



# unspoken words

WRITTEN BY JENNIFER KA

A LEGACY OF THE KHMER ROUGE GENOCIDE

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Funding for this publication is generously provided by DC-Cam Staff & Family with the core support from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and Swedish International Development Agency (Sida).

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Cover and book concept : Youk Chhang

Graphic design: Yvonne Wong for Double Happiness Creations, Inc.

Photo credits: Saron Nhong, Elizabeth Aong, Smita Vyas, Matthiew Bauer, Sayana Ser, Jennifer Ka, Dacil Q. Keo and Kunthy Seng

Printed in Cambodia

## acknowledgments

I would like to thank the Cambodian Student Association of UC-San Diego for their dedication and passion for Cambodian culture. The establishment and success of our club could not have been possible without the valuable time and effort invested by its members. I would like to acknowledge Darlene Ly for sharing her ideas on the script. My gratitude goes to my sister for her unyielding encouragement. I would like to thank Youk Chhang and Documentation Center of Cambodia for giving me the opportunity to share my story with others. Finally, this play would not have been possible without my mother, whose love, courage and strength inspired me to write this story.

# preface

## THREE RINGS OF GENOCIDE

When people think of genocide, various images come to mind: Armenian death marches, Nazi concentration camps, burned villages in Darfur, and the killing fields of Cambodia. Less considered is the second ring of genocide, the survivors who saw their loved ones die, their communities destroyed, and their lives upended. Beyond this there is yet a still another ring of genocide, still less considered, the next generation that experiences the ripples of genocide vicariously through language lost, stories told, the peculiarities of parent survivors, and silences.

Jennifer Ka's play, *\*Unspoken Words\**, takes the reader on a journey through these three rings of genocide and the cross-currents that bind them. In the prologue, the protagonist, Jessica, discusses the first ring of genocide, the devastation wrought by the Khmer Rouge. Her parents were among the lucky ones who escaped, she tells us, carrying "with them the pain and suffering of the past, but also bringing with them their culture" as they started "a whole new life in America and later had me."

*\*Unspoken Words\** then turns the second and third rings of genocide. We meet Jess's parents, who have rebuilt their lives, overcoming the hardships of adaptation and the language barriers. Even with these successes, the genocidal past continues to impact upon the family in subtle ways. Her father wants nothing more than for Jess, the star student, to build the family business that he has started in this new land. Jess's mother is reluctant to leave their house, is hypervigilant about danger, and refuses to speak about the past. Jess, in turn, is caught between the desire to learn more about Cambodian culture and the family's tragic past and the desire to break free and experience life as an American kid who dates and can take a class in creative writing. Communication, or the lack thereof, remains central to the story that unfolds as Jess and her parents seek to understand one another and the ripples of genocide that cross their relationships and lives.

Take a breath and turn the page. Enter the world of this remarkable play.

Alex Hinton  
Rutgers University  
July 2010

# unspoken words

## THE BEGINNING: PROLOGUE

Cambodia was a beautiful and wholesome country. The inhabitants were humble and valued the importance of kindness and peace. Cambodia was a place many people called their home, but everything changed after the Khmer Rouge seized power over the nation in 1975. Pol Pot the leader of the communist group wanted to reconstruct Cambodia and start on the year zero, erasing all of Cambodia's past history and culture. Schools, hospitals, and businesses were closed down. Many victims were murdered because they were doctors, monks, Cham-Islam or other ethnicities or of any professional occupation. Children were separated from their parents into different labor camps to work in harsh conditions. Kids were brainwashed or re-educated by the communists to believe in their ideals and ultimately forced them to kill anyone who was not supporting their cause. No one was able to voice their own opinions anymore, it was only best to remain quiet to stay alive. Brutality and darkness dominated the fields of Cambodia as the harmonious spirit of the country faded away. The Khmer Rouge achieved nothing but the termination of their own people. Approximately 2 million out of 7.7 million occupants of the nation died. Only some were lucky enough to escape the deadly regime and start a new life. The survivors carry with them the pain and suffering from the past, but also bring with them their culture. Among these survivors were my mom and dad and they built a whole new life in America and later had me. This is our story.



## AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL: SCENE 1

Mom: Oh wow, America so big. Come look honey.

Dad: I am coming, uhyyyyy my back hurts  
(Chheu Cha-keh) Carry so much bag.

Mom: Uh Ohhh, you want me to give you Khmer Massa?!

Dad: Oh yeah, that always work but maybe later.

Mom: Ok let me help you bong.

Dad: Mmm, only take the small one.

Mom: Mmm.

Dad: We so lucky to make it to America! So many people and shopping around. Maybe we can go bargain.

Mom: Maybe, it is just so different, it is scary.

Dad: It is okay oun (darling). We need to do this, we could not stay in Cambodia.

Mom: I know (Knhom doeng haey). I just miss my home.

Dad: Me too, but it will never be the same anymore.

Mom: (sigh) I very hungry now bong. You think they have babar chheam chrouk cheamouy cha khvay or something here?

Dad: I don't know. Maybe we can try the McDonald, someone tell me they have good hambaga and fren frie.

Mom: What is that? Okay whatever. Let's do America.



20 years later.

### BACK HOME AGAIN: SCENE 2

Jess: Hi! I am back! Ma Pa is anyone here?

Mom: Oh hi kaun (children), why you come so late?

Jess: Oh yeah, had to do some packing before I left and there was traffic on the way.

Mom: Yeah that suck. (pause) Okay you must be stawving, come eat. I make you curry, it has a lot of veyetable so it healthy for you.

Jess: Ok thanks mom. Where is dad?

Mom: He at the store to finish some business. He will come back soon.

Jess: Yeah I thought so. Well I need to ask him if I can take a class this summer. I have been too busy taking econ classes for my major, so I have to take it to fulfill my GE's.

Mom: What? What is a GE?

Jess: It's general education. I need to take it for credit.

Mom: Ohhhh (still puzzled)

Jess: Do you get it?

Mom: No I don't understand.

Jess: Ugh, forget it. I don't feel like explaining it right now.

Mom: Why you not patient with me? I do not know a lot about that stuff.

Jess: I am just tired okay.

Mom: Okay

Dad walks in, (Door noise in background)

Mom: Bong you here, did you bring me my num pao?

Dad: Uhy, I forgot. Sorry, I bring you some tomorrow. Hi Kaun.

Jess: Hi dad! Come eat curry with us.

Dad: Okay. So how were your finals?

Jess: Easy! I am pretty sure I aced all my econ finals.

Dad: Very good. Keep working hard, you will be great business owner one day.

Jess: Um yeah... How is the cell and water shop?

Dad: A lot of people buy the phone and the water, it is a good business.

Jess: Yeah that's true. Anyways, I wanted to ask you if I could take a class this summer, so I can be done with my GE's faster. Is that okay?

Dad: Yes that is fine, BUT I still expect you to come help me at the shop sometimes and learn some things.

Jess: Okay that's fine

Dad: Yes there is so much to teach you about the business world.

Jess: Yeah...

Mom: What class you taking?

Jess: Just a creative writing class

Mom: Ohhhh.



### REUNITED FRIENDS SCENE 3

Mom: Oh good morning, kaun.

Jess: Morning, what are you doing?

Mom: I am using the youtube to watch Cambodian drama. Do you want to watch it with me? The movie is so interesting, so much drama.

Jess: No it is okay, I don't really understand Khmer.

Mom: Oh it is okay. I can translate for you, so you can learn Khmer too. So in the movie, the guy likes the girl but then the bad girl try to get the guy

Jess: No it's okay mom. My friend is coming over soon.

Mom: Oh okay, what friend? Thida?

Jess: Yeah, well she is like my only closest friend.

Mom: Yeah I like her, she so nice and speak Khmer very well.

Jess: Yeah I guess she does.

Mom: What you guys gonna do?

Jess: Go get some yogurt and go to her house after.

Mom: Oh you go to yogurtland?? Can you get me some taro, it's so good.

Jess: Um, maybe on the way back. I am not sure what time I am coming home.

Mom: Ok try to come before the dark time, you never know if something happen.

Jess: I know mom, I know how to take care of myself okay? I am in college now.

Mom: I just want you to be careful, there is a lot of scary people out there. I get worried.

(Knock)

Jess: Oh that's her! HEY Thida!

Thida: Hi Jess! I missed you so much, I am so glad you are back.

Jess: I missed you too!

Thida: Jumreap suor, om.

Mom: Hello! How are you?

Thida: I am pretty good. Oh are you watching something?

Mom: Yeah, I watching Cambodian movie.

Thida: Oh really? Let me see. Ohhh I watched this one already, you will like it a lot.

Mom: Oh, you watch Cambodian movie too??

Thida: Yeah my yeay watches it all the time at home.

Jess: Anyways, how are you Thida? What you been up to?

Thida:.. Just school and been watching over my grandma at home. I am so excited for summer though, we are going to have so much fun. Oh and my brother's back now, he just graduated from college...

Jess: Oh your brothers back? It's been a while since I've seen him.

Thida: Yeah you will probably see him when you come over.

Jess: Yeah that sounds cool... Okay let's go! Bye Ma.

Thida: Chamreap lea om.

Mom: Okay bye, don't forget my taro!

Jess: I know mom. okay let's go!



#### SAMNANG: SCENE 4

Jess: Your house looks so different than from before Thida.

Thida: My brother still hasn't unpacked. He so annoying. What's new with you? Meet any guys?!

Jess: I knew you would ask that. I haven't really met anyone. My dad would flip if he knew I was dating. He only wants me to focus on school, meaning no boys!

Thida: Yeah I know, but you should have some fun and meet people!

Jess: I know, but I need to keep my eye on the goal and succeed. I cannot have distractions. Oh yeah that reminds me! My grades came out today, do you think I can check it on your computer??

Thida: Sure. I need to check on my grandma, be back.

Jess: Okay. (typing noise) Oh yeah Straight A's!!!

Ringing noise

Mom: Hello?

Jess: Mom! It's me. I got straight A's in all my classes!

Mom: Oh, that good.

Jess: Um okay...Tell dad for me he will probably want to go celebrate.

Mom: Okay I will tell him. You come home soon?

Jess: Yeah mom, ugh. I have to go bye (hangs up)

Mom: Don't forget my taro....

Samnang: Jessica ?

Jess: Oh hey Samnang!

Samnang: I almost did not recognize you, well you look good, I mean different since it's been a while.

Jess: Haha. Yeah you too.

Samnang: What are you looking at?

Jess: Oh just my grades. No big deal.

Samnang: Straight A's! That is a big deal!

Jess: You are much more enthusiastic than my mom. I just called her to tell her and she never knows what to say.

Samnang: Yeah it can be difficult talking to parents sometimes.

Jess: I feel like she doesn't care about how hard I work at school and everything I do. She is just always so unresponsive so we can never talk about things.

Samnang: I am sure she cares. It just may be hard for her to show it. My mom and I were kind of the same way before,

but we grew closer after my father left us. It was a hard time for us but I let her know I was there for her. I was more patient and started to her. You should try talking to your mom, there is probably a lot you do not know about her.

Jess: Yeah I guess I should try. Sorry didn't mean to tell you all of this.

Samnang: Don't worry about it. I don't do much anyways since I am done with school.

Jess: Yeah you are done, that's a relief right?

Samnang: I miss college. It was fun and I learned a lot living on my own. How do you like school?

Jess: It's okay, just trying really hard to get into business school.

Samnang: Business huh? That must be tough.

Jess: Yeah I guess it is. My dad really wants me to expand the family business.

Samnang: Is that something you always wanted to do?

Jess: Yeah, it's okay. I mean it's a safe route, my dad just kind of planned it all out for me. What was your major?

Samnang: I am actually a...

Thida: Samnang, go away stop annoying my friend.

Samnang: You need to chill, I need to run some errands anyway. See ya Jessica!

Jessica: Bye! Hope to see you around.

Thida: Bye loser... Anyways, back to the important stuff. I still think you need to meet more guys, you may find

someone you like.

Jess: Yeah, maybe you are right...



### LEARNING MORE ABOUT MOM: SCENE 5

Jess: Ma what is that smell?

Mom: Oh sorry, I am making some prahok (Cambodian death-salty fishes). You want some?

Jess: No not really, I forgot how strong the smell was.

Mom: Yeah I put extra fish in it, I craving it. It tastes so good.

Jess: Oh, did you eat that a lot in Cambodia?

Mom: Yeah it was my favorite, my mom always make for me when I was young.

Jess: What was yeay (grand-ma) like? You don't really talk about her.

Mom: She a good mom. She always talk with me and take me places. She very kind and patient. I always try to be like her.

Jess: Where did she take you in Cambodia?

Mom: She take me to the waterfalls and to the temples. It was very pretty in Cambodia.

Jess: Do you ever think you are going to go back and visit?

Mom: I don't know... Your dad is too busy to go so it is okay if I cannot go back

Jess: But don't you miss it? I am sure dad would be okay with it.

Mom: Yes, but... I just don't feel like going.

Jess: Why not? Don't you want to see how it is? It is probably really different now.

Mom: I just can't okay. Why you ask me about this?

Jess: I just want to learn more about you. You don't ever tell me about your life before you came to America. I want to learn more about my culture.

Mom: If you want to learn, help me cook the prahok, it help you learn.

Jess: Cooking does not tell me much about you mom. Why can't you tell me about how you escaped the Khmer Rouge and got to America and stuff.

Mom: You don't need to know.

Jess: I am trying to understand you better mom, why can't you be a little more open?

Mom: I clean for you, cook for you and take care for you. Why you want so much?

Jess: Fine, forget it.

Mom: It's just hard for me, kaun. Maybe I tell you another time.

Jess: No it's okay, if you don't want to tell me you don't have to.

(Pause)

Mom: Do you want to go temple today? I am going with your auntie.

Jess: No, I have class today ma, I am going to go get ready.



### CREATIVE WRITING CLASS: SCENE 6

Samnang: I didn't know you were taking this class!

Jess: Samnang! What are you doing here? You still have to take classes?

Samnang: No. I am taking it again because I liked it. I wasn't able to tell you, but I majored in English. Why are you here?

Jess: Need it for credit. It won't be too hard right?

Samnang: Depends. You just have to express yourself

through your own feelings and experiences using words and you will be fine. You've never taken a class like this?

Jess: Not really, this is all new to me. It will be nice to have a break from math and econ classes for a while.

Samnang: Yeah, this class is way more fun. It may be a little challenging, but I can always help you out.

Jess: Thanks I appreciate it.

Samnang: What book were you reading? Sorry if I interrupted.

Jess: No it's fine, I've read this book so many times, it's my favorite, Great Expectations.

Samnang: No way, that's my favorite book too. I have a copy in my backpack right now.

Jess: Haha. Wow you do, we should discuss it sometime.

Samnang: Sure, so I am guessing you read a lot?

Jess: Yeah since I was a little kid. It's like my thing. What are all those papers on your desk?

Samnang: Oh these are just my favorite Los Angeles Time articles. I've always wanted to write for a newspaper.

Jess: Why don't you apply?

Samnang: Incredibly talented people work there. I am not that good.

Jess: I am sure you are. Thida told me you got some of your writing published in your school newspaper.

Samnang: She told you about that? She usually doesn't say nice things about me.

Jess: Yeah, it was kind of weird. I think you really should do it though.

Samnang: I'll think about it... Oh yeah, how are things with your mom?

Jess: Whatever I guess.

Samnang: Did something happen?

Jess: Well I asked her if she was going to visit Cambodia again and she didn't really want to talk about it. She was just very resistant.

Samnang: Just be patient, I am sure she will tell you when she is able to. There are probably so many bad memories there for her. My grandma talks about Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge all the time. Our families were so brave, I admire them.

Jess: You're lucky she tells you. I guess I just want her to tell me her story.

Samnang: Yeah I am glad I have a grandma that talks so much. I really do learn a lot from her and see the culture through her eyes.

Jess: Yeah I think I feel disconnected to my own culture, since I am not close with my mom.

Samnang: Yeah. Look we are getting our first assignment in class already!

Jess: What really on the first day?

Samnang: Don't worry, it looks like an interesting topic.

Jess: What do we have to write about?

Samnang: Write about yourself and what defines you.

Jess: Yeah I don't really know what to write about though.

Samnang: I am sure it will come to you. Writing takes a lot of patience, ideas will just come up. Or we can talk about it over lunch sometime?

Jess: I would like that.

Samnang: Okay it's a date.



## TEMPLE: SCENE 7

Aunt: Aun, where are you?? (Loudly)

Mom: I over here... (softly)

Aunt: Where? Uhy so many people in the temple, I can't find you.

Mom: Bong, right here...

Aunt: Oh I see you!

Mom: Why you so loud? Khmah ke (embarrassing)

Aunt: Mmm. Khmas thveu ei (Why you embarrassed) Who care.

Mom: Uhy, ok come sit, it almost over.

Aunt: Ok good. I am hungry, temple always have so much food.

Mom: Why you always come only for food. You should come to pray.

Aunt: M-haup chh-nganh. (The food is good) Thats why. I pray sometime, its okay. You just pray too much.

Mom: Yeah, I want to pay respect to yeay, and pa. Jessica asked me about yeay yesterday. It makes me miss her.

Aunt: Yeah me too... uhy my foot always fall asleep. (moves around) (spik cheung)

Mom: Yeah, that always happen to me.

Aunt: Muel ne, Khnom tinh kabaup thmei (Look I bought a new purse).

Mom: Oh wow, very nice. Tlei tno. (Expensive)

Aunt: Yeah it is. It is a gucci. Saat men (very pretty) You want to go shopping after this? I think they have a lot of sale!

Mom: No, I want to stay for a little bit longer.

Aunt: Why you always at the temple. You need to do more stuff, it make you happy.

Mom: Temple make me feel better, it make me feel okay.

Aunt: I know, but you need to try more things, you always at home and watch Cambodian drama. Go to Srok Khmer or something! It is fun over there now.

Mom: I like to stay home, I don't need to go out.



Aunt: Uhy. You very stubborn, why you so scared?

Mom: I don't know. I feel safe at home.

Aunt: You need to live your life, we getting old you know.

Mom: I worry a lot, I don't want anything bad to happen.

Aunt: What you worry about?

Mom: You know, we seen a lot of scary stuff happen in Cambodia bong. It make me think something bad happen again. I worry for my daughter the most, I want her to be okay.

Aunt: I know its hard oun, but you need to stop being so scared. It was a long time ago.

Mom: I know it is, but I still think about what happen to Ma. I remember so clearly.

Aunt: Me too, did you tell your daughter about everything?

Mom: I don't want to, its not important for her to know.

Aunt: You should just tell her

Mom: There is no reason to tell her, it will not change anything.

Aunt: She can understand you and everything you been through. That is important.

Random girl: Neak na chang samla machou? (who wants samla machu)

Aunt: me me me!! lets go!

Mom: I am going to check my fortune first. I come see you later. Save me some.

(Shake sound for fortune)



#### MONOLOGUE: SCENE 8

Jess: Ok I need to start this paper, and get it over with. Why is this so difficult. So I have to write about myself. I am a college student who plans to be a business woman. Hmm... Is that really what I want to do, I mean I never had any other options really. It just seems like the path I should go on. Well more like the path my father wants me to go on. Business is all about making money, that's not really me. Ok getting distracted. back to the paper. I am Cambodian American. Hmm. But I guess I am not as cultured as I should be. If my mom was just a little bit more open I might be interested or if she just tried to be involved in my life I would. She just so closed, how am I suppose to care if she does not tell me anything. Wow, I am getting sidetracked again. I need to focus. I just need to let my words flow just like Samnang said. He's so cute, I really hope he likes me. I don't think Thida will like it though. Should I even get involved with boys right now? My dad would be super angry with me, but I think I should just give it a chance. This creative writing class is kind of interesting, being able to express myself is allowing me to think differently. Okay, time to begin writing, it will be a paper that really defines who I am or I will try my best at least.



#### A NEW TALENT: SCENE 9

Samnang: Wow, this paper is really good! You have great writing skills.

Jess: You really think so?

Samnang: I am serious, you have a unique style of writing. Simple, but very powerful.

Jess: I guess I never tapped into my writing skills. But I do read all the time.

Samnang: Well it's paying off. You should look into it more, only if you enjoy it.

Jess: Actually, I did enjoy my writing experience. It made me think creatively and since I have read so many books, writing naturally flowed for me.

Samnang: I think it is your time to start exploring

Jess: My dad would not be okay with that at all, he is so set on me doing business. I cannot disappoint him.

Samnang: You shouldn't do it just because your dad wants you to. You have to be open to new opportunities.

Jess: I don't even know what I want right now. Economics is convenient and easy for me.

Samnang: True, but it is not what you want. I just think you need to take a chance and find something you love to do.

Jess: It's just so difficult, I don't know what to do.

Samnang: It is better to reach for something great than settle for something good. I know you are capable of so much.

Jess: I guess you are right. I don't want to admit it but you are. Gosh why are you so smart?

Samnang: Because I am older than you.

Jess: By like two years.

Samnang: It makes a difference (haha). Just do me a favor and make your own decisions.

Jess: Ok I will. Did you apply to the LA times by the way?

Samnang: No, don't think I will.

Jess: What?! You told me to follow my passion and go for my dreams. You should follow your own advice. If you want something just do it.

Samnang: Ok, I'll consider it.

Jess: Good!

Samnang: Okay, let's get back to your paper. I really liked it as I said, but I feel it's missing something.

Jess: Like what?

Samnang: I don't know, you have to figure it out

Jess: Yeah, I need to figure out a lot of things

Samnang: Don't worry I'll be there when you need it



### THE FIGHT: SCENE 10

Jess: Dad can I talk to you about something?

Dad: I watching the boxing, can we talk later? Wait for commercial.

Jess: Please, I really want to talk to you now.

Dad: Ok then, what you want to talk about? How is school?

Jess: School is fine, how do you see my future pa?

Dad: You going to work in the business and be really successful. Oh of course, you will have a big family and everything be happy and grandchildren for me and your mom after your 30 and finish with school.

Jess: I don't know if I can see my future that way. I can't picture myself in business anymore.

Dad: MMM. What? Say again? You always wanted to do

business. What you talking about?

Jess: No, YOU always wanted me too.

Dad: Because business is good. You can make money for your family, what you want to be? Doctor? That is okay too.

Jess: I don't know yet dad. I need more time. But my friend said I am a good writer, I could look into that or something?

Dad: You listen to your friend, you don't listen to me?!

Jess: Career is a big decision, I haven't really got the chance to look at other options.

Dad: You don't need to. Business the best, you will waste your time.

Jess: But I am not happy, I want to find what's good for me.

Dad: Who is this friend? Why they make you think this way?

Jess: He said that I should.

Dad: MMM, it's a boy, oh that's why. They make you change your mind. Don't trust what the boy say okay!

Jess: No it's not about him dad, he has nothing to do with this. I need time to experience new things, you have to let me learn and let me do things on my own.

Dad: No you do the business if you care about the family.

Jess: That's not fair to me!

Dad: I give you everything you want and show you the way to go. How that not fair?!

Jess: You always tell me what to do and what to think. You don't let me live my own life!

Dad: MMM. (Niyey jraen mleh, att doeng ey) You don't know what you are talking about, you too young to know anything.

Jess: So let me take risks, make my own mistakes.

Mom: Please stop yelling.

Dad: Look at your daughter. So stubborn!

Jess: Ma, if you do care about me, let me be. I don't want to be forced upon something I don't want to do. I want to have a dream, just give me a chance.

Mom: Maybe you should listen to your dad.

Jess: Do you really think I should do business Ma? You must not care enough for me to let me do what makes me happy. You wouldn't even know what makes me happy, since you never ask. Just tell me how you feel, talk to me mom.

Pause.

Jess: You know what forget it! I am just going to do business and do whatever you want!



### MOM'S STORY: SCENE 11

Mom: I want to talk to you.

Jess: Didn't seem like you wanted to say anything before.

Mom: I know, I don't know how to talk to you easily. It's hard for me to speak English.

Jess: I know that Mom, the point is we don't really talk about anything at all.

Mom: Yeah I sorry I don't tell you a lot my daughter. You know you have your grandma smile. You remind me of her.

Jess: I wish I could see a picture of her. You don't have any pictures of her?

Mom: No, the communists take everything away from us and destroy everything.

Jess: Why would they do that? It's so cruel.

Mom: Yeah, the Khmer Rouge wanted to create a new society, but it only lead to the death of my people. I watched so many people die. They killed the smart people like my dad. He was a soldier and they took him away and I never see him again.

Jess: That's horrible.

Mom: We could not even grieve for my father because we struggle to stay alive too. They take me my mom, and my sister to the fields where we force to work. I try to stay strong because I watch my mom and she stay brave. She still smile and try to make us happy. She a true Cambodian woman. The only thing I look forward to after working is to see my Ma.

Jess: What was working in the fields like?

Mom: Very scary. Our own Khmer people beat us and kill if they see us not working. The communists brainwash Cambodian kids too and make them kill. The days were so long and they don't give us a lot of food either. We get only spoonful of rice and water. Not enough to keep us strong. (Vetanea)

Jess: How were you able to keep working?

Mom: My mom give me her food. I don't want to take it but she make me eat it. She care a lot for us, she does not want us to starve. But after so long, I see my mom she get weak and weaker. She work so hard she start to get sick. I try to help her, I steal food and I don't care if I get caught. I just want her to be okay. But it don't work. Me and my sister stay with her and watch her die. She tell us to take care of ourselves, to be strong, and that she will be watching us. We cry so much and tell her not to leave us but she too weak. And then she gone.

Jess: Mom, I am sorry. That is so hard to deal with.

Mom: I don't think I got to heal from it still. They forced us to work more and we finally escape to the camps. Then I come to America and have to learn how to deal with new culture. I still don't understand it that much. Then we make a life here with you and that make me happy. But it all happened so fast.

Jess: Yeah it did. It must have been difficult to leave your own country and enter a completely new one.

Mom: Yeah, America very different from Cambodia. I try to hold on to Cambodian culture because that is all I have from my home.

Jess: Mom, you don't have to hide anything from me. I want to know so I can understand and be there for you.

Mom: We do want you to understand everything, but at the

same time we do not want you to know and feel the pain we went through. I wanted to protect you, I thought it was better this way.

Jess: You don't have to. I don't want you to feel alone.

Mom: I know, that is why I tell you all of this. It already help me. You know when I went to the temple, I go do my fortune and you know what it say? It tell me to free myself from my past. I know it is a message from yeay. She is watching over you too you know.

Jess: Yeah, I hope she can help me with Lok Pa too.

Mom: We will go talk to him. Your daddy calm down a little already. He very stubborn, but he want the best for you. I think he let you do what make you happy.

Jess: You sure mom? Lok Pa looked really really mad.

Mom: Yeah it will be okay, trust me. So I heard you talk about a boy? Who is it? You like him? He Khmer?

Jess: Mom. Can we not talk about that?

Mom: But I want to know what is going on in your life.

Jess: Yeah I like him and he is Khmer.

Mom: Oh I so proud of you Kaun. You are growing up a lot.

Jess: Thanks mom. I love you.

Mom: I love you too.



### GETTING SERIOUS: SCENE 12

Samnang: I can't believe you talked to your dad. That's crazy. How do you feel?

Jess: I feel great! I was surprised my dad was okay with it, but I know he is still a little upset.

Samnang: He will be okay with it soon hopefully. And you talked to your mom right?

Jess: Yeah, she came to me after my fight with my dad. She told me about her past. I can't believe she did, it feels great to know that she can come to me and I can come to her. She is teaching me how to cook too! She invited you and Thida to dinner, would you want to come?

Samnang: You told your mom about me? Wow you did get close.

Jess: Yeah, she kind of figured it out. Don't be intimidated my dad he's just like that.

Samnang: Okay. This will be interesting. Haha.

Jess: Don't worry, they will like you.

Samnang: Okay, I will do my best to impress. So I have some news to tell you.

Jess: What is it??

Samnang: I applied to work at a local newspaper and had an interview.

Jess: And how did it go??

Samnang: It turned out great, I got the job on the spot!

Jess: Congratulations Samnang! I am so happy for you.

Samnang: I am hoping to get more experience and gain better skills, so I can work my way up. And here I got you a present.

Jess: For what??

Samnang: For being awesome.

Jess: Really? Haha.

Samnang: It's just for giving me that extra push and all.

Jess: A book! I love it!

Samnang: Yeah it's a romance. It's about a boy and girl who fall in love.

Jess: Sounds intriguing. I will be sure to read it. Thanks.

Samnang: So what are you going to do now. This is all a big change for you.

Jess: I am not sure and I am okay with that. I will see where my path takes me, I mean that is all part of the journey right?

Samnang: Yeah it is, I know you will find what's right for you.

Jess: I know I will and I am excited for what the future holds. But for now I think we should celebrate you and your new job! I say we go to yogurtland.

Samnang: Yes I love that place! What is your favorite flavor?

Jess: I guess it would be. Taro.

Samnang: You are so Cambodian. Haha.

Jess: What?? Haha. What's yours?

Samnang: Oh. Durian flavor.

Jess: I didn't even know they had that.

Samnang: Yeah it's new, we can go try it. Let's go.



### ALL TOGETHER: SCENE 13

Dad: So who is coming over again?

Jess: Oh. my best friend and her brother.

Dad: Why he come too?

Jess: Oh yeah. He wants to meet you both and talk to you about your business.

Dad: Oh he want to talk about my business, very good.

Aunt Knocks Door

Jess: I'll get it!

Aunt: Hello!

Jess: Hi Ming Navy!

Aunt: Oh you grow so big now, the food smell so good! It almost done?

Jess: No not yet.

Mom: Did you bring the karaoke DVD bong?

Aunt: Yes I brought all the good ones, it is going to be very fun.

Jess: Yes even though I suck at it and will embarrass myself.

Mom: It's okay I will teach you. I sing very well.

Aunt: No, I can teach you I sing better than your mom.

Mom: MMM

Aunt: I just kidding, we both sing very well.

Jess: It's okay, you both can then.

Knock on door.

Samnang and Thida: Hello Pou!

Dad: Hello, come in come in

Mom, Aunt, Jess: Hello!

Samnang: Thanks for inviting us to dinner, Ming.

Mom: Yes of course we make a lot of food.

Thida: We brought dessert, but we need some bananas. Do you have any?

Mom: Oh yeah we have a lot in the backyard. So many banana tree. Bong go cut some banana!

Dad: Uhy Okay. Let me get my butcher knife. You want to come help me Samnang?

Samnang: Um. Sure.

Dad: Okay. So I heard you are interested in business.

Samnang: Oh yeah yeah. I am.

Mom: He is very handsome my daughter. I think he will get along with your dad.

Aunt: Yeah he is very handsome. Okay I go nap before I eat. Tell me when food is done.

Mom: Ok, go sleep.

Thida: I can't believe you are with my brother, it is a little weird.

Jess: Well you did tell me to meet guys.

Thida: But not my brother. Yuck. It's okay as long you are both happy.

Jess: Thanks Thida! Um.. Do you think you can check on my

dad and Samnang in the backyard to make sure everything is okay?

Thida: Yeah I will help them get bananas.

Mom: Jessica! Come help me finish this.

Jess: Oh ok. So mom I was thinking we should go visit Cambodia and maybe you could show me the waterfalls and other places your mom took you.

Mom: Oh you want to go?

Jess: Yeah if you come with me.

Mom: Ok I go tell your daddy. He need break from his business anyways

Jess: Really?

Mom: Yes.

Jess: Awesome. So how do you make this again mom?

Mom: You just take the vegetables, the meat, and put it in the pan and that is how you make Banh Chaiv!



## EPILOGUE

My mom taught me something. She taught me about her courageous journey through life. Her pain and suffering was hidden underneath her tranquil façade fooling everyone around. However, she was not just hiding from others but also from her own past that haunted her all of these years. Tragedies such as the Khmer Rouge changed many Cambodian lives including my mother's, but she remains strong and bold till this day. I am thankful we are able to connect at a deeper level. We are able to communicate, putting aside our differences and understanding one another. We formed a loving relationship together allowing me to feel a stronger bond to my Cambodian culture as well. I am thankful I had this opportunity to learn about Cambodia's history, culture, and my mother's past because it opened up a

different part of me. I learned that my mom is a part of who I am. My mom and I were like opposites because we grew up in different countries and spoke different languages. But what we have in common is our love for our culture and each other. We broke the barrier that dominated our lives for so many years. So I can say now that I am a college student still figuring out what I love to do, and a girlfriend to a supportive and intelligent boy, the daughter of two incredible parents, and a Cambodian American who embraces the beauty of her culture.

**THE END**











## journey to my motherland



I was a 20 year old girl entering the world of the unknown. I did not really know what to expect when I arrived to Cambodia, but I was told about the poverty, the poor sanitation, and was warned about the safety. I did not want this to affect my outlook on the country so I came with no expectations. I wanted to see what Cambodia offered, the good and the bad. So I decided to indulge in my Cambodian side. I tried to learn the language, I ate the food, I interacted with the people here, and I became like one of them. I wanted to have the full experience so I would not miss any aspect of the culture and lifestyle. And I fell in love.

I saw the ancient temples, the humble country-sides and the growing industrialized cities. I was given the opportunity to see the different parts of Cambodia to gain insight about the country as a whole. I cannot fully understand the land unless I see it with my very own eyes. And I saw the beauty within the land and the smiles of her people. Their way of living intrigued me because it was so free. Everyone seemed to own their own businesses through means of selling food on the street or driving customers on their motos. They all worked hard to make a living here and their strength continues to amaze me. Cambodians are not idle beings; they continue to strive for better. I loved it for the way it was and saw the hope for growth and opportunity. I wanted the country to move forward away from the atrocities of the past and have a bright future. The past continues to haunt the victims of the Khmer Rouge through the heavy emotions they carry. I know I cannot heal all of their deep wounds, but I will try by writing stories that will hopefully inspire and touch the hearts of the Cambodian people like they had mine.

Cambodia opened a different part of me. It was a side I really never got to embrace. In America, I was exposed to the societal concerns of wealth, comfort,

and independence. I did not have all of this myself, but I wanted it. I was confused about my identity like any other person struggling to find out who they are. Sometimes I did not feel like I belonged in America because I never fit in quite right. I was stuck between two different cultures with two different values and ideals. I saw parents of my fellow students show love and support to their children. I wanted that the most. At home, my parents did not hug me or show affection. I felt rejected and felt as if I was not wanted. After learning about the Khmer Rouge and



being here in Cambodia, I learned about all the pain that prevent them to show how they feel. But I knew they loved me even if it was in secret. I saw that their true feelings shined through their actions of feeding me or caring for me. For a while, I unknowingly resented my parents for not loving me, but in the end I learned they are probably the only people in the world who loved me the most. The country showed me the truth.

As I discovered more about the country, I discovered more about myself. I struggled every day here trying to be someone I have always wanted to be. I wanted to fulfill the expectations of others and never me. I



ignored myself to avoid my own confictions, but I shall not neglect her any longer. I will give her the attention she needs and focus on my own healing. I will write, explore, and continue learning so I can understand myself and the world around me. I will give her compassion, acceptance, and love. I know I will one day awaken my heart and be alive again.

Cambodia is the land of my mother and now mines as well. The connection between me and my mother has grown even stronger after my experience here. Even though we are far apart, my love for her grows stronger as my love for Cambodia grows. I finally had the chance to visit her home, the place where she truly belongs. I was so fortunate to see a glimpse of her life because it has taught me so much about my

own. I was a lost girl unsure of her own future, and I know I am still that same girl. The only difference is that I am aware of the importance of capturing the world with an open heart. Thank you Cambodia for your lively and courageous spirit because it helps me to be strong every day.



the path toward justice





Cambodians were stuck in a nightmare they could not wake up from. I cannot imagine the brutality of the Khmer Rouge period because it was too chaotic. There was no mercy, no compassion, and no rules. The savagery makes me question the goodness of humanity. The act of genocide will always keep us wondering how this happened. We ask these questions to appease our virtuous hearts because we are too afraid of what we are all capable of.

Tuol Sleng prison was full of horror. Everything was left untouched after the fall of Democratic Kampu-

chea. I could still see the blood stains on the floors of the innocent victims who were tortured. I saw the torture methods, the narrow rooms, and the pictures of victims. The eyes of the victims stared timelessly back into mine. I saw the suffering and the agony deep within them. They knew that they could do nothing. I began to feel my hate and anger grow. They did not deserve this treatment; the prisoners didn't have a chance. The Khmer Rouge was blinded by their own distrust toward others leading to the unneeded deaths. They really did not care if you were innocent or not. At Cheoung Ek, I roamed around

the Killing Fields of the buried souls. Most of the former prisoners were taken here after mutilation or were killed here. It felt empty and silent because there was nothing left. The lives of Cambodians were gone leaving only the clothes they once wore. I saw the desolate skulls that once belonged to a baby, an elder, a woman or a man piled together. My emotions began to overwhelm me as I tried to soak in the truth. I wanted justice for my people.

I went to the Khmer Rouge Tribunal for the long awaited verdict of Duch with hundreds of others including the civil parties, monks, reporters, and other interested viewers. The energy of the courtroom was bleak and apathetic. There seemed to be no remorse for the victims, it wasn't enough. After the controversial verdict was read, people scattered around expressing all kind of emotions. Some cried, some were angry, some wanted to get a great story out of it, and some did not really care at all. Me, myself didn't really know what to feel. I just stared at this wild scene of humans hovering over each other to catch the reactions. The tribunal's significance began to fade away because the whole process seemed like a spectacle instead of a path toward justice. I was then confused and disappointed by the unsatisfactory result of the tribunal. However, I soon realized that the tribunal itself was not as important as what the tribunal symbolized. Yes, the survivors searched for justice within the court and most of them left disappointed, but the truth is they will never be completely satisfied. Nothing can ever bring back their loved ones.

We all search for a cure to heal our emotional wounds, but the only way is to face the pain itself. The tribunal set the past free allowing the victims to face the truth. It gave them a chance to tell their stories and have a voice. The people of Cambodia must see the tribunal as the foundation for the future. The revival

of the country can begin as the basis of her wounds is learning to heal. It is a long process we all must contribute to as a collective community to rebuild what was lost. Cambodia has lost so much already, but she shall no longer be victimized by the Khmer Rouge. This regime has taken too much power from her already to let them do it once again. She knows the younger generations are the future and will bring back justice for her people. Together with the wisdom of the old generation and the strength of the new, we can build a better tomorrow for Cambodia.

I did not want to hate or be angry anymore. The negative energies wanted to take over and take me to complete darkness. It wanted me to remain detached from the world and fall into my own self pity. But I couldn't let it. I know now that we all have a choice in what we do with our emotions. We must believe that our pure hearts will override the fangs of evil. As humans, we are capable of so much which still scares me, but we cannot lose sight of what is needed. We must continue to fight the invisible armies of evil with our weapons of truth and love.

Feeling what is real can be overbearing and cause us to feel weak, but when we choose to make a change, our weakness becomes our strength.

## angkor wat and her people



I was never able to grasp the beauty of Angkor Wat until we first met this summer. I have always wanted to see this historical site because it was a big part of Cambodia. The people were proud of this monumental accomplishment made by their people centuries ago and it belonged to them. Although it belonged to the Cambodian people, it seemed more controlled by industry and tourism. I knew this was a huge tourist spot for foreigners, but did not expect the tour guides to be foreigners as well. I was told before I went to explore Angkor that Cambodian kids who lived within her walls use to be informal tour guides. They told her ancient stories not just from history books, but from the words of their elders. These were myths passed down from generation to generations; I would find these more interesting than just factual information. The spirit of Angkor then becomes bogged down by facts instead of imagination.

The beauty of Angkor Wat then becomes materialized into some kind of display. They stampede and suppress the powerful energies of the temples with their self involved intentions. They do not appreciate her significance, but through it all she stands with dignity. She does not dwell on the woes of her dismay, but dwells only in the greatness of her land and people. The roots of the trees, the currents of the water, and the graceful winds follow her. She continues to flow with the growth of her land. She cannot be beat. Her people are aware of her immortal powers and respect the values and ideals she offers. She teaches her children to remain wise, honest, and peaceful. Through the obstacles of life, she reminds them to keep peace within. She herself witnessed the magnificence of the Golden Age in Cambodia and lived through the Dark Ages of the Khmer Rouge as well. She is left unchanged because she found her own inner strength in the end.

Angkor is similar to her people. She deceives others with her tranquil facade to make others believe she has not suffered. Her people do as well. Cambodians do not want to expose their true feelings explicitly in fear of the unknown. They do not want to show their suffering because it will make their pain real. They hide from their fears and as a consequence they lose the chance to feel real love and happiness. Any act of expression will release the pain, the happiness,



and the anger together. So they choose to smile as an automatic reaction to endeavors in life, but overall it is an image they continue to portray to avoid reality of the past and present. The Khmer Rouge era changed the way people think and feel. It made them feel powerless and hopeless, but their persistence of today is supported by Cambodia's strong cultural values. The Khmer people are harmonious and peaceful like the Angkor and carry great strength in their core. The difference between them is that Angkor has reached a stage of serenity waiting for her people to join with her. She will always be a strong foundation for her people as she continues living. Individually the Cambodians need to continue



to fight to reach their own victories in themselves with the spiritual support of her country.

I know they will reach their dreams. Their genuine and sincere hearts will help path the way toward their deepest desires. Cambodian's kindness should not be overlooked because it is a rare gift. Angkor's people have suffered but still choose to be kind to others. Their ideals and beliefs are now instilled within me as I grew more in love with their culture. They made me laugh, cry and open my eyes. They put me through a ride of emotions to understand myself. I use to wonder why I felt so at home in Cambodia or why I felt a strong connection to Angkor Wat

and her people, until now. Her blood runs within me, drips around my bones, and beats within my heart. The answer was then very simple; it was because I am Cambodian.

Angkor Wat, as her child, has taught me through mystical ways. Her quiet confidence breaks through the walls of reality into the realm of imagination. She teaches me not to be broken by reality, but not to be ignorant of it either. She teaches me to live with imagination, but to not get completely lost in it. She teaches me to live with balance and equality. She teaches me to always dream on this world we live in.





JENNIFER KA, standing in front of Pol Pot's grave in Anlong Veng district, Oddar Meanchey province (near the border of Thailand). Nearby, the Documentation Center of Cambodia distributed several hundred copies of the textbook, *A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)*, in a ceremony attended by Im Chaem, a former senior Khmer Rouge cadre. June 21, 2010. Photo by: Youk Chhang.

## about the author

Jennifer Ka is a Cambodian-American undergraduate at the University of California, San Diego majoring in Psychology. She has been involved in the Cambodian community for several years and is part of the Cambodian Student Association at her university. For the club's annual show she wrote, directed, acted, and choreographed the play, "Unspoken Words." The play is about a mother and a daughter who are unable to connect because the mother hides the pain of her past of the Khmer Rouge Genocide from her daughter. This is a past that the mother herself has not faced. Through the play, we witness one of the main reasons why there is a gap between the new generation and old generation of Cambodians.