: immediately before, during, and after its takeover by the Khmer Rouge.
- **Climax:** Vietnamese soldiers bomb the child soldier camp where Loung is stationed. In the resultant chaos she is able to escape the Khmer Rouge and reunite with her siblings Kim and Chou, with whom she then journeys to a refugee camp.
- **Antagonist:** The Khmer Rouge, Pol Pot
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Big Screen. *First They Killed My Father* was made into a feature film in 2017, directed by Angelina Jolie; it features entirely Cambodian actors and was co-written by Loung Ung.

Slow Justice. As of 2017, three high-ranking Khmer Rouge officials had been convicted of crimes against humanity by a UN-backed court.

PLOT SUMMARY

In April of 1975, the rambunctious, five-year-old Loung Ung lives with her large, loving family in Phnom Penh. Ma is a beautiful, proper woman who was born in China, while Pa works as a police captain for the Lon Nol government. Loung enjoys a comfortable middle-class lifestyle with her six siblings: eighteen-year-old Meng, sixteen-year-old Khouy, fourteen-year-old Keav, ten-year-old Kim, eight-year-old Chou, and three-year-old Geak.

One day trucks roll through the streets occupied by men wearing black clothing with red scarves tied around their heads. The men command everyone to leave Phnom Pen, and Keav tells Loung that the men are called the Khmer Rouge. The Ungs travel for a grueling eight days—first in Pa's truck and then on foot—until they arrive at the village of Krang Truop, where they are to live with Ma's brothers. To survive, Pa says the family must pretend to be peasants and never speak of Phnom Penh, since the Angkar—the name of the new government—hates any signs of worldliness or association with the West. When people arrive from the city who could recognize Pa, the Ungs are forced to leave again. They are sent to the village of Anlungthmor, where they must perform manual labor every day for meager rations. When famine strikes, hundreds die. With their lighter skin—the result of Ma's Chinese heritage—and lack of farming knowledge, the Ungs attract negative attention from the rest of the villagers. Pa says the Khmer Rouge has started killing anyone perceived as a threat to the new government, and seven months after leaving Phnom Penh the family moves again to the village of Ro Leap.

The original villagers of Ro Leap, called "base people" and considered "model citizens" by the Khmer Rouge, are hostile toward the family. Loung can't understand why the villagers look at them so angrily when, to her, they are all the same. Because everyone must wear the black uniform of the Khmer Rouge, the soldiers destroy the new arrivals' clothing. Loung watches in anguish as her beloved **red dress**, which Ma made her for New Years, is lit on fire.

Despite the professed equality of "Democratic Kampuchea," as the country is now called, the new villagers are treated like slaves. As light-skinned Chinese-Cambodians, Loung's family must work harder than others to prove themselves valuable. Ma and Pa force Khouy to marry a girl from a nearby village to decrease his likelihood of being recruited to the Khmer Rouge army. She and Khouy are sent to a labor camp, along with Meng. The brothers bring extra food home when they are allowed to visit, but these visits become increasingly infrequent. Soon, all teenagers, including Keav, are forced to go to a work camp.

Hundreds continue to die from starvation, disease, and executions. Rumors circle about a mysterious man named Pol Pot as the leader of the Angkar. Bartering for food is illegal, but Pa manages to get extra rice in exchange for jewelry Ma had hidden from the soldiers. One night, in a moment of desperation, Loung steals a handful of this rice for herself. Despite sensing that Pa knows her guilt, she cannot bring herself to admit it.

After six months in her work camp, Keav dies of dysentery. Pa says they must go on as if nothing has happened if they are to survive. Four months later, men arrive at their hut demanding Pa come with them. Understanding that this is the end, Pa embraces Loung one last time and tells Kim to look after the household. Loung reflects that war has filled her with hatred and rage. Another New Year's passes, making everyone a year older. In keeping with Pa's request, Kim now acts as the head of the household and begins stealing corn for the family, as they are yet again close to starvation. One night, however, soldiers catch and brutally beat him. Kim survives but never steals again.

The Khmer Rouge have started killing the children of the people they've already executed, and Ma forces Loung, Kim, and Chou to split up for their safety. Kim walks off alone, but Loung and Chou find a work camp together. At night they must listen to propaganda lessons fervently praising the might of the Angkar and Pol Pot. After three months Loung is sent to a camp for child soldiers, where her supervisors teach the girls that the Youns—Vietnamese soldiers—are savage monsters bent on destroying them. After seven months, Loung is able to visit Ma. She feels guilty as she sees how frail Geak looks and learns that Chou has visited often with rice. Later, famine hits again and Loung grows so ill that she must walk to the only infirmary for miles. There, she is surprised to be reunited with Ma, Geak,

Chou, Kim, and Meng. The family is able to stay happily together for a few days. Still starving, however, Loung guiltily steals a ball of rice from an old woman.

Back at her camp, rumors of Youn invasions spread. One day Loung feels as though Ma and Geak are calling out to her and sneaks away to see them, only to learn that soldiers took her mother and sister away the day before. Loung is so overwhelmed with grief that she has no memory of how she spends the next three days.

The Youns invade, and a bomb sets Loung's camp ablaze. Everyone runs away, joining a mob of traffic as those from other camps do the same. Loung is able to find Kim and Chou in the crowd, and they walk for days until they reach men whom Loung realizes are the Youns she was warned about; she is surprised at how human they look. The Youns direct them to a refugee camp in Pursat City. There, Loung learns that the Youns marched into Cambodia three weeks earlier and defeated Pol Pot. She and her siblings are able to find a family to take them in, but their foster parents are cold and cruel. One day, Paof, their fourteen-year-old foster brother, tries to sexually assault Loung. Later, a Youn soldier attempts to rape Loung while she is gathering firewood and she only narrowly escapes. Upon returning home, Loung's foster mother scolds her for bringing back too little wood and says she will amount to nothing. Loung reflects that she will amount to something because of everything Pa taught her.

The Khmer Rouge attack the Youn camp, but Loung and her siblings survive by taking shelter in an abandoned warehouse. Later Kim is able to find Meng and Khouy, who escaped from their own labor camps during the initial Youn invasion and also made it to Pursat City. Both brothers look tired and hardened, but Loung is happy to be taken care of once again. The Youns capture a Khmer Rouge soldier and a frenzied mob of villagers demand he be released to them so that they can kill him. Loung crawls her way to the front of the crowd to watch his brutal execution.

At the end of April, Loung and her siblings leave the displacement camp and walk for eighteen days toward Bat Deng, where their uncles live. There, they are welcomed by their surviving family members. An uncle arranges for Meng to marry Eang, a girl who was away at school during the purge of Phnom Penh and whose family is in Vietnam. After three months, Eang and Meng go to Vietnam to reunite with Eang's family. Meng returns days later and talks excitedly about moving to America. First they must cross through Vietnam into Thailand, however, in a dangerous and costly human smuggling operation. Meng only has enough money for two to go and chooses to take Loung, as she is still young enough to learn English. In five years, Meng says he will have saved enough money to send for the rest of the family.

Meng and Loung are smuggled to Vietnam on a fishing boat. They live in Saigon with Eang's parents before being moved to floating houseboats with Eang's sisters. After three quiet months, they begin a harrowing boat journey and eventually reach the Lam Sing Refugee Camp in Thailand. Because they must obtain a sponsor before coming to America, Meng converts to Christianity in the hopes of attracting support from a church group. Months pass, and Loung and her family are among the poorest of the refugee camp. Finally, Meng announces they have obtained a sponsor and are going to a place called Vermont.

In celebration, Eang takes Loung to buy fabric for a new dress. She suggests an orange, red, and blue checkered cloth, and seeing the red Loung agrees. As Loung packs the night before they leave, however, she realizes that her new dress cannot ever replace the one Ma made, and that she is really gone. Loung thinks of Pa as she drifts off to sleep, worrying that his spirit will not be able to cross the ocean to be with her in America. In her dreams, Pa tells her that he will find her wherever she goes. The next morning Loung, Meng, and Eang board an airplane for America.

In the story's epilogue, the now adult Loung reflects on her life in America. Meng and Eang live in Vermont with their two daughters. Both obtained jobs at IBM, despite having little knowledge of American culture, and support the entire family. Loung notes that current immigration laws mean their family will likely never be reunited, however. Loung was able to attend college and eventually moved to Washington, D.C. to work with the Campaign for a Landmine-Free World. She is now the CLFW spokesperson and travels across the world to spread its message. Loung tells the story of how, after fifteen years, she returned to Cambodia for the first time. Her family greeted her at the airport but seemed unsure of how to react. But when Chou and Loung lock eyes, the former bursts into tears. The two hold hands as if no time has passed, and together walk out of the airport.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Loung Ung – The author and narrator of the memoir, Loung is just five years old when the Khmer Rouge takes over the Cambodian government. Before the genocide she lives a comfortable, middle-class life in Phnom Penh with Ma, Pa, and her six siblings. The most rambunctious of her brothers and sisters, Loung describes herself as an intensely curious, at times unruly child. Though Ma initially scolds Loung for not being ladylike, Loung's vibrant spirit helps her survive the terror of life under the Khmer Rouge. Because she is so young, Loung has little understanding of Cambodian politics; her narration thus focuses on the overwhelming, incomprehensible cruelty her family endures as they move between rural villages and engage in backbreaking labor for the next four years. Faced

with starvation, Loung steals food twice: once from her family's own hidden stash of rice, and once from an elderly woman outside the infirmary. Loung feels immense guilt for these actions for the rest of her life. Loung is extremely close with Pa, considering herself his favorite child and frequently finding strength by reflecting on his love for her. After Pa's death, Ma forces Loung, her older sister Chou, and their older brother Kim to leave their home in the village of Ro Leap for their own safety. The girls becoming part of a labor camp, where Loung's strength catches the attention of a supervisor who sends her to a training camp for child soldiers. Loung sees through attempts at indoctrination and is sustained largely by her anger toward the Khmer Rouge, which she understands has robbed her of her innocence. She eventually escapes Cambodia and moves to the United States with her brother Meng and his wife Eang. In the epilogue to her story, Loung reveals that she assimilated to American life and became an activist who has used her story to spread a message of peace across the world. Upon her return to Cambodia for the first time after fifteen years, she is relieved to find that her bond with Chou—whom she always considered her closest companion—remains unbroken.

Pa – Loung's father is a generous man with dark skin, a stocky build, warm eyes, and a broad smile. Born in a rural village in 1931, Pa joined a Buddhist monastic order at the age of eighteen but left upon falling in love with Ma. Ma's parents did not approve of the match, citing Pa's skin color and poverty at the time, so the two eloped. While Ma often scolds Loung for her adventurous behavior, Pa praises his daughter as clever and brave. He and Loung often have conversations on the family's balcony in Phnom Penh, where he tells her stories and, at one point, tries to explain what bombs are. Having been conscripted into the army of the Lon Nol government, Pa works as a military police captain in Phnom Penh—a position that puts his family in jeopardy under the Khmer Rouge, which is intent on exterminating anyone associated with the former government. As such, Pa orders Loung and her siblings to pretend they are peasants from the countryside. Pa does whatever he can to protect his family and is a loving, steady, yet increasingly somber presence in Loung's life. He is eventually taken by Khmer Rouge soldiers and executed. Loung imagines his death in horrific detail, picturing him being brutally beaten by a hammer but finding comfort in thoughts of his child before he dies. Loung continues to speak to Pa after his death, and to find strength in the lessons he taught her. When her foster mother tells Loung she will amount to nothing, for example, Loung thinks back to Pa calling her a diamond in the rough. Before boarding a plane for America, Loung dreams of Pa's spirit saying he will always be with her. With this assurance, she is able to leave Cambodia behind.

Ma – Ma, Loung's mother, was born in China—a fact that Ma says is to thank for her height and porcelain skin. While living in Phnom Penh, the beautiful Ma is very concerned with social proprieties and frequently laments the fact that Loung does not behave more like a young lady. She also clashes with the opinionated Keav about her clothing and music choices—arguments Loung believes Ma must regret upon Keav's eventual death. Because Ma grew up well off and is not used to hard labor, Loung worries how she will survive after Pa is killed by the Khmer Rouge. Ma proves capable and strong, however, working harder than other villagers to counteract the stigma of having light skin. While working at the riverside one day, Ma sneaks Loung a handful of baby shrimp; theft of food is punishable by death, and this incident grants Loung newfound respect for her mother. Ma also cleverly sews some of her jewelry into the straps of bags before all of their possessions are destroyed by the Khmer Rouge; these jewels will later help Loung and Meng secure passage to Vietnam. Loung initially resents Ma for sending her, Chou, and Kim away from Ro Leap after Pa's death, but she later grows to understand the strength such an act must have taken. Life in the villages hardens Ma, as it does all of Loung's family members, but she is still able to find moments of joy in seeing her children. While at the training camp for child soldiers, Loung senses that Ma and her younger sister Geak are calling to her. Loung rushes back to Ro Leap to find Ma's hut abandoned; another villager informs her that the Khmer Rouge took her the previous day. Loung imagines Ma's death by firing squad. Loung also thinks often of the **red dress** Ma once made her for New Year's.

Meng – Loung's oldest brother is eighteen when the Khmer Rouge takes over. The valedictorian of his high school class before the genocide, the kind, soft-spoken Meng had planned to go to France to earn his degree. After being forced to leave Phnom Penh, however, he and Loung's brother Khouy are sent to a labor camp. At first, he and Khouy are allowed to return to Ro Leap once every three months; they bring life-saving extra rice for the family on these visits, but are eventually prevented from returning. After the Khmer Rouge is defeated, Meng reunites with Loung, Chou, and Kim in the Vietnamese displaced peoples' camp in Pursat City. Meng later marries Eang and makes arrangements to smuggle himself, his wife, and Loung out of Cambodia and into a Thai refugee camp. There, he is baptized in the hopes of attracting a church sponsor for the family's journey to America. He is able to get sponsorship and moves to Vermont with Loung and Eang. Despite having no knowledge of American culture, he and Eang are able to secure jobs at IBM and support their growing family in the U.S. as well as in Cambodia. Meng has two daughters, whom Loung cares for as she grows up. Loung believes Meng never stops feeling guilty for not being able to bring the rest of the family to America.

Khouy – Loung's second oldest sibling (who is sixteen when the memoir begins), Khouy's hobbies in Phnom Penh including riding his motorcycle, karate, and flirting with girls. Loung asserts that while Khouy thinks he is cool, he is just mean—at

least in her eyes. After the takeover, however, Khouy becomes a more protective figure—for example, shielding Loung from seeing dead bodies on the march out of Phnom Penh. Five-foot-seven with a black belt in karate, Khouy is perhaps the family member best prepared to withstand physical labor under the Khmer Rouge. In the village of Ro Leap Ma and Pa force Khouy to marry Laine, against both parties' wishes, in an effort to prevent his being conscripted into the Khmer Rouge army. He and Laine are then sent to a labor camp together, along with Meng. During his visits back to Ro Leap, Loung observes that Khouy has lost the confident swagger he possessed in Phnom Penh and has aged well before his time. He and Meng are able to visit less and less, until more than a year goes by without Loung seeing her brothers. They are eventually reunited in the Vietnamese displaced peoples camp, where Khouy tousles Loung's hair the way Pa used to do. Laine is not with him, having run off to find her own family after being liberated. Khuoy remains in Cambodia after Meng and Loung leave, eventually becoming a village police captain and having six children.

Keav – Loung's fourteen-year-old sister is beautiful but a gossip, a quality Ma does not consider very ladylike. Loung considers Keav similar to herself in that both are "headstrong and ready to fight." They argue as sisters do, but Keav, like all of Loung's siblings, is ultimately a loving, protective force in Loung's life. When Pa explains Cambodia's violent history, for example, Keav comforts Loung and says she will protect her. While living in the village of Ro Long, Keav is forced to go to the teen labor camp of Kong Cha Lat. As she walks away, Loung laments that her sister—who took such pride in her clothes and appearance in Phnom Penh—no longer has the joy of beauty in her life. Keav promises she will survive, but Loung wonders if she will ever see her again. Six months later, Ma gets word that Keav is very ill and in the infirmary. Though Ma is able to see her daughter one last time, by the time she returns the next day with Pa, Keav has died of dysentery. The nurse throws out her body before Ma and Pa can collect it. Loung imagines her sister's lonely, terrifying final hours in the infirmary and continues to think of Keav often after her death.

Kim – Another of Loung's brothers, Kim is ten years old at the beginning of the story. His name means "gold" in Chinese, though Ma calls him "little monkey" because he is so agile and small. Loung initially finds his antics annoying, reflecting that it must be an older brother's duty to irritate his sisters. Kim takes great pride in helping his family under the Khmer Rouge, however. Pa helps him secures work with the village chief of Ro Leap, a position that allows Kim to obtain leftover food that saves his parents and siblings from starvation. Kim also knows more about the political situation in Cambodia than Loung and often explains things to her, such as the concept of capitalism. Before Pa is taken away by soldiers, he tells Kim that he must become the man of the house despite being only twelve years old. Though Kim is terrified, he takes this duty seriously and steals corn from the village field to again fend off starvation for his family. One night he is caught by soldiers, who beat him brutally. He never steals again, and Loung reflects that though Kim must act like the man of the house, he is still only a little boy. When the Vietnamese defeat the Khmer Rouge, Kim finds both Chou and Loung and takes the lead on their journey to the displacement camp in Pursat City. There, he continues to do whatever he can to provide for his sisters, causing Loung to reflect upon how mature he has become over the years. Kim eventually makes it to a Thai refugee camp in 1988, though changing American refugee laws mean Meng is only able to get his brother Kim as far as France.

Chou – The eight-year-old Chou, whose name means "gem," is Loung's opposite in personality: where Loung is bold and rambunctious, Chou is quiet and obedient. Nevertheless, Chou is Loung's closest companion. After Keav's death, Loung turns to Chou for an explanation about what happens when people die. Chou responds that they sleep for three days before moving on to be reincarnated. Chou is also quick to forgive; for example, at one point Loung picks a fight with her out of general anger and frustration, but Chou grabs her sister's hand on the way to work the following morning to reaffirm their bond. When the two leave Ro Leap, they cannot bear to be separated, as Ma had insisted, and instead pretend to be orphans together at a girls' work camp. Chou does not stand up for herself the way Loung does and cannot handle the physical demands of harvesting rice. As such, she is picked on by the other girls and eventually demoted to the role of cook. She finds the work easier, however, and is able to bring rice back to Ma and Geak before their deaths. Despite Chou's comparative weakness, Loung repeatedly marvels at Chou's ability to survive the Khmer Rouge without holding onto the intense rage that Loung herself feels. Chou prefers to distance herself from the horror she has witnessed, refusing, for example, to watch a Khmer Rouge soldier's execution with Loung. In the story's epilogue, Loung reveals that Chou married at age eighteen and bore five children. Upon their reunion fifteen years after Loung first left Cambodia, Chou bursts into tears and reaches for Loung's hand once again as if nothing has changed.

Geak – Loung's little sister and the youngest Ung sibling, Geak is just three years old at the beginning of the story. Her name means "jade," and Loung describes her as a happy, adorable child who is frequently cooed over by strangers. She becomes very frail and sick under the Khmer Rouge, however, and Ma and Pa fear that the prolonged periods of near-starvation have stunted her growth. Loung often laments how difficult things must be for Geak because she lacks the communication skills to convey her fear, anger, and sadness about the loss of Pa and Keav. While Loung is being trained as a child solder, Geak is killed by the Khmer Rouge along with Ma. Loung imagines the horror and confusion Geak must have felt, and laments that her short life was full of so much pain.

Uncle Leang – Ma's second brother, Uncle Leang is nearly six feet tall and very thin. He lives in Krang Truop, the village the Ungs travel to after being forced to leave Phnom Penh, and readily takes the family in despite living in relative poverty. Like Uncle Heang, he has always lived in the countryside and as such is considered "uncorrupted" in the eyes of the Khmer Rouge. When Loung, Meng, Khouy, and Kim eventually return to his village after the defeat of the Khmer Rouge, Uncle Leang is shocked to hear of their barbaric treatment; he informs them that the soldiers in his province were not quite as cruel, and that as a life-long villager he was not subjected to the same horrors his relatives endured.

Uncle Heang – Ma's oldest brother who lives in the same village as Uncle Leang. He brings a wagon to pick up the Ung family after they have been on the road from Phnom Penh for days. As with Uncle Leang, because he has always lived in the countryside the Khmer Rouge consider him a model citizen.

Laine – A teenage girl from a neighboring village of Ro Leap who is forced by her parents, as well as Ma and Pa, to marry Khouy. Laine's parents arrange the marriage in an effort to prevent their daughter from being abducted and raped by Khmer Rouge soldiers. After the ceremony, Laine is sent to a labor camp with Khouy. When Vietnamese soldiers topple the Khmer Rouge, Laine runs away in search of her own family and the Ungs do not see her again.

Davi – The beautiful teenage daughter of Loung's neighbors in the village of Ro Leap. Despite her parents' efforts to hide her beauty, the soldiers take notice of Davi and force her to leave her home one evening. She returns the next morning covered in bruises and refusing to meet her parents' gaze. No one ever asks what happened to her, and many villagers avoid speaking to her. Loung notices that Davi's fate reflects that of many girls in the village who are raped by the Khmer Rouge soldiers.

Chong – A woman in Ro Leap whose husband is murdered by the Khmer Rouge. When her two-year-old son then dies of starvation. she carries his dead body around for days, until the village chief forces her to bury him. Just a few days later, her young daughters, desperate for food, accidentally eat poisonous mushrooms and suffer painful deaths in front of Chong. Having lost any sense of grounding. Chong becomes known as the village "crazy lady" and walks around talking to her children as if they are still alive. At one point she gives Ma a bowl of earthworms to eat, saying if only she had thought to eat them sooner her daughters would still be alive. She eventually dies from food poisoning, just like her daughters.

Eang – Meng's wife, who was away at school during the purge of Phnom Penh. After she and Meng marry in Bat Deng, Eang learns that most of her family escaped to Vietnam and are alive and well. She and Meng then smuggle Loung to a Thai refugee camp. Eang is kind and motherly to Loung. Upon learning that they will be moving to America, for example, she takes Loung to buy fabric for a new dress in celebration. The dress has red in its pattern, helping Loung fulfill her dream of replacing the **red dress** the Khmer Rouge destroyed. In Vermont, Eang works with Meng at IBM.

Met Bong – Loung's supervisor at the child soldier training camp. "Met Bong" is a generic title or means of address, rather than a specific name (and Loung briefly has a different Met Bong at her earlier camp). This Met Bong gives the children impassioned propaganda lessons praising the might of the Angkar and denigrating the Vietnamese as savage monsters. Loung spies Met Bong resting her head on a male supervisor's shoulder, and wonders why she is allowed companionship when the rest are not.

Palm Tree Boy – A young boy who waves to Loung from a palm tree when she first arrives at the child soldier training camp, granting her the first hint of human contact. He lives in a nearby village and collects sap with his father to bring to the chief. Though they have never spoken, he becomes the closest thing Loung has to a friend and tosses her fruit when he sees her. Later, his father becomes Loung and her siblings first foster father in the Vietnamese displacement camp.

Foster father – The father of the palm tree boy who once waved to Loung outside the child soldiers camp ends up taking her, Chou, and Kim in while they are living in the Vietnamese camp. Though welcoming and warm at first, he quickly switches to a business-like tone as he lists the siblings' duties in exchange for their food and accommodation, causing Loung to realize this is only "a family of convenience."

Foster mother – Loung's excitement about being part of a family again are abruptly shattered upon meeting her first foster mother. She treats Loung and her siblings cruelly. When Loung cuts her foot after nearly being raped by the Vietnamese soldier, the foster mother calls her lazy and stupid and says she will amount to nothing or become a hooker. Loung reflects that she has everything she needs to amount to something because of what Pa taught her.

Foster Grandmother – The cruel grandmother of Loung's first foster family in the Vietnamese camp. After the grandmother is shot in the leg by a Khmer Rouge attack, Loung is forced to bring food to her in the infirmary. Loung helps nurses change her bandages and pities the grandmother as she writhes in pain. As soon as the nurses have left, however, the grandmother barks at Loung to give her the food she has brought and accuses her of eating some.

Paof – The fourteen-year-old son of Loung, Chou, and Kim's first foster family in the Vietnamese displaced peoples camp. Loung at first considers Paof the only bright spot in her cruel new foster family because he treats her kindly. One day in the woods, however, Paof attempts to sexually assault Loung. When she slaps him and threatens to tell someone, Paof smugly asserts that no one will believe her and that it is her fault for

always tagging along with him. After this incident, Loung vows to stay away from Paof.

Pithy – A girl whom Loung and Chou befriend while gathering water from a stream in the Vietnamese displaced peoples camp. Like Chou, Pithy is quiet and meek. The Khmer Rouge also took her father away, so she lives with her mother and brother and meets Chou and Loung each morning to gather firewood. Pithy is sitting next to Loung when a bomb hits the abandoned warehouse where villagers have taken shelter from a Khmer Rouge attack, killing her. Loung describes the gory horror of seeing Pithy's head smashed in, as well as the subsequent anguish of Pithy's mother and brother.

Pol Pot – The autocratic leader of the Khmer Rouge whose policies lead to the deaths of an estimated two million Cambodians. Pol Pot's name begins as a mysterious rumor whispered across villages after the Khmer Rouge takeover; eventually it replaces "Angkar" in Loung's propaganda lessons and chants, reflecting that he is a figure even more important than the government. Loung hears people describe Pol Pot as a fat, brilliant soldier with "kind eyes," yet wonders if those eyes can see that his people are starving. Loung grows to hate Pol Pot for all the pain he has caused her family. She often wishes for his violent death and tells Chou that she will kill him.

Vietnamese Soldier – A young soldier whom Loung, Chou, and Pithy come across while gathering firewood. Having forgotten their canteen, Loung asks the soldier—via gestures, because he does not speak Khmer—if he has any water. The soldier mimes back that he knows where she can get some and tells Loung to follow him. Having lured Loung away from her friends, he begins to scream at her and then takes off his pants. Loung fights back savagely and is able to escape before he can rape her.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Aunt Leang – Uncle Leang's wife.

Second foster father – The father of the second family to take in Loung, Chou, and Kim. The family are secretly Buddhists, and are kinder than the first foster family the siblings lived with.

Second foster mother – The mother of the second family to take in Loung, Chou, and Kim. The family are secretly Buddhists, and are kinder than the first foster family the siblings lived with, although the mother accuses the siblings of looking at "dirty things" when they get an eye infection.

Rarnie – A girl at the child soldier training camp who calls Loung a "stupid Chinese-Youn" because of her light skin. An enraged Loung viciously attacks her, screaming "Die!" From that moment on, the other girls at the camp stop picking on Loung.

TERMS

Angkar – Angkar means "the organization," and is the name by which the Khmer Rouge referred to its government. In her child soldier training camp, **Loung** is forced to shout chants of praise toward the Angkar.

Dysentery – Dysentery is a case of infectious diarrhea, typically spread through ingesting contaminated food or water. It is often accompanied by abdominal pain, rapid weight loss, nausea, and dehydration. Though treatable with modern medicine, severe cases can be deadly, especially for those with compromised immune systems. **Keav**'s death from dysentery was likely the result of a lack of access to antibiotic or antimicrobial treatments, combined with a weakened state from malnutrition and intense physical labor.

Khmer Rouge – Translated as the "red Khmers," the Khmer Rouge refers to Cambodian communists who, led by the dictator **Pol Pot**, overtook Cambodia in 1975. The group attempted to transform Cambodia into a self-sufficient agrarian society, banning modern technology, medicine, and anything indicative of foreign influence. The Khmer Rouge oversaw the Cambodian genocide, during which an estimated two million people were killed through mass executions, overwork, starvation, and disease. It ruled Cambodia until being defeated by the Vietnamese in 1979.

Lon Nol – A Cambodian general who led the overthrow of the monarchy in 1970 and ruled until the Khmer Rouge takeover in 1975. **Pa** is conscripted into working as a military police captain for the Lon Nol government, which was viewed by many as deeply autocratic and corrupt.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE PRICE OF SURVIVAL

First They Killed My Father is Loung Ung's unflinching first-person account of the 1975 to 1979 Cambodian Genocide, during which the Khmer Rouge regime killed an estimated two million citizens through forced labor, starvation, and indiscriminate execution. Loung is just five years old when the Khmer Rouge takes control of the country, but she makes it through its reign of terror through a combination of luck, personal strength, and the unwavering support of her family. In her author's note preceding the text, Ung calls her memoir "a story of survival."

Indeed, Ung's account is a testament to both human resilience and the sacrifices people make in the name of survival when faced with horrific violence.

Loung begins her story by discussing her family's comfortable middle-class life in Phnom Penh, highlighting how ill-prepared they are for life under the Khmer Rouge. With a maid to cook and clean for them, the Ungs have "more leisure time" than many families in Phnom Penh, and Loung doesn't have to do "any chores." Loung later notes that her mother, whom she refers to as Ma, grew up in a similarly privileged environment and is unused to having to do any sort of physical labor. Upon the Khmer Rouge's takeover of the city, however, the Ungs are thrust into a life of extreme hardship: they must leave every comfort behind and walk for seven days to a poor village, where even children engage in strenuous labor under the constant threat of punishment or even death. By emphasizing the middle-class comfort of her life in Phnom Penh, Loung's narrative highlights the difficulties of life under Khmer Rouge. At the same time, by presenting her family as an unexceptional Cambodian family, she implies that the strength her family showed in the face of hardship was *also* unexceptional. Her story reflects the experience of many Cambodians who lived through the genocide—and, as such, serves as a broader testament to the strength of the human will to survive.

The will to live must be stronger than everything else to make it under the Khmer Rouge, and Loung makes repeated reference to the sacrifices and compromises her family makes to survive the terror of the new regime. When the Angkar (that is, the new government) reduces food rations to near-nonexistence, the Ungs readily eat anything they can find to stave off starvation—from raw rabbit and rotten leaves, to rat tails, brains, and blood. Loung notes that she would have "thrown up" such things in the past, but "surviving for another day has become the most important thing" to her. Like disgust, personal pride has no place under the new government. Loung's father, whom she calls Pa, readily shows meek respect for their captors and orders his family to obey the Khmer Rouge no matter what if they want to live. He demands that they forget Phnom Penh, and instead focus their energy on surviving their current situation. Kim, Loung's ten-year-old brother, goes to work for a village chief and endures consistent physical abuse at his hands for the sake of obtaining leftover food for the family. Though Ma and Pa look at Kim's bruises with shame, they know the family would die without the food he brings home, so they swallow their discomfort.

Because Pa worked for the now toppled Lon Nol government, Loung's family must hide their identities and move between villages to avoid being recognized. At first Loung cannot understand why their neighbors would ever turn on them, but Pa knows that fear and hunger can quickly eclipse people's sense of loyalty and compassion. Similarly, although Loung judged thieves as lazy and worthless when she was a "rich and spoiled" child in Phnom Penh, experiencing extreme hunger under the Khmer Rouge forces her to accept that sometimes people have "to steal to survive." Loung herself does this when she steals rice from her family's hidden stash and later from a dying old woman. Loung grapples with immense guilt about these actions for the rest of her life, because, of course, their significance extends beyond a few handfuls of grain; the struggle for survival reveals both the impressive depths of human strength and the desperate lengths to which people will go in order to live one more day.

Above all, Loung's story suggests that survival is about sacrifice. To live through the Khmer Rouge, Loung must give up her identity, pretending instead to be a peasant from the countryside; she must give up her voice, not speaking for fear of giving away her family's true background; and she must give up her right to grieve, pretending that her family members' deaths do not detract from her devotion to the Angkar. This final renunciation proves the most difficult. When Loung's fourteen-year-old sister Keav dies from dysentery after being sent to a work camp, Pa demands they "forget" Keav's death. Trapped by a regime that defines human value by productivity, lingering on sadness would only hurt the Ungs' chances of living another day. "We have to save our strength to go on," Pa says, adding, "it is the only way we will survive."

Loung repeatedly echoes this notion—that to dwell on sadness would make her want to stop living. Nurturing her anger, however, grants her strength to continue. After Pa dies, Loung reflects that the Angkar has made her "hate so deeply" that she wants to "destroy and kill." She feeds her rage by imagining "bloody images of Pol Pot's slain body being dragged in the dirt." She says, "My hate empowers and scares me, for with hate in my heart I have no room for sadness. Sadness makes me want to die inside … Rage makes me want to survive and live so that I may kill." Loung's story makes clear that while the will to live can overcome nearly every other desire, it also serves as fuel for darker emotions like hatred and anger. The Khmer Rouge create a world in which survival depends on being able to hide or whittle away the things that constitute one's humanity. Loung's story is thus not simply one of the indomitability of the human spirit, but also of the impossible choices people must make to survive unspeakable cruelty.

GENOCIDE, RACISM, AND PROPAGANDA

The Khmer Rouge is a deeply paranoid, xenophobic, racist regime that seeks to rid Cambodia of all outside influence and so-called "ethnic poison." As a child with no broader understanding of the historical or political issues that lead to the rise of the Khmer Rouge regime, Loung Ung frequently questions the rationale behind the Angkar's brutality, only to find that there really is none. In this way, her innocence highlights the absurdity of hating people on the basis of their ethnicity.

The Khmer Rouge takes power at a time when tensions between racial groups in Cambodia are already palpable. Loung notes that Cambodians of Chinese descent "have almond-shaped eyes, thin noses, and light skin" while "pure Khmer have curly black hair, flat noses, full lips, and dark chocolate skin." Ma comes from a well-to-do Chinese background, and her "porcelain white skin" is associated with beauty and sophistication. Ma's parents objected to her and Pa's marriage specifically because Pa, who was born in a poor village, is dark-skinned. This is its own kind of racism and colorism—one more consistent with the global climate of colonialism—but in response to it the Khmer Rouge goes to the opposite extreme. Loung notices notice that the Khmer Rouge soldiers who march through Phnom Penh are "dark-skinned, like the peasant workers at [her] uncle's farm." Pa later explains that the Khmer Rouge has exploited the atmosphere of resentment between the urban rich and the rural poor to garner support from the countryside. Because rural workers often have darker skin and more typically-Khmer features, the Angkar's rule encourages extreme prejudice against anyone with lighter skin. Lighter skin is further associated with being mixed race—something the vehemently xenophobic Khmer Rouge cannot abide. The group thus exploits preexisting—but ultimately meaningless—racial divisions and prejudices to further its own horrific ends.

One of the first things the Khmer Rouge does upon seizing power is expel foreigners from the country and forbid anything suggestive of foreign—especially Western—influence. Things like cars and electronics are banned, Kim tells Loung, because the Angkar believes imports give "foreign countries a way to invade Cambodia." Despite widespread famine, foreign aid is rejected on similar grounds. Upon the family's arrival in Ro Leap, the village chief announces that everyone must wear the same black clothes to rid themselves "of the corrupt Western creation of vanity." The Angkar goes so far in its quest for Cambodian "self-reliance" as to deem those who have always lived in the countryside "model citizens" while rejecting people from cities as having been "corrupted by the West." As such, Pa insists that Loung's family pretend to be peasants from the countryside and never speak of their life in Phnom Penh. The Khmer Rouge's hatred of foreigners is, of course, extremely shortsighted, leading to a lack of doctors and medicine that in turn contributes to a spike in otherwise preventable deaths (including Keav's). Because the Angkar's xenophobia is intrinsically linked to belief in the superiority of the Khmer race, it is inextricable from extreme nationalism and racial prejudice—which, together, set the stage for the Khmer Rouge's genocide.

Indeed, Loung writes that "Pa says the Angkar is obsessed with ethnic cleansing," and wants to rid Cambodia "of other races, deemed the source of evil, corruption, and poison." As Chinese-Cambodians, Ma, Loung, and her siblings are easy targets for the genocidal regime and must therefore work harder to prove themselves valuable and loyal to the new government. "Ma also has to be extra careful because she speaks Khmer with a Chinese accent," Loung adds, which "will make her a target for the soldiers who want to rid Cambodia of outside ethnic poison." The Khmer Rouge spreads its hatred to the many villagers who, moved by the Angkar's propaganda and isolated from the outside world, support the revolution. Without radios or televisions, the Khmer Rouge is the only source of information in these villages, so it can easily skew news to suit its own agenda. Leaders frequently condemn the "Youns" (Vietnamese) as intent on kidnapping Khmer children, raping Khmer women, and murdering Khmer men. Met Bong, the supervisor of the child soldier camp to which Loung is taken, describes the light-skinned Vietnamese "as savages who are bent on taking over our country and our people." It is no surprise, then, that Loung observes villagers "make rude comments about 'lazy white people'" to Ma. While at the child soldier training camp, Loung similarly notes that the other children "despise me and consider me inferior because of my light skin."

Having inflamed an epidemic of vehement, paranoid ethnic hatred among its people, the Khmer Rouge is bloodthirsty in its attempt to rid Cambodia of so-called "ethnic poison." Loung does not shy from describing the group's brutality, noting things such as the overwhelming stench of corpses rotting in the sun; the "tofu-like" bits of brain she sees when her friend Pithy's skull is crushed by a bomb; and the "trails and puddles of blood" she must walk through after the Khmer Rouge attack the Vietnamese displaced peoples camp. These vivid images emphasize the Khmer Rouge's utter lack of respect for human life, its shallow justifications for extreme violence, and its attempts to use brutality to terrify the population into submission.

Loung rubs dirt and charcoal on her skin to better blend in with the other villagers, but she ultimately has no idea "what ethnic cleansing means." Throughout the book Loung does not understand why the horrors she witnesses are happening, unable to grasp why people would treat her—or anyone—differently on the basis of appearance or background. When villagers in Ro Leap spit at Pa's feet and shout that capitalists should be killed, Loung, who does not know what a capitalist is, cannot understand why the villagers look at her family so angrily when they are "very much the same." In fact, Loung thinks that, apart from superficial differences like lighter skin or thinner noses, everyone she meets simply looks like a human being. Similarly, when she reaches the displacement camp after the Vietnamese invasion she says, "these men look remarkably human"—not like "the devils" the Khmer Rouge said they were. As a child with no understanding of the political or historical complexities behind the Khmer Rouge's rise, Loung is in a unique position to cut to the heart of the absurdity of racial, ethnic, and class prejudice. Her childlike view of the world

highlights not simply the Khmer Rouge's barbarity, but the utter irrationality of persecuting people on the basis of their ethnicity in the first place. Loung's story is thus a condemnation not only of the Khmer Rouge, but of dehumanizing prejudice of any kind.

WOMEN'S TREATMENT IN TIMES OF WAR

Women faced unique horrors—including rape and forced marriage to soldiers—under the Khmer Rouge, who viewed them as weak and disposable. Even prior to the takeover, however, many Cambodian women were subjected to sexist societal expectations and unfair treatment. Writing from the perspective of a young girl, Loung's story is particularly attuned to the ways in which women suffer before, during, and after times of war. Whatever group controls Cambodia—the Lon Nol government, the Khmer Rouge, or the Vietnamese—women are denied independence, dignity, and respect, their lives routinely considered less valuable than those of men. Loung's story ultimately shows that even small moments of misogyny are part of a larger continuum of sexist violence.

Societal expectations of women are established early in the novel when Ma scolds the rambunctious, curious Loung for not being sufficiently ladylike. "It must be hard for her to have a daughter who does not act like a girl," Loung reflects. Ma again echoes demands of female propriety by wishing to mold Loung's argumentative fourteen-year-old sister Keav into a "great lady." Loung also recognizes the power of female beauty in Phnom Penh. She points out that pretty girls are more successful street vendors, noting how beauty "turns otherwise smart men into gawking boys."

By highlighting societal expectations of women before the Khmer Rouge takeover, Ung is able to later draw connections between these expectations and the violence committed against them under the new regime. Specifically, Ung shows that the ideology that says women should be pure, delicate, and submissive is the same ideology that undergirds the denial of women's dignity and bodily autonomy.

Women are targets for violence throughout the story, regardless of who is in power. In Phnom Penh, Pa notes that civil unrest has resulted in daughters of government workers being harassed in the streets and even kidnapped. Because of this, Pa—a military police captain—has two colleagues follow Keav around for protection. Women's safety grows yet more precarious under the Khmer Rouge. Though the Angkar touts ideals of equality, in practice it deems women "weak and dispensable." Khmer Rouge soldiers kidnap and rape girls with impunity, asserting that it is women's duty to bear sons for the Angkar. Davi, the pretty daughter of Loung's neighbors in the village of Ro Leap, is abducted and raped by soldiers one night, and returns traumatized and covered in bruises. Some of the girls whom soldiers kidnap never return at all. Loung understands that "if they do not fulfill their duty"—that is, if they do not submit to their captors—"they are worthless and dispensable." Laine, a teen from a nearby village, is forced by her parents to marry Loung's older brother Khouy in an effort to protect her from a similar fate.

The danger does not end when Loung escapes the Khmer Rouge, either. Later in the book, after the Vietnamese have invaded Cambodia and toppled the Angkar, three young women stay with Khouy and Loung's other brother Meng in the displaced peoples camp because they know they are safer with men than they would be on their own. Their fears are not unfounded. In the same camp, Loung is attacked by Paof, the teenage son of her first foster family, and also nearly raped by a Vietnamese soldier in the woods—a soldier, she notes, who is meant to be protecting people like her from the Khmer Rouge. These incidents emphasize the fact that gendered violence does not start and end with the Khmer Rouge. Misogyny is not limited to any single group, but is reflective of broader, more deeply embedded attitudes about women.

Loung's story also highlights how women—rather than their abusers—are generally blamed for the violence that befalls against them. Women are expected to behave in ways that will reduce their chances of being targeted by men, regardless of the fact that they are rarely in control of the situation and that none of these self-preservation behaviors seem to make much of a difference. A woman's beauty, for example—in many ways, her only currency in Phnom Penh—is regarded as an invitation to harass her. With this in mind, when the boat smuggling Loung and other refugees to Thailand comes across a pirate ship, the women onboard smear their bodies with charcoal and scoop vomit into their hair—all in an effort to make themselves less likely to be raped by the pirates. Davi's parents similarly work to hide their daughter's beauty whenever she is out in public, and she is "rarely seen without a scarf covering her head or mud on her face," but she is taken by soldiers regardless.

If women are perceived as not taking sufficient steps to ward off attacks, they are held at fault for the sexual violence committed against them. When Loung attempts to fights off Paof's advances, for example, he tells her, "It's your fault anyway, always tagging along and going places with me." Loung thinks that "Paof is right: I cannot fight him. I cannot tell anyone … There is nothing I can do but keep away from him." Similarly, Loung is deeply embarrassed and ashamed after being nearly raped by the Vietnamese soldier, and feels there is no one to whom she can report his actions.

Loung does not question the unfairness of women's treatment until the end of the story. When a Vietnamese girl is nearly raped in the Thai refugee camp, Loung overhears women "prattle about how the girl brought it upon herself … always laughing loudly, talking, and flirting with men"—in short, for

exhibiting unladylike behavior. Speaking ill of the Vietnamese girl and others like her, the women continue: "They wear sexy clothes with long slits up their skirts and swimming suits. They bring bad attention to themselves." Though Loung, too, is initially scandalized by Vietnamese girls' comparative lack of modesty—staring in shock at one such girl deigning to wear in a bathing suit in public—she has grown to recognize the unfair double standard with which women must cope. Having witnessed so much mistreatment at the hands of men throughout her ordeal, her "face burns with rage" as she asks, "Are they right? Those people who are always so quick to blame the girls."

Loung's multiple encounters with misogyny suggests that it will not end with any single shift in regime, but rather must be stamped out on an ideological level. Only by recognizing—and, as Loung ultimately does, questioning—society's treatment of women can this happen.

THE UNBREAKABLE BONDS OF FAMILY

As a young child at the start of the Khmer Rouge takeover, Loung has little else in her life apart from her parents and six siblings. Family is Loung's entire world, and as the horror of the next four years steals her innocence, ties between family members are the only things unbroken by the Angkar.

In the beginning of the story, Loung emphasizes that her relationships with her siblings in Phnom Penh are fairly typical, full of the love, frustration, and rivalry that characterize many family bonds. She notes, for example, how annoying her ten-year-old brother Kim is, and that older brothers seem to exist solely to pester their little sisters, writing that "their whole purpose for being is to pick on you and provoke you." Strict Khouy is "the brother we fear," while Ma is always comparing the "spoiled, troublesome" Loung to her more well-behaved older sister Chou. When the Khmer Rouge takes over, however, every member of Loung's family puts petty differences aside. Khouy, for example, tries to shield Loung from seeing dead bodies on the march out of Phnom Penh. When he and Meng are later sent to a labor camp, they do backbreaking work without complaint and risk their lives to smuggle extra rice back to their family. After being sent away by Ma, Chou, too, sneaks back as often as she can to bring rice to her and their youngest sibling, Geak.

Of all her siblings, Loung's relationship changes most drastically with Kim—who, after Pa's death, is thrust into the role of head of household in the absence of Khouy and Meng. Despite being "only a little boy," Kim takes the job of providing for his remaining family members seriously. He risks his life night after night to steal ears of corn for his starving mother and sisters, fully aware that getting caught could mean death. As Loung sees how much her family is willing to sacrifice for one another, her appreciation for her parents and siblings only deepens. Thus, not only is the Khmer Rouge unable to break their bond; its cruelty, in fact, makes it ever more steadfast.

Family ties are not just unshakeable, but are also a special source of inspiration and strength. Throughout the book, Loung finds comfort amidst the horror by thinking of her parents and siblings. She remembers twirling around in dresses with Chou and Keav, eating a New Year's feast together at their apartment in Phnom Penh, or watching Kim practice karate. These flashbacks are often the sole source of hope or light in her existence under the brutal Khmer Rouge. Thoughts of family sustain Loung long after she has been separated from everyone she has ever known. While in the infirmary due to malnutrition, for example, Loung's dreams of Keav grant her the will to overcome her exhaustion and find food. "Determined to live, the next morning I force myself to walk the hospital grounds looking for food to steal to fill my stomach," she writes. Even Loung's hatred for the Khmer Rouge is inextricably linked to love for her family, as her will to live hangs on her desire to avenge the deaths of Ma, Pa, Keav, and Geak. When Loung's cruel foster mother in the Vietnamese displacement camp tells Loung she will never amount to anything, Loung draws strength from Pa's words of encouragement. "Pa loved me and believed in me," Loung thinks, asserting that she will "make something" of herself one day because she possesses "everything [her] Pa gave [her]." Thus, for Loung, familial love overcomes everything—including death, distance, and time. The love Loung's family gave her, the lessons they taught, and the sacrifices they made will forever be with Loung because they made her the woman she is.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

LOUNG'S RED DRESS

Loung's red dress represents her family and life before the Khmer Rouge. Years before the takeover, Ma made three identical red dresses for Loung, Chou, and Geak to wear during New Year's celebrations. Loung packs her beloved dress when her family leaves Phnom Penh. Upon their arrival in Ro Leap, Loung looks on in horror as a Khmer Rouge soldier then tosses her dress onto a pile with the other new villagers' clothes and lights it all on fire. He has not simply destroyed a happy memory, but also Loung's sense of hope. However irrationally, Loung packed the dress with the dream of one day being able to wear it again—and more broadly, with the dream of being able to return to her life as it was in Phnom Penh. The destruction of the dress, then, signifies the sudden, shocking destruction of a life she knew and loved.

Even so, Loung spends much of the book reminiscing about the

dress, which remains an indelible symbol of her family and past. While doing laundry for her foster family in the Vietnamese refugee camp, for example, Loung remembers the joy of twirling around in her dress with her sisters on New Year's morning, before joining the rest of her family for a delicious feast. She also vows to one day obtain a new red dress—to recreate what was taken from her. Only when she eventually *does* get a new dress does she realize that certain things—her old life, her family members—are irreplaceable, and that she must accept their loss: "I am sad thinking I have finally replaced the other red dress that the soldier burned," she thinks. "Staring at the dress I realize it will never be the dress Ma made for me. They are both gone."

With this acceptance, however, comes the opportunity for Loung to move on. Indeed, the red dress is not only a symbol of dreams destroyed, but of hope reborn. Loung wore the original dress for New Year's celebrations—a time of fresh starts, and, in Cambodian culture, the time when people become a year older. While the dress Eang makes for Loung can never replace the original made by Ma, it is what she will wear for her journey to America—where she has the chance to finally build a new life.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Harper Perennial edition of *First They Killed My Father* published in 2001.

Chapter 1 Quotes

"Don't you ever sit still? You are five years old. You are the most

troublesome child. Why can't you be like your sisters? How will you ever grow up to be a proper young lady?" Ma sighs. Of course I have heard all this before.

It must be hard for her to have a daughter who does not act like a girl, to be so beautiful and have a daughter like me.

Related Characters: Loung Ung, Ma (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

Loung cannot sit still while having a traditional noodle breakfast with Ma and Pa in Phnom Penh. This scene immediately establishes both Loung's rambunctious nature as well as the restrictive societal attitudes towards women that exist before the Khmer Rouge come to power. Ma's scolding emphasizes that women in Cambodia are expected to be delicate and docile—two qualities Loung clearly does not embody. While this strong spirit will prove to help Loung survive the horror to come, it does not adhere to certain expectations of ladylike behavior. These expectations, however, are ultimately a manifestation of the same sexist thinking that will lead the Khmer Rouge to cast women as weak and disposable. By highlighting even this small moment of sexism early on, Loung establishes that misogyny does not begin or end with the Khmer Rouge; rather, it is an issue deeply embedded in society, and even seemingly minor prejudices can contribute to a culture that dismisses women's value.

Ma saw that he was kind, strong, and handsome, and she eventually fell in love with him. Pa quit the monastery so he could ask her to marry him, and she said yes. However, because Pa is dark-skinned and was very poor, Ma's parents refused to let them marry.

Related Characters: Loung Ung (speaker), Pa , Ma

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

While eating breakfast with her parents in Phnom Penh, Loung reflects on the way Ma, who is of Chinese heritage, and Pa, who has more Khmer heritage, met and fell in love. This is the first point in the story to address the racial prejudice that exists in Cambodia before the Khmer Rouge takeover: Loung's words reveal how lighter skin is associated with sophistication and wealth, whereas darker skin is associated with being lower class and poor. This quote makes clear that Ma's light skin affords her a certain amount of privilege in Phnom Penh. It will make her a target when the new regime takes over, however, because the Khmer Rouge vehemently believes in the superiority of the Khmer race and seeks to eliminate ethnic minorities—including Chinese-Cambodians like Ma. The group will soon exploit the pre-existing atmosphere of racial tension in Cambodia, painting those with light skin as lazy and selfish while lauding those from the countryside—who often have darker skin—as model citizens.

Strolling slowly along the sidewalk, I watch men crowd around the stands with the pretty young girls at them. I realize that a woman's physical beauty is important, that it never hurts business to have attractive girls selling your products. A beautiful young woman turns otherwise smart men into gawking boys.

Related Characters: Loung Ung (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

Loung makes this observation after having left the breakfast table and wandering Phnom Penh in search of salty snack food. Despite being a young child, Loung already recognizes the ways in which women can use beauty as currency in Phnom Penh. Loung's statement that beauty turns men into "gawking boys," however, is ultimately part of the same thinking that blames women for men's bad behavior. Under the Khmer Rouge, beauty becomes an invitation for harassment. While in Ro leap, for example, Loung will tell the story of Davi—a pretty young girl whose parents work to hide her beauty in order to prevent her being raped by soldiers. Later, in the Thai refugee camp, Loung will once again observe how a woman's appearance is regarded as being at fault for gendered violence: when a Vietnamese refugee is nearly raped, Loung overhears women haughtily declare that the girl brought the attention upon herself by wearing "sexy clothes." By including this observation about beauty in Phnom Penh, Loung is once again establishing a continuum of sexism and misogyny that affects women's lives regardless of who is in power.

Chapter 2 Quotes

The explosion from the bomb in our trashcan knocked down the walls of our kitchen, but luckily no one was hurt. The police never found out who put the bomb there. My heart is sick at the thought that someone actually tried to hurt Pa. If only these new people in the city could understand that Pa is a very nice man, someone who's always willing to help others, they would not want to hurt him.

Related Characters: Pa , Loung Ung (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2

Explanation and Analysis

When Loung was two, someone tried to kill Pa—a military police captain—by putting a bomb in the Ungs' trash can. Pa explains that, as a government official, he was the target of civil unrest. He continues to elaborate on the broader context of the Cambodian civil war, and how devastation of the countryside by foreign bombs has led to resentment towards urban Cambodians and the Lon Nol government. Pa's story provides valuable insight into the trouble brewing beyond Loung's world. Importantly, this moment is the first mention of danger encroaching on her happy life in Phnom Penh, and foreshadows the fact that Pa will have to hide his identity as a government worker once the Khmer Rouge take power. Loung's subsequent assertion that simply getting to know a person could curtail violence reveals the innocence of her perspective. As a child with no broader understanding of the political realities that lead to the Khmer Rouge, she is able to identify the absurdity and irrational cruelty at the heart of the violence that will soon sweep across Cambodia.

Chapter 7 Quotes

By the time we arrive at the rendezvous area on the roadside, about thirty people have already gathered there. They squat and sit on the gravel road in four family groups. Many have almond-shaped eyes, thin noses, and light skin, which suggests they might also be of Chinese descent. Pure Khmer have curly black hair, flat noses, full lips, and dark chocolate skin.

Related Characters: Loung Ung (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

Loung makes this observation while her family is waiting for a truck to pick them up and take them away from the village of Krang Truop. This is the fullest description Loung has given yet regarding the different ethnicities living in Cambodia, and suggests her growing awareness of the Khmer Rouge's genocidal agenda. The fact that many of the people being moved around are lighter skinned is further evidence of the Khmer Rouge's racial prejudice. Lighter skin in Cambodia is associated with urban wealth and being foreign or mixed raced; rural workers often have darker skin and more typically-Khmer features. The Khmer Rouge thus inflames a pre-existing atmosphere of racial resentment to take control of the country and further its violent ends. This scene also foreshadows the ways in which Loung's family

will be discriminated against because of Ma's Chinese heritage throughout the story.

Chapter 8 Quotes

"The Khmer Rouge are executing people perceived to be a threat against the Angkar. This new country has no law or order. City people are killed for no reason. Anyone can be viewed as a threat to the Angkar—former civil servants, monks, doctors, nurses, artists, teachers, students—even people who wear glasses, as the soldiers view this as a sign of intelligence. Anyone the Khmer Rouge believes has the power to lead a rebellion will be killed. We have to be extremely careful, but if we keep moving to different villages, we may stay safe."

Related Characters: Pa (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

Pa says this to Loung's older brothers as the family is forced to leave the village of Anlungthmor for the village of Ro Leap. His words evidence the extreme paranoia and irrationality at the heart of the Khmer Rouge's genocide. The fact that the group targets those displaying any sign of free thinking or intelligence reveals that it upholds its power through force, ignorance, and fear. The elimination of educated individuals, especially doctors, will also prove extremely short sighted as malnutrition and disease continue to sweep across Cambodia. Pa—a former government worker—foreshadows his own targeting and death here, as well as the Khmer Rouge's later killing of entire families of alleged subversives in order to prevent retaliation. Loung, Kim, and Chou will also one day be forced to move yet again after Ro Leap in order to stay safe.

Chapter 9 Quotes

"Capitalists should be shot and killed," someone yells from the crowd, glaring at us. Another villager walks over and spits at Pa's feet. Pa's shoulders droop low as he holds his palms together in a gesture of greeting. I cower at the edge of the truck, my heart beating wildly, afraid to get off. Fearing that they might spit at me, I avoid their eyes. They look very mean, like hungry tigers ready to pounce on us. Their black eyes stare at me, full of contempt. I don't understand why they are looking at me as if I am a strange animal, when in reality we look very much the same.

Related Characters: Loung Ung (speaker), Pa

Related Themes:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

The Ungs face immediate hostility from the villagers upon their arrival in Ro Leap. Loung's description of their antagonistic greeting suggests that many in Ro Leap are true believers in the Khmer Rouge, and foreshadows how difficult life will be for the Ungs in their new village. The comment that capitalists should be killed reflects the fact that the Khmer Rouge violently smothers any dissent. Pa's bow, meanwhile, underscores his willingness to sacrifice personal pride in the name of protecting his family. As a child with no understanding of things like capitalism, Loung is in a unique position to see through to the irrational heart of the hatred for her family. Her assertion that she and the villagers are "the same" suggests that intense prejudice on the basis of things like political beliefs or ethnicity is ultimately absurd and dehumanizing.

My first red dress, the one Ma made for me for the New Year's celebration. I remember Ma taking my measurements, holding the soft chiffon cloth against my body, and asking me if I liked it. "The color looks so pretty on you," she said, "and the chiffon material will keep you cool." Ma made three identical dresses for Chou, Geak, and me. ... I grind my teeth so hard the pain in my throat moves up to my temples. My hands clench in fists; I continue to stare at my dress. I do not see the soldier's hand reach into his pocket and retrieve from it a box of matches. I do not hear his fingers strike a match against the side of the box. The next thing I know the pile of clothes bursts into flames and my red dress melts like plastic in the fire.

Related Characters: Loung Ung (speaker), Geak, Chou, Ma

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

On the family's first night in the village of Ro Leap, the Khmer Rouge burns everyone's clothing and forces them to all wear the same black uniform as a rebuke of Western vanity. The destruction of Loung's red dress is deeply traumatic because of everything she associates with the

garment—her mother, her sisters, and her happy life before the Khmer Rouge took over. Loung must have packed the dress with the hope of one day being able to wear it again—and, it follows, with the hope of returning to her life as it was in Phnom Penh. The destruction of the dress, then, marks the destruction of that hope, as well as Loung's realization that her life will never be the same. Later in the book she will attempt to replace the red dress with a new one, only to be forced to accept that she cannot replace the family and life that the Khmer Rouge took from her.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ As much as I want to become a thief myself, I do not have the courage to do it. It seems a lifetime ago when I was rich and spoiled in Phnom Penh, when children stole from me and I did not care. I could afford to be stolen from, but I judged them harshly for doing so. I thought thieves were worthless, too lazy to work for what they wanted. I understand now that they had to steal to survive.

Related Characters: Loung Ung (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis

Because villagers are starving to death in Ro Leap, some have resorted to stealing corn from a nearby field. Loung's admission here that she was spoiled in Phnom Penh is a sign that she has had to grow up quickly under the Khmer Rouge. She has developed more compassion for those who are less fortunate, while extreme hardship has also forced her to accept that morality is not as clear-cut as she once believed it to be. Theft, which she once saw a sign of laziness, has been transformed into an act of courage. Kim will later steal corn just as these villagers do to help the family stave off starvation. Loung's acceptance of theft as necessary for survival also foreshadows the fact that she will eventually steal rice twice—once from her own family, and once from a dying old woman—in the name of living one more day.

❝ "It was me, Pa!" my mind screams out. "I stole from the family. I am sorry!" But I say nothing and do not confess to the crime. The guilt weighs heavily on me. I had gotten up in the middle of the night and stolen the rice. I wish I had been still in between the sleeping and waking worlds when I did it, but that is not true. I knew exactly what I was doing when I stole the handful of rice from my family. My hunger was so strong that I did not think of the consequences of my actions. I stepped over the others' sleeping bodies to get to the container. With my heart pounding, I slowly lifted off the top. My hand reached in and took out a handful of uncooked rice and quickly shoved it into my hungry mouth before anyone woke and made me put it back.

Related Characters: Loung Ung (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 89-90

Explanation and Analysis

With the family close to starvation, Pa is able to obtain extra rice from the village chief in exchange for Ma's jewelry. The family keeps the rice hidden, but Loung—driven by extreme hunger—steals a handful late one night. This action echoes her earlier realization that sometimes people must steal to survive, but that knowledge does not assuage her guilt. She cannot bring herself to admit what she did and will feel ashamed of this action for years to come, especially upon seeing how frail her younger sister Geak grows from malnutrition. In reality, a single handful of rice would not have been the difference between life and death for any of Loung's family members. To Loung, however, this theft exposes the desperate, at times selfish lengths she will go to in order to survive. After the fall of the Khmer Rouge, Loung will attempt to atone for the rice by giving some to a family in need.

❝ Ma is proud of her heritage but has to hide it before it proves dangerous to us all. Pa says that the Angkar is obsessed with ethnic cleansing. The Angkar hates anyone who is not true Khmer. The Angkar wants to rid Democratic Kampuchea of other races, deemed the source of evil, corruption, and poison, so that people of the true Khmer heritage can rise to power again. I do not know what ethnic cleansing means. I just know that to protect myself, I often have to rub dirt and charcoal on my skin to look as dark as the base people.

Related Characters: Loung Ung (speaker), Ma , Pa

Related Themes:

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

This is the book's first direct mention of "ethnic cleansing." By using this term, Pa is putting a name to what the government is really doing under the guise of social engineering: scapegoating Cambodia's problems onto non-ethnic Khmers and trying to rid the country of minority groups. Ma's Chinese heritage—a source of pride and beauty in Phnom Penh—continues to be a dangerous burden under the genocidal Khmer Rouge. Loung again approaches this new information from a child's perspective, cutting the Angkar's grandiose plans down to size with her own lack of understanding. Rubbing dirt on herself does not change who she is, only what she looks like—thus underscoring the absurdity of hating someone on the basis of their skin color.

Chapter 13 Quotes

I am a kid, not even seven years old, but somehow I will kill Pol Pot. I don't know him, yet I am certain he is the fattest, slimiest snake on earth. I am convinced that there is a monster living inside his body. He will die a painful, agonizing death, and I pray that I will play a part in it. I despise Pol Pot for making me hate so deeply. My hate empowers and scares me, for with hate in my heart I have no room for sadness. Sadness makes me want to die inside. Sadness makes me want to kill myself to escape the hopelessness of my life. Rage makes me want to survive and live so that I may kill. I feed my rage with bloody images of Pol Pot's slain body being dragged in the dirt.

Related Characters: Loung Ung (speaker), Pol Pot

Related Themes:

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

After Pa is taken away and killed by soldiers, Loung declares to Chou that she will kill Pol Pot, the leader of the Khmer Rouge. Just as the Khmer Rouge robbed Loung of the chance to mourn Keav, here, too, Loung must repress her grief over Pa's death to keep going. In the place of sadness, she draws strength from anger and dreams of violence. Loung will repeatedly echo this notion—that anger grants her the will to survive—throughout the book. Her visions of torture and bloody revenge are made all the more shocking by the fact that she is still a young child, highlighting how the horrors of war have robbed Loung of her innocence.

Chapter 16 Quotes

In Phnom Penh, Pa once told me the Youns are just like us but with whiter skin and smaller noses. However, Met Bong describes the Youns as savages who are bent on taking over our country and our people. I do not know what to believe. The only world I know beyond this camp is the one Met Bong describes to me. Sitting in the dark, I find myself starting to believe her message about the enemies.

Related Characters: Loung Ung (speaker), Met Bong, Pa

Related Themes:

Page Number: 141

Explanation and Analysis

While in the child soldiers' training camp, Met Bong, Loung's supervisor, gives the children enthusiastic propaganda lessons about the might of the Angkar and the monstrosity of the Youns (the Vietnamese). With no other source of information about the outside world, Loung finds herself unable to dismiss Met Bong's enthusiastic dehumanization of an entire race of people. The fact that even Loung—who was once taught by her beloved Pa that the Youns are people just like her—begins to get confused reveals the immense power of propaganda, ignorance, and fear to inflame racial prejudice and hatred. Of course, the Khmer Rouge are guilty of all the atrocities Met Bong accuses the Vietnamese of committing, making her scary stories ring all the more hollow and absurd.

Chapter 18 Quotes

By taking her food I have helped kill her. But I cannot return the rice. I lift it to my lips as salty tears drip into my throat. The hard rice scrapes down in a dry lump, thus I put a marker on the old woman's grave.

Related Characters: Loung Ung (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 156

Explanation and Analysis

While attempting to recover from near-starvation in the Khmer Rouge infirmary, Loung steals food for the second

time in the book. Just as she once took rice from her own family in a moment of hungry desperation, here she again makes a painful choice for her own well-being. Loung's will to live is stronger than her compassion for the old woman. This moment thus reflects the book's theme of the price of survival; strong-spirited as Loung may be, hunger exposes the lengths to which she will go in order to stay alive. As with the rice she took from her family, Loung will feel guilty about this theft for years to come.

Chapter 20 Quotes

❝ My breath becomes short and shallow; images of the Youns torturing and killing their victims flash before my eyes. I have never seen a Youn and yet these men look remarkably human. They are the same size as our Khmer men and are similarly built … The Youns look more like Ma than many Khmers. They do not look like the devils Met Bong said they were.

Related Characters: Loung Ung (speaker), Met Bong, Ma

Related Themes:

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

After the Vietnamese invade Cambodia, Loung—along with thousands of others—is able to flee from her Khmer Rouge-controlled work camp and walks for days. Shortly before reaching a Vietnamese displaced people's camp, Loung sees her first "Youn"—that is, her first Vietnamese person. Khmer Rouge propaganda sought to dehumanize the Vietnamese, presenting them as barbaric monsters bent on brutally murdering Cambodians like Loung. As a child with no source of information apart from the teachings of Met Bong, Loung earlier admitted to absorbing some of this prejudice, and, as such, growing terrified of the Youns. She is thus shocked to discover not only how very human the Vietnamese are, but that they even resemble her own mother. This moment makes the extreme hatred expressed by the Khmer Rouge seem all the more outlandish, and again reflects the book's theme that ethnic hatred is illogical and absurd.

Chapter 21 Quotes

❝ He breathes heavily, his wet lips on my cheek. In a surge of anger, I slap him across the face and push him away.

"Leave me alone! Get away from me!" I scream into his face.

"What's the problem, am I not nice to you? You like me, I know you do." He smirks and approaches me again. I want to rip his lips off his face. "Get away or I'll tell on you!"

"All right," he says, and his eyes glare at me. "Who will believe you? It's your fault anyway, always tagging along and going places with me." Spitting at his feet, I turn and run away. Paof is right: I cannot fight him. I cannot tell anyone—not even Kim and Chou.

Related Characters: Paof, Loung Ung (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 177

Explanation and Analysis

Loung's fourteen-year-old foster brother, Paof, brother attempts to assault her in the woods outside the Vietnamese displaced people's camp. When Loung fights back, Paof's response exemplifies how, in a misogynistic society, women are often blamed for violence committed against them. Paof's thinking is undergirded by the same sexism that Loung has highlighted throughout the story—whether it manifests as expectations that girls be submissive to men, or as beauty being deemed as an invitation for harassment. Paof's comments will be echoed later in the Thai refugee camp, when a Vietnamese girl is nearly raped and other women assert that it was the girl's own fault for dressing provocatively and flirting with men. Each of these incidents push Loung closer to understanding how sexism is reinforced in ways both small and large throughout society, as well as the fact that misogyny does not start and end with the Khmer Rouge.

❝ "No one knows how precious you are. You are a diamond in the rough and with a little polishing, you will shine," Pa whispers softly. His gentle words bring a small smile to my lips. The mother may not give me the love I crave, but I know what it feels like to be loved. Pa loved me and believed in me. With that little reminder from him, I know the foster mother is wrong about me. I do possess the one thing I need to make something of myself one day: I have everything my Pa gave me.

Related Characters: Pa , Loung Ung (speaker), Foster mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 183

Explanation and Analysis

Loung's cruel foster mother scolds her for bringing back too little wood one day, declaring that she is lazy and will grow up to be nothing but a hooker. Loung briefly doubts herself, wondering if she will indeed have a future after all she has endured. She hears Pa's encouraging words in her head, however, and once again his voice becomes a source of immense strength, even after death. By deciding that she will succeed because of everything Pa taught her, Loung is asserting that the Khmer Rouge could not destroy their bond; on the contrary, the love Loung's family gave her and the lessons they taught her made Loung the person she is. As such, her family will always be a part of her.

Chapter 24 Quotes

One by one, people return to their homes, leaving me standing there alone, staring at the corpse. My mind plays back images of my parents' and sister's murders. Again my heart tears open as I stand there and wonder how they died. Quickly, I push the sadness away. The slumped over corpse reminds me of Pithy in her mother's arms. Pithy's head bled in much the same way. His death will not bring any of them back.

Related Characters: Loung Ung (speaker), Geak, Keav, Pa , Ma , Pithy

Related Themes:

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

While Loung is living in the Vietnamese displaced people's camp, a Khmer Rouge soldier is captured. A frenzied mob of villagers demand the soldier be released so that they can be the ones to kill him. Loung eagerly attends the execution, wriggling her way to the front of the crowd to watch as the soldier is brutally beaten and stabbed to death. The event is somber rather than celebratory, however, and does not grant Loung the catharsis she has long hoped for. By connecting the soldier's blood to that of her friend Pithy, Loung suggests that, however monstrous the Khmer Rouge soldiers may be, they are still human beings. Loung also makes the mature realization here that revenge—a desire that granted her strength to survive under the Khmer Rouge—won't give her what she really wants, which is to bring her family back. This moment signifies an important step for Loung in letting go of the rage instilled in her by the Khmer Rouge and finally moving on.

Chapter 27 Quotes

Waiting in lines for their ration of food, the women prattle about how the girl brought it upon herself. "After all," they say, "she is Vietnamese. These Vietnamese girls are always laughing loudly, talking, and flirting with men. They wear sexy clothes with long slits up their skirts and swimming suits. They bring bad attention to themselves." My face burns with rage; I run away from the gossips. Are they right? Those people who are always so quick to blame the girls.

Related Characters: Loung Ung (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 230

Explanation and Analysis

After a man attempts to rape a Vietnamese girl in the Thai refugee camp, Loung overhears two women talking about how it was the girl's fault because of her allegedly unladylike actions. The way the two prattling women describe the girl's behavior echoes the way Ma used to wish Loung would be quieter and more demure; as such, this moment illustrates the ways in which strict expectations of femininity can lead to girls being blamed for gender-based violence. At this point in the story, Loung has been nearly assaulted or raped twice—once by Paof, and once by a Vietnamese soldier. Having experienced the violent results of misogyny firsthand, she begins to express resentment of society's more innocuous mistreatment of women for the first time.

Then I lift and smooth my dress once again before laying it down carefully, making sure it will not be wrinkled tomorrow. I am sad thinking I have finally replaced the other red dress that the soldier burned. This is my first dress in five years, and tomorrow I will wear it and show off to everyone. Before the giggles can escape my lips, a feeling of sadness pushes them down. Staring at the dress I realize it will never be the dress Ma made for me. They are both gone.

Related Characters: Loung Ung (speaker), Eang, Ma

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 232

Explanation and Analysis

After getting word that they have obtained a sponsor to bring them to America, Eang celebrates by taking Loung to a Thai market to buy fabric in order to make her a new dress. The dress is made of an orange, blue, and, importantly, red checkered cloth—meaning Loung has fulfilled the promise she once made to herself to obtain a new red dress to replace the one the Khmer Rouge destroyed. As she considers the dress while packing the night before leaving the refugee camp, however, she comes to understand that some things are not so easily replaced. The old dress represented her happy life in Phnom Penh and her family, both of which are irreplaceable. In this moment, Loung finally accepts the reality of their loss.

Epilogue Quotes

❝ Once her glance reached my face and our eyes locked, I saw that they are the same: kind, gentle, and open. Instantly, she covered her mouth and burst into tears and ran over to me. The family was speechless. She took my hand, her tears cool in my palm. Our fingers clasped around each other naturally as if the chain was never broken, and I allowed Chou to lead me to the car while the cousins followed with my bags.

Related Characters: Loung Ung (speaker), Chou

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 238

Explanation and Analysis

Fifteen years after coming to America, Loung returns to Cambodia for the first time. Her family greets her at the airport, but their reunion is initially awkward, as neither party is entirely sure how to respond to the other. Chou's actions here, however, reassert the strength of her bond with Loung. This scene recalls one that occurred many years earlier: after a desperate, hungry Loung attacked Chou in Ro Leap, the latter revealed the depth of her kindness and ability to forgive by reaching for Loung's hand as they walked to the village garden the following morning. Now, many years later, Chou reaches for Loung's hand once again—affirming that the bond between family transcends time, trauma, and distance, and that sisterhood is unbreakable.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1: PHNOM PENH, APRIL 1975

The story begins in Phnom Penh in April of 1975. The bustling city comes to life early as people try to avoid the extreme heat of midday. The streets are full of food vendors, children playing, and people on their way to work. Loung Ung is five years old and lives with her family in a third-floor apartment in the middle of the chaos. She enjoys traveling with Ma via cyclo, a sort of "big wheelchair attached to the front of a bicycle," as police officers stand on metal boxes at intersections to direct traffic. This morning Loung struggles to sit still as she and her parents eat a traditional breakfast of noodle soup. Ma scolds her and Loung believes it must difficult for Ma—who is tall, slender, and beautiful—to have such an unruly daughter. Despite Ma's efforts, Loung cannot walk daintily like a proper young lady.

To open her memoir, Loung establishes the vibrancy and normalcy of life in Phnom Penh before the Khmer Rouge takeover. The city is full of regular people simply going about their lives, including Loung and her parents. Her unruliness at the breakfast table is the first hint at her strong-willed character, while Ma's scolding reflects the restrictive attitudes towards women even before the Khmer Rouge takeover. The association between Ma's pale skin and beauty suggests the racial prejudice within Cambodian society, equating lighter skin with superiority.

The family's food comes and Loung adds two whole red chilies to her bowl, reflecting that Pa told her that eating spicy food is good for people in hot climates because it makes them drink more water. Loung knocks over a salt shaker and Ma becomes angry once again, pointing out that Loung frequently gets into trouble—such as when she carried around a chicken to join in chicken fights with her friends. Pa, meanwhile, asserts that Loung is clever for getting herself out of tricky situations.

Loung clearly respects Pa's advice and values his praise. Her story of the chicken further establishes Loung's adventurous, "unladylike" nature. Pa's assertion that Loung is able to get out of tricky situations foreshadows her ability to survive under the Khmer Rouge.

Pa is five-foot-five with a stocky frame and a warm smile that reaches his eyes. He was a monk when he met Ma but, smitten by her beauty, left the monastery so they could marry. Because he was poor and dark-skinned, however, Ma's parents did not approve of the match and the two eloped. Pa had a serious gambling problem early in their marriage; he lost his house and money in a game, and stopped gambling when Ma threatened to leave him. As a result, he does not allow playing cards in the house. He works as a military police captain, and though Loung does not get to see him often because of his job, she insists he is "everything a good father should be" and is respected by many.

Ma's parents' disapproval of her relationship with Pa further establishes the racial prejudice of the time between light and dark-skinned Cambodians—prejudices that will soon be exploited by the Khmer Rouge. Pa's job will also later threaten the survival of the Ungs. Loung continues to display love and respect for her family members and establish what their lives are like in the time before the Khmer Rouge takeover.

Loung is extremely curious about the world, though her incessant questioning annoys Ma. After she has finished eating, her parents let her leave the table and she buys fried crickets for a snack. She notices that many of the more successful street vendors are pretty girls, and that beauty is a powerful commodity. She recalls friends of her parents frequently saying she is "ugly," which in Cambodia is a compliment; people believe that evil spirits become jealous when they hear a child being complimented outright.

Loung's observation of beauty as currency in Phnom Penh further reveals the societal expectations of and pressure placed on women regardless of who is in power. Later on, beauty will become a burden as it attracts harassment and even rape under the Khmer Rouge.

CHAPTER 2: THE UNG FAMILY, APRIL 1975

Loung has three brothers and three sisters, and the family of nine lives in a large, modern third-floor apartment with a flushing toilet, running water, and a maid. Loung is well off compared to many of her friends, who live in cramped ground floor apartments, which are dirtier and offer less privacy. The city's poor live in tents in areas where Loung is not allowed to go, though she has seen the children who live there begging or attempting to sell crafts. Because the family lacks a refrigerator, Ma gets heavily dolled up and then goes to the nearest market every morning to buy food that she carries back in an ice-filled cooler. Ma is ethnically Chinese, and as is Chinese tradition, always takes her shoes off before reentering the apartment.

Loung continues to describe the joy and normalcy of her life in Phnom Penh. The Ungs' relative privilege—evidenced by their large apartment and modern amenities—will contrast greatly with the horror they are about to be subjected to and reveals how ill-prepared they are for lives of hard labor. Loung also once again reflects on Ma's Chinese heritage, which will prove dangerous under the genocidal Khmer Rouge.

At night, Loung enjoys sitting with Pa on their balcony and looking at the French colonial buildings alongside dingy houses. The two have "important conversations" on the balcony. In one, Pa says Loung's name translates to "dragon" in Chinese, and that dragons are powerful and wise. Pa says a dragon formed from clouds has visited him many times to give messages about his children's births.

This scene further establishes the special bond between Loung and Pa—a bond to which Loung will turn throughout the story in times of need. The story behind Loung's name again foreshadows her ability to persevere under the horror to come.

Ma once told Loung that when she was two, someone tried to kill Pa because he was a government official and put a bomb in their trash can. Loung asks Pa about this, and he responds that Cambodia is in the middle of a civil war. Loung asks what bombs are, and Pa describes how such weapons are devastating the countryside and forcing many Cambodians to move to cities for safety. When they arrive, however, they cannot find work and resent the government for this. Pa says he does not understand why Cambodia is fighting a war, while Loung reflects that if only people knew how kind her father is, no one would want to hurt him.

This is the story's first hint at the trouble brewing beyond Loung's world. Pa gives context for the tensions that help give rise to the Khmer Rouge, and which fuel resentment towards government workers like himself. Loung's reflection that getting to know a person can curb hatred highlights the innocence of her perspective; as a child, she is able to cut straight to the irrationality of the violence that will soon dominate her life.

Loung describes Pa's past. He was born in a rural village in 1931. His father died when Pa was twelve, and his stepfather was an abusive drunk. He left home at eighteen to become a Buddhist monk, and had to sweep the ground in front of him to avoid killing living things. After leaving to marry Ma he joined the police force and became a secret agent. Pa left the force for the business world, but when the Cambodian government fell in 1970 he was conscripted by the new government of Lon Nol. He had to comply or would have been branded a traitor. Loung asks if other countries do things this way, and Pa explains the democracy of America. Pa says that, for example, if Republicans lose an election in America they would have to find other jobs; in Cambodia, they would have to become Democrats "or risk punishment."

Pa's background establishes the instability of Cambodian politics even before the Khmer Rouge: the Lon Nol government was full of corruption and denied citizens genuine freedom. The fact that Pa had no choice but to work for the Lon Nol government makes his later execution by the Khmer Rouge for his involvement all the more tragic. This is also the story's first mention of America, which will ultimately serve as a symbol of hope and a chance for a new beginning for Loung.

Meng, Loung's eighteen-year-old brother, joins them on the balcony. Meng, like Pa, is soft spoken and kind. He was valedictorian of his class and plans to go to France to earn his degree before marrying his girlfriend. Khouy, another brother, is sixteen. He rides a motorcycle, likes karate and girls, and is strict with his younger siblings. Keav, the family's oldest girl at fourteen, is beautiful but a gossip—a trait Ma does not consider ladylike. Pa has heard stories of people being so discontent that they harass or kidnap government officials' daughters, and so he has a policeman follow Keav wherever she goes. Kim, another brother, is ten and nicknamed "little monkey" for being small and agile. Chou is three years older than Loung and, unlike her little sister, quiet and obedient. She has dark skin like Pa. Loung's siblings think she is a spoiled troublemaker, though Pa thinks she is simply passionate. The youngest sibling is Geak, an adorable three-year-old girl.

This is the first introduction to the rest of the Ung family, who will be a source of comfort and strength for Loung throughout the horror of next four years. Pa's fear about Keav being kidnapped or harassed echoes the many abductions and rapes that happen under the Khmer Rouge. It also reveals that mistreatment of women is not unique to a single government; rather, misogyny it is a broader, more deeply embedded issue.

As a middle-class family, the Ungs have a television and two telephones. Loung also notes that her family seems to have more leisure time than others; a maid does the cooking and cleaning. Loung attends school with Chou and Kim six days a week and does homework on Sundays. Pa insists that the way to get ahead is to learn languages, and the children study French, Chinese, and Khmer. Loung sometimes skips school to go to the playground. She likes her school uniform, and when a boy tries to lift her skirt she pushes him so hard that he falls.

Loung continues to detail her family's privilege in Phnom Penh, which later makes the transition to hard labor under the Khmer Rouge all the more difficult. The children's education will also become a liability as the Khmer Rouge seek to exterminate intellectualism. Finally, Loung's interaction on the playground again emphasizes her strength and ability to stand up for herself.

Pa takes the children swimming after school on Sundays at "the club." There Loung sees her first "Barang"—which Chou says means "white man." Keav corrects her, saying Barang actually means "French," but because the French have lived in Cambodia for so long they use the word to describe any white person.

There are many French people living in Cambodia because the country was under the control of France until 1953. The Khmer Rouge gains power in part by exploiting the former colony's hatred of Westerners, and will soon expel all foreigners.

CHAPTER 3: TAKEOVER, APRIL 17, 1975

Loung is playing hopscotch in the street on a Thursday afternoon because Pa has kept all the children home from school. Suddenly mud-covered trucks roll through the streets, occupied by filthy, dark-skinned men with long greasy hair—a sign in Cambodia of having something to hide. They wear black pants and shirts, with red scarves tied around their foreheads. A crowd forms and people cheer. Loung runs to ask Pa what is happening, and he says that they are soldiers cheering because they won the war. Pa says they are not nice men, pointing out that their shoes are made of tires—signaling that they destroy things.

This is Loung's first sight of the Khmer Rouge, and reveals how abruptly the group invades and upends her life. Though she does not understand exactly what is happening, she knows the men's dark skin associates them with the rural countryside. The men's long hair and Pa's observation about their destructive nature foreshadow the havoc the Khmer Rouge will wreak upon Cambodia.

Everyone has stopped what they are doing to watch the men. Loung joins in the cheering, though she has no idea what is going on. When she returns home, her family is frantically packing, and Ma snaps at her to eat because they have a long journey ahead. Loung reluctantly does so under Khouy's watchful eye. Upon Ma's instructions, Loung changes her clothes, and then walks toward the family Mazda—a car that signals that they are middle class. Kim picks Loung up and instead plops her in the back of Pa's rundown pickup truck, and the family drives off through the crowded streets of the city.

The fact that Loung cheers for the soldiers underscores how little she understands about the Khmer Rouge, but also how they could potentially be seen (particularly by the poor) as liberators—overthrowing a corrupt government and advocating for equality—until their own corruption and brutality becomes apparent. The confusion she feels will be present throughout the story, highlighting the ultimate irrationality of the violence that is about to become part of her life. The family takes the truck to avoid being associated with wealth or worldliness, both of which are punishable under the Khmer Rouge, as Ma and Pa immediately understand.

Many other families are leaving the city, both in vehicles and on foot. The soldiers shout at citizens to surrender all weapons, and Loung notes that they no longer seem friendly. Keav explains to Loung that they are called the Khmer Rouge and are Communists. The soldiers shout that the city must be emptied for a few days because the U.S. will bomb it. They fire their rifles in the air, causing the crowd to push and shove in a frenzy as people try to escape the city.

Even amidst Loung's confusion about why her family has to leave Phnom Penh, the cruelty and violence of the Khmer Rouge is immediately apparent—they are not liberators at all, but have only replaced one corrupt government with another that is even worse. Many families appear to be in the same situation as the Ungs. Loung's family continues to be a source of information and comfort for her.

CHAPTER 4: EVACUATION, APRIL 1975

After many hours the family is out of the city. It is the dry season, and the air is very dry and dusty. The wet season runs from May to October and turns the country into a "green paradise," but April is the hottest month of the year. Khouy wraps a scarf around Loung's head and tells her not to look over the truck's sides. Thousands of families can be seen walking. Loung's family stops at an empty hut for the night. When Loung has to use the bathroom, Ma hands her cash to use as toilet paper, and Loung realizes the family must be in big trouble.

Loung's description of the unforgiving environment emphasizes how difficult the journey from Phnom Penh is. Despite being a fearful figure in Phnom Penh, Khouy behaves in a paternal way towards Loung here, emphasizing the bond between the Ung family underlying whatever petty squabbles they might have had in easier times. The fact that money no longer has value reveals how rapidly society has changed and how the Ungs can no longer buy the comfort of their old lives.

The next morning more Khmer Rouge soldiers yell at them to keep moving. Pa says that the soldiers kicked everyone out of the city, including from schools and hospitals. They were not allowed to go home first, and many families have been separated. Khouy says many old and sick people did not survive the journey, and Loung understands why he told her to keep her head down. The soldiers shot and killed those who refused to leave. Pa again calls the Khmer Rouge "destroyers of things." When the truck runs out of petrol, the family gathers what they can carry and begins to walk. Soldiers stop Pa and demand he give them his, Meng's, and Khouy's watches, which he does without hesitation. He whispers to the children that they must give the soldiers whatever they want.

The extreme brutality and paranoia of the Khmer Rouge becomes ever more apparent, as does the danger of speaking against it. The Ungs must let go of more comforts and luxuries to continue moving forward and survive in their new environment. The Khmer Rouge demand the men's watches because they seek to abolish any indications of wealth—but also take that wealth for themselves. Pa's warning forebodes the danger of speaking out against the repressive regime.

CHAPTER 5: SEVEN-DAY WALK, APRIL 1975

Khouy and Meng enter a temple to fetch water from its well, but a soldier is guarding it and demands they leave. Others enter the temple anyway, and they hear gunshots. On the third day of walking Loung observes that there haven't been any American planes in the sky. She is excited because she thinks they can return home as the soldiers said, but that evening Pa tells her that the soldiers lied. Loung sobs from hunger and exhaustion; though they are rationing food, Pa lets her have a ball of sticky rice and takes the pot she is carrying from her. Loung sees that many of the people walking are barefoot, and realizes many are worse off than she is.

The Khmer Rouge soldiers prove even more cruel and also deceitful. The United States did bomb parts of Cambodia during the Vietnam War, but Loung's observation reveals that the Khmer Rouge's rationale for forcing people to leave the city was a lie. Pa's compassion remains strong in the face of terror, and Loung—who was relatively spoiled in Phnom Penh—gains more empathy for those around her.

On the fourth day, they reach the Khmer Rouge's military checkpoint in Kom Baul. Soldiers question families before they can pass and insist none lie to the "Angkar," which Pa says means "the organization" and is the new government. Cambodia was a monarchy until a military coup in 1970 by the Lon Nol democratic government, which had been at war with the Khmer Rouge ever since.

Pa grants context for the Khmer Rouge takeover and reveals the political corruption and instability that helped give rise to the Angkar. The soldiers' insistence on honesty to the Angkar, meanwhile, suggests the authoritarian nature of the new government.

There is a separate checkpoint line for anyone who worked for the deposed government. Pa says they must pretend to be peasants, and that only he should speak. Loung watches the soldiers empty a man's bag, and, upon discovering a Lon Nol army uniform, push him away with the butt of a rifle. After many hours the Ungs reach the soldiers. Pa says he works and in a shipping port and Ma says she sells clothes at the market. A soldier digs through all their bags and then clears them to go.

Pa wisely surmises that his association with the former Lon Nol government is dangerous under the Khmer Rouge for both himself and his family, and that they must hide their identities to survive. The fact that another man is revealed as being associated with the Lon Nol government adds tension as the soldier digs through the Ungs' bags.

That night Loung dreams she is at a Lunar New Year's celebration filled with fireworks. When she wakes up, she overhears Ma say that the soldiers opened fire on all the people who worked for the previous government, killing every single one. Keav takes Loung to go to the bathroom in the woods and they stumble across a dead body, which horrifies her.

The stakes under the Khmer Rouge are raised higher still, as soldiers quickly execute anyone with dissenting political opinions. This scene is also the first time Loung has seen a dead body. Her horror here contrasts with the numbness toward violence she will develop throughout the book.

The family walks for a sixth day, spurred forward by the soldiers. Many people become ill from heatstroke and dehydration but are forced to keep moving. That night Meng, Khouy, and Kim forage for food and return with some brown sugar, much to Loung's delight. After dinner Ma leads the girls to the river to bathe and wash their clothes. The next day they see a lone cyclist on the road, and realize it is Ma's brother Uncle Leang. He gives Ma a package of food and tells Pa that ever since evacuees arrived in his village he has been searching for the family. Later Ma's oldest brother Uncle Heang arrives with a wagon. Both uncles have always lived in the countryside and as such are considered "uncorrupted model citizens" by the Khmer Rouge. Pa says they will live with them in the village of Krang Truop.

Loung's description of her family's long walk highlights the brutality and cruelty of this first attempt by the Khmer Rouge to reshape society. An estimated twenty-thousand Cambodian citizens died during the forced march from Phnom Penh alone. The welcomed arrival of Uncle Leang reflects the book's theme about the importance of family. His description as a "model citizen," meanwhile, hints at the Angkar's hatred for anything associated with the city or the West, and foreshadows the horrific treatment the Ungs will soon experience.

CHAPTER 6: KRANG TRUOP, APRIL 1975

The Ungs arrive in Krang Truop on April 25, eight days after leaving Phnom Penh. The village is small and dusty, full of rice paddies and straw huts. Soldiers replaced the old village chief with a Khmer Rouge cadre, and villagers must now ask permission to leave or have relatives stay with them. Pa gets permission for the family to stay.

The village contrasts greatly with Loung's descriptions of Phnom Penh, underscoring how different the Ungs' new life will be. Pa needing to get permission shows the authoritarianism of the new society, as does the presence of the Khmer Rouge soldiers.

Uncle Leang's house is simply one big room with a dirt floor. With his own children, seventeen people are staying under one roof. Kim scolds Loung for being snobbish about their new living arrangements, saying Uncle Leang was brave to beg the Khmer Rouge chief to let the family stay. Pa tells the children that they must stay away from any city people who might recognize him, and they must act like they are from the countryside. Loung again asks if they can return home since it has been three days. To Loung's great distress, Pa bluntly says they can never return and that she must forget about Phnom Penh.

The description of Uncle Leang's house again reveals how different life will be for the Ungs, as well as how unprepared Loung is to handle her new, less comfortable existence. Loung and her family members must continue to hide their identities to survive under the Khmer Rouge. Loung remains hopeful of returning one day to her old life, even as this becomes increasingly unlikely.

Pa explains that Cambodia gained independence from France in 1953, but many people viewed the monarchy—led by Prince Sihanouk—as corrupt. The Khmer Rouge sprang up to fight the government. Meanwhile the war in Vietnam crossed Cambodia's borders. The United States bombed both countries, destroying villages and increasing peasant support for the Communist Khmer Rouge. Backed by the U.S., general Lon Nol overthrew Prince Sihanouk in 1970, but the Khmer Rouge easily defeated the new, weak government.

Pa gives more context for the rise of the Khmer Rouge, again emphasizing the corruption and injustice of governments past and how this led to widespread unrest and dissatisfaction. His explanation reveals the ways in which nationalistic regimes like the Khmer Rouge can take advantage of political instability and fear to assert power.

Keav comforts Loung and says she will look after her. The next morning, Loung wakes up after the others, who are already hard at work on the farm. Pa says the Angkar have abolished schools and markets and banned money and items like watches and televisions. Loung must be very careful about what she says to other children so as not to reveal that they are from the city. The family must also make do without the comforts of city life, including toothpaste and soap. Though she gradually adjusts to the tedium of life in the village, Loung often feels as though someone is watching them. Pa works long days, and Loung misses his stories.

Family is again a source of comfort for Loung, and the fact that Keav is the one to comfort Loung will make her later death all the more painful. The Khmer Rouge continues to be irrationally brutal, and the Ungs must quickly adjust to the hardships of their new surroundings in order to survive. Loung's feelings of being watched reflect the way the Khmer Rouge uses fear and distrust to control citizens.

CHAPTER 7: WAITING STATION, JULY 1975

One morning, Loung wakes to find her family again packing up. With the arrival of new city people who might recognize them, Pa and Ma say it is no longer safe for them in the village and they must leave quickly. An uncle has arranged for a Khmer Rouge truck to take them to Battambang, where Loung's grandmother lives. There are about thirty other people at the roadside rendezvous point when they arrive. Loung thinks that many look Chinese, with thinner noses and light skin; Khmer have curly black hair and darker skin.

Loung's observation reflects the fact that the Khmer Rouge targets ethnic minority groups in Cambodia, many of whom have lighter skin than ethnic Khmers. The treatment of the Chinese here contrasts with Loung's earlier statements about her mother's beauty and social status coming in part from her pale skin and Chinese heritage. The old way of thinking was prejudiced and unjust, but this new hierarchy is as well.

The ride is bumpy and uncomfortable. When they finally stop that evening, everyone jumps out to stretch. Loung watches Khouy, who has a black belt in karate, do so, and remembers how much she liked to watch him practice in Phnom Penh. He would contort his face to make her laugh, and though he does many of the same movements now, his face remains serious.

Life under the Khmer Rouge has robbed the family of joy, as each member must instead focus his or her energy on survival. Khouy, like Pa, has grown more serious, reflecting the toll that the horror of the Khmer Rouge is taking on its people.

After a short meal, the Ungs climb back in the truck and drive through the night. When they arrive in Pursat province, a soldier instructs them to wait for people to come and bring them back to their village. Pa tells Loung they had to leave Krang Truop because new people from Phnom Penh had arrived and might have recognized him; even if they were friends, they may not have had a choice when it came to telling on Pa.

The fact that former friends would give away the Ungs' identity reflects the depth of the terror the Khmer Rouge has inflicted upon its citizens. It is using fear of punishment (or starvation) as a form of control and to inflict its agenda, and will continue to do so throughout the story.

The soldiers have not taken them to Battambang as they were supposed to, but Pa says that they cannot argue. Kim tells Loung she must look after herself and not trust anyone anymore. He says it is best if she does not speak at all, and Loung reflects that she is learning "what loneliness feels like" at five years old.

The Ungs' helplessness under the Khmer Rouge is further established, as is the price of survival: to live, Loung must sacrifice her voice and sense of connection to other human beings.

Curious, Loung slips away from her family's watchful eyes to look around the "waiting station." There are hundreds of people, many of whom look like they have been there for a long time. She comes across a listless elderly woman being fed by her granddaughter, who says the woman is "half-dead." Loung asks if there are any doctors to help, but the girl snaps at her to go away.

The curiosity Loung displayed in Phnom Penh is still alive under the Khmer Rouge. The regime is clearly not tending to its citizens' needs—its rejection of anyone with an education or allegedly influenced by the West has also resulted in a lack of doctors.

Ma calls Loung back and the family boards another truck. Two middle-aged men in black pants stand next to them, counting heads and writing something on a piece of paper. Once the truck is full they set off. Pa tells Loung that the men in black pants are representatives from rural villages. They were able to leave the waiting station so quickly because Pa bribed someone with Ma's gold necklaces. Loung reflects on how lucky she is to have Pa, and remembers clinging to his arm during scary movies. He seems "so serious and sad" now, and she worries she won't see "fun Pa" again.

The fact that these representatives wear the same black clothing as the Khmer Rouge is the first indication that life in the new village will be even more dangerous and repressive than it was in the previous one. Pa again reveals the lengths to which he will go to help his family and to survive. Loung's appreciation of Pa will only make his later death even more difficult.

CHAPTER 8: ANLUNGTHMOR, JULY 1975

The truck driver seems to leave them in the middle of nowhere with green mountains in the distance. It is now the rainy season, and the air is humid. The village representative leads them to a small trail up a mountain. Loung finds it difficult to hike in her flimsy flip flops. They reach the village by nightfall, at which point they are fed and led to the bamboo and straw hut that is to be their home. The chief will ration salt, rice, and grains every week or two. The village is called Anlungthmor and is patrolled by Khmer Rouge, so they must never speak of Phnom Penh.

The change in season reveals how much time has passed, while Loung's improper footwear again emphasizes how ill-prepared she is for her new circumstances. The patrolling Khmer Rouge creates a sense of tension and reveals how strictly-controlled the Ungs' lives are becoming.

The family huddles together in their hut for warmth at night. Loung gets a fever the second night and hallucinates that ghosts and monsters coming to kill her; Kim and Chou also get sick and have the same nightmares. Pa says they must be careful what they eat, because there are no doctors or medicines in the mountains.

Survival becomes yet more difficult. Loung and her siblings' nightmares echo their fears of being taken by the Khmer Rouge. Pa's words foreshadow the fact that many will die from starvation and disease over the next four years.

Hundreds of others have come to the village and are often moved from place to place by the Khmer Rouge. Pa, Khouy, and Meng must do manual labor every day. Food becomes increasingly scarce, and they catch animals to supplement their diet. The chief eventually sends the young men of the village to dig for wild potatoes and other roots on the mountain. They are gone for days at a time. During their second month in the village, a severe rain storm prevents them from going to the mountains and also washes away the family garden. It rains for weeks, flooding the village. Pa catches dead rabbits that float by, but because they cannot build a fire they must eat them raw.

The Ungs must continue to sacrifice comfort in the name of survival. The fact that they eat eating stomach-turning foods reveals their desperation. The Khmer Rouge's assertion that it would provide for its citizens has clearly proven false, and the Ungs are just one family of hundreds being subjected to the regime's cruelty and ineptitude.

When the rains recede, there is still no food. Hunger and fear cause villagers to become suspicious of newcomers. With their lighter skin and lack of farming knowledge, the Ungs stand out. Pa begs the village chief to relocate them. He also says that the Khmer Rouge have started killing anyone perceived as a threat to the new regime, including monks, doctors, teachers, or even people who wear glasses because they appear too intelligent. Only by moving between villages will the Ungs be safe.

The Ungs' Chinese heritage and privileged life in Phnom Penh again prove a burden under the Khmer Rouge, whose brutality grows ever more paranoid and irrational. The fact that other villagers would turn on the family highlights the difficult choices people often must make in the name of survival.

The family is again picked up by a Khmer Rouge truck. Loung feels used to the routine of moving by this point. Meng says that while three hundred people moved into Anlungthmor five months earlier, by now two hundred have died from starvation, food poisoning, and malaria. Geak has grown extremely thin and frail. She cries with hunger.

Loung's resignation to moving underscores the fact that, when necessary, people can adapt to horrific circumstances to survive. The mass deaths in the village, meanwhile, reveal the extent of the devastation the Khmer Rouge has already caused in Cambodia.

CHAPTER 9: RO LEAP, NOVEMBER 1975

The family arrives at the village of Ro Leap, their third move in the seven months since they were forced out of Phnom Penh. There is a town square where people wait for announcements and work assignments. When the family gets off the truck they are surrounded by villagers wearing black pants and red and white scarves, the familiar outfits of the Khmer Rouge. Someone shouts that capitalists should be killed and spits at Pa's feet. Loung can't understand why the villagers look at them so angrily when they are "very much the same." She asks Pa what capitalists are, but he does not respond.

The immediate antagonism of the Ro Leap villagers foreshadows the difficulty the Ungs will face in their new home, which already appears even stricter than the last. Because Loung is a child with no understanding of political ideologies, she is able to immediately see the absurdity of the intense hatred the villagers feel for her family when they are all simply human beings.

The five hundred original villagers of Ro Leap, called "base people," are considered model citizens by the Khmer Rouge because they have not been "corrupted by the West" and supported the revolution. Kim explains to Loung that a capitalist is someone from the city, and that the Khmer Rouge view science and technology as evil. Things like electronics and cars allow the "urban rich to flaunt their wealth" and are also "contaminated" because they have been imported by foreign countries. Thus all such goods have been abolished; only trucks remain to relocate people and carry weapons to silence dissent.

Loung's family is again a source of information. Kim's explanation of capitalism reveals the rationale, however extreme, behind the Khmer Rouge's cruelty, as well as its blossoming hypocrisy. Despite professing equality for all, the group has already stratified the new Cambodian society into a system of haves and have-nots. Essentially it has removed the positive byproducts of capitalism (technology, communication, education) and emphasized its worst aspects (dehumanization, class divisions, hierarchies of prejudice).

That evening the chief arrives. He is Pa's height and has sharp, coal-dark eyes. The chief tells the new arrivals that they must live by the strict regulations of the Angkar. Everyone must dress the same and wear the same hairstyles to avoid Western vanity. One by one a soldier dumps out each new family's clothing. Loung watches in anguish as her beloved **red dress**, which Ma made her for New Years, is tossed on the pile. She cannot understand why the others seem to hate them. The soldier lights all the colorful clothes on fire as the chief says they will be issued a new set of black clothing every month.

The Khmer Rouge shallowly equates conformity with equality. Loung's red dress is a symbol of her happy life in Phnom Penh, and its destruction represents the destruction of the hope that she may one day return to things as they were. Loung again cuts to the meaninglessness of hatred between people on the basis of skin color or political background.

The chief continues that all foreigners have been expelled, and everyone must be addressed as "Met" rather than "Mr." or "sir." Children must call their parents "Poh" and "Meh." There will be no private property in the village, as everything belongs to the Angkar. People will be fed according to how hard they work, with the base people and soldiers monitoring for laziness or traitors. Schooling of any kind is not allowed. After this, Loung falls asleep. When she awakes she learns that a doctor, his wife, and their three children from Phnom Penh have committed suicide by swallowing poison.

This scene further establishes the strict authoritarianism of the Khmer Rouge as well as the ways in which the group uses fear and violence to silence dissent. The Khmer Rouge robs citizens of their voices, identities, and property, while its emphasis on productivity foreshadows the way many will die from overwork. The suicide of the doctor's family reveals that, to many, life under the Khmer Rouge is a fate worse than death.

Despite the professed equality of the Khmer Rouge, there are three "levels of citizenship." First-class consists of the chief and Khmer soldiers, who make all village decisions and enforce the Angkar's laws. The "base people" are largely free from oversight of the soldiers and do not have to work or eat with the new villagers. They are "bullies" who tell the new people what to do. Finally, the new people like Loung's family who have been forced from cities are the lowest class. They have no freedom, are closely watched, and have the hardest workload. Within the lowest class are racial divisions, and as Chinese-Cambodians the Ungs must work harder to prove themselves valuable.

Loung's description of the stratification of society under the Khmer Rouge again highlights its hypocrisy in asserting that it is creating a more equal society. The Khmer Rouge carries out its genocide in part by exploiting resentment between villagers and comparatively wealthy urban Cambodians; the group encourages extreme prejudice against ethnic minorities and former city-dwellers, who are treated like slaves and must do more work than other groups in order to survive.

The family eats the communal dinner of rice and fish, but they are still hungry. Pa arranges for Kim to work as an errand boy at the chief's house. The chief's "boys" take a liking to Kim and often give him their leftover food to take home. It is clear from marks on his skin that they also abuse him, however, and Loung understands her ten-year-old brother's sacrifice to help his family. Pa has grown extremely thin, and his eyes often linger on Kim's bruises. Loung eats her food with shame.

Pride has no place under the Khmer Rouge, and Pa does what is necessary to help his family—even if this means allowing his son to be hurt. His shame at seeing Kim's bruises again highlights the tough choices people must make to survive. Kim's actions, too, show the strength of his will to survive and the bond he feels with his family, for whom he is willing to sacrifice his personal safety.

There is almost no social interaction between villagers, as people fear others will find a reason to report them to the Angkar in exchange for more food, or in some instances to save their own lives. Loung works in the garden with her younger siblings, while her parents and older siblings toil in the rice fields for twelve to fourteen hours a day, seven days a week. The village is completely isolated from the outside world, with mail, radios, and newspapers banned. All news comes from the chief during meetings. The chief espouses the philosophy of the Angkar, saying it will bring about a perfect agrarian society free from Western influence. Soldiers patrol at night; if anyone is caught discussing politics their entire family disappears.

Without radios or televisions, the Khmer Rouge is the only source of information in these villages and as such can easily spread propaganda and skew news to suit its own agenda. It is able to enforce its rule by keeping citizens both ignorant and fearful. Yet again, people may compromise their morals or allegiance to their neighbors in the name of survival.

With women so overworked, few become pregnant. Those that do often miscarry, and most newborns die within days. Pa says the country will have a missing generation of children, and vows that Geak will not be the "Khmer Rouge's next victim." He works harder than anyone else, and the chief makes him leader of the new people. Despite the professed equality of "Democratic Kampuchea," as the country is now called, the new people are treated like slaves and never have enough to eat. Those who steal food have their fingers cut off or are forced to work near minefields. Anyone who becomes disabled is killed, as they are useless to the "pure agrarian society."

Loung reveals one of the ways in which women suffer uniquely under the Khmer Rouge. Pa again swallows his personal beliefs and works harder than others in the name of helping his family survive. The Khmer Rouge continues to enact its genocidal agenda via extreme violence, forcing citizens into submission through fear and cruelty—all while using idealistic, entirely unrealistic language.

The Khmer Rouge also ban religion, fearing it will detract from people's loyalty to the Angkar. They destroy religious sites including much of Angkor Wat, the enormous monument built in the ninth century by Khmer kings and one of the seven man-made wonders of the world. Loung remembers marveling at the sacred temples with Pa, who said it was where the gods live. The Khmer Rouge mutilate it with bullets and kill any monks who refuse to accept the Angkar. With the temple destroyed, Loung wonders "where the gods go."

Much like Loung's red dress, Angkor Wat holds happy family memories for Loung and is partly destroyed by the Khmer Rouge. This fulfills Pa's earlier description of the Khmer Rouge soldiers as destroyers of things, and also reveals the extent of their disrespect for the heritage of the Khmer race they claim to honor. Loung's musing about where the gods have gone reflects the isolation and loneliness she feels.

CHAPTER 10: RO LABOR CAMPS, JANUARY 1976

Ma and Pa force Khouy to marry a girl from a nearby village, Laine, to decrease the likelihood of his being recruited to the Khmer Rouge army; with a wife, the Khmer Rouge know he can "gives sons to the Angkar." Laine's parents meanwhile want to protect her from being raped by soldiers. This happened to Davi, the pretty teen daughter of Loung's neighbors who was taken by soldiers one night. She returned covered in bruises and refused to meet her parents' gaze. Now she does not speak to anyone, and villagers grow quiet around her. The soldiers similarly abduct many girls from their homes, asserting that it is their duty to bear sons for the Angkar. If they cannot do so, they are killed. Some girls commit suicide to escape.

Davi's fate reveals the particular horrors women often face in times of war. The soldiers' treatment of women is on a continuum with the expectations of femininity Loung described earlier in Phnom Penh; though far more extreme, of course, the Khmer Rouge's denial of women's dignity and bodily autonomyis undergirded by the same thinking that demands women be pure, delicate, and submissive.

Laine and Khouy are married and sent to a labor camp. The soldiers also force Meng to go to the labor camp. The brothers bring extra food home when they are allowed to visit the village, but these visits become increasingly infrequent. Laine never comes to the village, so Loung knows little about her sister-in-law apart from the fact that her marriage is one of convenience rather than love. Khouy is no longer the suave martial artist he was in Phnom Penh; instead, he is already "old and hard, and alone." Meng is thin and lanky, making the labor camp more difficult for him than it is for Khouy. He gazes intently at his siblings when he returns home, as if afraid he will forget their faces.

Meng and Khouy continue to display devotion to their family, showing that the bond between the Ungs remains unbroken. Loung's observation of her brothers' newly-acquired hardness, however, reflects how survival in the face of extreme horror forever changes people and chips away at their humanity—and in the case of young people, at their innocence and wonder as well.

Rumors spread of the Youns, or Vietnamese, trying to invade. All teenagers, including the fourteen-year-old Keav, are forced to go to Kong Cha Lat, a work camp. Loung remembers how beautiful Keav seemed in Phnom Penh, and how much pride she took in fussing over her school uniform. Loung laments that with her black uniform and thinning hair, "now the joy of beauty is gone from her life." Pa says it is good that the family is separated; Kim later explains to Loung that if the Khmer Rouge ever discover that Pa worked for the Lon Nol government, they will not be able to punish the whole family.

This is the first mention of the Vietnamese, who will continue to be presented by the Angkar as cruel savages and fodder for racist propaganda. Pa's assertion that the family's separation is a good thing foreshadows Ma later sending Loung, Chou, and Kim away from Ro Leap for their own safety.

Loung worries that the soldiers will kill them because they are educated. Many families commit suicide to end the terror. Loung is frightened of dying, having begun to realize death's permanence. One evening Kim returns from the chief's house and tearfully tells the family that the chief told him not to come back. Without his leftovers, Loung worries that the family will starve. Pa suspects Kim's firing has to do with Pol Pot, a name that has begun to be whispered around the village as the rumored leader of the Angkar. He may have given orders to increase the number of soldiers in villages, which has in turn reduced the power of village chiefs.

Loung again cuts through to the irrational cruelty at the heart of the Khmer Rouge's hatred. This is also the book's first mention of Pol Pot, and foreshadows how he will eventually outweigh the Angkar itself in terms of importance. Kim's distress at being unable to provide for the family again shows the unbreakable bond between the Ungs.

Kim explains that the Angkar borrowed money from China for weapons and supplies, and now the Angkar has to pay China back. Loung cannot understand why the villagers hate the Chinese so much. Kim says that they may be confusing them with the Vietnamese, because to people who have never left the village all "white-skinned Asians look alike." That evening Pa says that the Angkar dreams of ruling over an empire that extends into neighboring Thailand, Laos, and southern Vietnam.

Loung's innocent perspective continues to highlight the absurdity of racial prejudice. Kim, meanwhile, shows the ignorance and meaninglessness at the heart of the ethnic hatred inculcated by the Khmer Rouge; people are so blinded by irrational hatred that they do not even realize who they are discriminating against.

CHAPTER 11: NEW YEAR'S, APRIL 1976

Pa and Ma worry that malnutrition has stunted Loung's growth. The Khmer Rouge does not allow New Year's celebrations, despite it being Cambodia's biggest holiday. Loung reminisces about the multi-day feasts and can think about little else besides food. Many villagers have begun stealing corn to survive, and Loung regrets how she judged thieves as simply too lazy to work back when she was "rich and spoiled" in Phnom Penh. She dreams of feasts that she refuses to share even with her family, and wakes up feeling guilty.

Loung continues to adapt to life under the Khmer Rouge, going to extreme lengths to survive. Her guilt over refusing to share food in her dreams shows how one's will to live can overcome nearly everything else—including deeply-held beliefs and morality. Her realization that sometimes people must steal to survive foreshadows her stealing rice from her family and, later, an elderly woman. New Year's will repeatedly be used to mark the passage of time throughout the book.

Many have died from starvation and disease, and Loung eats things she would not have touched at home, from snakes and rats to insects. In Cambodian culture, people do not celebrate birthdays until the age of fifty. Before that time, everyone gets older on the New Year—meaning Loung is now six. As she gnaws on charcoal to ease her hunger, she recalls Pa's stories of how children in other countries get birthday cakes.

Loung's reflection on eating charcoal while other children get cake creates a stark contrast between the outside world and Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge.

As the months pass, the villagers begin to stink of death. People are often too weak to bury the dead, whose bodies rot in the sun and become full of maggots. Loung has grown numb to watching people dispose of bodies in communal graves. Her neighbor Chong's husband was killed by the Khmer Rouge, and her two-year-old son then died of starvation. Now, desperate for food, her daughters Peu and Srei accidentally eat poisonous mushrooms they find in the woods and die in pain in front of a horrified Chong. Loung thinks about how the chief said the Angkar would take care of them. She worries about the frail-looking Geak, who has lost most of her hair from starvation. Chong goes "crazy," speaking to her children as if they are still alive and handing Ma a bowl of earthworms to eat.

Loung does not shy away from describing the atrocities that occur under the Khmer Rouge, and in doing so highlights the extent of the group's barbarity. Chong's tragic fate reflects the novel's theme of family; without her husband and children, Chong becomes utterly unmoored. Loung again points out the hypocrisy of the Angkar, which promoted equality yet is letting its citizens starve and encouraging them to turn on each other.

Ma sewed jewelry into the straps of their bags to hide it from the soldiers in Uncle Leang's village, and plans to use this to trade—even though bartering is considered treason. Meanwhile Kim says more people are talking about Pol Pot as the leader of the Angkar, though his identity remains mysterious. People say he is a fat, brilliant soldier with "kind eyes"; Loung wonders if those eyes can see them starving. Chong becomes known as the village "crazy lady" and eventually dies from poisonous food like her daughters.

Despite being ill-prepared for life under the Khmer Rouge, Ma proves capable and forward-thinking in saving her jewelry; later on, this jewelry will eventually help Loung escape Cambodia. Loung's rejection of Pol Pot reveals that she sees through the propaganda of the Angkar and again recognizes the utter hypocrisy of the Khmer Rouge.

Pa remains friendly with the chief and gets extra rice in exchange for Ma's jewelry. This rice keeps the family from starving to death, though they must keep it hidden. Loung steals from the rice container one evening. Despite sensing that Pa knows her guilt and feeling deeply ashamed, she cannot bring herself to admit it.

Pa continues to swallow his pride in the name of helping his family. Loung taking the rice echoes her earlier realization that sometimes people must steal to survive. For the rest of her life she will feel guilty about this theft, which represents the desperate lengths to which people will go in order to live one more day.

Loung begins to close herself off from her family, and constantly fights with Chou. When the weaker Chou finally pushes back, Loung charges at her. Ma throws a coconut shell at Loung to stop her; it hits her head and makes her bleed. Ma immediately grows worried and begins to cry. Loung has never seen Pa angry, but now he scolds Ma, saying she could have blinded Loung, and that a blind child could never survive in the village. Later Ma apologizes for hurting Loung, asking why she must always start fights with everyone. An angry Loung ignores her, silently wishing her dead. She hates herself for being "bad" and the family troublemaker.

Loung's immature behavior with Chou reflects the fact that she is still a young child grappling with extreme horror. Ma and Pa, similarly, are clearly being pushed to their breaking points by the horror of life under the Khmer Rouge. The hardship they endure sometimes strengthens the bonds between the members of the Ung family, but it also brings out new conflicts as they are driven to desperation.

Chou grabs Loung's hand when they leave for work in the communal garden, and Loung knows she has already forgiven her. That night Loung's anger towards Ma turns to despair as she remembers how beautiful and joyous she was in Phnom Penh, lamenting that no one would even recognize her now. Born in China, Ma never did hard labor growing up. She must work to hide her accent because the Angkar is "obsessed with ethnic cleansing." Loung rubs dirt and charcoal onto her own skin to make it appear darker and better fit in with the base people.

The bond between Chou and Loung remains unbroken. Chou grabbing her sister's hand here will be echoed many years later, when Loung returns to Cambodia for the first time since the genocide in the story's epilogue. This is also the first time Loung mentions ethnic cleansing directly, emphasizing that the Khmer Rouge is actively and openly targeting ethnic minorities.

CHAPTER 12: KEAV, AUGUST 1976

Keav has been in Kong Cha Lat, the teen work camp, for six months when another girl arrives to tell Ma and Pa that she is very sick and in the hospital. Pa cannot leave work, but Ma is given permission to go.

The fact that Pa is not allowed to immediately see his daughter underscores the Khmer Rouge's extreme cruelty and disregard for its citizens.

Back at the hut, Loung imagines what it must be like for Keav at the camp: in barracks with eighty other girls, she has no privacy and can never show her emotions for fear of seeming weak. Once beautiful, her skin is ruined from the sun. Her legs look like sticks while her stomach is swollen with hunger. She has never held a boy's hand. She works long hours doing the backbreaking labor of planting rice in silence every day, and misses her family greatly. Her stomach refuses to settle, and she begins to have terrible diarrhea. Only after multiple requests does her supervisor allow her to go to the makeshift infirmary. There she waits, though she knows there is no medicine and that the Khmer Rouge killed all the doctors.

Loung's imagining of Keav's experience makes the overwhelming horror of the Khmer Rouge all the more personal. The fact that there are no doctors reflects the short-sightedness of the regime's killing of any foreigners or intellectuals.

Ma returns and says Keav has dysentery and will not live through the night. She was so weak she did not recognize Ma at first, and then kept asking for Pa. No one at the hospital cleaned her, so she lies on dirty sheets. Pa gets permission to bring Keav back to the village, and he and Ma go to get her while Loung again imagines her eldest sister's mindset: she must be happy to see Ma but frustrated to be trapped in such a weak body that can no longer move. She wants only to see Pa one more time and is fully of "pure fear." Ma and Pa return and say Keav had died before they reached the hospital, but the nurse had already thrown her body out to make room for the next patient. The nurse says they are lucky: a dozen other girls also died that day from food poisoning, but they could not locate their parents.

In Loung's mind, Keav's final hours are utterly horrific, again underscoring the incredible cruelty of the Khmer Rouge. What's more, her fate is hardly unique. The fact that the nurses dispose of her body so quickly and comment on many other girls getting food poisoning emphasizes that Keav's death is simply one of many—and each victim was as unique and valuable as Keav.

Loung asks Chou what happens when people die. Chou responds that they sleep for three days before moving on to be reincarnated, and Loung says she hopes Keav won't be reincarnated here. Loung creates a fantasy to dull the pain, imagining that Pa reached Keav before she died and that she passed peacefully in his arms. Loung wonders if Ma, who often butted heads with Keav in life, regrets their fights about music and clothing now. Pa says they must go on as if nothing has happened if they are to survive.

This scene further solidifies the bond between Loung and Chou. Family represents the ultimate source of comfort for Loung, which is why she fantasizes about Pa being able to reach Keav. The fact that the Ungs must continue on reveals how the Khmer Rouge has robbed them of their right to grieve; survival requires the suppression of even the most basic human emotions.

CHAPTER 13: PA, DECEMBER 1976

Four months have passed since Keav's death. The family is still starving and lives in fear of being outed as supporters of the Lon Nol government. One night Pa whispers to Ma that "they know," and that they must send the children to orphanage camps where they will change their names to survive.

Loung highlights the constant fear of life under the Khmer Rouge. Pa's mention of sending the children away reflects yet another painful choice the family must make in order to survive.

The next night Loung reflects that the world is still beautiful despite their suffering, and wonders if there are gods who will save them. Just then, two men in black appear and ask for Pa, saying they need him to help move a wagon that is stuck in the mud. Understanding that this is the end, Pa says goodbye to Ma inside. Loung can hear her sobbing. Pa then stands tall for the first time and says he is ready to go. Before he leaves he suddenly picks Loung up to squeeze and kiss her as he hasn't done in a long time. The soldiers say he will be back in the morning, but before he leaves Pa says goodbye to all his children and tells Kim to look after the household.

This is one of the most tragic and poignant scenes of the book, as the title's promise at last comes to fruition. Loung's appreciation of the world's beauty in this moment will contrast with her later resentment of this beauty in the face of her pain. Pa uses his final moments to reaffirm his love for his life and children, reiterating the book's theme about the unbreakable bonds between family.

The remaining family waits for Pa all of the next day, but he does not return. The sunset is beautiful, which makes Loung angry amidst their suffering. She reflects that war has made her full of rage, and that the Angkar have made her "hate so deeply" that she wants to "destroy and kill."

Loung's anger at the beauty of the sunset here contrasts with her earlier appreciation of the world's beauty; what before felt comforting now feels like a mockery of her pain. Loung becomes increasingly fueled by rage—for her, one price of survival is her innocence.

Despite knowing Pa will not return, the family continues to sit outside in the darkness until Ma sends the children into the hut. Loung hopes Pa died with dignity, and that the soldiers did not torture him. He once told her that monks' spirits could leave their bodies, and she now imagines leaving her body to look for Pa at the edge of a gruesome mass grave. She sees her spirit wrap her arms around his body before his execution, and believes that he focused on his children's faces in the moment before his death.

Loung's vision of Pa's death again reflects the book's theme of the bond between family, which can be a source of strength and comfort even in the darkest moments. Loung will continue to imagine Pa's spirit leaving his body to watch over her throughout the story.

After three days Loung understands that Pa must truly be dead. She feels as if she has poison in her stomach and prays to the gods to bring Pa back. She then tells Chou that she will kill Pol Pot. She feels so full of hatred that it scares her and leaves no room for sadness, which would make her want to kill herself to escape. Imagining Pol Pot's slow, painful death grants her the will to survive.

Just as the Khmer Rouge robbed the family of the right to mourn Keav, so too must Loung repress her grief over Pa's death. Loung will repeatedly echo this notion—that anger grants her the strength to continue—throughout the book, emphasizing that the cost of survival is her innocence.

Ma says she will always have hope that Pa is still alive, but Loung refuses to allow herself hope. She worries how Ma, who was very dependent on Pa, will get by without his help. That night Loung dreams of him as he was before the war. She reflects that she thought Pa was a god during their trip to Angkor Wat, because many of the stone statues had similar facial features. Everyone must go back to work, and though Ma seems to recover after a month, Loung knows she will never smile again. Geak has stopped growing, causing Loung to feel deeply guilty for stealing the rice earlier.

Pa was a godlike figure to Loung, and his death means she must reckon with the fact that no one can protect her from the horrors of the seemingly all-powerful Khmer Rouge. The fight for survival continues to erode her innocence and even humanity. Loung continues to feel ashamed for the lengths she went in order to sate her hunger.

Soldiers come to take fathers away more often, always with casual excuses and the promise that they will return the next morning. Loung tries to remember their faces so she can one day come back to kill them. Rumors spread that Pa was made a prisoner and tortured every day until he managed to escape into the mountains. People say he is working to recruit an army to fight the Khmer Rouge, giving Ma hope. But weeks pass, and he never returns. The family continues to depend on Meng and Khouy to bring them extra food, but Khouy gets sick and Meng is kept too busy with work to return to the village.

The horror of the Khmer Rouge is again extended beyond Loung's family, emphasizing the tragic fact that her story is not even unique. Others' improbable theories about Pa's death reflect the depths of their desperation. Though the Khmer Rouge is able to temporarily separate Loung from her siblings, their bond will ultimately remain unbroken.

People look down on Ma because of her white skin, but she works hard. One day she takes Loung with her to catch shrimp. There are harsh punishments for stealing, but Ma quickly gives Loung a handful of raw baby shrimp to eat, then does the same for herself. Loung is proud of her mother's strength, and says they "find ways to stay alive."

Loung again highlights the racial prejudice her family faces under the genocidal Khmer Rouge. Despite Loung's fears about how Ma will get on without Pa, she proves very capable—underscoring the strength of the human will to survive.

CHAPTER 14: MA'S LITTLE MONKEY, APRIL 1977

Another New Year's has passed, making Loung seven, Geak five, Chou ten, and Kim twelve. In keeping with Pa's request, Kim acts as the head of the household. Ma no longer calls him "monkey." Having had a good rainy season, there is plenty of ripe corn. Soldiers guard the cornfield, shooting trespassers and even raping young girls they catch trying to steal. Even so, Kim begins to steal corn for the family at night. He is terrified but determined to remain strong, as he knows Geak will die without more food. One night, however, while stealing in the rain, soldiers catch Kim and brutally beat him. Loung prays to Pa to help him survive, but also feels guilty about not having any more corn. Kim survives but never steals again. Loung reflects that he is still "only a little boy" who "feels unable to protect" them.

The hypocritical Khmer Rouge banned anything suggestive of wealth, yet now flaunts its own abundance in front of starving villagers. Instead of lifting up the poor, it has merely killed the rich and taken their wealth while leaving everyone else even poorer than before. Kim's actions continue to reflect the strength of the bond between family and how much people will risk in order to survive. Kim, like Loung, has had to grow up too fast in the face of such extreme horror. Though Loung loves and respects her brother, the will to live makes her lament the fact that he can no longer risk his life and steal food for her.

CHAPTER 15: LEAVING HOME, MAY 1977

The famine has ended, but the Angkar seems to sporadically increase and decrease food rations. Kim believes it is because they send more rice to China in exchange for weapons when they think the Vietnamese are about to attack. Loung reflects that they have all changed from who they were in Phnom Penh: Kim rarely speaks, she and Chou do not fight, and Geak is increasingly withdrawn. Loung is deeply sad but knows Pa would not want her to give up.

Loung finds strength from her relationship with Pa, as she will continue to do so throughout the story. Kim remains a source of information for his sister. The Khmer Rouge is slowly robbing the Ungs of their humanity, as they can focus only on survival.

Entire families begin to disappear overnight. Kim says the Khmer Rouge are killing even the children of the people they've already executed, fearing they will one day rise up to seek revenge. Ma gathers the children to say they must split up and leave her if they are to survive. Because Geak is only four, she must stay with Ma. The three others will walk in different directions until they reach work camps, where they will say they are orphans and give new names. Loung cries that she wants to stay, but Ma says she does not have a choice, and sends them away the next morning. Ma says she cannot take care of them, and they must not return.

The barbaric Khmer Rouge recognizes the strength of the bonds between families and considers it a threat. Ma sending her children away is the ultimate sacrifice, but she knows it is what must be done for all of their survival. Loung has long turned to her family for strength, so the thought of separating represents yet another horror inflicted by the regime.

Loung's sadness turns to anger as she walks. She thinks Ma is weak, reflecting that the Angkar calls women "weak and dispensable." Kim leaves them "without words of goodbye or good luck" and Loung wonders if she will ever see him again. She and Chou cannot bear to separate yet. When they reach a work camp they are greeted by an imposing woman they greet as Met Bong, who supervises the camp. Loung is surprised at how easy it is to lie, saying they are orphans whose parents died in the Civil War. The camp is for girls "too weak to work in the rice fields." Instead, they grow food for the army.

The Angkar's regressive attitude towards women is based on the same kind of thinking that Ma espoused in Phnom Penh—that is, that women should be submissive and docile. This reveals how such ideas about women are all part of the same continuum of sexism. Loung's bond with Chou continues to remain especially strong. Loung has now both stolen and lied in the name of survival.

At night Met Bong repeats propaganda lessons that the Angkar will protect them, and the children must chant "Angkar! Angkar! Angkar!" The other children bully Loung and Chou for their white skin. When one girl, Rarnie, calls Loung a "stupid Chinese-Youn," Loung viciously attacks her, screaming "Die!" Met Bong breaks up the fight and forces Loung to water the garden alone as punishment. Loung thinks of revenge as she does so. After this, the girls stop picking on her but continue to do so to the weaker-seeming Chou. Chou says she dreams of being able to forget all this, but Loung says she needs angry memories to replace the sad ones. She will never forget her hatred for the Khmer Rouge.

The Khmer Rouge gains support for its genocidal mission through propaganda, in which it portrays the Angkar as superior and, as such, deserving of its power. Loung knows by now that the Angkar will not protect her, however, no matter what she is taught to say. She continues to experience racial prejudice that she does not fully understand. Her fight with Rarnie echoes the very beginning of the story when she pushed a boy for lifting up her skirt, revealing that the Khmer Rouge has yet to fully crush her spirit. Even so, she continues to be fueled by rage and denies herself the chance to grieve.

CHAPTER 16: CHILD SOLDIERS, AUGUST 1977

Chou is demoted to a cook. After three months, Met Bong tells Loung that she is the hardest worker at the camp and the Angkar needs people like her. She is sent to a camp for stronger children, where she will train to become a soldier. The new camp is an hour away, and Loung is surprised when a young boy in a palm tree smiles and waves at her when she arrives.

In being separated from Chou, Loung is completely on her own for the first time in her young life. Her surprise at a simple friendly gesture from the palm tree boy—who will reappear in the Vietnamese displaced people's camp—reveals how starved she is for kindness or companionship.

Loung is the youngest of eighty girls there, some of whom have family in nearby villages and were selected based on their strength. There is also a boys' camp, and the two groups meet for propaganda meetings around a bonfire where they must fervently praise the Angkar. The supervisors talk excitedly about how the Khmer soldiers are slaughtering the Youns, who are described as monsters who want to steal "children of the Angkar." The new Met Bong encourages the children to report any traitors who speak against the Angkar. Suddenly Loung realizes that this must have been why Pa was killed; Ma, too, is against the Angkar, and no one can know. Loung raises her fist and screams "Angkar" with the others.

The Angkar attempts to brainwash children into supporting its genocidal ambitions by dehumanizing its enemies, exploiting fears of foreigners, and encouraging racial resentment. Loung finally gains a deeper understanding of the political reality around her; her raised fist could be interpreted as an attempt to avoid the fate of her father by acting the part of a loyal servant to the Angkar, as well as a manifestation of her rage in a form that the Khmer Rouge will not notice.

After the speeches, four boys begin to play instruments, laughing and teasing one another. Loung, who has not heard laughter since the takeover, is shocked by their happiness. A group of girls wearing shiny black uniforms and red scarves with fake flowers then get up to sing songs of praise for Pol Pot and the Khmer soldiers. Despite the lyrics, Loung is happy to hear music once again, and reminisces about playing around in Keav's stylish clothes with Chou in Phnom Penh. When the girls finish singing, they are all invited to dance. Met Bong says Loung is a good dancer, and that she will join the dance troop that performs for soldiers.

The children's happiness and enthusiastic praise of Pol Pot contrasts disturbingly with the horror Loung has witnessed thus far. It suggests that the Khmer Rouge has been successful in its attempts to brainwash—or at least terrify—the group into submission. Nevertheless, Loung is able to enjoy the music because she has been denied pleasure for so long, and has learned to accept what little joy she can. Despite being on her own, Loung still feels deeply bonded to her sisters.

Loung, who gives her name as Sarene to protect her identity, is at first excited to get new costumes and rehearsal time away from work. The rehearsals prove painful, however, as the girls have their hands bent backwards and wrapped in grass to eventually create a permanent curve. When not rehearsing, Loung works in the field. Leeches cover her feet; while another girl shows her how to swat them off, she also says she must get used to them. Picking rice is backbreaking, and Loung thinks about how Keav did this until she died.

Loung's excitement over dance rehearsals highlights the fact that, despite everything she has been through, she is still very much a child. She is still subjected to horrific work conditions, but must once again quickly adapt to survive. Her painful thoughts of Keav add poignancy to the scene and reiterate her connection to her family.

Pol Pot is now recruiting all children from age eight to help fight against the Youns. Met Bong tells Loung that she is ahead of the other village children; she says that anyone can learn to use a weapon, but she has been training the children to follow orders without hesitation, even if it means killing "their traitor parents."

The use of child soldiers shows both the Khmer Rouge's barbarity and its desperate need for support in an increasingly difficult fight against the Vietnamese. Met Bong's words reveal how the Khmer Rouge functions through strict, unquestioning loyalty. It seeks to destroy even the bond between children and parents.

Loung is lonely at the new camp without Chou, who was her closest companion in Phnom Penh. All of the new girls keep to themselves, knowing any secrets could be used against them. The closest thing Loung has to a friend is the palm tree boy, who she learns lives in a nearby village and collects sap with his father to bring to the chief. Though they have never spoken, he waves and tosses her fruit when he sees her.

The deep bond between Loung and Chou is again emphasized. This scene reveals that, even when it comes to children, one of the cruelest things the Khmer Rouge has done is to rob people of human connection. In the face of such horror, even simple gestures can mean a great deal. The palm tree boy's father will later return as the Ung children's first foster father.

Pol Pot has grown to be more important than the Angkar and is given credit for seemingly anything that happens. The children get gory details of the ways Khmer soldiers mutilate the Youns, which Loung reflects is an attempt to numb them to violence. People start being pulled from the camp, presumably to join the fighting, and eventually the boys' side shuts down.

Despite preaching equality, Pol Pot becomes an even stronger dictatorial, corrupt figure than Lon Nol. The Khmer Rouge continues to dehumanize its enemies and inflame racial hatred. Loung's experience reveals the horrific trauma inflicted on child soldiers in order to make them more able to kill.

Loung spies Met Bong resting her head on the shoulder of the boys' leader, and wonders why she is allowed companionship when the rest are not. Met Bong later gathers the remaining girls together and tells them that all the tools they have been using in the fields—hoes, sickles, rakes—can be used as weapons. She then makes Loung get up to demonstrate how to carry a rifle, which Met Bong says is easy to use.

Loung again recognizes the hypocrisy of the Khmer Rouge, which denies her the human companionship its leaders enjoy. Met Bong's flippant assertion that rifles are easy to use reflects her lack of concern for human life.

Loung has recurring vivid dreams of being attacked by a Khmer Rouge soldier or some sort of monster. They always end with her struggling to obtain control of the weapon and then turning into the killer of the monster herself. Met Bong continues to teach the girls that the Youns are savage monsters bent on destroying them.

Loung's dreams are a manifestation of the deep trauma she has been subjected to, her constant fear of death from many different sides, and the intense rage that makes her want to kill.

One night around the bonfire a girl screams and says she felt a cold hand attack her, and that it is a Youn coming to get them. Met Bong tells the girls to take loaded guns and shoot anything that moves. Though Pa once told Loung that the Youns were just like them, she now does not know what to believe. The girls find no evidence of an attack, but Met Bong insists the Youns are "raping girls and pillaging towns," and makes the girls take turns guarding the camp. When it is Loung's turn to guard, she reflects that Pol Pot does not love her like Met Bong says—he hates her, in fact, though she does not know why. That night she sleeps with her gun close to her chest.

So fervent is Met Bong in her dehumanization of the Vietnamese that Loung begins to get confused, revealing the power but also the irrationality of propaganda and paranoia. Even as Met Bong accuses the Vietnamese of raping and pillaging, it is clear from Loung's experience that the Khmer Rouge does this as well—ultimately making her scary stories ring all the more hollow.

CHAPTER 17: GOLD FOR CHICKEN, NOVEMBER 1977

Seven months have passed. With the Youn scare over, the children are allowed a day of rest every few months. Loung lies and says she is visiting Chou and then walks to Ro Leap to see Ma. As she does so, she reflects that she is no longer the scared child who begged Ma to let her stay, but fears Ma will not want to see her. She spots Ma working in the garden while Geak sits under a tree, looking as thin and tiny as ever despite now being five. Ma makes Geak laugh, and Loung is happy that they have each other.

Having only a single day off over months underscores the extreme working conditions Loung continues to face. Survival has forced Loung to grow up quickly. The moment of joy between Ma and Geak reflects the power of family to be a source of comfort.

Ma is excited to see Loung and takes her permission slip, which is simply a piece of paper that says Loung could leave her camp, to the chief to ask for the day off. Loung waits with Geak, whom she observes looks sick. Despite having plenty of rice now, Ma fears that the periods of starvation permanently stunted her growth.

Geak's increasingly frail appearance suggests that innocent children are often the most vulnerable victims in times of war.

Ma tells Loung of attempting to trade her jewelry for some chicken in a nearby village. Other women told her where to go, and she nervously approached the house. The woman there told her to come back the next day, and when she did a man was waiting. He took the earrings and brutally beat Ma. Loung feels increasingly guilty as she tells stories of Chou coming to visit every other month and bringing rice. Loung thinks about how much her family members have sacrificed for each other while she has done nothing.

Family continues to create unbreakable bonds amidst the horror of the Khmer Rouge, and Ma again exhibits great strength and determination to survive. Loung will continue to feel guilty for her perceived lack of contribution to her family for a long time.

CHAPTER 18: THE LAST GATHERING, MAY 1978

Famine hits again and Loung grows weak. She gains a permission slip from the reluctant Met Bong to go to the infirmary, which is a few hours from the camp. She reflects that another New Year's has passed, and counts the dates since she has last seen each member of her family; dates are the only "sane thing" she knows can understand in this new world. Loung reaches the makeshift infirmary and thinks of how Keav died there alone. When people are too weak to work, Pol Pot sends them there to die.

Loung having to walk miles while ill further reveals the terrible living conditions in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge. She continues to feel deeply connected to her family even in death. Finally, her assertion that Pol Pot sends sick people to the infirmary to die reiterates the Angkar's utter disregard for the value of human life.

Loung hears Ma calling to her and thinks she has gone crazy until she sees that Ma, Geak, Chou, Kim, and Meng are, in fact, all really there; it is the only infirmary for miles and all came with separate ailments, which Loung quickly deduces have been caused by starvation. Kim says work in his camp is similar to her and Chou's, and also has propaganda meetings. Meng still lives with Khouy and his wife Laine, though no one asks about her, having learned that under the Khmer Rouge some things are better left unsaid. No one brings up Keav or Pa either, choosing to keep their memories private.

Starvation and malnutrition are clearly widespread, pointing to Khmer Rouge cruelty and inefficiency throughout Cambodia. Despite the time that has passed, the Ungs remain deeply bonded to one another and find strength and joy in being reunited.

Loung is still starving and steals a ball of rice from an old woman in desperation. She knows the woman will probably die, and feels she has "put a marker" on her grave. The family is able to stay happily together for a few days, though they're still hungry. Loung has a nightmare about Keav transforming from her beautiful figure in Phnom Penh to skin and bones. Loung vows to steal food the next morning to stay alive. After a week she is kicked out of the infirmary to make space for new people. She looks back at her family as she walks away, wondering when she will see them again.

Loung again makes a painful choice in the name of survival, stealing rice as she did from her own family years before. The thought of Keav grants her strength, however, as well as the knowledge that her parents and siblings would want her to do what it takes to live. Loung's final musing about when she will see her family again creates a sense of foreboding.

CHAPTER 19: THE WALLS CRUMBLE, NOVEMBER 1978

Six months pass. Rumors of Youn invasions spread, and Loung spends hours learning to fight in combat. Met Bong stuffs clothes with leaves and straw to act as Youn dummies, then lines the children up in front of them. On Met Bong's cue, Loung charges at her dummy, stabbing it and screaming, "Die! Die!" The next morning she feels agony, panic, and rage coursing through her body so strongly that they "manifest into physical pains."

The Vietnamese continue to hover in the background of Loung's story as a vaguely threatening force. Life under the Khmer Rouge has deeply corroded Loung's innocence and filled her with such overwhelming anger that she attacks what she can to let some of it out.

Loung feels an overwhelming urge to see Ma, and sneaks away from the camp. She rushes back to Ro Leap, feeling as though Ma and Geak are calling out to her. Pa once told Loung she had extrasensory perception, which she now fears is true. When she reaches the Ro Leap she finds Ma and Geak's things still in their hut, but the two of them gone. A young woman is there instead, who tells Loung that soldiers took Ma and Geak away the day before. Loung knows what this means. She cannot believe Ma fought so hard for three years only to die now, and that Geak never "got anything good out of life." She again thinks of stealing rice from the container, "out of their mouths."

Loung's bond with her family is revealed to be so strong that she can sense Ma and Geak's deaths. The fact that she arrives a day too late to see them one last time echoes Pa's inability to see Keav before she died, and again highlights the inhumanity of the Khmer Rouge in nearly every aspect of life. Loung continues to grapple with stealing rice, which has grown to represent far more than a few grains; for Loung, the theft represents her selfishness in the name of survival.

Loung pictures how they could have died: First they are marched away by Khmer soldiers through muddy fields, along with everyone else deemed traitors to the Angkar. Ma thinks of Pa and wonders if he, too, was this afraid. The soldiers make everyone kneel and Ma pulls Geak toward her, praying and thinking of Pa rather than begging for her life, which she knows is useless. Seconds pass and a solder tears Geak away from Ma. They scream for each other, but soldiers kill all the adults. Geak runs to Ma's dead body, crying as she cannot understand what has happened, before the soldiers kill her too.

Loung's detailed imagining once again forces the reader to consider the immense cruelty and horror of execution by the Khmer Rouge, and to recognize the deeply human, universal emotions one might feel in that moment.

Loung walks back to the camp, so overwhelmed with grief that she has no memory of how she spends the next three days. She is angrier than ever before and charges at her Youn dummy in training, pretending it is Pol Pot and reflecting that she no longer has to "pretend to be an orphan."

Loung gives in to the grief she has so long denied herself in order to survive, and in doing so loses three days of her life. Her realization that she is now truly an orphan creates a sense of tragic irony.

CHAPTER 20: THE YOUN INVASION, JANUARY 1979

Met Bong tells the children at Loung's camp that the monstrous Youns have invaded, adding that they are raping women and killing men. She also declares Pol Pot all powerful, and Loung is confused as to why they are taught to fear the Youns if they can so easily defeat them. Mortars explode in the distance throughout the night, until one lands at the camp and lights the girls' sleeping hut on fire. An injured girl screams for help as the others rush out, and then reaches her hand to Loung. Realizing she is too small to carry the girl, Loung leaves her behind as the hut collapses in flame. Girls run from the blazing camp, joining a mob of traffic as those from other camps do the same. Loung reflects that it is like leaving Phnom Penh again, but this time she is alone.

Loung again is able to cut through to the hypocrisy and absurdity at the heart of the Khmer Rouge's paranoid, racist propaganda. When she leaves the injured girl behind in the hut, she is being forced to make yet another horrible choice in order to survive. Though the rush of people feels to her like leaving Phnom Penh, she is an entirely different person than she was before the Khmer Rouge takeover.

Suddenly Kim grabs Loung's shoulder. He is with Chou, having run to her camp when the explosions started and then continued toward Loung's. Kim takes the lead, seeming so mature that Loung forgets he is only fourteen years old. They follow the huge crowd through the night, until Kim eventually leads them off the road. They reach an abandoned village, left in such a hurry that there are clothes, pots, and rice left behind. There are also two chickens, which Kim kills by bashing their heads against a stone well. Chou prepares the birds. As she eats, Loung thinks of how Ma was beaten when she tried to get chicken for Geak.

The reunion with her siblings is a moment of catharsis for Loung, who only a moment before had felt more alone than ever. Even as war has forever changed her siblings, their bond remains intact. Loung, Kim, and Chou are markedly more self-sufficient and prepared for this march than they were when leaving Phnom Penh, but thoughts of Ma emphasize that they have lost far more than they have gained.

The children rejoin the mob of people and walk until night. When they rest, Loung overhears people cursing Pol Pot's name and discussing the Khmer Rouge's defeat by the Youns. Loung thinks of how Met Bong said the Khmer Rouge were much stronger than the Youns, reflecting that this was another of Pol Pot's lies. Loung is too young to understand politics or Pol Pot's motivations, but she knows that if the Youns had invaded sooner her family members might have survived. That night Loung sees the clouds transform into a mass of skulls overhead, and feels as though her body is decomposing into the dirt.

Loung's lack of broader political understanding allows her to yet again identify the absurdity and hypocrisy at the heart of the Khmer Rouge. Despite ostensibly being free, her visions of skulls and decomposition represent thoughts of death and trauma, and reveal how the scars of life under the Khmer Rouge will not so quickly heal.

Neither Kim nor Chou mention Ma and Geak, so Loung assumes they know they are dead. Kim says they will walk to Pursat City to wait for their brothers, though they have not heard from them in more than a year. It is an implicit rule that they do not talk about family, knowing it will only hurt one another.

Not discussing family here is a kindness the siblings show one another. Despite the odds, the continued strength of the bond between family means they are intent on finding their remaining older brothers.

After days of walking, three men in "green clothes with funny round cone-shaped hats" appear before the crowd. Loung realizes they are Youns, and is surprised at how "remarkably human" they look, given all the monstrous tales about them from Met Bong. In fact, with their light skin, they look like Ma. The crowd is anxious, but to its surprise one of the Youns greets them in Khmer, smiles, and says there is a refugee camp in Pursat City.

Loung's observation of the Vietnamese's "human" appearance reflects the fact that they are just that: human. This makes the outsized hatred by the Khmer Rouge seem all the more ridiculous and ignorant.

Youns patrol the refugee camp with guns, but also pat children on the head and flirt with the women. Loung overhears people saying that the Youns are there to protect them, having marched into Cambodia three weeks earlier and defeated Pol Pot. They say Pol Pot had provoked invasion by massacring Vietnamese border villages in what he viewed as a preemptive strike. The Youn army was far better trained and had more weapons, however, and easily defeated the Khmer Rouge.

Though the Vietnamese are meant to protect people like Loung, their armed patrols echo those of the Khmer Rouge and foreshadow some of the ways in which they will behave like those they have defeated. The explanation of their invasion, meanwhile, further highlights how untrue the propaganda about the Khmer Rouge's might really was.

Loung wishes there were an adult to care for them, but knows they are on their own now. The siblings set up camp with a group of orphans. Kim rations rice and fishes each day in the nearby river, but soon the camp become overcrowded and the river too polluted. Loung cries for her brother, knowing how hard it must be for him to come back each night unable to provide for his sisters. On the verge of again starving to death, Kim asks a nearby family if they can stay with them. The father refuses, saying they already have too many mouths to feed. Feeling guilty, Kim searches for a family that will take the three children in.

Kim is once again thrust into the role of head of household despite still being a child, and again shows deep devotion to his family. Survival in the camp proves nearly as difficult as it was under the Khmer Rouge, revealing that being liberated did not free the Ungs from hardship. Family has been an important theme throughout the book, and Loung continues to try to fill the hole created by the Khmer Rouge.

CHAPTER 21: THE FIRST FOSTER FAMILY, JANUARY 1979

A week later the man says he has found a family for the children. Loung is excited to be part of a family again, and even happier when she sees that it is the family of the palm tree boy who once waved to her outside the child soldiers camp. His father—now their foster father—is welcoming and warm at first, but quickly switches to a business-like tone. He says that the girls will help care for his three young daughters and elderly mother, while Kim will help him fish and hunt. Loung understands that this is only "a family of convenience."

Family is so important to Loung that she hopes to recreate what the Khmer Rouge destroyed; unfortunately, she quickly learns that a bond as powerful as that between a family is not something so easily replaced.

Their new foster mother greets the children coldly and instructs them to sleep in the corner of their hut. One afternoon Loung sees her digging through their things and pulling out Ma's prized silk shirt, which she had hidden under her black uniform when the Khmer Rouge soldiers burned their clothes. The mother puts it on, but sensing the children's anger, declares it ugly and tosses it back. Paof, their fourteen-year-old foster brother, is the only one who is kind, though his lingering looks at Loung make her uncomfortable. One day he attacks her in the woods; she says she will tell, but he says no one will believe her and Loung knows he is right. She vows to stay away from him.

Loung quickly learns that mothers are not interchangeable, and her and her siblings' lives continue to be filled with pain and cruelty. Paof's assertion that no one will believe Loung—or will say she brought it on herself—reflects the sexist attitudes towards women that have been present throughout the book. Though clearly expressed in different extremes, Paof's denial of Loung's dignity and bodily autonomy is undergirded by the same thinking that led the Khmer Rouge to abduct and rape girls.


While gathering water from a stream one day, Chou and Loung befriend a girl with pretty brown eyes named Pithy. She is the same age as Chou and similarly timid. Pithy's father was also taken by the Khmer Rouge. She meets them each morning to gather firewood.

Under the Vietnamese, Loung is at least able to start reaching out to other humans besides her family, having less fear of being betrayed by a desperate or starving neighbor.

One such morning Loung forgets their water canteen. When they come across a Vietnamese soldier in the woods, Loung mimes their need for water and the soldier mimes back for Loung to follow him. As he leads Loung further into the woods, she grows nervous. He suddenly screams at her in Vietnamese to lie down, and though she cannot understand the words she observes that his face has turned "dark and mean" like the faces of the Khmer Rouge. He attempts to rape Loung, but she screams angrily and is able to fight him off before running off into the woods. Having heard her screams, Chou and Pithy come running. They carry their firewood back to the base. When Loung thinks she sees the soldier she rushes toward him for revenge, only to cut her bare foot on a shard of glass.

Tension grows from the moment the soldier leads Loung away from her friends. Still only a child, Loung's graphic description of her attempted rape—including her repulsion at seeing a man's genitals for the first time—underscore the moment's brutality and horror. It is clear that no matter who is in charge—the Lon Nol government, the Khmer Rouge, or now the Vietnamese—women are often disrespected, abused, and dismissed. The misogyny of the Khmer Rouge was not unique, it appears, and as such will not be stamped out with its defeat.

Upon returning home, their foster mother scolds Loung and Chou for bringing back too little wood and calls Loung stupid and lazy for cutting her foot. When Loung defends herself, the foster mother says she is nothing and will grow up to be a hooker. Despite her bravado, Loung fears she has no future. She hears Pa's words in her head telling her she is precious, and reflects that she *will* amount to something because of everything her father taught her.

Though the spirited Loung briefly doubts herself, Pa once again is a source of strength for his daughter even in death. Loung's assertion that she will survive—and thrive—because of what Pa taught her is a step towards accepting the past and moving towards her future.


CHAPTER 22: FLYING BULLETS, FEBRUARY 1979

Loung hates her foster family but knows living with them is their safest option. Villagers talk in fear of the Khmer Rouge closing in, and their soldiers attack random villages every few days. Because many villagers still wear their black uniforms, it is impossible to tell who is with the Khmer Rouge and who is not. One day while washing dishes with her foster grandmother, gunfire erupts around Loung. She finds safety behind a tree, but the grandmother is shot in the leg. Fearing the foster family will blame her for the grandmother's wound, she stays behind the tree for hours after the gunshots end.

Safety is not assured even in the Vietnamese camp, where talk of a Khmer Rouge attack foreshadows the bloody battle soon to come. Loung's life continues to be full of cruelty and fear, and she is forced to make more difficult choices in the face of violence.

Three days later Loung is tasked with bringing food to her foster grandmother in the hospital two miles away. On the way she thoughtlessly kicks a grenade before realizing what it is; thankfully, it does not go off. The building is decrepit from neglect. The inside presents scenes of death and suffering similar to what Loung saw in the Khmer Rouge infirmary, though she notes that there, people went to die; here, on the other hand, people "scream in pain because they are fighting to live." Loung resents having to bring food to the grandmother, who has been cruel to her. She thinks that if only she were taking food to Ma, she would be redeemed of all the wrongs she has committed.

The grenade Loung almost sets off foreshadows the fate of the boy she will soon meet in the hospital. As an adult, Loung will work to end the use of landmines around the world—a passion fueled by her experiences as a child in Cambodia in moments like this. The difference in atmosphere of the infirmary reflects people's newfound hope now that the Khmer Rouge has ostensibly been defeated. Loung continues to feel guilty for the rice she stole, believing she somehow contributed to Ma's death.

Loung sees a badly burned little boy in the hospital surrounded by two nurses and an old woman, who says he either stepped on a landmine or kicked a grenade. Loung helps nurses change her foster grandmother's bandages and pities her as she writhes in pain. As soon as the nurses have left, however, the grandmother barks at Loung to give her the food she has brought and accuses her of eating some.

Experiences like this will fuel Loung's activism against landmines later in life. Her compassion is revealed as she helps care for her foster grandmother, even as the latter proves to be unworthy of such pity.

The next day Loung's foster father brings her foster grandmother home from the hospital and tells Loung, Chou, and Kim that the family can no longer afford to keep them. Hours later, the father brings them to a new family consisting of a mother, father, and three children ages one to five. Their duties are similar to those in their first foster home, but their new family is kinder, even occasionally giving them sweets. The family is very superstitious and in secret practices Buddhism, which teaches kindness.

The cruel foster mother likely contributed to the children being kicked out of the home. The Khmer Rouge banned all religion, which is why their new foster family began practicing in secret. Buddhism, deemed corrupt by the Khmer Rouge, proves a source for good in Loung's life.

Many villagers have begun wearing colorful clothes again. As she does her new foster family's laundry, Loung thinks wistfully of the **red dresses** Ma made for her and Chou for New Year's. She thinks of Keav helping with her hair while Chou got Geak dressed, and the feast she then had with the rest of her family. She dreams of owning a new red dress to replace the one the Khmer Rouge destroyed.

Colorful clothes are a direct rebuke against the black uniform insisted upon by the Khmer Rouge. The red dress symbolizes Loung's individuality and connection with her family, and her newfound determination to find that kind of happiness once again.

One day while gathering firewood with Pithy, the girls come across a decomposing body in the woods. Though she cannot be sure, Loung asserts it is a Khmer Rouge soldier who deserved to die; it is too difficult to think of the body as another civilian. Loung clings to her hatred for the Khmer Rouge to make it through her days. She and her siblings get "red eye disease" and wake up each morning with their eyes crusted shut. Their second foster mother says they must have been looking at "dirty things" and the gods have made them blind as punishment.

Loung again channels her rage to live through the horror she is repeatedly presented with. She and her siblings' "red eye disease" reveals that they still live in difficult, unsanitary conditions.

CHAPTER 23: KHMER ROUGE ATTACK, FEBRUARY 1979

Explosions erupt all around the foster family's hut as the Khmer Rouge attack. The second foster father hurriedly leads everyone across the river, where they take shelter in an abandoned warehouse along with many other villagers. Loung sees Pithy and her family and motions for them to sit next to her. Everyone spends a restless night in the shelter.

The Khmer Rouge is not yet neutralized as a threat, and the possibility of imminent death is always around the corner for the Ungs.

The next morning, a rocket hits the warehouse. Loung reaches for Pithy's hand only to find that her skull has been smashed in, creating a gruesome scene of blood and bits of brain matter. Panicked, Loung runs with Kim and Chou out of the shelter. Realizing Kim has left the backpack with their things, Loung rushes back and finds Pithy's mother, who is also injured, cradling her daughter's dead body. Pithy's brother says the Khmer Rouge are crossing the river. Loung grabs the backpack, ignores the cries for help around her, and rushes back to her siblings. They run as Khmer Rouge bullets fly past, killing people all around them. The siblings take shelter behind a remnant of a cement wall, where they are so scared they do not realize they have disturbed a hornet's nest and are covered in stings.

Loung does not shy from describing the extreme brutality of the Khmer Rouge. Pithy's death is gory and horrifying, and, considering she was lying next to Loung, underscores the continued fragility of life in this world. As in her child soldier camp in the wake of the Vietnamese attack, Loung must again make the difficult decision to leave those in need behind for her own survival. The fact that she, Kim, and Chou do not even notice that they have stumbled into a hornet's nest further establishes how fear can blind one to any thought other than survival.

When the bombing and gunfire stop, the siblings find their foster family near the Youn camp. Their second foster father says the Youns have taken back the village, but the Khmer Rouge left a horrific scene behind. Stories spread about them tossing victims' heads through the streets, spearing babies with bayonets, and eating their victims' livers for strength. When they return to the village, Loung sees blood everywhere and worries about stepping on a landmine, which the Khmer Rouge often leave behind after an attack. Loung sees Pithy's brother, who is kind to her one day but the next screams at her to get away before slumping to the ground in tears; she understands that "he is alone now too."

Loung's graphic descriptions of the chaos left behind by the Khmer Rouge highlight the group's barbaric cruelty. She again mentions landmines, which will fuel her advocacy later in life. Given the importance of family established by the story, it is no wonder that Pithy's brother has been unmoored by grief over his sister's death.

When Kim goes to the Youn camp to work each day he asks if anyone has heard anything about Meng or Khouy. One day he returns with Meng beside him, who takes the three younger siblings away from their foster family. Though Meng looks weathered and tired, Loung still sees Meng as he was in Phnom Penh. He leads them to the tents where has been living with Khouy, whose wife ran off during the Youn invasion, ostensibly to find her own surviving family members. Soon Khouy returns to the tents, looking strong but hardened. He places his hand on Loung's head just as Pa used to do.

This is a moment of joy and catharsis for Loung, who finally has someone to take care of her again. However changed they may have been by the Khmer Rouge, the Ungs are more deeply bonded to one another than ever before. Though Loung feared Khouy back in Phnom Penh, for example, his actions here further solidify him as a caring, paternal figure in her life.

That night Meng and Khouy tell their story. When the Youn invasion happened, they were in a labor camp. Unable to escape, the Khmer Rouge forced them to be porters and to come with them into the jungle, closer and closer to an area still under Khmer Rouge control. They were able to escape one night on a makeshift raft of logs, and in the morning reached Pursat City. Loung feels safe now that she is reunited with her brothers. Meng says they will gather supplies and then making the risky journey to their uncles' village, during which they may have to pass through Khmer Rouge-controlled land.

Like Loung, Meng and Khouy did whatever they had to in order to survive—and to return to their family. With Pa gone, Meng becomes the patriarch of the family. Their ordeal is not over yet, however, and the chapter ends with a sense of tension as they contemplate the risky journey ahead.

CHAPTER 24: THE EXECUTION, MARCH 1979

The Youns capture a Khmer Rouge soldier and a frenzied mob of villagers demand he be released to them so that they can kill him. With the mob nearly breaking down the jail, the Youns are forced to comply and give them the prisoner. Two men drag then him to a field and tie him to a chair for a public execution. Loung's heart races with the excitement of seeing revenge for her murdered family members, and she pleads with Chou to come watch with her. Chou refuses, but Loung goes anyway. She crawls her way to the front of the crowd and stands only a few feet from the bound soldier. The crowd argues about the most painful way to kill him, and Loung notes that Pol Pot has made her a person "who wants to kill."

The bloodthirsty mob underscores that Loung is hardly the only one fueled by intense anger towards the Khmer Rouge. Chou's desire to leave the past behind once again contrasts with Loung's need to seek painful revenge. Her bloodlust underscores how surviving the horrors of the regime has cost her her innocence.

Two women volunteer to kill the man, asserting that he is the soldier who killed their families. One, in her sixties or seventies, smashes his head with a hammer. Loung wonders if this is how Pa died. The woman hits him again and again, spattering Loung with blood. The younger woman then comes forward and stabs the prisoner until he dies. The women walk away covered in blood, their eyes filled with rage. As the crowd disperses, Loung again wonders how her family members died, and notes that the soldier's head bleeds the same way Pithy's did. His death won't bring any of them back. Loung and a few other children follow some men as they dispose of the body in a well. Looking into it, Loung realizes it is full of corpses.

The soldier's death by hammer echoes Loung's imagining of Pa's death earlier in the story; the Khmer Rouge did indeed infamously use this weapon on many victims. Loung's connection between the soldier's blood and Pithy's establishes that, even if the soldiers are monstrous, they are still human beings. The execution is somber rather than celebratory, as Loung realizes that revenge won't bring her family back or bring her any real peace or happiness. This is a step towards letting go of the rage she feels.

CHAPTER 25: BACK TO BAT DENG, APRIL 1979

At the end of April, Loung and her siblings pack their things and leave the displacement camp. Two women who have been staying with Meng and Khouy for safety join them. Looking back at Pursat, Loung notes how normal the mountains look despite all the horror that has happened there. For days they march toward Bat Deng. Loung thinks of that first march from Phnom Penh four years earlier, and how her sheltered life in the city had not prepared her for it. Though her body can better handle the journey now, she reflects that her heart will never get over losing Ma, Pa, Keav, and Geak.

The fact that women stay with Meng and Khouy for safety even after being liberated from the Khmer Rouge again echoes the book's theme about specific issues women face during times of war. Loung has been made stronger by her fight to survive under the Khmer Rouge, but the loss of family will scar her forever—a testament to the power of their bond.

The group comes across an abandoned hut where they will stay for the night. A husband, wife, and their sick-looking baby are already there. Loung thinks the wife looks exactly like Ma. Before leaving the next morning, Loung discretely wraps some of her siblings' cooked rice in a banana leaf and leaves it with the family.

Loung gives the family rice as a means of penance for stealing from her own family earlier in the novel. It is a step towards healing and forgiving herself for what she had to do in order to survive.

After eighteen days of walking they near Bat Deng. Meng and Khouy ask people they meet on the road to give word to their uncles, and soon they see Uncle Leang driving toward them on his bicycle. He gives Chou and Kim sweet rice cakes. He does not recognize Loung at first.

Uncle Leang's approach mirrors his arrival when the Ungs first left Phnom Penh. The fact that he does not recognize Loung at first, however, reveals how much things have changed in the intervening years.

Back at Uncle Leang's hunt, Aunt Leang gives them new clothes. Khouy and Meng tell their aunt and uncle, who were considered base people in their village, what happened. Loung says nothing about her own experiences, reflecting that while her memories used to make her angry and strong, holding onto them now is "unendurable."

The bond between family means that the Ungs' relatives immediately take them in and help care for them. With her family back, Loung no longer needs to be quite so angry to survive, and begins the process of putting her past behind her.

Loung learns that Bat Deng was liberated weeks before Pursat, and that the Khmer Rouge were more humane in the eastern provinces: people had more food, worked shorter hours, and killings were less indiscriminate. Loung walks to the market that has sprung up in town, where rice is bartered for a wide variety of foods and even books. When she comes to a stall selling pork dumplings, Ma's favorite food, she grows angry at the fact that if only Ma had held on for two more months she would have made it.

The market signifies life as it was before the takeover slowly returning to the village. This is also the first indication that certain areas of the country fared differently under Khmer Rouge control. Ma's death is made all the more painful by the fact that she almost made it through to the Khmer Rouge's defeat.

An uncle arranges for Meng to marry Eang, a Chinese girl in her twenties who was away at school during the purge of Phnom Penh and has no idea if her family is alive. The men work in the family's garden while the girls make sweets to sell in the market. Without a stall or table, they walk around barefoot with wicker baskets on their hips. At one point, Loung approaches a woman with ruby earrings, but the woman shoos her away.

This is the first introduction to Eang, who will ultimately help raise Loung in the United States. Loung's job selling sweets echoes that of the children she used to see selling things or begging for money on the streets of Phnom Penh before the takeover. She has become one of the poor children she used to pity.

After three months in Bat Deng, Eang's sister arrives at the village and says that most of her family escaped to Vietnam and are alive and well. Eang and Meng go to Vietnam, where the economy is stronger. Meng returns four days later and talks excitedly about moving to America. He also says that, fearing the return of the Khmer Rouge, many Cambodians are leaving for Thailand to start a new life. Meng says the safest route to do so is through Vietnam, which bypasses Khmer Rouge-controlled zones in the north as well as the fields of landmines they have planted. Crossing through Vietnam involves a dangerous and costly human smuggling operation, however, and they only have enough money for two to go.

Meng's visit to Vietnam is the first step towards his—and ultimately Loung's—new life. Despite the Khmer Rouge's defeat, there is still far more opportunity and stability outside of Cambodia. Meng is no longer focused solely on survival, but on making a better life for himself and his family.

Meng says he will take Loung, as she is still young enough to learn English and get an education when they eventually move to America. In five years, Meng says he will have saved enough money to send for the rest of the family. At the end of the week, he and Loung leave the village on a bicycle. Chou sobs as she says goodbye, but Loung won't let herself cry. She reflects that people expect the more sensitive Chou to cry, but she has the burden of always being strong.

Meng's decision will change Loung's life forever. This is the last time Loung and Chou will see each other for nearly two decades, and Chou's tears reaffirm her gentle nature and bond with her sister. It is notable that Loung lingers on this goodbye with Chou, as Chou will be the one to welcome her back to Cambodia many years later.

CHAPTER 26: FROM CAMBODIA TO VIETNAM, OCTOBER 1979

Meng and Loung pass through Phnom Penh, where the streets are full of holes and many buildings have been destroyed. Tents are all over the city now, as many farmers have had to leave the countryside because it is full of landmines. Meng says he will take Loung to see their old apartment, though there are no property documents from before the takeover and someone else is now living there. He then sells his bike to pay for passage along the Mekong River on a fisherman's boat, and Loung realizes he forget about the apartment; she decides she is ready to leave everything behind regardless.

Loung's description of the vibrant, lively Phnom Penh before the takeover contrasts with its state of destruction after only four years. The place she once called home does not belong to her anymore, and Loung accepts that if she wants to heal, she cannot hold onto Cambodia any longer.

The fisherman hides Meng and Loung under a tarp covered with fish as they enter Vietnam. They then get on a bus to Saigon, where Loung notes that people walk around and laugh without fear as they once did in Phnom Penh. For two months they live in a one-bedroom apartment with Eang's parents, who speak Vietnamese and are kind to Meng and Loung. Eang takes Loung to the salon for a perm. That night Loung dreams about Keav.

The perm is Loung's first hairstyle after the Khmer Rouge made her—and everyone else—cut their hair into the same style. As such, it is a step towards reclaiming her individuality. Keav loved makeup and fashion, which is why the experience of going to the hairdresser makes Loung think of her sister.

Meng teaches Loung about America and also says she must no longer call Vietnamese people "youns," because it is considered derogatory. Both begin to gain weight. In December they move in with Eang's sisters, who live in floating houseboats on the Mekong. Loung is jealous and thinks of Chou as she sees other young girls play together. In order not to arouse suspicion, Meng and Loung are not allowed to socialize or speak anything other than Vietnamese. After three quiet months, they begin their journey to Thailand.

Meng and Loung are beginning to heal from their time under the Khmer Rouge. Loung, who has been politically ignorant for much of the book, also begins to learn more about the world around her. Meng becomes more of a father figure for Loung, while Loung reiterates the deep connection she feels with Chou.

They are transferred to a larger boat with nearly one hundred other people. The crew insist people stay below deck, where the air is stale and many get seasick. The crew takes a liking to Loung and allows her on deck more than the others. The journey is dangerous. On the third day of they run into a pirate ship, but Loung and Meng have prepared by hiding their bits of gold inside candies; other passengers swallowed their gemstones or sewed them into the lining of their clothes. Fearing rape, women smear themselves with charcoal and scoop vomit into their hair.

Loung is subjected to yet more horror and danger, despite being out of the reach of the Khmer Rouge. The women's fear of rape by pirates again echoes the book's focus on the ways misogyny is embedded across many societies, regardless of who is in power.

The pirates seem friendly, however, and invite everyone aboard for rice and fish. Before letting the passengers return, everyone must line up and give them something. Eang gives Loung Pa's jade Buddha pendant so she will have something to give them. The pirates ransack the small boat as well, but then give the captain directions to the Thai refugee camp, wish the group luck, and wave goodbye. Hours later, they arrive at the Lam Sing Refugee camp.

The fact that Loung must give up Pa's pendant—one of her father's only remaining possessions—represents the continued sacrifice she must make in order to survive. At the same time, it's ironic that the pirates—who are openly outlaws and criminals—are far more humane than the "lawful" government and soldiers of the Khmer Rouge.

CHAPTER 27: LAM SING REFUGEE CAMP, FEBRUARY 1980

Using the gold hidden in their clothes, Meng, Eang, and Eang's sister, whom they meet at the camp, are able to buy a hut from another refugee who is leaving for America, as well as cooking supplies; they need a sponsor to get to America and finding one can take a long time. The sponsor can be an individual or group, and is in charge of helping refugees adjust to life in the U.S. Meng says they are lucky there are only a few hundred people in the camp; some refugee camps have hundreds of thousands. Meng, along with many others, converts to Christianity and is baptized because he says church groups often sponsor people.

Even after all the horror they have endured up to this point, the Ungs know they may have to wait a long time to find a sponsor and finally start a new life abroad. Meng's mention of other camps with thousands of people waiting reveals how distressingly widespread refugee crises are. His baptism—and, as such, the rejection of the religion he was raised with—is another sacrifice he makes to survive and help his family.

Loung is shocked to see a Vietnamese girl swimming in nothing but a red bathing suit. She thinks she must be one of "those" Vietnamese girls people talk about, asserting that a Cambodian or Chinese girl who never be so brazen. Later, a different girl is nearly raped in her hut, but many in the camp say it was her own fault because Vietnamese girls dress provocatively and flirt with men. Loung grows angry reflecting on how people always "blame the girls."

Loung's thoughts initially reflect the sexist attitudes she has been raised with—which demand women be submissive, modest, and demure. She begins to question these teachings, however, upon seeing others dismiss an attempted rape as the girl's fault; Loung is beginning to connect societal expectations of ladylike behavior with women's unfair treatment.

Months pass, and Loung and her family are among the poorest of the camp. On June 5, Meng announces they are finally going to America the next week. No longer needing to save so much money. Eang takes Loung to a Thai cloth market to buy fabric to make her a new dress. She suggests an orange, red, and blue checkered cloth, and seeing the red Loung agrees. The camp shows a movie about California that evening to help refugees prepare, though Meng says they will be going to a place called Vermont, and that no one seems to know much about it. Loung packs the night before they leave, looking thoughtfully at her new **dress**. Though she is excited about it, it is not the same as the one Ma made, and she is really gone.

Loung fulfills her earlier promise to herself to obtain a new red dress to replace the one the Khmer Rouge destroyed. Upon receiving the new dress, however, she realizes that everything the old dress represented—her happy life in Phnom Penh, her family members—are irreplaceable, and that she must fully accept their loss. Still, this new dress is what Loung will wear for her journey to America—where she has the chance to start over and build a new life.

That night Loung thinks of Pa as she drifts off to sleep, worrying that his spirit will not be able to cross the ocean to be with her in America. In her dreams, Pa tells her not to worry and that he will find her wherever she goes. The next morning Loung, Meng, and Eang go to the Bangkok airport. Thinking of Pa, Loung boards the airplane for America.

The plane represents the first step towards Loung, Meng, and Eang's new life. Having started to let go of the past, Loung is able to rekindle her hope for a better future. Pa will always be with her, because he made her the person she is. The love and support of her family give Loung the final push she needs to leave everything she has ever known behind.

EPILOGUE

Many years later, Loung reflects on her life in America. Determined to fit in, she immersed herself in American culture and tried to Americanize herself to erase memories of the war. Chou often wrote letters to Meng asking about her, but Loung never wrote back.

The fact that Loung never writes back to Chou betrays her guilt about leaving her sister in Phnom Penh while she lives a more stable life in the United States. Loung's second memoir, in fact, details the vastly different directions their lives take after Loung leaves Cambodia.

Khouy, Kim, and Chou stayed in Bat Deng. Chou married at eighteen and bore five children. Khouy became the village's police chief and has six children. Other relatives also made their way to the village. Kim made it to a Thai refugee camp in 1988. Though Meng filled out reunification papers, the United States reduced the number of accepted refugees and Thai officials began to deport many to Cambodia. Meng managed to get Kim as far as France through a black-market ring, and still awaits his arrival in Vermont.

The Ungs are able to rebuild their lives after the devastation of the Khmer Rouge—a testament to the power of the human spirit. The fact that Kim is not able to make it to the United States after all he has been through serves as an unstated indictment of overly-strict immigration laws.

Meng and Eang live in Vermont with their two daughters. Both obtained jobs at IBM despite having little knowledge of American culture, and support the entire family. Loung notes that current immigration laws mean their family will likely never be reunited, however. Loung was able to attend college and get a job working with victims of domestic violence. She eventually moved to Washington, D.C. to work with the Campaign for a Landmine-Free World. She is now the CLFW spokesperson and travels across the world to spread its message. Talking has reduced the nightmares, as well as the hate and fear she feels.

Meng and Eang's success reveals their strength of character and will to survive, while their support of those back in Cambodia again emphasizes the unbreakable bond between family. Loung's work with the CLFW is directly inspired by her experience with landmines in Cambodia, exemplified by the badly-burned boy she saw in the Vietnamese camp's infirmary. Whereas she survived via rage and hate under the Khmer Rouge, she has now turned her trauma into a force for peace.

After fifteen years Loung returns to Cambodia for the first time, both nervous and excited. Her family greet her at the airport, but seem unsure of how to react. Chou looks like her mother, and when she and Loung lock eyes, Chou bursts into tears. The two hold hands "as if the chain was never broken" and walk out of the airport together.

Chou's easy acceptance of Loung after all this time mirrors the way she reached for Loung's hand in forgiveness back in Ro Leap. Their bond transcends time, distance, and trauma.

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