

Books by Souvankham Thammavongsa

Fiction

How to Pronounce Knife (2020)

Poetry

Small Arguments (2003)

Found (2007)

Light (2013)

Cluster (2019)

How to Pronounce Knife

Stories

Souvankham
Thammavongsa



McClelland & Stewart

THE NOTE HAD BEEN typed out, folded over two times, and pinned to the child's chest. It could not be missed. And as she did with all the other notes that went home with the child, her mother removed the pin and threw it away. If the contents were important, a phone call would be made to the home. And there had been no such call.

The family lived in a small apartment with two rooms. On the wall of the main room was a tiny painting with a brown bend at the centre. That brown bend was supposed to be a bridge, and the blots of red and orange brushed in around it were supposed to be trees. The child's father had painted this, but he didn't paint anymore. When he came home from work, the first thing he always did was kick off his shoes. Then he'd hand over a newspaper to the child, who unfolded sheets on the floor, forming a square, and around that square they sat down to have dinner.

For dinner, it was cabbage and chitterlings. The butcher either threw the stuff away or had it out on display for cheap, so the child's mother bought bags and bags from him and put them in the fridge. There were so many ways to cook these: in a broth with ginger and noodles, grilled over charcoal fire, stewed with fresh dill, or the way the child liked them best—baked in the oven with lemongrass and salt. When she took these dishes to school, other children would tease her about the smell. She shot back, "You wouldn't know a good thing even if five hundred pounds of it came and sat on your face!"

When they all sat down for dinner, the child thought of the notes her mother threw away, and about bringing one to her father. There had been so many last week, maybe it was important. She listened as her father worried about his pay and his friends and how they were all making their living here in this new country. He said his friends, who were educated and had great jobs in Laos, now found themselves picking worms or being managed by pimple-faced teenagers. They'd had to begin all over again, as if the life they led before didn't count.

The child got up, found the note in the garbage, and brought it to her father.

He waved the note away. "Later." He said this in Lao. Then, as if remembering something important, he added, "Don't speak Lao and don't tell anyone you are Lao. It's no good to tell people where you're from." The child looked

at the centre of her father's chest, where, on this T-shirt, four letters stood side by side: LAOS.

A FEW DAYS AFTER THAT, there was some commotion in the classroom. All the girls showed up wearing different variations of pink, and the boys had on dark suits and little knotted ties. Miss Choi, the grade one teacher, was wearing a purple dress dotted with a print of tiny white flowers and shoes with little heels. The child looked down at her green jogging suit. The green was dark, like the green of broccoli, and the fabric at the knees was a few shades lighter and kept their shape even when she was standing straight up. In this scene of pink and sparkles and matching purses and black bow ties and pressed collars, she saw she was not like the others.

Miss Choi, always scanning the room for something out of place, noticed the green that the child was wearing and her eyes widened. She came running over and said, "Joy. Did you get your parents to read the note we sent home with you?"

"No," she lied, looking at the floor where her blue shoes fitted themselves inside the space of a small square tile. She didn't want to lie, but there was no point in embarrassing her parents. The day went as planned. And in the class photo, the child was seated a little off to the side, with the grade and year sign placed in front of her. The sign was always right in the middle of these

photos, but the photographer had to do something to hide the dirt on the child's shoes. Above that sign, she smiled.

When her mother came to get her after school, she asked why all the other children were dressed up this way, but the child didn't tell her. She lied, saying in Lao, "I don't know. Look at them, all fancy. It's just an ordinary day."

THE CHILD CAME HOME with a book. It was for her to read on her own, for practice. The book the child was given had pictures and a few words. The pictures were supposed to explain what was going on with the words, but there was this one word that didn't have a picture. It was there on the page by itself, and when she pronounced each letter, the word didn't sound like anything real. She didn't know how to pronounce it.

After dinner, the three of them sat down together on the bare floor, watching television side by side. From behind, the child knew she looked like her father. Her hair had been cut short in the shape of a bowl. The child's shoulders drooped and her spine bent like there was some weight she was carrying there, like she knew what a day of hard work was all about. Before long the television pictures changed into vertical stripes the colour of a rainbow, and her parents would soon go to bed. Most nights, the child followed, but tonight she was bothered

by what she didn't know and wanted to know it. She opened the book and went looking for that word. The one that didn't sound like anything she knew.

That one.

It was her last chance before her father went to sleep. He was the only one in their home who knew how to read. She brought the book to him and pointed to the word, asked what it was. He leaned over it and said, "Kah-nnn-eye-ffff. It's kahneyff." That's what it was, what it sounded like to him.

THE NEXT DAY, Miss Choi gathered the whole class together to sit around the green carpet at the front of the room. She did this when she wanted to get someone to read out loud. Sometimes a student would volunteer and sometimes she would point at someone, but on this day Miss Choi looked around and found the child.

"Joy, you haven't read yet. Why don't you get your book and read for us."

The child started reading and everything went along just fine until she got to that word. It was only five letters, but there might as well have been twenty there. She said it the way her father had told her, but she knew it was wrong because Miss Choi would not turn the page. Instead, she pointed to the word and tapped at the page as if by doing so the correct sound would spill out. But the child didn't know how to pronounce it.

Tap. Tap. Tap. Finally, a yellow-haired girl in the class called out, "It's *knife*! The *k* is silent," and rolled her eyes as if there was nothing easier in the world to know.

This girl had blue eyes and freckles dotted around her nose. This girl's mother was always seen in the parking lot after school honking in a big shiny black car with a *V* and a *W* holding each other inside a circle. Her mother owned a black fur coat and walked in heels like it was Picture Day every day. This girl was like everyone else in the class, reading loud and clear, winning prizes. The child was the only one not to have won one yet. On this very day, Miss Choi added a red yo-yo to the sack. Had the child known what that word was, that red yo-yo would have been hers, but now it would remain locked in the top drawer of Miss Choi's desk.

LATER THAT NIGHT, the child looks over at her father during dinner. How he picks up each grain of rice with his chopsticks, not dropping a single one. How he eats, clearing away everything in his bowl. How small and shrunken he seems.

The child does not tell him the *k* in *knife* is silent. She doesn't tell him about being in the principal's office, about being told of rules and how things are the way they are. It was just a letter, she was told, but that single letter, out there alone, and in the front, was why she was in the office in the first place. She doesn't tell how she

had insisted the letter *k* was not silent. It couldn't be, and she had argued and argued, "It's in the front! The first one! It should have a sound!" and then she screamed as if they had taken some important thing away. She never gave up on what her father said, on that first sound there. And none of them, with all their lifetimes of reading and good education, could explain it.

As she watches her father eat his dinner, she thinks of what else he doesn't know. What else she would have to find out for herself. She wants to tell her father that some letters, even though they are there, we do not say them, but she decides now is not the time to say such a thing. Instead she tells her father *only* that she had won something.

At the end of the school day, Miss Choi was waiting for her by the door. She asked the child to follow her to the front desk, where she unlocked the top drawer and pulled out the red velvet sack. "Pick one," she said. And the child reached inside and grabbed at the first thing her fingers touched. It was a puzzle with an airplane in the sky.

When she shows her father the prize, he is delighted because, in some way, he has won it too. They take the prize, all the little pieces of it, and start forming the edge, the blue sky, the other pieces, the middle. The whole picture, they fill those in later.