

*Climbing the walls*

Hip-hop in Cambodia

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WE PULL UP outside the Centre. The dust resettles on the path, I pay my driver two dollars and slide my helmet off. Sweat trickles down my back as I pull my hair off my neck and tie it into an unruly bun. It's 8.30 am, but the sun is piercing through the smog as if it is midday. I enter the gate and a boy smiles at me, clasps his hands together under his chin and lowers his head. He takes my helmet and bag off my shoulder and heads to my office. The other teenagers bow slightly and smile as I begin my long walk up the outdoor corridor. The staff, only a couple of years older, hug me and we stroll with arms linked as we catch up on the weekend.

After two years here, the unspoken rules of male–female affection don't apply to me. Maybe no rules apply here, in this underworld of street kids. I'm sure it looks that way to any visitor, Cambodian or otherwise. But it is not lawless, just different. They wear their jeans low off their hips below their underwear line, have tattoos and piercings and their hair dyed bright yellow or pink. They strut rather than walk and I'm sure that if I met any of them in a dark alley I would be terrified.

It is 2011, and hip-hop is still considered 'anti-Khmer'. Neighbours are always complaining about the noise and too many kids in their streets. At the Centre we know the truth. In a country that lives outdoors – with weddings and funerals in the streets blocking all traffic and speakers blasting a mix of Buddhist scripture and music – noise is not the issue. The truth is nobody wants 'street kids' in their street.

Ex-gangsters, recovering drug users and alcoholics, children from extremely poor families, and victims of family violence who still carry scars and bruises. No one wants to know these kids. No one wants to see. We are evicted year after year. The good neighbours want to live in their bubble and try to believe that Cambodia has recovered from its past trauma, that Phnom Penh is a thriving city. Look at all the shiny new buildings, the SUVs clogging streets that were only ever built for motorbikes and tuk-tuks, and look at all the foreigners who come to spend money on souvenirs or investment. Sweep these teens under the carpet. No one wants the reminder.

I poke my head in to each class as I pass. It is my favourite part of the day. The look of hope in the youngsters' eyes is in sharp contrast to those I just saw picking up rubbish in the streets on my fifteen-minute motorbike ride here. I try to be inconspicuous but the teacher never

allows it and, before I know it, the kids are on their feet singing good morning to me in English. Sometimes the teacher will want to show off and ask the children to sing the alphabet. I always sing along, wiggling my hips to the rhythm, producing endless giggles and mimicking. No, I am not very discrete.

The math and computer classes for the teenagers are usually more serious, and after my 'good morning' it is straight back to the books or hands up to show they know the answer to the last question. The music room at the end of the corridor has a few boys in their twenties sitting on the one donated computer. They try over and over to mix their beats and rap vocals, without being able to read the instructions written in English. The dance studio opposite is locked and silent, which accounts for all those I encountered as I entered. It is too early for breakdancing.

I scan for Ratana, who is often writing lyrics when the studio is closed. Normally the first to jump up as I enter, hold my hand and want to chat, his absence is noticeable. I seem to have taken on the role of the mother he is lacking. An unlikely combination we are; he is a nineteen-year-old Cambodian and I am an Australian woman of thirty-five, but the unconditional love, respect and concern can only be likened to mother and son.

I think about it sometimes. I think I learn more from these guys than they do from me. Teenagers and young adults who have nothing and yet give me everything. How is that possible? I have read about unconditional love, even seen it in movies, but to feel it and know I can give it back is quite something else. I learnt that here, in my thirties, in the slums. Sometimes I sit in my apartment and cry.

The boys here know me well and can see my rising concern as I look around. They answer without being asked.

'He come before, look for you, but he go now.'

'Where he go? He come back?' and I'm met with shrugged shoulders and a tinge of guilt that I somehow hoped they could hold on to him, make him stay. But Ratana is not the type of guy you can make do anything.

THIRTY MINUTES LATER and I have made it up to my office. It is Monday. Ratana has come and gone; now he's either high or hanging out somewhere. Maybe he was in a street fight. Maybe he tried to visit his father but was met with fists instead. I know he is not in jail because he has been seen already today. I turn on my laptop but can't work.

'Where is he? Why didn't he wait?' I mumble over and over. I try to remember what he was like on Friday, if there were any clues.

Monday's problems usually stem from a desire to kick his addiction to ice, a drug that makes people feel invincible but also makes them aggressive and paranoid. This desire often follows a heavy weekend of drug taking, after he has landed himself in some sort of trouble with his father or the police. Either results in violence and his return to the Centre, battered and bruised.

He wants to get clean. I can see the conviction in his eyes when he stares at me closely, willing me to believe him. I have asked him in the past why he keeps doing it. With such sadness he simply answers, 'To forget.' It gets to me every time. He can usually make it from Monday to Friday by breakdancing at the Centre with his team of brothers.

I can see when he is struggling. He works harder, volunteers to clean, assists other kids, keeps busy. He dances harder, hugs tighter, sings louder, writes lyrics about his childhood with greater intensity in the hope that it will release his pain and frustration and, just maybe, hold him together. Each week though, the Centre closes for the weekend. Sometimes he can make it until Monday, but usually not. Going to his family home is not a good option, so he tries to survive alone on the streets.

I feel my blood boil when I think of his father. I hate him, then instantly feel guilty. Ratana's parents live just outside the city in a poor village. They are trying to survive as best they can, trying to find enough work to put food on the table despite being unskilled and illiterate.

They grew up in the time of the Khmer Rouge, becoming orphans at a young age. Pol Pot, better known as 'Brother Number One', ruled with violence and torture. The lack of trust and love that Ratana has in turn grown up with is as clear as the scars on his body.

I understand this in my own way – my parents are the children of war survivors. My Jewish grandmother spent her teenage years in a concentration camp. She is now eighty-eight years old and the sole survivor of a family of eight. Not a day goes by that she doesn't re-live the trauma, the torture, the starvation and the loss.

The impact the war had on my parents and my upbringing was brought to a head one day, when I asked them why they had never told me they loved me. They were shocked and hurt by the question and tried unsuccessfully to argue that it wasn't true. All three of us awkwardly shuffled in our seats and I remember wishing the world would swallow me up and make me disappear. I don't how long we sat like this for. My mother, who would always avoid confrontation, was first to break the silence..

'Do you think we ever heard that growing up? Do you think we were ever told we were loved?' Her voice was trembling. 'No. Our job as children was to keep quiet, be invisible. Our parents worked day and night just to feed us in this foreign country. Growing up, all I

remember was my mother in survival mode and my father being sick. There was no time for love, no “I love you,” just work. Just sadness, memories and nightmares. They were the survivors. We had to learn to survive too.’

It completely changed my understanding and suddenly everything made sense. It also helped me understand this country, whose war history is only recent. The world says ‘never again’ and then it happens again: Darfur, Rwanda, Bosnia, again and again, and in 1975 the Khmer Rouge – the ‘Holocaust of Asia’. People don’t recover, they survive.

The war in Cambodia destroyed everything. The once lucrative country was left with no schools, no hospitals, no courts and no infrastructure. It wiped out almost the entire educated, professional, arts and cultural population. Today, it is being rebuilt in its own chaotic way by a ‘democratic’ government under the iron-fist rule of Prime Minister Hun Sen, formerly of the Khmer Rouge, now in his twenty-sixth year of power.

THESE STREET KIDS are the children of the survivors. Begging. Eyes so dark, so sad. I want to reach out but can’t – they are living in a country where it is frowned upon to talk about feelings. They have no outlet for the rise in their emotions, for the anger and frustration at being poor, at being mistreated. They are barely surviving themselves.

There is something different in this Centre though. There is hope. They are not just surviving; they are driven and they want to learn. They want to heal. They are the lucky ones who found the Centre. No one is forced to do anything here. They come to dance, to rap, to DJ and to write their own lyrics. They go to classes. They learn about bonding, friendship, respect and loyalty. The Centre is one big family and we are all responsible for its upkeep, we are all responsible for each other. It is like a three hundred-fold Big Brothers Big Sisters program, and it works. Ratana would not be here today if it didn’t – he would be in jail or dead.

I keep listening for footsteps, feeling guilty I wasn’t here earlier. I know he will be told to visit me when he arrives, if he arrives. The morning hours come and go. At 11.30 am the Centre quiets down for the lunchtime break. I am still staring blankly at my laptop. My trance is broken by the sound of footsteps, but no-one enters.

I step out to find Ratana circling my doorway, holding his head down low, gripping his thick hair and pulling at it. Eventually his feet stop to face mine, his hands still pulling at his hair. I can see he has been crying.

He is tall for a Cambodian, just taller than I am. He has a dancer’s body, toned and ripped in all the right places, sculpted like a Greek god but with the small waist of an Asian man.

‘Are you high right now?’ I ask the dreaded question gently, in a whisper so as not to accuse. He knows I need to know. He shakes his head side to side as tears start rolling down. He tries to speak. Fragments of words... I search my brain in English and Khmer. I ask precise ‘yes’ and ‘no’ questions and find out that he made it through the weekend...just.

His eyes tell me he doesn’t think he can make it through the day. With one foot facing out I can see it is taking all his power just to stay, not to run back to the streets where he knows he can numb his brain and take all his pain away. I want to wrap him up in my arms and hold him like a child – *sshhh*. I want to tell him everything will be all right, but I can see now is not the time. Instead I stand up straight, look him in the eye and simply say, ‘OK.’ No other words are needed. I take control so he can let go.

I lead him back down the stairs by his hand to the dance studio. It is a large room, with mirrors covering two walls and graffiti on the others. There are two small, barred windows that barely move any of the thick air and two old fans in the corners that do even less. The only things that work in this sweatbox are the speakers. In here, that’s all that matters.

Ratana has followed me without question. I lock the door. The room is silent – no kids dancing or laughing outside, just him and me. I walk over to the stereo and search for his favourite ‘crump’ song. Crump music is the kind of music that has to be played loud. It is chaotic and full of intense energy that is both wild and sexy at the same time. Crump is a real ‘battle’ song, often seen in breakdance battles where opponents give their biggest moves before throwing down the challenge. It is a perfect song for Ratana, who is such a ‘big’ dancer and does it better than anyone I have ever seen. It is just not the kind of music you can sit still to.

I turn the volume up, secretly pray this will work and go and sit in the corner. Ratana is standing in the middle of the floor, waiting for me to say something. I don’t. We just stare at each other, me breaking glance first as I eye the dance floor. His body starts to move, slowly at first, uncertain, bouncing his knees to the beat. Within seconds he has closed his eyes and let the music engulf his body and his mind.

I watch him slip into what seems like a trance, and his movements get bigger and bigger. He is switching between breakdancing and thrashing his body around in a wild fit. His face is intense and he takes every breath with conviction, makes every stomp, every jump and every spin with determination, as if he is trying to get somewhere. Thirty minutes pass and he is still going, more and more aggressive. Letting go more with each thumping beat.

I cherish every moment I get to watch him dance. At team rehearsals he is focused, encouraging and playful, learning new moves with lots of laughs. Moments like this one are

different – they come from a place of need, rejection and anger. He is a true powerhouse and I am watching him explode, his sweat and tears like fireworks being spat in every direction. I sit mesmerised. He forgets that I am even there; he is deep in his own world of pain. An hour passes and I understand for the first time the expression drug users have about ‘climbing the walls’, as Ratana powers at them full speed.

I worry he is going to hurt himself with each run at the wall, only breaking the momentum with his arms, his forehead nearly colliding with the bricks. The next time he doesn’t slow down. Instead of putting out his hands, he extends a foot out to the wall, followed by the other in stride. Head reaches back and body follows in momentum – soon he is vertical to the floor and flips over, landing on his feet. Adrenaline still pumping he runs again at the next wall and the next, flipping up and over himself, running back to the middle of the room with wild spins, flips and moves I’ve never seen him do before.

His strained jaw softens, his fists unclench and he allows himself to drop on the floor. He lies there in a puddle of his own sweat like a starfish, trying to find his breath. I notice his forehead has relaxed from its scowl, the tears have stopped and his limbs have gone completely limp.

My body starts to relax too, and it is only then that I realise I have been tensing my muscles and holding my breath. I notice my cheeks are wet and wonder when it was that I started crying, or when I stopped. I wipe my face and turn the volume down slowly before moving over to him. I sit cross-legged beside him, picking up one of his hands and letting it drop into mine. As I bring my other hand and gently cover his, he rolls his head to face me. Eye to eye, we smile in silence.

‘I ready to talk now.’