

The Inspiration for *Lulu in the Sky*

FIRST THEY KILLED MY FATHER: A Daughter of Cambodia Remembers (2000) was born out of my need to tell the world about the Cambodian genocide, and *Lucky Child: A Daughter of Cambodia Reunites with the Sister She Left Behind* (2005) came out of my desire to share my sister's story and my own transformative journey from victim to survivor in the aftermath of war. In my latest, *Lulu in the Sky: A Daughter of Cambodia finds Love, Healing, and Double Happiness*, I wanted to share the story of the love that binds my family and me together, the love of a child for her mother, and of a woman and her partner.

Lulu in the Sky jumped into my mind on my thirty-eight birthday as I was blowing out the candles on my cake. As my friends cheered, I was focused on one singular thought: In one year I would outlive my mother. Suddenly, instead of laughing, I felt myself sinking into a depression.

My mother died when I was eight. But with each passing year, as long as I knew she was alive at my age, I could feel her presence. Throughout my childhood and metamorphosis into a woman, I continued to talk to my mother as if she were near. There were days when I could even see us walking side by side, sharing our lives, and having intimate mother-daughter conversations just like my friends ►

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(continued)

had with their mothers. And sometimes, when I was particularly creative, I imagined my mother living out her life in a parallel world. But not that day.

In one year, my life would move past my mother’s, and our roles as mother and daughter would reverse. Wrapping my mind around this thought made the room sway. I had spent my life thinking about my mother and speaking to her as an elder, but soon, I would be the elder. It was then that I was hit with another fear that forced me to sit down. *What if, when I outlived my mother, I stopped feeling her presence?* The room darkened as the anxiety of losing my mother all over again crept into my consciousness. The cells in my body screamed for me not to let this happen.

As my birthday candles went out, I was reminded of the time, a few years back, when I went to see a psychic to try to communicate with my mother. I had resisted visiting one until then out of fear that this could open a portal to the other side and I’d be stuck with all kinds of spirits following me around. But I was desperate to speak with my mother so I pushed away my trepidation. I found a reputable medium through a friend and arrived early for my reading.

The medium was a man in his early fifties, with a face that reminded me of Mr. Rogers. I scanned the room; it was decorated like an old farm cottage and smelled of burnt incense and potpourri.

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(continued)

“They’re speaking a language I do not understand.”


“Wait,” I said, incredulous. “You can’t understand them? Isn’t there a universal language of the dead or something? Is my mother in the Buddhist Heaven? Is she with my father and sisters? Wha—”

The medium ushered me out the door without answering my questions. I returned home that afternoon bluer than when I’d left it.

After my birthday I became obsessed with learning more about my mother, who she was, her dreams and desires. Exploring these questions made me realize how little I knew about her beyond her roles as a wife to my father and a mother to my siblings and me. It was then, as I lay on my bed fuming about the medium, staring at the pens and papers on my bedside table, that I knew the portal to my mother was in me all along. It was that night that I began to write about her.

The next few months, in between visits with family, friends, and my therapist, I spent ten to twelve hours a day talking to my mother, dreaming up her thoughts, and reliving her life. At first I could only write about how much I missed her, how I wished she had been there to watch me grow up, graduate from schools, and travel back to Cambodia. But the more I wrote, the more I saw that a story about my mother would not be complete without the stories of her family. And soon I was

writing about the lives that have grown from her line, weaving in the threads of my own life as well as those of my grandmother, sister, brothers, and friends. Writing my mother's story also made me realize that she had always been with me. She was beside me when I reunited with my sister and family, she was watching when I fell in love, and she stood next to me when I married Mark. Even in the times I could not feel her presence, I believed she was there in all the big and small moments in my life. *Lulu in the Sky* is a story about those moments.

I wrote this book in honor of my mother, grandmothers, and other aunties and mothers around the world. As an aunt and great-aunt, I want my mother's descendants to know her, at least as much as I could gather of a woman who was vibrant, beautiful, and full of light. As a daughter, I wanted to say thank you to my mother, and to let her know—wherever she may be—that I am proud to be her daughter. 

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