

Strangers in Black

A Young Boy's Struggle to Survive
in Khmer Rouge Cambodia

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*To the memory of Betty Kaiser, whose spirit lives
on in the lives she touched. And to "Mok,"
who had the courage to share his story.*



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Prologue

Chest heaving, sweat pouring into my eyes, I hugged the tree trunk. “We must be like lizards,” I whispered to my cousins, Pheap and Saveun. “Like *tekahs* who dart from place to place so fast no one sees them. Wait until I’ve crossed the clearing before you follow.”

Eyes straining to catch the sun’s reflection on a rifle barrel, ears straining to hear the slightest sound, I sucked in my breath, crouched low, and bolted to the next tree. And the next. And the next. Until there were no more trees.

Bare, charred ground stretched before me. Rusted barbed wire, strung across the field by the Khmer Rouge to keep us trapped in Cambodia, blocked my way. I scanned the cratered gray mile of minefield littered with broken, red-splotched bodies that would be my stepping stones to freedom.

Listening for gunshots, I waited for the girls to catch up with me. The only sound invading the silence was a baby wailing. It was an infant’s cry, too young to be Tha’s. My sister Luon and the baby are still okay, I assured myself.

Finally, they were beside me. Pheap and Saveun pressed against me, their labored breathing mingling. Tha, tied securely in Luon’s *krama*, was asleep.

We gazed at the tranquil greenbelt beyond the minefield. Luon's broken teeth showed for an instant as a smile in her sunken face. "That's Thailand," she whispered.

Watching Saveun rub the angry red scars on her neck, I thought of all that had happened to us in the past four years—and all we'd lost: Tiny Sinoeun, Veun, my friend Khoy, Mir Ton, our farm, my mother in Vietnam. Remembering life before the strangers in black came, I wondered how we had come to be here—scared and starving, hiding, waiting for dark to escape to Thailand.

Chapter One

1975: Strangers in Black

The first time I saw a Khmer Rouge soldier, I was at the marketplace with my sister Luon. We had just unloaded our banana leaves and milkfruit from the rickety old town bus. It hadn't been an easy ride, perched on a reed basket that was wedged between a chicken coop and a sow with her litter. The piglets, smelling the ripe fruit, kept digging their noses into our baskets. Between swatting them, shooing chicks, and trying to stay on the jostling bus, it had been a long, bumpy ride to Big Bor.

"I'll carry the fruit," I said. Though I was small for my nine years, I was strong. I settled a bamboo pole on my shoulders, and Luon hung baskets of fruit on the ends.

"Let's go, Mok," she said. "It's almost daylight. The market will be busy already." Balancing a bundle of banana leaves on her head, she started off.

We passed women with wooden yokes across their shoulders. On one end of the yokes hung a charcoal brazier, balanced on the other end by cooking pots and produce. "Fried bananas! Sizzling rice soup! Rice cakes!" they called. My stomach rumbled with hunger as the smell of fish cooked over a charcoal fire wafted past, carried by the curling black smoke that followed them.

I followed Luon as she pushed her way toward a jungle of crowded stalls in the center of the market, where vendors beckoned shoppers in a jumble of Chinese, French, Vietnamese, and Khmer. There, under a canopy of braided palm fronds, farmers gathered to sell their produce and livestock.

“Mok!” My friend Khoy ducked under a line of crispy fried chickens hanging by their feet. “Ma gave me some *riel*,” he said, waving a fistful of money. “Do you want to see the shadow play from Phnom Penh?”

Once or twice a year, a shadow play would come to Bor. While the players made tiny paper figures dance in front of a lighted screen, they sang songs and made up stories.

“Can I go, Luon?” I asked anxiously.

Luon sighed. “We have to sell all this fruit today, or it will spoil. If we make enough *riel* from selling the fruit, you may have a few *sen* to go to the shadow play.”

“We can sell it in no time,” said Khoy. “I’ll help.”

I set down the bamboo pole and grabbed a basket full of fruit. “Let’s go to the *wat*,” I said, hearing the sound of the monks’ metal drum. “People are always hungry after they’ve been to the temple.”

Built on stilts, the *wat* was the tallest building in the village. Through its open sides, we watched the orange-robed monks kneeling before a giant Buddha. *Even with my eyes closed, I would know I was at the wat*, I thought, inhaling the smoky jasmine of burning incense.

Our baskets emptied quickly as villagers visiting the temple bought fruit for the monks and offerings for the dead.

“Look! Someone has tied a duck to one of the graves,” said Khoy. “Let’s let it loose.”

“We might get caught,” I said.

“But they won’t know who we are,” assured Khoy, taking off his *krama* and wrapping the blue cloth around his face like a bandit. “Besides, the old man who guards the graves is asleep under that tree.”

While Khoy kept an eye on the old man, I sneaked over to untie the duck. The duck started quacking. The old man’s eyes opened.

“What’s going on?” he shouted, struggling to his feet.

Khoy quacked and flapped his arms. The old man couldn’t see very well and chased after him. Khoy dodged behind a statue and ran out of the graveyard. The old man stood in front of the gate, trying to locate the noisy duck.

I grabbed the duck and clamped its beak shut. I knew that if I could sneak past the old man, I’d be safe. Once I was out of the graveyard, he’d never be able to catch me.

I inched my way around the graves. There was only one shrine between the old man and me when the duck pulled its beak loose and quacked. The old man heard it and ran toward me, his white beard bouncing, spittle flying out of his mouth. I bent down and darted toward the gate behind him.

Snap! My head jerked back. The old man had hold of my hair. Gritting my teeth, I twisted free.

“You got the duck!” Khoy laughed, clutching his sides as I ran up to him safely outside the graveyard. “But look what he got!” The old man stood just outside the gate, yelling and waving a fistful of my hair.

I rubbed my head. “Come on, or we’ll miss the play,” I said, tossing the duck back into the graveyard.

“I’ll race you,” said Khoy.

I pretended to stumble at the start and then didn’t run my fastest. It made Khoy mad when I always won. I chased him through the marketplace. A couple of performers were out in front of a shop, beckoning people inside to see the shadow play. I sped up, not wanting to be late, and almost bumped into Khoy, who had stopped short in front of me. I started to yell at him, but then I saw what had made him stop.

Dressed in black, red-checkered *kramas* knotted around their heads and with rifles strapped across their chests, a line of stony-faced, dark-skinned soldiers marched into the village. Their round, black eyes stared straight ahead, oblivious to the crowds watching them.

“Khmer Rouge!” Khoy whispered.

We had heard stories about the legendary Khmer Rouge who lived in the jungle. These tough peasant soldiers and their fearless leader, Pol Pot, had fought for years to oust the corrupt government of President Lon Nol. To gain support, the Khmer Rouge had promised that they would reinstate our beloved Prince Sihanouk to power.

An old man guiding an oxcart struggled to pull the cart off the road so the soldiers could pass by. The ox balked.

One of the soldiers prodded the beast from behind with his rifle.

“Look at that gun!” I said.

“I’ll bet it’s an AK-47 or an M16,” said Khoy.

“It’s an M16,” I said, “just like my uncle’s.”

Falling into step behind the soldiers, we examined their uniforms, from their ragged tunics to the pants rolled up to their knees. Their legs and feet were streaked with mud. Their sandals, cut from tires and tied with rags, made a slapping sound on the dirt road as they marched through the village.

“Phew!” hissed Khoy, holding his nose. “I’ll bet they never take baths!”

Just then an old woman broke through the crowd. “Peace at last!” she cried, falling at the feet of the soldiers. “Lon Nol has been defeated. We’re saved! Long live Pol Pot! Hooray for the Khmer Rouge!”

On all sides, people took up the cry. Khoy tossed the last of the fruit to the soldiers. Clapping and shouting, we joined the excited throng weaving its way down the road.

Out of nowhere, a hand pulled me out of the cheering crowd. “We’re going home,” said Luon quietly. My objections were squelched by the solemn expression on her face.

It was a long, silent walk back to Small Bor. When we arrived home, my cousins, Pheap and Saveun, rushed out to greet us. “We have a surprise!” the little girls squealed. “Ba is home from Battambang!”

Mir Ton stepped out of the house. Though he was Luon's husband, I called him *mir*, or uncle, instead of brother-in-law out of respect. He was dressed in a white tunic with a blue and orange *sampot* wrapped around his waist. The expression on his face was as serious as Luon's.

Sampeihing in the traditional Cambodian fashion, Luon pressed her hands together and bowed. "I'm glad you're here," she said.

While Luon brewed a pot of tea, she and Mir Ton spoke in quiet tones. "The Khmer Rouge have come," she said.

"After five years of civil war, President Lon Nol is defeated," said Mir Ton. "The bribery, kidnapping, and tyranny that he called 'government' have come to an end. Finally, after all these years of fighting, we will have peace. Our Republican Army will work with Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge soldiers to rebuild the country."

"Everyone in the village is cheering and waving white flags," said Luon. "They've all gone crazy."

"That's how it was in Battambang, too," said Mir Ton. "The Khmer Rouge tore open the shops. People stampeded the marketplace, scavenging everything they could find. The city is in chaos. Cars with loudspeakers patrol the streets, broadcasting messages that the Americans are going to bomb the city and everyone must leave. I came as quickly as I could."

"Will we be safe here?" asked Luon.

"I don't know," said Mir Ton.

From the doorway, I watched my cousins chasing chickens while confused thoughts tumbled through my mind. *Would the Americans bomb us, too?* I wondered. *Would we have to leave? And if so, could we return home to Vietnam and our family?*

That night the village was lit up like a New Year's celebration. Paper lanterns were strung from pole to pole, and children ran through the streets banging pots. "Long live peace!" villagers shouted, waving white flags. Young people sang and danced while the elderly played cards and gambled.

Friends and neighbors called us to join them. "Rice is flowing in the streets! The Khmer Rouge have opened the shops! Everything belongs to everyone now!"

From behind our bamboo fence, Pheap, Saveun, and I watched them rush past. "Can we go, too?" asked Saveun.

"Things are not always as they seem," said Mir Ton. "We will wait and see."

What would usually have been a festive dinner celebrating Mir Ton's return was instead a hasty meal of fish paste and rice. Taking their cue from the adults, Pheap and Saveun were quiet. Chopsticks clicked against the sides of our bowls in a strange rhythm, and martial music blared from the radio.

After dinner, while Luon and Mir Ton listened for news bulletins, I put my cousins to bed and settled onto my sleeping mat.

Finally, an announcer's voice broke through the music. "Attention all officers of the Republican Army. We ask you

to assist the revolutionary organization. Help train Khmer Rouge soldiers to drive armored trucks and pilot aircraft, operate radios and clear minefields. Our soldiers are ignorant and do not know how to do any of these things. Assemble your arms, and report to your command post before 8:00 a.m. tomorrow, April 18.” As abruptly as it began, the voice died.

“What will happen now?” asked Luon. The sound of fear in her voice frightened me.

“The war has ended,” explained Mir Ton. “I’ll help with the restructuring. Now that the fighting is over, you and the children will be safe.”

“Should we send Mok home?” Luon asked.

I squeezed my eyes shut and hoped Mir Ton would say that the war in Vietnam was over, too. I missed my mother.

“No,” said Mir Ton. “It’s still too dangerous. Besides, with me gone, you need Mok’s help with the farm. Though Saveun thinks she’s grown, she’s only seven, and Pheap is still a baby. We must try to sleep now. The days ahead will be difficult for all of us.”

Long into the night, I listened to the rejoicing villagers and watched the light from the lanterns play across the sleeping girls’ faces. I wondered why, when everyone else in Bor was celebrating the victory of the soldiers in black, Luon and Mir Ton were so somber, and why the radio was on when all we could hear was static.