

Khemera

fiction by Simone D. Cottrell

During WKRK's August 26th evening weather segment, Cheun heard the name "Katrina" and misunderstood it for her husband's name, "Khemera." She watched the young, yellow-haired girl move her hands in circles upwards toward the map of Louisiana, showing the predicted movement of the hurricane. The girl clicked something black in her hand and the picture changed to a map of southern Alabama, the entire coastline slashed in red. The numbers "10 - 15" flashed above Bayou La Batre, Cheun's home. The girl's words were fast to Cheun's ears, but it didn't matter. She saw the strength in the hurricane's weather icon and how it swallowed the Gulf of Mexico. A quiet breeze passed through her trailer's windows, her handmade pink curtains fighting to touch the roof. The wilted azaleas fluttered in an old Bama jelly jar. When the girl said "Katrina" again, Cheun's only photo of Khemera—his black and white identity photo, blown up to an 8x10—fell off its Buddhist altar. She had waited 30 years for this sign.

Cheun lifted herself off the floor and picked up Khemera's photo. She ran a finger along his black eyebrows and placed him back on the altar. She turned off the TV. Cheun needed silence to think and to remember what needed to be done.

The neighbors down Satsuma Street drilled plywood to their windows that would later bear spray-painted trespass warnings to looters and misspelled messages of defiance toward the hurricane. Cheun dampened a paper towel and carefully cleaned the three Buddha statues on her altar. Her favorite

statue was a gift left to her by her *luktah*—her grandfather—when he died. Luktah had whittled the tiny Buddha from fragrant Cambodian wood. Cheun remembered how the Buddha's pointy top had poked her belly when she walked in the tidal wave of people out of Phnom Penh and toward the countryside. She had wrapped it tightly in a soft cotton rag and tied it around her waist, hidden by her sarong. Khemera had held her sweaty hand so she wouldn't float away with the millions of others who were disoriented.

Cheun threw the old azaleas into the garbage, rinsed the jelly jar, and put it aside to dry. She then used a chair to reach a cabinet containing other repurposed jelly jars. Cheun was not a short woman, but she was afraid that in her old age she needed more concentration to balance and not break another plate. One by one, she pulled five glass jars of various sizes and designs. Together, her six jars would be filled with azaleas and stems of wild honeysuckle. They would adorn the most sacred areas of Cheun's home—two for the *wat david*a in her back yard near the pine trees, another two for the Buddhist altar in the living room, and the last two on the nightstand next to her twin size bed. In the utensil drawer, she pushed chopsticks and small soup spoons out of the way and found a small knife with a hook. She placed the items—six jars, the small knife, three incense sticks, and a lighter—in an old Easter basket a child forgot in front of her trailer one year. Tomorrow, Cheun would prepare for her death.

The next day Cheun woke before sunrise and tucked her only blanket tightly under the mattress and propped her pillows. She

thought against it and laid the pillows side by side instead. Cheun performed her morning prayers, her mouth becoming dryer with every repeated chant. The morning prayers were reminders of how to approach the day: right thoughts, right words, right actions. When Cheun finished, she sipped water from a small, clear plastic cup, enjoying the sweet fluid filling the spaces of her missing teeth. The Vietnamese neighbor's rooster crowed and Cheun stepped outside with her Easter basket.

The sky was grayer and the clouds were heavier than the day before. Cheun smelled the salt from the Gulf. It won't be too long now, she thought, but I have enough time to prepare. A stray rain drop fell from the sky and tapped her nose.

Khemera used to press his index finger on Cheun's nose to see how flat it could get. She would slap his hand away and laugh.

They met on the social grounds of her village's temple after Cambodian New Year prayers. The New Year celebrated the ushering in of the monsoon season. Village children and young adults eligible for marriage played traditional water games. Cheun was fourteen and Khemera was eighteen. She liked to think that he fell in love with her when she and her younger sister Chanrithy played "Fill the Bottle." In her freshly cleaned lace blouse and tight *sapoit* that dared to restrict her legs to tiny ladylike steps, Cheun ran barefoot from one water station to the other. Her loose long black hair with a few strands wrapped tightly around marigolds caught the wind and ran wildly behind her. She won the game. Cheun knew she loved Khemera when he lost a fried chicken-wing eating contest with his friends. He over-exaggerated his stuffed cheeks and held his stomach like he was going to throw up. "Chhob, chhob," he jokingly begged when his great-aunt

brought him more wings. She slapped him on the back and joked that the young ladies wouldn't be impressed with a quitter. Khemera winked at Cheun. They were married by the end of the monsoon season.

A white note was taped to Cheun's chain-linked fence gate. She already knew what it said, so she folded it carefully and tucked it into the basket. This was not Cheun's first hurricane in Bayou La Batre—there was Andrew—and she knew what monsoons were. Bayou la Batre city officials left white notes written in English and Vietnamese on doors, windows, gates, cars, and boats to inform residents that they had 24 hours to evacuate inland before the J.A. Wintzell Memorial Bridge was drawn for boats during the storm. Once the bridge was drawn, no one could enter or exit Bayou la Batre. Cheun had learned about this at the Khmer community meeting at the temple in Irvington. "If you need help evacuating please call the number in your pamphlet or contact someone here at the temple," the Buddhist chaplain translated to the crowd for the Red Cross member. Last night, Cheun had unplugged the landline before she went to bed.

Cheun clipped the stems off her garden's gourds. The bumpy bitter melon was her favorite and would be delicious in a savory beef dish with garlic. Thai basil was next, and with every clip of her small knife, the basil's sweetness filled the space around her. She inhaled deeply. A young lizard zigzagged between three lemongrass plants and scaled the fence. Cheun wrapped the lemongrass in her fist and chopped low on its stalks. She liked the lemongrass least, because, if she wasn't careful, its blades cut her palm. She placed the vegetables and herbs into the Easter basket then carefully dumped them on the porch. Next, she filled the

basket with white and pink azalea blooms and branches of wild honeysuckle that grew near the garden. She sat on her porch and arranged the flowers into the six jars. Flowers, she thought. Such a brief and beautiful life. We are all flowers. As she arranged, she meditated on this mantra until all the jars were filled. "The water will come soon," she promised them.

Cheun placed the smallest of the jars on either side of the *wat davida*, the house for angels. A miniature concrete version of an elaborate Buddhist temple, the *wat davida*'s white paint was cracked and its once delicately light gold leaf top dulled in the daylight. She lit the incense, said a prayer while their tips glowed bright orange between her fingers, and placed them in a small vase filled with rice and other dead incense sticks. The white neighbor's daughters thought Cheun's *wat davida* was some sort of exotic dollhouse. When the sisters thought Cheun wasn't home they would sneak into her yard with their dolls to play. The dolls entered and exited on their tip-toes through the *wat davida*'s four open doors, blocking the spirits of angels that wanted to pass through. Cheun didn't mind. When the angels didn't want to be disrespected anymore, they would send the sisters a message. One hot summer day, the sisters were stung in the face and arms by wasps that built their muddied home inside the *wat davida*.

Sharp rain droplets landed on Cheun. There was about another hour before Cheun could eat her first and only meal of the day. She knew the monks in Irvington would be blessing their only meal of the day right now. Monks ate first. Community ate last. Cheun gathered her vegetables into the basket as well as the other four jars.

Cheun cooked a large meal and offered the food's essence to her ancestors. Salad plates of skillet-fried fish sprinkled with closely chopped lemongrass, sliced cucumbers, and a savory tomato dipping

sauce in a chipped bowl, bitter melon and slivered beef in a large soup bowl with a serving spoon, two servings of sweet jasmine rice, and a cup of hot tea were arranged on the altar between the azalea and honeysuckle jars. She bent the lemongrass blades in half, tying and knotting one blade around its center before tossing it away.

Cheun then filled an ornate silver bowl with water and sprayed Elizabeth Taylor's Black Pearls perfume into it. At the altar, she lit more incense and prayed for her grandparents, her parents, Khemera, and the children she never had. Though she was supposed to be killing any of her own desires while she prayed, in her heart Cheun hoped they recognized each other in the next life. It hurt her deeply to have spent so many years in a foreign land alone. She lit a thin orange candle and recited chants. The wax spilled into the water, each drip representing a soul. The first strong band of rain hit the trailer's tin roof. Khemera was on his way.

Cheun blew out the candle and used an azalea bloom to wash the altar with the perfumed water, careful not to catch the floating souls. She paid extra attention to washing Khemera's photo with the petals. She prostrated three times, her forehead and palms lightly brushing the floor. A small streak of blood smeared the gray carpet. The lemongrass had cut her palm and she'd been bleeding the whole time.

Cheun hated the lemongrass. Whenever it cut her hand the pain went straight to her heart and ached.

On April 17, 1975, millions, including Cheun and Khemera, were forced into the countryside from Phnom Penh by the Khmer Rouge. A child—a boy or girl, Cheun couldn't tell—stood on the side of the paved road with an adult man

wearing all black, a red and white checkered *krama* tied around his neck. The child's clothes were identical, but an automatic was strapped across the chest. The man was encouraging the child to single-out individuals in the moving crowd to interview. Cheun's eyes met the child's. The child pointed at her and whispered into the man's ear. Cheun squeezed Khemera's hand and tugged him to follow her toward the middle of the crowd. The man ordered the people to move until he reached them. Khemera called the man "brother" and "comrade" and offered him money to allow them to pass. Cheun and Khemera had planned to escape the crowd and return to their home village where a cousin was waiting for them. Their families were to hide together until this political wave passed and then they would run away through the jungles toward the Thai border. The man with the *krama* drew Cheun and Khemera out of the crowd to face the judgment of a child. The child—a girl on closer inspection—asked Cheun and Khemera to please follow her into the woods. They wouldn't go very far and it wouldn't take too long. Just a few questions.

Khemera walked ahead of Cheun down a slope and into the woods. The girl-child knew Khemera. He was her teacher once and he'd given her a poor grade in French. She was angry with him and told her girlfriends, "Mr. Khemera I'm only became a teacher to have sex with little girls like us. He gave me a poor grade so that I would have to stay after school and practice." This girl-child warned her friends that first it would be her and the next time it would be them. None of this was true, of course, but this girl-child with a bowl-cut remembered it as if it were.

It was not a short walk through the woods. The girl-child poked Khemera in the back with her automatic, demanding that he walk faster. Cheun tripped on roots and vines. She wanted to

look into the face of the man but didn't. They reached a quiet pond, the edges surrounded by sugar palm trees. A bird called in the distance, and the grasshoppers' stringed hums rose and fell with the wind. The moving crowd couldn't be heard anymore.

The girl-child asked questions that couldn't be answered. The man encouraged the child to redirect the questions, to yell louder, to use the sight of the automatic to coax Cheun and Khemera to admit that they were against the brotherhood. "He's a teacher," the girl-child said to the man. Khemera's face registered who she was and his breathing became shallow. The man asked to see Khemera's school identity photo and Khemera, trembling, retrieved it from his wallet. The man looked at the photo and looked at Khemera. He asked the girl-child what she would like to do with this traitor to Year Zero. She pointed to the sugar palm tree. The man gently twisted and pulled a frond from its fan, leaving it at the water's edge. He then led Cheun to a nearby tree. With her chest against the wood and the Buddha poking harder into her belly, Cheun's hands were tied around the trunk with a plastic zip tie. The man warned her that if she screamed, she would get two bullets—one for each eye. Weaver ants made their way down the trunk and passed through the space under Cheun's armpit.

The man grabbed Khemera's arms behind him and tied another zip tie around his hands. Khemera's thumb rubbed against his gold wedding ring. The girl-child pushed the small of Khemera's back toward the pond's bank and forced him to kneel into the marsh. Khemera turned his head toward Cheun and winked. He loved her and always would. The girl-child used the sugar palm frond to slice Khemera's throat over and over again. She used a new frond when the old one wore out. Cheun bit hard on her bottom lip to swallow her screams. She

cried and began smashing her forehead against the tree until she passed out. When she woke, the girl-child and the man with the red and white checkered *krama* were gone. Khemera's body had been pushed into the pond. His heels looked like two saplings.

The rain came faster now and pounded the tin roof. Cheun ate her last meal slowly and with purpose. She washed the dishes and from her kitchen window watched the banana plants dance to the pressure of the wind. It was no longer the quiet breeze, but a rushed gust. In a few hours, the wind would be strong enough to push the rain into an angle. Cheun checked to make sure that all the windows were open. She propped the front and kitchen doors with a suitcase and her Khmer-to-English dictionaries. Cheun wanted to make it easier for Khemera to find her. The fat rain dampened the frames. Small puddles gathered on the window ledges and on the aged linoleum floor.

Cheun filled an old, large, white ten-gallon bucket in her tub with warm water and mixed the perfumed water into it, the floating souls swirled around the rush of the water spilling from the spout. Gray clouds bled black. The wind whistled and tunneled through the small bathroom windows. Cheun found shaving cream and a razor, placed them aside, and undressed. Using the silver bowl, she poured the water over herself, imagining her history sliding off her skin. Cheun meditated through each memory that sprang forward. The water fell over her face, and she tasted a hint of perfume on her lips. It was sweet and she smiled.

As Cheun soaped up, she thought about the airplane ride to America in 1983. How she wailed with the children, women, and their husbands saved from the Thai refugee camps and adopted by an

American Christian church—and threw up all over the back seat of a chair when they landed in Nashville. All Cheun possessed was in a plastic sack, her Buddha statue strapped to her belly and secured by a seatbelt. Khemera's identity card was kept close in the secret pocket she sewed to the inside of her simple blouse. Her first shower was in the church's gym. Though the parishioners were kind enough, they were absolutely ignorant in teaching people how to bathe properly. It was taken for granted. Cheun and the other women fiddled with the knobs and tapped on the pipes until they figured it out. The church served chicken spaghetti and no one ate. The food looked like thick worms swimming through a yellow-flooded, sticky garden of English peas and rotel. Cheun had eaten enough worms and spiders when she was escaping toward the Thai border. She pushed her plate away and looked down at the t-shirt given to all the refugees—Jesus Saves! Cheun left the next week with a family that had cousins in Bayou La Batre. "It's like Cambodia," they had promised her. I don't want Cambodia, she thought.

Cheun wrapped a towel around her body and looked in the mirror. She touched her face and followed the wrinkles from her brow to her chin. She stretched her eyelids up and down and to the side. There were skin spots and skin tags. Her remaining teeth were stained by years of drinking tea. The wind howled. Khemera was laughing and Cheun laughed, too. "I am so old now," she said. "But, so are you." The rain fell in sheets and the pine trees threatened to split.

Cheun shook the can of shaving cream and shot the thick foam into her hand. She lathered her bald scalp and felt the pricks growing in patches close to her ears. She took the razor to her scalp and began to shave, blood budding to the surface. As Buddhist tradition dictates for a woman reaching a certain age, Cheun

dedicated her life to her death. It was the year she turned seventy, and, other than the Irvington temple monks, no one witnessed her first step into her last stage of life. Now, at age eighty-one, she found it difficult to understand why she hadn't become a nun earlier. Maybe it was foolishness, but she woke every morning hoping that her secular life would change for the better.

Cheun's favorite fantasy was that her sister Chanrithy would find her. She played the scene out in her mind almost every day: At sunrise, the rooster would crow to wake Satsuma Street. Cheun would already be squatting in her garden, her sarong pulled up to her knees and tied into a knot, the hem dampened by morning dew. She would be digging the weeds out with her favorite slender knife, killing the weeds at their roots. A fancy car pulls up alongside Cheun's chain link fence that separates her world from the rest of Bayou La Batre. A ruggedly, handsome man that resembles her favorite singer, Yol Aularong, slides out of the driver's side and opens the passenger door for his wife. Chanrithy appears and is as young and as beautiful as the day Cheun last saw her in the Old Market of Phnom Penh. Chanrithy wears a red blouse and matching skirt, precious gold jewelry dripping from her ears, neck, and wrists. Chanrithy opens the gate and hugs Cheun, caked with dirt and smelling of dried fish. Chanrithy draws close to Cheun's ear. "I've been searching for such a long time. I've missed you." Chanrithy's breath is like warm jasmine.

Cheun rinsed her scalp one last time. She dried her bald head with the towel and wiped away her final tears.

It was late evening now and the storm began to peak. Outside, the Gulf's tides rose by five feet and crashed against the natural barrier of large stone rocks. The bayou's waters rose, too, and crept along the saturated ground. Bayou La Batre would flood from the north and the south. At the storm's end Bayou la Batre would be flooded over five feet more than the predicted fifteen feet.

Cheun looked in her dresser for the clothes wrapped in butcher paper. She had sewed the death clothes a few years ago. A white blouse and pants, a white lace *krama* to be tied diagonally across her chest. She laid them out on her bed, as if she were already sleeping in them. She saw her body filling the clothes and how it would be if anyone found her there.

The wind cried faster. Khemera wanted to talk. Cheun turned off all the lights except for the desk lamp next to her bed. She stood naked in the doorway of her trailer and let the rain beat her sagging skin. "Welcome, my husband," she said into the storm. A seagull was caught somewhere and cried for help. The bayou's water rose another foot. The Gulf was swelling too quickly. Khemera's breath rushed through the trailer, blowing the garbage can over and sending the lemongrass skittering across the floor. "Be patient. We've waited this long," Cheun said.

Cheun gathered Khemera's picture, incense, wooden Buddha, and the last two jars of azaleas. Before she resigned herself to her bedroom, she took one last look at her garden and waited. Chanrithy would not be coming for her.

Cheun arranged the jars and incense around Khemera's picture on her nightstand, a small altar for their reunited love. She turned the floor length mirror around and slowly dressed herself. The cloth was light and the lace intricate. She added the wooden Buddha next to Khemera's picture, sat on the floor, and began to meditate her last chants. This

was not how it was supposed to be done, really. Her final body was supposed to be consumed by fire, her ashes made into a tea for her family to drink, her fractured bones kept in a box to be added to someone's altar. She meditated through the wicker bookcase falling over in her living room, the notebooks of failed attempts to learn the English language fluttering with the wind. She paid no attention to the tree branches slamming through her kitchen window, glass exploding into shards. And the water kept rising.

"Are you ready, Cheun?" Khemera said.

Cheun opened her eyes and nodded. "I am ready."

Cheun laid herself on top of her bed, finding the most comfortable position on her thick, itchy, red blanket. She switched between keeping her hands crossed over her chest or palms face down beside her. She decided on the latter. The waters from the Gulf made it to Cheun's trailer floor. The moans of trees falling over with loud crashes, the static of heavy rain, and the sound of metal clanging into each other in the shipyard not too far from Cheun's trailer scared her. She opened her eyes to nothing. The lamp went black. No more electricity. She fumbled for Khemera's photo to hold close to her chest. She knocked over a jar of azaleas and instead of hearing the crash of more broken glass, it plopped into the rising water and sank to the bottom. A white azalea bloom floated in the darkness.

"Don't be afraid, Cheun. I am with you," Khemera said when the trailer was lifted off its concrete blocks, the skirt floating away.

She felt Khemera's arms wrap under and around her arms. His chest under her back, his chin beside her forehead. He slipped one hand through hers. Khemera pressed his index finger on her nose and she smiled. And when

Cheun smiled, he kissed her—filling every space in her stomach, her chest, and her heart. Cheun was no longer alone.