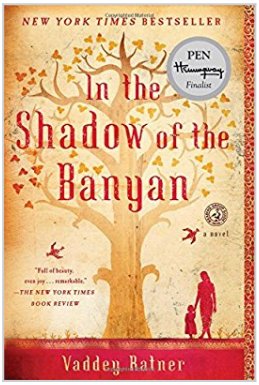

In the Shadow of the Banyan: A Novel

By Vaddey Ratner

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A beautiful celebration of the power of hope, this *New York Times* bestselling novel tells the story of a girl who comes of age during the Cambodian genocide.

You are about to read an extraordinary story, a PEN Hemingway Award finalist "rich with history, mythology, folklore, language and emotion." It will take you to the very depths of despair and show you unspeakable horrors. It will reveal a gorgeously rich culture struggling to survive through a furtive bow, a hidden ankle bracelet, fragments of remembered poetry. It will ensure that the world never forgets the atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge regime in the Cambodian killing fields between 1975 and 1979, when an estimated two million people lost their lives. It will give you hope, and it will confirm the power of storytelling to lift us up and help us not only survive but transcend suffering, cruelty, and loss.

For seven-year-old Raami, the shattering end of childhood begins with the footsteps of her father returning home in the early dawn hours, bringing details of the civil war that has overwhelmed the streets of Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital. Soon the family's world of carefully guarded royal privilege is swept up in the chaos of revolution and forced exodus. Over the next four years, as the Khmer Rouge attempts to strip the population of every shred of individual identity, Raami clings to the only remaining vestige of her childhood—the mythical legends and poems told to her by her father. In a climate of systematic violence where memory is sickness and justification for execution, Raami fights for her improbable survival. Displaying the author's extraordinary gift for language, *In the Shadow of the Banyan* is a brilliantly wrought tale of human resilience.

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In the Shadow of the Banyan: A Novel By Vaddey Ratner Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #17998 in Books
- Brand: Simon Schuster
- Published on: 2013-06-04
- Released on: 2013-06-04
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.37" h x 1.00" w x 5.50" l, .67 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 352 pages

Editorial Review

Review
"Lyrical . . . It's Raami's mother who will stay in your heart . . . Somehow she retains the will to survive and the strength to help others, fiercely telling her daughter, 'Remember who you are.'"

"How is it that so much of this bleak novel is full of beauty, even joy? . . . What is remarkable, and honorable, here is the absence of anger, and the capacity--seemingly infinite--for empathy."

"The horrors committed by Cambodia's Khmer Rouge, as experienced by one extremely resilient girl. A brutal novel, lyrically told."

"Unputdownable."

"Lyrical . . . a love story to her homeland and an unflinching account of innocents caught in the crossfire of fanaticism."

"A tale of perseverance, hope and the drive toward life."

"Humanity . . . shines through in her storytelling."

"For all the atrocities witnessed and hardships experienced, Ratner's story is filled to an even larger extent with opportunism and beauty. Ratner's gift is her exquisite descriptions of the careful details of daily life . . . Ratner describes her desire to memorialize the loved ones she lost with an enduring work of art. She has done just that; hers is a beautiful tale with considerable poetry and restraint. "In the Shadow of the Banyan "is an important novel, written by a survivor with unexpected grace and eloquence."

"The powerful story of how even the most brutal regime lacked the power of a father's love for his daughter."

"Gorgeous . . . Ratner bears witness to the unyielding human spirit."

About the Author
Vaddey Ratner is a survivor of the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia. Her critically acclaimed bestselling debut novel, *In the Shadow of the Banyan*, has been translated into seventeen languages. She is a summa cum laude graduate of Cornell University, where she specialized in Southeast Asian history and literature.

In the Shadow of the Banyan

one

War entered my childhood world not with the blasts of rockets and bombs but with my father’s footsteps as he walked through the hallway, passing my bedroom toward his. I heard the door open and shut with a soft click. I slid off my bed, careful not to wake Radana in her crib, and snuck out of my room. I pressed my ear to the door and listened.

“Are you all right?” Mama sounded concerned.

Each day before dawn, Papa would go out for a solitary stroll, and returning an hour or so later, he would bring back with him the sights and sounds of the city, from which would emerge the poems he read aloud to me. This morning, though, it seemed he came back as soon as he’d stepped out, for dawn had just arrived and the feel of night had yet to dissipate. Silence trailed his every step like the remnant of a dream long after waking. I imagined him lying next to Mama now, his eyes closed as he listened to her voice, the comfort it gave him amidst the clamor of his own thoughts.

“What happened?”

“Nothing, darling,” Papa said.

“What is it?” she persisted.

A deep, long sigh, then finally he said, “The streets are filled with people, Aana. Homeless, hungry, desperate . . .” He paused, the bed creaked, and I imagined him turning to face her, their cheeks on the same long pillow, as I’d often seen. “The miseries—”

“No matter what awfulness is out there,” Mama cut in gently, “I know you will take care of us.”

A breathless silence. I imagined her lips pressed against his. I blushed.

“There!” she exclaimed, the insouciant ring and chime of her voice returning. Then came the sound of slatted shutters being opened, like wooden birds released, suddenly taking flight. “The sun is brilliant!” she enthused, and with these easy words chased away the morning’s gravity, threw “Nothing” back out the gates like a stray cat that had clawed its way onto Papa’s shoulder.

A shaft of light fell on the front of the house and spilled into the open hallway from the balcony. I imagined it a celestial carpet thrown from the heavens by a careless tevoda—an angel. I ran toward it, my steps unencumbered by the metal brace and shoes I normally wore to correct the limp in my right leg.

Outside, the sun rose through the luxuriant green foliage of the courtyard. It yawned and stretched, like an infant deity poking its long multiple arms through the leaves and branches. It was April, the tail end of the dry season, and it was only a matter of time before the monsoon arrived, bringing with it rains and relief from the heat and humidity. Meanwhile the whole house was hot and stuffy, like the inside of a balloon. I was slick with sweat. Still, New Year was coming, and after all the waiting and wondering, we’d finally have a celebration!

“Up, up, up!” came a cry from the cooking pavilion. It was Om Bao, her voice as voluminous as her ample figure, which resembled an overstuffed burlap rice sack.

“Pick up your lazy heads!” she clucked urgently. “Hurry, hurry, hurry!”

I ran around the balcony to the side of the house and saw her roll back and forth between the women’s lower house and the cooking pavilion, her sandals smacking the dirt with impatience. “Wash your faces, brush your teeth!” she ordered, clapping as she chased a row of sleepy servant girls to the clay vats lining the wall outside the cooking pavilion. “Oey, oey, oey, the sun has risen and so should your behinds!” She whacked one of the girls on the bottom. “You’ll miss the Tiger’s last roar and the Rabbit’s first hop!”

The Tiger and the Rabbit were lunar years, one ending and the other beginning. Khmer New Year is always celebrated in April, and this year—1975—it was to fall on the seventeenth, just a few days away. In our house, preparations would customarily begin long in advance for all the Buddhist ceremonies and garden parties thrown during the celebration. This year, because of the fighting, Papa didn't want us to celebrate. New Year was a time of cleansing, he reminded us, a time of renewal. And as long as there was fighting in the countryside, driving refugees into our city streets, it would be wrong for us to be celebrating anything. Fortunately, Mama disagreed. If there was a time to celebrate, she argued, it was now. A New Year's party would chase away all that was bad and usher in all that was good.

I turned and caught a glimpse of Mama standing in the corner of the balcony just outside her bedroom, lifting her hair to cool the nape of her neck. Slowly she let the strands fall in gossamer layers down the length of her back. A butterfly preening herself. A line from one of Papa's poems. I blinked. She vanished.

I rushed to the broom closet at the back of the house, where I'd hidden my brace and shoes the day before, pretending I'd lost track of them so I wouldn't have to suffer them in this heat. Mama must've suspected, for she said, Tomorrow then. First thing in the morning you must put them on. I'm sure you'll find them by then. I pulled them out of the closet, strapped on the brace as quickly as possible, and slipped on the shoes, the right one slightly higher than the left to make my legs equal in length.

"Raami, you crazy child!" a voice called out to me as I clomped past the half-open balcony door of my bedroom. It was Milk Mother, my nanny. "Come back inside this minute!"

I froze, expecting her to come out and yank me back into the room, but she didn't. I resumed my journey, circling the balcony that wrapped itself around the house. Where is she? Where's Mama? I ran past my parents' room. The slatted balcony doors were wide open, and I saw Papa now sitting in his rattan chair by one of the windows, notebook and pen in hand, eyes lowered in concentration, impervious to his surroundings. A god waxing lyrical out of the silence . . . Another line from another of his poems, which I always thought described him perfectly. When Papa wrote, not even an earthquake could disturb him. At present, he certainly took no notice of me.

There was no sign of Mama. I looked up and down the stairway, over the balcony railings, through the open doorway of the citrus garden. She was nowhere to be seen. It was as I'd suspected all along—Mama was a ghost! A spirit that floated in and out of the house. A firefly that glowed and glimmered, here one second, gone the next. And now she'd vanished into thin air! Zrup! Just like that.

"Do you hear me, Raami?"

Sometimes I wished Milk Mother would just disappear. But, unlike Mama, she was always around, constantly watching over me, like one of those geckos that scaled the walls, chiming, Tikkaer, tikkaer! I felt her, heard her from every corner of the house. "I said come back!" she bellowed, rattling the morning peace.

I made a sharp right, ran down the long hallway through the middle of the house, and finally ended up back at the spot on the balcony in the front where I had started. Still no Mama. Hide-and-seek, I thought, huffing and puffing in the heat. Hide-and-seek with a spirit was no easy game.

Pchkhooo! An explosion sounded in the distance. My heart thumped a bit faster.

"Where are you, you crazy child?" again came Milk Mother's voice.

I pretended not to hear her, resting my chin on the carved railing of the balcony. A tiny pale pink butterfly, with wings as delicate as bougainvillea petals, flew up from the gardens below and landed on the railing, near my face. I stilled myself. It heaved as if exhausted from its long flight, its wings opening and closing, like a pair of fans waving away the morning heat. Mama? In one of her guises? No, it was what it appeared to be—a baby butterfly. So delicate it seemed to have just emerged from a chrysalis. Maybe it was looking for its mother, I thought, just as I was for mine. “Don’t worry,” I whispered. “She’s here somewhere.” I moved my hand to pet it, to reassure it, but it flew away at my touch.

In the courtyard something stirred. I peered down and saw Old Boy come out to water the gardens. He walked like a shadow; his steps made no sound. He picked up the hose and filled the lotus pond until the water flowed over the rim. He sprayed the gardenias and orchids. He sprinkled the jasmines. He trimmed the torch gingers and gathered their red flame-like blossoms into a bouquet, which he tied with a piece of vine and then set aside, as he continued working. Butterflies of all colors hovered around him, as if he were a tree stalk and his straw hat a giant yellow blossom. Om Bao suddenly appeared among them, coquettish and coy, acting not at all like our middle-aged cook but a young girl in the full bloom of youth. Old Boy broke a stem of red frangipani blossoms, brushed it against her cheek, and handed it to her.

“Answer me!” Milk Mother thundered.

Om Bao scurried away. Old Boy looked up, saw me, and blushed. But finding his bearings right away, he took off his hat and, bowing at the waist, offered me a sampeah, palms together like a lotus in front of his face, a traditional Cambodian greeting. He bowed because he was the servant and I his master, even though he was ancient and I was, as Milk Mother put it, “just a spit past seven.” I returned Old Boy’s sampeah, and, unable to help myself, bowed also. He flashed me his gappy grin, perhaps sensing his secret would be safe.

Someone was coming. Old Boy turned in the direction of the footsteps.

Mama!

She made her way toward him, her steps serene, unhurried. A rainbow gliding through a field of flowers . . . Again a line fluttered through my mind. Though I was no poet, I was the daughter of one and often saw the world through my father’s words.

“Good morning, my lady,” Old Boy said, gaze lowered, hat held against his chest.

She returned his greeting and, looking at the lotuses, said, “It is so hot and now they’ve closed again.” She sighed. Lotuses were her favorite blossoms, and even though they were flowers for the gods, Mama always asked for an offering to herself every morning. “I was hoping to have at least one open bloom.”

“And you shall, my lady,” Old Boy reassured. “I cut some before dawn and placed them in iced water so that the petals stay open. I shall bring up the vase to your room when His Highness finishes composing.”

“I can always count on you.” She beamed at him. “Also, would you make a bouquet of the closed buds for me to take to the temple?”

“As you wish, my lady.”

“Thank you.”

Again, Old Boy bowed, keeping his gaze lowered until she'd floated past him. She ascended the stairs, her right hand pressed on the flap of her silk sampot to keep her steps small and modest. At the top, she stopped and smiled at me. "Oh good, you found your brace and shoes!"

"I've practiced walking slowly in them!"

She laughed. "Have you?"

"One day I want to walk like you!"

Mama's face went still. She glided over to me and, bending down to my level, said, "I don't care how you walk, darling."

"You don't?"

It wasn't the pinch of the brace or the squeeze of the shoes, or even what I saw when I looked in the mirror that pained me the most. It was the sadness in Mama's eyes when I mentioned my leg. For this reason, I rarely brought it up.

"No, I don't . . . I'm grateful you can walk at all."

She smiled, her radiance returning.

I stood still and held my breath, thinking if I so much as breathed, she'd disappear. She bent down again and kissed the top of my head, her hair spilling over me like monsoon rain. I took my chance and breathed in her fragrance—this mystery she wore like perfume. "It's good to see that someone is enjoying this stifling air," she said, laughing, as if my oddness was as much an enigma to her as her loveliness was to me. I blinked. She glided away, her entire being porous as sunlight.

Poetry is like that, Papa said. It can come to you in an intake of breath, vanish again in the blink of an eye, and first all you'll have is

A line weaving through your mind

Like the tail of a child's kite

Unfettered by reason or rhyme.

Then, he said, comes the rest—the kite, the story itself. A complete entity.

"Oey, oey, oey, there's not a minute to waste!" Om Bao rattled on from below. "The floor must be mopped and waxed, the carpets dusted and sunned, the china arranged, the silver polished, the silk smoothed and perfumed. Oey, oey, oey, so much to do, so much to do!"

The branches of the banyan tree in the middle of the courtyard stirred and the leaves danced. Some of the branches were so long they reached all the way to the balcony, the shadows of their leaves covering my body like patches of silk. I twirled, arms stretched out, mumbling an incantation to myself, calling forth the tevodas, "Skinny One, Plump One . . ."

“And just what are you doing?”

I swung around. There was Milk Mother in the doorway with Radana on her hip. Radana squirmed down to the floor and immediately started stomping on the shadows with her chubby feet, the tiny, diamond-studded bells on her anklets jingling chaotically. It was normal for Cambodian children to be covered with expensive jewelry, and my much-adored toddling sister was bedecked in the most extravagant way, with a platinum necklace and a tiny pair of hoop earrings to match her anklets. This was not a child, I thought. She was a night bazaar!

As she toddled around, I pretended she had polio and a limp like me. I knew I shouldn’t wish it on her, but sometimes I couldn’t help it. Despite her bumbling and babyness, you could already tell Radana would grow up to look just like Mama.

“Eeei!” she squealed, catching a glimpse of Mama floating through one of the doorways and, before Milk Mother could stop her, she ran jingling through the hallway, calling out, “Mhum mhum mhum . . .”

Milk Mother turned back to me and asked again, with obvious annoyance, “Just what are you doing?”

“Summoning the tevodas,” I told her, grinning from ear to ear.

“Summoning them?”

“Yes, I’d like to meet them this year.”

No one ever met the tevodas, of course. They were spirits and, as with all things spectral, they lived in our imaginations. Milk Mother’s tevodas—at least as she’d described them to me—sounded suspiciously familiar. With names like Skinny One, Plump One, and Dark One, I’d say she was describing herself, Om Bao, and Old Boy. By contrast, my tevodas looked nothing like me, but were as lovely as court dancers, wearing their finest silk and diadems with spires reaching all the way to the sky.

Milk Mother wasn’t listening to me, her ear tuned to a different kind of noise. Pchkooo! Again, the tremor of an explosion. She strained to hear, her head tilted in the direction of the din.

The explosions worsened. Pchkooo pchkooo pchkooo! A series of them now, just as I’d heard in the night.

Turning to me, Milk Mother said, “Darling, I don’t think you should put too much hope on the tevodas coming this year.”

“Why not?”

She took a deep breath, seemed about to explain, but then said, “Did you wash yet?”

“No—but I was about to!”

She shot me a disapproving look and, nodding in the direction of the bath pavilion, said impatiently, “Go on then.”

“But—”

“No arguing. Grandmother Queen will join the family for breakfast, and you, my bug, cannot be late.”

“Oh no, Grandmother Queen! Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“I was trying to, but you kept running away.”

“But I didn’t know! You should’ve told me!”

“Well, that’s why I called and called—to tell you.” She heaved, exasperated. “Enough lingering. Go. Get ready. Try to look and behave like the princess that you are.”

I took a step, then turned back. “Milk Mother?”

“What?”

“Do you believe in tevodas?”

She didn’t answer right away, just stood there and looked at me. Then finally she said, “What can you believe in if not the tevodas?”

I went down the front steps. That was all I needed to hear. The rest was easy to figure out. They were things I could see and touch—lotuses opening their petals, spiders weaving tiny silvery hammocks on wispy branches, slugs slipping through watered green grass . . .

“Raami.” Looking up, I saw Milk Mother leaning over the balcony railing. “Why are you still dawdling?”

I placed one foot in front of the other, swaying my hips slightly. “I’m practicing my walk.”

“For what—an earthworm contest?”

“To be a lady—like Mama!”

I broke a sprig of jasmine blossoms from a nearby bush and tucked it behind my ear, imagining myself as pretty as Mama. Radana appeared out of nowhere and stood in front of me. She cooed, transfixed for a second or two, and then, as if deciding I didn’t look anything like Mama, bounced off. Where are you? I heard Mama sing. I’m going to get you . . . Radana shrieked. They were playing hide-and-seek. I had polio when I was one and couldn’t walk until I was three. I was certain Mama and I didn’t play hide-and-seek when I was a baby.

From above, Milk Mother let out an exasperated sigh: “For heaven’s sake, enough lingering!”

• • •

Later that morning, in an array of brightly colored silks that almost outshone the surrounding birds and butterflies, we gathered in the dining pavilion, an open teak house with a hardwood floor and pagoda-like roof, which stood in the middle of the courtyard among the fruit and flower trees. Again, Mama had transformed herself, this time from a butterfly to a garden. Her entire being budded with blossoms. She had changed into a white lace blouse and a sapphire phamuong skirt, dotted with tiny white flowers. Her tresses, no longer loose, were now pulled back in a chignon tied with a ring of jasmine. A champak blossom, slender

as a child's pinkie, dangled on a single silk thread down the nape of her neck; when she moved to adjust herself or to reach for this or that, the blossom slid and rolled, smooth as ivory on her skin.

Beside her, in my metal brace and clunky shoes and a ruffled blue dress, I felt ungainly and stilted, like a sewing dummy on a steel post, hastily swathed in fabric. As if this wasn't humiliating enough already, my stomach wouldn't stop rumbling. How much longer would we have to wait?

At last, Grandmother Queen—"Sdechya," as we called her in Khmer—appeared on the balcony, leaning heavily on Papa's arm. She slowly descended the stairs, and we all rushed to greet her, queuing on bended knees in order of importance, heads bowed, palms joined in front of our chests, fingertips grazing our chins. She paused near the bottom and, one by one, we each scooted forward and touched our forehead to her feet. Then we trailed her to the dining pavilion and claimed our appropriate seats.

Before us was an array of food—lotus seed porridge sweetened with palm sugar, sticky rice with roasted sesame and shredded coconut, beef noodle soup topped with coriander leaves and anise stars, mushroom omelets, and slices of baguette—a dish to suit everyone's morning taste. At the center of the table sat a silver platter of mangoes and papayas, which Old Boy had picked from the trees behind our house, and rambutans and mangosteens, which Om Bao had brought from her early morning trip to the market. Breakfast was always an extravagant affair when Grandmother Queen decided to join us. She was a high princess, as everyone constantly reminded me so that I would remember how to behave around my own grandmother.

I waited for Grandmother Queen to take her first bite before I lifted the cover off my soup bowl; when I did, steam rose like a hundred fingers tickling my nose. Tentatively, I brought a spoonful of hot broth to my lips.

"Be careful," Mama said from across the table as she unfolded her napkin and laid it across her lap. "You don't want to burn your tongue." She smiled.

I stared at her, mesmerized. Maybe I had seen a New Year's tevoda after all.

"I thought I'd visit the temple in Toul Tumpong after breakfast," she said. "My sister will send her chauffeur. I'll go with her, so our car is free if you'd like to venture out." She was speaking to Papa.

But he was reading the newspaper, his head slightly cocked to one side. In his usual muted attire of brown wraparound pants and beige achar shirt, Papa was as solemn as Mama was radiant. He reached for the cup in front of him and began to sip the hot coffee mixed with condensed milk. Already he'd forgotten the rest of his breakfast as he immersed himself in the news. He hadn't heard Mama at all.

She sighed, letting it go, determined to be in a good mood.

At one end of the table, Tata offered, "It'll be nice for you to get out a bit." Tata was Papa's elder sister—half sister actually, from Grandmother Queen's first marriage to a Norodom prince. "Tata" was not her real name, but apparently when I was a baby, I came to identify her as my "tata." The name stuck and now everyone called her this, even Grandmother Queen, who, at the moment, reigned at the other end of the table, blissfully ensconced in old age and dementia. I'd come to believe that because she was a high princess—Preah Ang Mechas Ksatrey—Grandmother Queen was more difficult to grasp than the tevodas. As a "queen" who ruled this family, she was certainly unreachable most of the time.

"I shouldn't be long," Mama said. "Just a prayer and I'll be back. It doesn't seem right to start the New Year without offering a prayer first."

Tata nodded. “The party is a very good idea, Aana.” She looked around, seeming pleased with the start of the day, noting the preparations being made for the celebration to take place on New Year’s Day.

In the cooking pavilion, Om Bao had started steaming the first batch of the traditional New Year’s num ansom, sticky rice cakes wrapped in banana leaves. These we would give out to friends and neighbors during the coming days as each batch was made. On the balcony of the master house, the servant girls worked on their hands and knees waxing the floor and railings. They dripped beeswax from burning candles and rubbed it into the teakwood. Below them Old Boy was sweeping the ground. He had dusted and wiped the spirit house so that now it stood sparkling on its golden pedestal under the banyan tree like a miniature Buddhist temple. Several long strands of jasmine adorned its tiny pillars and the spire on its roof, and in front of its entrance, a clay pot filled with raw rice grains held three sticks of incense, an offering to the three pillars of protection—the ancestors, the tevodas, and the guardian spirits. They were all there, watching over us, keeping us out of harm’s way. We had nothing to fear, Milk Mother always said. As long as we remained within these walls, the war could not touch us.

“I couldn’t sleep a wink.” Again Tata spoke, spooning brown sugar from a small bowl and sprinkling it on her sticky rice. “The heat was awful last night and the shelling was the worst it’s ever been.”

Mama put down her fork gently, trying not to show her exasperation. I knew, though, what she was thinking—Couldn’t we talk about something else? But being the sister-in-law, and a commoner among royals, she couldn’t speak out of turn, tell Tata what to say or not to say, choose the topic of a conversation. No, that would be graceless. Our family, Raami, is like a bouquet, each stem and blossom perfectly arranged, she’d tell me, as if to convey that how we carried ourselves was not simply a game or ritual but a form of art.

Tata turned to Grandmother Queen sitting at the other end of the table. “Don’t you think so, Mechas Mae?” she asked, speaking the royal language.

Grandmother Queen, half deaf and half daydreaming, said, “Eh?”

“The shelling!” Tata repeated, almost shouting. “Didn’t you think it was awful?”

“What shelling?”

I suppressed a giggle. Talking with Grandmother Queen was like talking through a tunnel. No matter what you said, all you could hear were your own words echoing back.

Papa looked up from his newspaper and was about to say something when Om Bao stepped into the dining pavilion, bearing a silver tray with glasses of the chilled basil-seed drink she made for us every morning. She placed a glass before each of us. Resting the tip of my nose on the glass, I inhaled the sweet ambrosia. Om Bao called her drink—a mixture of soaked basil seeds and cane sugar in ice-cold water, scented with jasmine flowers—“little girls hunting for eggs.” When Old Boy picked the blossoms earlier they had been tightly closed, but now they opened up like the skirts of little girls with their heads dipped in water—hunting for eggs! It hadn’t occurred to me before, but the basil seeds did look like transparent fish eggs. I beamed into the glass, delighted by my discovery.

“Sit up straight,” Mama ordered, no longer offering me a smile.

I sat up straight, pulling my nose back. Papa glanced at me, mouthing his sympathy. He took a small sip from his glass and, looking up in surprise, exclaimed, “Om Bao! Have you lost your sweet touch?”

“I’m terribly sorry, Your Highness . . .” She looked nervously from Papa to Mama. “I’ve been trying to cut down on the cane sugar. We don’t have much left, and it is so hard to find at the market these days.” She shook her head in distress. “Your servant humbly regrets it’s not so sweet, Your Highness.” When nervous, Om Bao tended to be overly formal and loquacious. “Your servant humbly regrets” sounded even more stilted, when across the table from His Highness, I was lapping up my soup like a puppy. “Would Your Highness—”

“No, this is just right.” Papa drank it up. “Delicious!”

Om Bao smiled, her cheeks expanding like the rice cakes steaming away in the kitchen. She bowed, and bowed again, her bulbous behind bobbing, as she walked backward until she reached a respectful distance before turning around. At the steps of the cooking pavilion, Old Boy relieved her of the emptied tray, quick as always to help her with any task. At the moment he seemed unusually agitated. Perhaps he was worried that I’d revealed his and Om Bao’s morning canoodling to Grandmother Queen, who forbade such displays of affection. Om Bao patted his arm reassuringly. No, no, don’t worry, she seemed to say. He turned toward me, obviously relieved. I winked. And for the second time this morning, he offered me his gappy grin.

Papa had resumed reading. He flipped the newspaper back and forth, making soft snapping noises with the pages. I tilted my head to read the headline on the front page: “Khmer Krahom Encircle City.”

Khmer Krahom? Red Khmers? Who had ever heard of that? We were all Cambodians—or “Khmers,” as we called ourselves. I imagined people, with their bodies painted bright red, invading the city, scurrying about the streets like throngs of stinging red ants. I laughed out loud, almost choking on my basil-seed drink.

Mama gave me another warning look, her annoyance now easily piqued. It seemed the morning hadn’t gone in the direction she wanted. All anyone wanted to talk about was the war. Even Om Bao had alluded to it when she mentioned how hard it was to find cane sugar at the market.

I hid my face behind the glass, hiding my thoughts behind the little floating jasmine skirts. Red Khmers, Red Khmers, the words sang in my head. I wondered what color Khmer I was. I glanced at Papa and decided whatever he was, I was too.

“Papa, are you a Red Khmer?” It came out of me like an unexpected burp.

Tata set her glass down with a bang. The whole courtyard fell silent. Even the air seemed to have stopped moving. Mama glared at me, and when a tevoda glared at you like that, you’d better hide or risk burning.

I wished I could dip my head in the basil-seed drink and look for fish eggs.

• • •

The afternoon arrived, and it was too hot to do anything. All preparations for New Year came to a halt. The servant girls had stopped cleaning and were now combing and braiding one another’s hair on the steps of the cooking pavilion. Seated on the long, expansive teak settee under the banyan tree, Grandmother Queen leaned against the giant trunk, her eyes partly closed as she waved a round palm fan in front of her face. At her feet, Milk Mother sat swinging Radana in a hammock lowered from the branches of the tree. She pushed the hammock with one hand and scratched my back with the other as I rested my head on her lap. Alone in the dining pavilion, Papa sat on the floor writing in the leather pocket notebook he always carried with him, his back against one of the carved pillars. Beside him the radio was playing the classical pinpeat music. Milk

Mother began to doze off as she listened to the chiming melodies. But I wasn't sleepy, and neither was Radana. She kept sticking her face out of the hammock, wanting me to play with her. "Fly!" she squealed, reaching out for my hand. "I fly!" When I tried to grab her wrist, she pulled it back, giggling and clapping. Milk Mother opened her eyes, slapped my hand away, and gave Radana her pacifier. Radana lay back down in the hammock, sucking the pacifier like a piece of candy. Grandmother Queen clucked her tongue in encouragement, perhaps wishing she too had something to suck on.

Soon all three were asleep. Grandmother Queen's fan stopped waving, Milk Mother's hand rested on my back, and Radana's right leg hung out of the hammock, fat and still, like a bamboo shoot, the bells on her anklet soundless.

Mama appeared in the courtyard, having returned from her trip to the temple, which took longer than she'd planned. Quietly, so as not to wake us, she climbed the few short steps to the dining pavilion and sat down next to Papa, resting her arm on his thigh. Papa put down his notebook and turned to her. "She didn't mean it, you know. It was an innocent question."

He was talking about me. I lowered my eyelids, just enough to make them believe I was asleep.

Papa continued, "Les Khmers Rouges, Communists, Marxists . . . Whatever we adults call them, they're just words, funny sounds to a child, that's all. She doesn't know who they are or what these words mean."

I tried repeating the names in my head—Les Khmers Rouges . . . Communists . . . They sounded so fancy and elliptical, like the names of mythical characters in the tales of the Reamker I never tired of reading, the devarajas, who were descendants of the gods, or the demon rakshasas, who fought them and fed on fat children.

"Once you shared their aspirations," Mama said, head resting on Papa's shoulder. "Once you believed in them."

I wondered what kind of race they were.

"No, not them. Not the men, but the ideals. Decency, justice, integrity . . . I believed in these and always will. Not only for myself but for our children. All this"—he looked around the courtyard—"will come and go, Aana. Privileges, wealth, our titles and names are transient. But these ideals are timeless, the core of our humanity. I want our girls to grow up in a world that allows them, if nothing else, these. A world without such ideals is madness."

"What about this madness?"

"I hoped so much it wouldn't come to this." He sighed and went on. "Others abandoned us long ago at the first sign of trouble. And now so have the Americans. Alas, democracy is defeated. And our friends will not stay for its execution. They left while it was still possible, and who could blame them?"

"What about us?" Mama asked. "What will happen to our family?"

Papa was silent. Then, after what seemed like a long time, he said, "It's extremely difficult at this juncture, but I can still arrange to send you and the family to France."

"Me and the family? What about you?"

“I will stay. As bad as it looks, there’s still hope.”

“I will not leave without you.”

He looked at her, then, leaning over, kissed the nape of her neck, his lips lingering for a moment, drinking her skin. One by one he began to remove the flowers from her hair, loosening it and letting it spread across her shoulders. I held my breath, trying to make myself invisible. Without saying more, they stood up, walked toward the front stairway, climbed the newly polished steps, and disappeared into the house.

I looked around the teak settee. Everyone was still asleep. I heard droning in the distance. The drone grew louder, until it became deafening. My heart pounded, and my ears throbbed. I looked up, squinting past the red tile roof of the master house, past the top of the banyan tree, past a row of tall skinny palms lining the front gate. Then I saw it! Way up in the sky, like a large black dragonfly, its blade slicing the air, tuktuktuktuktuk . . .

The helicopter started to descend, drowning out all other sounds. I stood up on the teak settee to better see it. All of a sudden it swooped back up and went the other way. I stretched my neck, trying to see past the gate. But it was gone. Zrup! Vanished completely, as if it had only been a thought, an imagined dot in the sky.

Then—

PCHKOOO!!! PCHKOOO!!! PCHKOOO!!!

The ground shook under me.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Edna Brooks:

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