Cambodia, 1981

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In the winter of 1981, my daughter's mother was born. Her mother had crossed the border between Cambodia and Thailand and finally collapsed there in the no-man's land of tent villages and shanties. She was shaking from pain and weak with malaria and starvation. The father of my daughter's mother, an American serviceman from Detroit called Tex, neither knew nor would he have cared about the birth. By the time she delivered their baby, he didn't remember the woman, and he had never known her name. My daughter has her grandfather's wide, broad nose.

My daughter's mother was nursed by another woman after her mother died. The delivery was difficult; the baby was too big for her small, angular body. She died the day after my daughter's mother was born. The woman who nursed her raised her as her own daughter in Shinoukville, where they returned when the Khmer Rouge had been driven out of Cambodia and into hiding in the jungles of Thailand.

When my daughter's mother became pregnant at fifteen, her foster mother forced her out of the home she'd grown up in. My daughter's mother promised that she would give the baby up, but her foster mother suggested it would be better to drown the baby in the Mekong river. My daughter's mother thought about this a long time, but she finally left home to deliver her baby away from the temptation of the river. She had nowhere to go—no family other than this—and she delivered my daughter in the back room of the bar where she got a job selling drinks or, maybe, herself. I have a picture of her holding my daughter, her nails and lips a rich, ripe red.

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In the fall of 1981, my daughter's mother was born. By this time, the Khmer Rouge had been chased out of Cambodia, though some of them had remained behind immune from prosecution because of the fear they had so thoroughly instilled in their countrymen. My daughter's grandmother was married to the son of a former Khmer Rouge, and they lived in luxury compared to other Cambodians. They often had clean water to drink and a toilet they flushed with a bucket. They had a television, run by car battery. Their house, on stilts, was protected from the seasonal flooding in Shinoukville, and they received yearly tributes of money the villagers paid to the family out of fear or loyalty, or habit.

My daughter's mother was delivered into the hands of a midwife, even though most Cambodians with medical knowledge had been killed starting in 1975, hacked to death with hoes after digging their own graves because bullets were too expensive. Midwives were an exception, though, as long as they didn't have glasses or speak English. Women kept having babies, Communist or not, and someone needed to catch them and clean up the messes the women made.

The midwife wrapped my daughter's mother in soft cloth and put her on her mother's chest where she began to suckle. Mother and daughter gazed into each other's eyes as the midwife cleaned. When my daughter's grandmother died, she did it silently in a gush of blood, the baby slipping from her arms. My daughter's mother wasn't hurt, though, because the mattress was thin and resting on the floor, but her mother was dead, and someone had to take care of her. Poor motherless girl. Is this why, sixteen years later, she carried her own baby to the gates of an orphanage and left her there?

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My daughter's mother was born in a hospital in Thailand

in 1981. Her parents had crossed the border from Cambodia in 1977 at the height of the destruction and genocide. My daughter's grandmother was a surgeon, educated in France and fluent in four languages. Her husband, another surgeon, was half French, tall with dark hair and glasses. He could pass for a foreigner and could have left the country safely without his wife and children. After being forced from Phnom Penh and onto a collective farm, he knew they must leave or they would be killed. A slip of the tongue, a phrase in French or English, the eye glasses he couldn't force himself to destroy, all death. They pretended to be peasants. The children, a son and a daughter, had been taken from them and sent to a reeducation camp.

My daughter's grandfather spent fourteen months trying to farm without his glasses, hacking accidentally at edible plants and unable to see the weeds clearly before he and his wife left the country. They were afraid to take their children—afraid the children would denounce them to the party after their reeducation—so they left them behind. After walking for days without food, his wife's eyes leaking tears for their abandoned children, they crossed the mountains into Thailand.

At first, my daughter's grandmother refused to have more children. She busied herself treating the refugees from Cambodia and dreaming of her lost boy and girl. When she fell pregnant she was terrified of losing another child.

My daughter's mother was just fine, hearty and robust as an infant, rebellious and athletic as a teenager. When she became pregnant at fifteen, she tried to hide her growing belly from her parents, and they pretended not to see it. She paid a Khmer taxi driver forty dollars to take the baby and leave her at the gates of an orphanage in Shinoukville. My daughter was abandoned, like her aunt and uncle before her, as if abandonment were contagious, her birthright. My daughter's mother kept whatever she had called my daughter to herself, and so the taxi driver named her. The name, Branett, means wealth in Khmer, and we didn't keep

it, not even as a middle name.

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My daughter's mother delivered my daughter in the night in the shanty she shared with her parents, her grandparents, and her brothers and sisters. Her grandmother caught the baby, and her mother, white-lipped and angry, never said a word or tried to comfort my daughter's mother. Her parents had been angry about her pregnancy because they intended for her to marry someone else. They forbade her from seeing the father of her child and insisted she give the baby away. She was not driven from her village in shame. She was not damaged goods. She was not able to keep the baby, but she was allowed to marry the boy of her parent's choosing. No one mentioned my daughter.

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My daughter's mother was sent from her village to Shinoukville when she was twelve years old. She was a virgin and worth plenty to the woman who had paid her parents two hundred dollars for her. They hoped she was being sold as a servant, but they had seven other children to care for and didn't ask many questions. She was sold by the hour to tourists, some American, some Thai, some Chinese. Because she was so small, she bled a lot, and not just the first time. The woman who owned her was able to sell her virginity several times over before my daughter's mother stopped bleeding and screaming and the men no longer believed in her innocence.

My daughter's mother didn't know the father of her child, but it could have been anyone.

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My daughter's mother had four other children and was

pregnant with my daughter when her husband was killed, beaten to death with a hoe after an argument. She and the children already worked every day, she sewing and the children selling candy on the busy streets of Phnom Penh. She didn't know how she would continue to feed herself and the children without her husband's income. She wanted an abortion, but she couldn't afford it. Her brother, a taxi driver, offered to take the new baby and find her a good home. My daughter's mother considered drowning my daughter in the Mekong river, but instead, she gave the child to her brother. He took the baby to an American run orphanage in Shinoukville, where he was paid a one hundred dollar finder's fee. He gave the baby the name Branett, wealth in Khmer, as a joke. He didn't share the money with his sister.

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My daughter's mother was a whore.

My daughter's mother was a child.

My daughter's mother is alive, or maybe she's dead.

My daughter's mother was motherless, or overprotected, or she was neglected, or she was pampered.

My daughter's mother never thinks of the baby she gave away.

My daughter's mother thinks of the baby she gave away every day.