

5 The first time I cooked rice by myself, at five years old, I burned it to a tarry blackness. My mother saw how much I loved to “help” her in the kitchen, so she bought me a clay cookpot and a small sack of rice to play with. I ran to visit my friend Yet, who lived in the village behind my parents’ house in Battambang, Cambodia. We gathered branches and stones and built a fire in front of her house, constructed of bamboo and grass mixed with elephant dung.

10 As the rice simmered, Yet and I sat on the rungs of the steep entry stairs and stoked the fire while we clapped our hands and sang. I left the rice on the fire for a long time, to be sure it was well done, then ran home and presented it to my mother — “Mae,” as I called her in Khmer.

15 “This is tasty!” Mae exclaimed, smiling. “The best I’ve ever had!” The rice was inedible, but it hardly mattered: I had cooked something, and my mother had praised me. For the rest of the day, I floated above the ground.

It amazes me to recall a time when we had so much rice to spare, we could afford to let a little girl blacken it just for fun. Even now that I have plenty to eat, I cannot bear to waste a single bite of food.

20 The memory of hunger is a curse that never leaves you.

25 In 1975, the Khmer Rouge informed the Cambodian people that we had no history, but we knew it was a lie. Cambodia has a rich past, a mosaic of flavors from near and far: South Indian traders gave us Buddhism and spicy curries; China brought rice noodles and astrology; and French colonizers passed on a love of strong coffee, flan, and a light, crusty baguette. We lifted the best tastes from everywhere and added our own: sour pickled fruits and vegetables, the famous Kampot peppercorn, and the most distinctive flavor (and aroma) of all: prahok, Cambodia’s (in)famous, stinking fermented fish paste.

30 Even now, I can taste my own history, in shimmering sense-memories of my mother’s homemade fish sauce, the delicious soup noodles she rolled out in her hands, one by one, and my favorite of all—the pâté de foie she served to special guests.

One occupying force tried to erase it all.

5 Cambodians were a new generation, starting from “Year Zero” — that’s what Pol Pot told everyone as his soldiers emptied the cities of people and replaced Civilization with an Agrarian Paradise. He borrowed a garbage ideology and added his own genocidal flavor; his cadres freed us from the burdens of pâté de foie and hand-rolled soup noodles, and also education, medicine, cinema, books, money, cars, and Buddhism. In return, Cambodians won the right to dig canals and harvest rice, starve and be executed. By those and other methods, Angkar — Pol Pot’s “organization” —
10 liberated nearly two million people from life itself.

I fled to Vietnam as a little girl of nine before the liberation began.

15 The ideologues were busy there, too, setting everyone “free” and turning back the clocks. At political meetings, they cried into their megaphones about indulgences from the past that must be disavowed: Down with old French ballads; up with songs of blood and sacrifice. Down with pâté and pastries; up with watery rice mash, cut with cassava, sweet potato, and noodles. Everything mushed together in one pot. It tasted like a gray nothing.

20 By the time I was a young woman of 24, I thought my past had been erased, too. My family was gone. My country had drowned in its own blood. All I had left were images and aromas: the smell of a charcoal fire in my mother’s open-air kitchen, the sweet perfume of my father’s pipe. Only smoke remained.

25 I spent my first nine years in my mother’s airy kitchen. In my memory, the room was constructed of pure light. Two wide windows framed a bright tropical sky. Sunlight streamed into an open doorway, which led from a narrow staircase over my father’s auto repair shop. A smaller window served as a portal for chatting to neighbors and lowering leftovers to them by a string tied to the pot handles. My mother and oldest sister Chanthu always prepared extra for our neighbors, who lived in wood-stilt huts arranged around a clearing. We had plenty to eat; they did not.

30 Every day after school, I went straight to the kitchen to shadow Mae and Chanthu while they cooked, begging them to assign me a task or feed me something tasty. In the rare moments when the kitchen was empty of cooks, I hunted for some tasty morsel to devour on the sly: svay ktih, a crunchy green mango dessert ice-cold from the thermos, or dried lotus seeds from a tin box high on a shelf.

In my dreams I'm back in that kitchen, chopping onions and garlic, running to fetch wood and water, and falling asleep in a hammock as Mae rocks me to sleep. But of course, that world is gone. My mother left me nothing but her songs and recipes, and aromatic memories to last the rest of my life.

- 5 I always remembered the flavor of happiness. It tasted like Mae's pâté de foie, encased in cracked pepper and smelling of garlic and cloves. It tasted like anticipation: the lullaby chick chick chick of the night train from Battambang to Phnom Penh rocking me to sleep, as I dreamed of the pâte à choux cream pastry we would buy upon our arrival, just by the station.
- 10 The most perfect happiness of all tasted like the wind, when I stood on the front of my oldest brother's Vespa as he raced around Phnom Penh, where he lived and studied. He told me to open my mouth wide and drink in the warm night air. "AHHHHHHH!" I cried as my brother laughed, zooming north along the riverside. It was my heaven, a snapshot of fleeting perfection.
- 15 I will never forget the recipe for little-girl heaven. It is a simple one, but very difficult to replicate.

Recipe: Little-Girl Heaven

Ingredients:

one older brother

20 *a moto*

a carefree girl, small enough to stand on the front

a beautiful city

night wind

- Combine one spoiled little girl, a shiny Vespa, and a worshipped older brother.*
- 25 *Weave through the bustling streets of pre-war Phnom Penh at night. Grin like mad into the onrushing wind and drink the night air through your teeth. Savor this feeling, as all the ingredients will soon be extinguished, save the night wind.*

- Pol Pot gave us Year Zero, but when did he imagine that Year One would begin?
- 30 When the dead rose from the ashes? Was it his plan to erase the future along with the

past? His henchmen murdered everyone whose job it was to consider tomorrow's plans: doctors, engineers, teachers. The Khmer Rouge buried them all and ground the schools and hospitals to dust. They remade a civilization into a vast forced-labor camp and turned eight million Cambodians into six million starved inmates and
5 beggars. Not even the eternal pagodas survived.

When I finally made it home to Cambodia at 33, after more than two decades a refugee, I found a country with no idea of tomorrow. During the Khmer Rouge regime (or, as we Khmer say, "During Pol Pot time") and for years afterward, lives
10 slipped away so easily — by torture, hunger, and disease; by land-mine blast; by guerrilla fighting that never seemed to end — people could scarcely imagine growing old. Every bowl of rice might be the last.

The Cambodian people had learned a great deal about endings. They had forgotten everything else and learned only how to survive.

I understand this mindset. When you are hungry, the past and future darken, until
15 only the present hour is visible. Many nights I, too, dreamed only of rice. It focuses the mind but narrows hopes.

It is the inverse of *pâté de foie* softness.

I was not a child when my mother died; I was a young woman. But she was the only
20 thing keeping me from the streets, the only treasure left in my life. And what had she left me? No gold at all, only a trove of recipes — useless to a girl with no money to procure the ingredients.

I blamed her for keeping me too soft, for failing to prepare me for how hard our world had become. Maybe my kitchen education, and all those delicious memories, weren't
25 a strength at all. Maybe it was a weakness to begin life with every luxury, only to lose it all, one golden thing at a time.

What if I'd been born hungry instead? What if I'd never tasted *pâté de foie* and did not know to crave it? Would I have been better prepared to survive on frogs and river greens that year, after the wars, when my husband and I lived in the jungle, digging
30 for rubies? Would I have been more grateful for my daily rice-potato-cassava gruel in communist Saigon, or for the meager refugee-camp rations in Thailand?

Pol Pot and his cadres made their position on “softness” very clear: They called educated city dwellers “New People” and targeted them for extinction. Uncalloused hands were useless in Angkar, the Khmer Rouge’s bold experiment with reinvigorating civilization through extermination, where the only industries were rice farming and rice-farming enforcement. The New People had little experience with these enterprises.

This is what the Khmer Rouge had to say to the New People: “To keep you is no benefit. To destroy you is no loss.” They saw no value in bourgeois tastes or book-learning. Having returned Cambodia to the Iron Age, they valued the following traits:

a strong back,
familiarity with the use of farming implements, and
a body that could operate on minimal fuel.

Please don’t misunderstand me. The “Old People” — rural Cambodians who had always lived on rice and river fish — suffered the same losses. They mourned their dead and dying, just as we did. But I’ll admit, with some shame, that once the communists of Southeast Asia had equalized us all into uniform states of poverty, I came to envy the farmers’ toughness. They did not cry over lost pâté de foie. They had never expected so much richness from life and were less inclined to feel disappointed by how little it delivered.

I feel small and low when I speak of my refugee life, an inconvenience compared to what so many endured. In Saigon, the bullets rained, too. But our Vietnamese philosophers murdered more selectively. They weren’t quite as ambitious as the Angkar architects. They were too practical, or too lacking in resoluteness (as the Khmer Rouge might say), to exterminate the professional class of a country.

But the Vietnamese communists offered their own lessons in toughness: “Turn your pain into strength,” they told us. And we learned to do just that.

It would be tempting to affect a survivor’s bravado, as if I had achieved my continued existence through will and wit. But my chief survival advantage was being born to a family that could afford to fly to Saigon. We used our dwindling gold to flee to a place where wearing eyeglasses did not put our lives in immediate danger.

I did not deserve my survival. I was a “New Person,” as soft and spoiled as any obedient Asian girl from a middle-class family. But I suspect that I can trust you with

this information. After all, you're reading an essay in a literary magazine right now. Which means you are, most likely, as soft as I was then.

Softness is not immutable, but it does not disappear all at once; it slips away slowly. You might not even notice its disappearance at first.

5

Let me tell you a story about tofu and shoes, sisters and mothers:

When I was in high school in Saigon, my eldest sister Chanthu learned to make fresh tofu, and she and Mae started selling it in a suburban market. Our small tofu enterprise kept hunger further from our door. With the money Chanthu paid me to help with the tofu making, I could buy a new pair of stylish wood platform clogs every week. My mother shouted at me for spending money on a collection of useless clogs: "I should use those as firewood!" But the shoes were cheap, and they made me feel beautiful and rich, even as I ran to join the ration queues.

Chanthu's death was sudden — a tumor that ran its course in mere months. Losing her took the light from Mae's eyes and brought the abyss ever closer. Chanthu had been a second mother to me. And with my resourceful sister gone and my mother often unwell, we could not keep the tofu business going.

Mae urged me to learn a skill. A proper girl, she said, should know how to sew. "Don't ever be a helpless housewife like me," she said, her expression suggesting that she knew a secret.

One day I came home from sewing class for lunch to find Mae weak and pale, and I took her to a hospital. Within a month, she, too, was gone.

I was utterly alone, double-motherless, and terribly afraid.

We have a saying in Khmer: "If a father dies, the children eat rice with fish. If a mother dies, the children sleep on a leaf." When you lose your mother, you lose everything. She is the roof over your head and the rice in your bowl.

I cursed myself for depending so completely on my mother and sister. I had no idea what to do next — Mae was not there to tell me. But something she'd said once floated into my head: "I can fill a fifty-kilo rice sack with your shoes and use them for cooking for a very long time!"

She was right: The shiny wooden clogs filled the rice bag to the top. I didn't need beautiful shoes anymore. I could use them to fuel a cooking fire and save the money I would have spent on wood. I didn't have much to cook, anyway — just rice. For “flavor,” I poured on a bit of cheap fish sauce from the state store.

- 5 The shoe-fuel lasted for a month. Every night, I lit a few shoes and cooked a small pot of rice over the fire. I felt nothing, not even hunger. I wanted nothing except to disappear. I was consumed with thoughts of death. But suicide was a sin. So I pushed away those dark dreams and willed myself to forget.

10 Recipe: Rice Bowl of Forgetting

Ingredients:

1 cup rice

2 cups water

a 20-kilogram rice sack

- 15 *clay pot for cooking rice*

a large variety of cheap wooden clogs

fake fish sauce from the state store

Prepare:

- 20 *Fill a large rice sack with the dozens of pairs of the stupid clogs you bought to make yourself feel less poor. These will serve as excellent firewood, per your mother's suggestion. You'll have only rice for dinner from now on, to stretch what little savings are left. Season the rice with the very bad, cheap, fake fish sauce from the communist state store, the one that tastes like salt and MSG and unlike fish.*

- 25 *It doesn't matter what it tastes like. No more indulgences. Not for you, the delicious Thai fish sauce your mother always bought, one of her few splurges.*

Combine water and rice in the clay pot, bring to a boil over the fire, then simmer. Feel free to overcook the rice. Burn it black around the edges, like you did as a tiny girl.

Burn the shoes, burn the rice. Burn away the spoiled-girl softness. Burn the memory of your mother, who was worried about you, according to the nurse. Apparently, she was not worried enough: She didn't forbid you to waste your money on shoes. She didn't force you to learn a trade. She saw your softness and let you hold it close. It
5 *was the last remaining artifact of her Life Before. She could not bear to lose that, too.*

Burn everything. All the better, to forget the delicious things that came before. Now is the time of forgetting.

Your rage makes the embers flare up, red and wild. A soft young girl with nothing at all will not survive the Saigon streets for long. You are not ready. Your mother knew it, and now you know it, too.
10

That soft little Battambang girl vanished along with the low whistle of bygone trains, a peaceful Cambodia, and the rest of my family. The elders would say that the creature who replaced her is a very improper Cambodian woman. She does not
15 adhere to the "Rules for Women" (*Chbab Srey*), didactic verses that girls study in school.

My darling daughter, don't ever forget:

You must serve your husband

Don't make him unsatisfied...

20 *Remember that you are a woman*

Don't say anything to suggest you are equal to him.

A good Asian woman is supposed to shine dimly, like a moon, and reflect her husband's sunlight. Her skirts must not rustle when she walks. She cannot show anger. Even her laugh should be quiet and demure.

25 When I first met my future husband Chan, I tried to be his silvery moonlight woman. In our first years together — running from Saigon, then waiting for years in the refugee camps — I strove to follow the *Chbab Srey*. But I discovered that obedience could not be exchanged for rice and was therefore of little use. "You are not an Asian woman at all," Chan told me once, smiling his half-joke smile.

30 My parents must have wanted a moonlight life for me. Why else would they name me *Chantha*, "the light of the moon"?

My family left the world before I could disappoint them.

We have a saying in Cambodia: “Men are like gold; women are like cloth.” It means men are a treasure, and women can be thrown away very easily. But more than that, it means that when a man falls into the dirt, he can be polished clean, but a woman
5 will be soiled forever.

But I know this: I’m no longer pliant like fabric. I’ve become as hard as diamond. I had no choice.

In Cambodia, who has time for being silver-soft? There is too much work to do. We cannot wait for a man’s permission to survive. We have to shine like suns and sparkle
10 like diamonds. I’ve often wondered why, in a poor country where women work as hard as men to feed their children, feminine softness is so highly prized. As for me, I no longer consider it a valuable attribute.

Maybe that’s why I didn’t die any of the times I should have, or even the times I wanted to. Maybe Death couldn’t find me when Saigon fell, or in the jungle, when I
15 screamed my malarial rage into a wall of rain. Maybe Death was searching for a woman named Chantha. I scarcely resembled her anymore, so I’m assuming that the bastard didn’t recognize me.

Besides which, back then in Indochina, he had his hands full with other clients. He
20 kept himself very busy, escorting a quarter of the Cambodian population into mass graves, emptying the classrooms of young men in my Saigon high school, and picking off my family members, one by one.

Death was a master chef and had many recipes for transfiguring soft and spoiled girls into tough gemstones. Here is the one I know best: It is a surefire alchemy and cannot
25 fail (so long as ingredient one survives the violent mixing process without becoming denatured).

Recipe: How to change cotton into diamond

Ingredients:

a pampered little girl

30 *2 communist revolutions*

2 civil wars

1 genocide

Take a well-fed nine-year-old with a big family and a fancy French-Catholic-school education. Fold in 2 revolutions, 2 civil wars, and 1 wholesale extermination. Separate her from home, country, and a reliable source of food.

- 5 *Slowly subtract small luxuries, life savings, and family members until all are gone. Shave down childhood dreams until only subsistence remains.*

- 10 The first nine years of my life were beautiful, magical, a perfection. I hoard my delicious Battambang kitchen memories like a buried box of gold. Those images became my recipes for building a future.

But maybe the years of loss were also gifts. They taught me this: Once you have learned how to lose everything, there is nothing left to fear. A poor woman's heart grows stouter as her options narrow. She has no choice but to make bold moves, to take wild chances, to tempt fate.

- 15 The recipe for a Chantha is very complicated and requires many steps.

I sometimes wonder how different my life would have been if my mother had lived for ten more years. Would I have ended up in refugee camps, or mined for rubies in the forest?

Would I have created a women's weaving center in Stung Treng, Cambodia?

- 20 For so long, I was consumed by the idea that Mae had failed to toughen me for the world outside her kitchen. When I was 24 years old and newly alone (and dreaming of a sack of rice), I needed an Instant Noodles strength, a thief's ingenuity that would feed me right away. Instead, my mother gave me a Slow Noodles recipe, with ingredients that would need years to simmer and meld. Today, as I squat over the grill in my tiny Phnom Penh courtyard, the charcoal smoke calls forth Mae's lessons:
25 not only how to prepare a perfect, clear soup stock and handmade banh canh noodles, but also why I should always make a bit extra to share.

The past cannot be erased so easily. My own history carries forward, borne on the smoke from a long-gone mother's remembered charcoal fire.

A fortune teller in Saigon told me that in my darkest hours of life, cooking and sewing would carry me. That prediction proved true in unexpected ways: I have worked as a cook for a brothel and a suture-nurse in a refugee camp, a tofu-maker and a silk-weaver. I have been through poverty and back out again. I know how to show other women how it's done. And that has become my life's work: creating a weaving center and social enterprise for women in Stung Treng, a rural province in northeastern Cambodia.

Our tiny oasis of self-reliance is a small compound of open-air structures that Chan and I carved out of the lush greenery. There's a faded sign by the entrance, hand-lettered in English and Khmer: "Stung Treng Women's Development Centre." On any ordinary day, a kindergarten teacher leads children in song, and in a breezy structure bathed in sunlight, women spin brilliant silk threads at wooden looms.

From the weavers and spinners, according to their abilities; to them, according to their needs — that is my dream. I am no Communist; I learned in Saigon that there is no such thing as Utopia. But what's wrong with creating a place of safety, where softness will not prove fatal? Where we Stung Treng women can turn our pain into strength? Where we can begin to build a new Cambodia on the ashes of the old?

Together, we are learning that it's better for a woman to cast her own golden light, like a sun. We are, I hope, a new kind of Cambodian woman — both strong and soft, and terribly improper.

Just like Mae.