HAING NGOR

A CAMBODIAN ODYSSEY

WITH
ROGER WARNER

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But then, I thought, what is so special about acting in the movies? It is a matter of taking on a new identity and convincing others of it. Convincing others, perhaps, the way I had convinced Mao the Khmer Rouge village chief. Waiting for the envelope to be opened and the winner announced, I was excited, but my heart was at peace. Whatever happened, I could accept. Because I knew that my best performances were over before I left Cambodia. And the prize there was much greater.

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EARLY REBELLIONS

My earliest memory is standing at the back door of my parents' house and gazing at the rice fields. The fields fascinated me. Low earthen dikes divided them into a pattern like irregular checkerboards, with paddies instead of squares, and trees rising here and there where dikes met.

It was a sight that changed with the seasons. By January, partway through the dry season, the fields were covered in brown stubble. By about April or May when light rains fell, a few paddies were planted as seed beds, turning a delicate green. When the rainy season itself brought its heavy storms, teams of men and women transplanted the seedlings to the rest of the paddies. Over the rainy months, the rice plants grew thick and green and lush, and the dikes were hidden from sight until around August, when the rains stopped, and the plants gradually began to turn golden. The farmers went out and harvested, leaving only dry stubble behind. They threshed the stalks, milled the grains and sold the rice to families like mine.

We ate the rice gladly, and we always set some aside for the monks, who came to our house every morning with their alms bowls. The monks wore robes, yellow or orange or even brown if they had made the dyes themselves from tree bark. Their heads and eyebrows were shaved. They were calm and silent, speaking not a word as they walked from one house to the next in a single-file line.

Those are my first memories, the rice fields changing with the seasons and the monks coming to our house each morning. And that is how I would like to remember Cambodia, quiet and beautiful and at peace.

But in fact the first entire incident I remember was not so peaceful. I was about three years old. The year was probably 1950. My mother sent my older brother and me into the rice fields to get water from a pond. It was the dry season. Soldiers from the village garrison fished at the pond with their shirts and shoes off. We filled the pail. My older brother took one end of a pole on his shoulder and I took the other on mine and we put the pail between us. We were returning to the house, two little barefoot boys carrying a single pail, when we heard a sharp *bang!* behind us, near the pond. Then we heard another *bang!* and the soldiers shouting. My mother appeared at the door. I had never seen that expression on her face before.

"*Come here*, children! Put the pail down! Drop it right now! *Hurry!*" she said. We set the pail down and trotted obediently toward her. She ran out of the house anyway, grabbed us by the wrists and dragged us in. There was more shooting behind us, and our neighbors were yelling.

The next thing I knew, my brother and I were in the hole under the big low wooden table that served as my parents' bed. It was dark and cool in there, with sandbags on the sides—my parents had known there was going to be trouble. Some of my other brothers and sisters were already under there, and more came tumbling in, a half-dozen wiggling children. Then my mother came in and finally my father, who had run from the market and was breathing hard, his face wet with perspiration.

We heard a shot nearby, then more shots right outside our house. Something crashed, and glass broke on the tabletop above us, while my mother clutched us tighter and prayed and my father cursed. We children tried to make ourselves even smaller in our hole in the floor under the table.

Then after a while there wasn't any more shooting. We heard voices outside. Someone called my father by his name. He climbed out. A few minutes later the rest of us got out. There was broken glass on the floor and holes in the wall above the front door. Outside there was a big crowd, and more people running up to it on the street and everyone was talking at the same time:

"No, the rest got away. Nobody else killed . . ."

"The soldiers got back to the garrison and fired down from the watchtower . . ."

"He used this tree for cover. So many bullet holes in the trunk of the tree, huh? Even in the doorway of the Ngor house . . ."

I pushed my way through the legs of the crowd. I had to see for myself. By the tree in front of our house, in the center of the crowd, a man lay face down in blood. Next to him was a single-shot carbine. Other children had wormed their way in with me, some of them with younger brothers or sisters hoisted on their hips.

We looked on, wide-eyed.

The dead guerrilla was sturdily built, with a strong back and thick legs. His bare feet were wide and calloused, like a farmer's. His skin was dark brown. Tattoos covered his arms and shoulders. He wore a pair of torn short trousers. Around his waist were a *krama*—the Cambodian all-purpose scarf—and some strings hung with Buddha amulets and prayer beads. He had no shirt. He was not from the towns or cities. He was a man of the earth, from the countryside. From the very heart of peaceful Cambodia. And he had rebelled.

Now, many years later, grown up and living far away, I think: Yes, there was trouble even then. Maybe not revolution but a deep, hidden discontent.

To outsiders, and often even to ourselves, Cambodia looked peaceful enough. The farmers bound to their planting cycles. Fishermen living on their boats, and their naked brown children jumping in and out of the water. The robed monks, barefoot, walking with deliberate slowness on their morning rounds. Buddhist temples in every village, the graceful, multilayered roofs rising above the trees. The wide boulevards and the flowering trees of our national capital, Phnom Penh. All that beauty and serenity was visible to the eye. But inside, hidden from sight the entire time, was *kum*. *Kum* is a Cambodian word for a particularly Cambodian mentality of revenge—to be precise, a long-standing grudge leading to revenge much more damaging than the original injury. If I hit you with my fist and you wait five years and then shoot me in the back one dark night, that is *kum*. Or if a government official steals a peasant's chickens and the peasant uses it as an excuse to attack a government garrison, like the one in my village, that is *kum*. Cambodians know all about *kum*. It is the infection that grows on our national soul.

But the fighting had been so small-scale back then, before the other countries got involved, that the damage was limited. When those few ragged guerrillas attacked the garrison in my village, it was only news for those of us who lived there. Nobody else cared. The attack might have been reported in the Phnom Penh newspapers, but not outside the country. It was only a minor incident in an inconclusive, low-level civil war. Wars like this are always going on in different parts of the world. And those in the outside world know little about them.

Cambodia: It is just a name to most people. Someplace far away where something terrible happened, and few can remember exactly what. Mention Pol Pot or the Khmer Rouge and people start to remember. Or bombs dropping and genocide or even a film called *The Killing Fields*. But all that came later.

Cambodia is a part of Indochina, which in turn is part of the landmass of Southeast Asia. "Indo-china" because a couple of countries to the west lies India, which gave Cambodia its religion and alphabet; and a couple of countries to the north is China, which gave Cambodia its merchant class, including my father's side of the family. For many years the region was known as French Indochina, because France colonized Cambodia and the neighboring countries of Laos and Vietnam beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. The guerrillas who came to my village were trying to get rid of French rule. And in Vietnam at the same time as this shoot-out, Ho Chi Minh and his communists were also trying to force the French to leave, with a rebellion on a much larger scale.

Vietnam has usually overshadowed Cambodia in world news, because the wars there are larger, and because Western countries have gotten directly involved in the fighting. So more people know about Vietnam than Cambodia. But I have never liked having to explain that Cambodia is next to Vietnam, or even near India and China. To me, Cambodia means something very special. It was the name of the country around my village. And like all children, I believed my village was the center of the world.

The village was called Samrong Yong. It was a sleepy crossroads on the highway south of Phnom Penh, with houses one row deep and rice fields and forests beyond. After the shooting incident, my parents moved us children out of the village to a friend's house in the countryside, where they thought we would be safer. Every afternoon

my parents came to the house and spent the night with us, and every morning they went back to the village to do business at their dry-goods store. Until one afternoon Papa didn't come back.

The guerrilla rebels kidnapped my father. My mother collected money for his release. After she paid them, they set my father free but took her prisoner instead, so then Papa had to raise ransom money for her. When they were both free, corrupt soldiers of the other side—Cambodian officers of the French-backed government—arrested my father and put him in jail. They accused him of working for the guerrillas. After all, he had been seen leaving Samrong Yong every afternoon to visit them. Of course, the soldiers were using this as an excuse for getting ransom money.

I was sent to stay in Phnom Penh. While I was there, the rebels and the military took turns kidnapping my father again. My father hated paying ransom, but there was nothing he could do. He had nobody to protect him. Like nearly all merchants, he was Chinese-looking, with pale-colored skin and narrow eyes. This made him an easy target. Most other Cambodians were of the Khmer race, with round eyes and dark brown skin, or else were of mixed racial descent.

When I finally came back to the village, the rice fields looked the same. The monks still made their rounds in the morning. But every afternoon, a new militia of young men and women marched around the village with machetes and wooden rifles. They were always out of step, and never looked like a real army, but they had the strong support of the people. The whole village was tired of the corrupt soldiers of the French-backed government, and tired of the corrupt guerrillas too. The man who had helped organize the militias, our young king, Norodom Sihanouk, felt the same. Sihanouk was trying to get the French to leave the country. He wanted the guerrillas to leave too, because some of them were communists allied with Ho Chi Minh. Sihanouk didn't want the country ruled either by a Western power like France or by communists. He wanted Cambodia to be independent and neutral. In the Buddhist tradition, he wanted the middle way.

Because of all the ransom payments my father was very poor. He sent me to a Chinese school with my older brother, Pheng Huor, but soon he took me out because he couldn't afford the tuition for both of us. I didn't mind. Pheng Huor was smarter than me. He

could take an abacus, the Chinese calculator with rows of wooden beads, flick the beads around with the tip of his finger and get the answer to a problem in seconds, while I would still be trying to remember what each bead stood for. Pheng Huor had always helped my father after school. I had always helped my mother. My mother was darker in color, like me, partway between a Chinese and a dark rural Cambodian.

While my father rebuilt his business and my brother studied at school, my mother and I went off on daily bartering trips in the countryside to get the family's food. I carried a long piece of bamboo across my shoulders with a hook at each end. From one hook hung a basket with fresh pastries cooked by my hardworking father, and from the other hung another basket with peanuts, dried fish, salt, soy sauce, and anything else we thought we could trade. At sunrise we were off, on foot. The baskets bobbed up and down from my shoulderboard and I adjusted my stride to fit the rhythm. My mother wrapped her krama, or scarf, around her head and placed a basket on top, steadying it with one hand.

We walked away from National Route 2, the paved highway that passed through our village, onto oxcart trails and footpaths. Soon we were out of earshot of the automobile traffic and into an entirely different world of fields and forests. We walked through open rice fields to shady villages, where thatched-roof houses built on tall stilts stood among tamarind, mango, banana and palm trees. The villagers were ethnic Khmer, friendly, dark-skinned people who had mastered the art of living off the land without working very hard. Each house had its garden surrounded by a reed fence, with vegetables and tobacco growing inside. Chickens clucked and pecked at the dirt, and roosters crowed at all hours. Mostly we bartered for rice, because we could get it more cheaply from these villagers than we could in Samrong Yong.

We walked all day, and I became strong and healthy. On the way home, I foraged for lotus plants, whose roots and seeds are tasty in soups; for water convolvulus, which is something like spinach; and for *sdao* tree leaves, rather bitter-tasting, as many of the rural foods are. Whenever we passed through woods, my mother wrapped a few grains of rice in a leaf and placed it on the ground as a gift to the local spirits.

When I was about eight years old I was allowed to go out to barter

on my own, without my mother. My favorite village was in a grove of sugar palm trees, which have tall, slender, curving trunks and fan-like fronds on top. Every morning the men scampered up the sugar palms to gather nectar from the flowers. They boiled the nectar in vats for many hours to make a crude brown sugar that tastes like molasses. They sold the palm sugar in the market, or traded it to me.

They also made an alcoholic drink that was slightly bubbly and tasted like beer. They made their best-quality beer right up in the palm trees. One morning when I walked into their village the men waved at me from the treetops. "Hey, boy! Hey! Ngor Haing!* Come up here! We've got something for you!" I climbed up the bamboo ladder. At the top, on a platform connecting several nearby trees, the men were sitting with loose, happy grins and glazed eyes. They were drinking fresh palm beer. I tried some. It was delicious. I drank more. The hours passed. We were laughing and joking up there in the tree until I realized that I had to get down and didn't have any control over my arms or legs. The ground looked far away and small, like the earth under an airplane. They had to carry me down. No more bartering for me that day. I was too busy weaving around on the footpaths and falling over. When I got home my mother scolded me and my father gave me a stern, angry look. He said I would never amount to anything if I spent time with the wrong people.

I disagreed with my father. The country people had always been nice to me. But I was very stubborn then; if my father said I was wrong about anything, automatically I felt I was right, without even considering what he said. That was my personality: If I hit my head against a wall accidentally, I would butt it again, to see if I could make the wall hurt.

Medically speaking, I was hyperactive as a child. I had a short attention span and far too much energy. I liked sports. I loved fighting. My gang, from the western side of the village, was always getting in fights with the gang from the eastern side of the village. If the eastern gang came at me when I was alone, I took my baskets off the hooks, waited calmly and got ready to swing my shoulderboard at their shins. I wasn't afraid. My fighting and playing displeased my father, who worked every day without a break and who expected me to stay home

*In Cambodia, as in most Asian countries, the family name goes first, followed by the individual's name. So I am Ngor Haing in Asia but Haing Ngor in the West.

and help his business. But the more he scolded me the more I stayed outside.

It became difficult to meet my father's gaze. My oldest or number-one brother, who was slow-minded, worked for my father all day long as an ordinary laborer, as faithful as a water buffalo. My number-two brother, Pheng Huor, the smart one, was already keeping my father's accounts. I was the number-three brother, with two more younger brothers behind me and three sisters too. I wanted to help the family, but I didn't want to work all the time. It was too much fun to play.

When I was about ten, matters came to a head. The government of Thailand, Cambodia's neighbor to the west, gave a large sculpture of Buddha to a monk in a town near my village, called Tonle Batí. The monk was very old and eminent, the equivalent of a bishop. The sculpture was to go inside a stone building made around A.D. 1200, in the period of an ancient Cambodian civilization known as Angkor. But before installing the statue, my father and the monk had to drive to Thailand to get it.

They set off together in Papa's old black and brown Ford truck, north from the village on National Route 2 to Phnom Penh and then in a northwesterly direction around the huge lake known as Tonle Sap and toward the Thai border town of Aranyaprathet. The roads were terrible. The truck kept breaking down. My father was irritated but he had to pretend to be calm, because of the monk. When they finally got the statue, it turned out to be unusually large and handsome. Once they re-entered Cambodia with it in the back of the truck they had to stop in every small town along the way to give a parade. The townspeople gave money, to make merit for themselves, to improve their chances of being reborn into a better life. The money paid for the truck repairs and for the gasoline. Papa, who was an impatient man, couldn't hurry things up.

In my father's absence my mother ran the store. I got in more fights than ever.

The morning before Papa returned, a box with a dozen packs of imported playing cards was missing from the locked cupboard above my parents' bed. The cards would have made a nice profit for the family if they had been sold. My mother came to me and asked whether I had taken them. I told her truthfully that I hadn't. But my

mother was suspicious. Of all the children I was the only one who got in trouble regularly.

She got right to the point. "If you stole it and sold it, just say so," she said. "If I know you are telling me the truth, I won't tell your father, and he won't beat you."

There was nothing I could say to her. Papa beat us occasionally, as all Chinese fathers did. But he didn't hurt us much.

That day I kept close watch on my older brother Pheng Huor. When he saw I was looking in his direction he lifted his gaze and looked back at me blankly. Whoever had stolen the cards had been a member of the family. But even if my brother had stolen the cards, which seemed likely, I couldn't prove it.

The following day Papa drove up to the house in his Ford truck. He was tired and irritated from having to behave so well.

My mother told him about the theft. He came angrily toward me. Perhaps he felt that this was the sort of thing that went on when he was away and that he needed to restore his authority.

He led me out back of the house and tied me hand and foot to a big piece of lumber. Then he hit me on the shoulders with a wooden slat. He beat me for an hour. When he was tired he went into the house, and then after a while he came out again with the slat in his hand. My mother stood in the doorway with a pitying look in her face, but she didn't ask him to stop.

I don't know when he stopped beating me, because I lost consciousness. When I came to, my feet and hands were still tied to the lumber, but I had rolled over on my side. The sunlight was coming in at a low angle over the rice fields. It was late afternoon. My mother and my favorite sister, Chhay Thao, had come out of the house. They untied me, and they asked me what they could do.

I lay on the ground without moving. They stood over me. Gradually I collected my thoughts.

"You didn't trust me," I said slowly. "You treated me like an enemy of the family. So don't bother helping me."

My mother knelt next to me.

"Your will is still strong, eh?" she said gently.

They helped me upstairs and led me to my bed. I slept. But that evening I woke up puzzled and angry. What had I done to deserve a beating like that? I loved sports. I loved to get out of the house and

play as often as I could. And yes, I got in fights with other boys. If that made me bad, if they were going to beat me for that, they could go ahead. That was their right. But I hadn't stolen anything. I didn't need any money. There was nothing I wanted enough to steal from my family. If they didn't trust me, how could I live with them under the same roof? How could I accept their authority?

Early the next morning I ran away.

My first stop was Samrong Yong's open-air market. It took up one corner of the village's only road intersection, across from the garrison of French-backed troops and their tall stone watchtower.

The market was the center of village commerce and gossip. Women thronged the aisles, bargaining, pinching the neat piles of fresh vegetables and fruits, peering critically at the basins of live, wiggling fish. Vendors sold grilled chicken and rice confections wrapped in banana leaves. At restaurant stalls, customers sat down to order bowls of soup prepared to their liking. I couldn't buy anything, though. No money. I talked with people I knew and kept an eye out for my family.

In the early afternoon, an old passenger bus rolled into the lot next to the market. The driver was a distant cousin, a man whose name was Kruy.

"Uncle, Uncle!" I called to him.*

"Well! Ngor Haing, eh? What happened to you?" Uncle Kruy said to me from the driver's window.

I came around to the door of his bus. "My father beat me last night for stealing playing cards from the store. But I didn't steal them."

"Well, come along, then. I'll give you a shirt to put over all those bruises." I got in, and off the bus went with a roar of its diesel engine as Kruy shifted through the gears.

Kruy and his wife lived south of my village, in central Takeo province. He was the sole owner and operator of the rickety passenger bus. Every day he made a trip from his village to Phnom Penh and back again along National Route 2, stopping in the marketplace of every village and town along the way.

At his house Kruy gave me a shirt and a straw hat. The next

*In Cambodia, if we feel close to older people we call them "Uncle" or "Aunt," whether or not they are actually related. If I felt close to a male my own age, I would call him "brother."

morning I began working for him, collecting fares. It was unbelievably noisy inside the bus: The pounding of the worn-out suspension on potholes had loosened all the bolts and rivets. Passengers squeezed in next to one another on the hard wooden benches until they were almost on each other's laps. Just when it seemed the bus could take no more, Kruy slowed and stopped for an old wrinkled monk standing beside the road with his parasol. The monk climbed up into the bus and headed for the seats in the back. The passengers shifted over to accommodate him and, amazingly, there was plenty of room. Everybody knew how important it was to treat monks with respect. It was particularly important that women not touch them, even accidentally, because monks had to be pure. And it would have been unthinkable to ask monks to pay fares. They rode free. Even I knew that, on my first day.

When he saw that I knew how to collect fares and count money, Kruy put me on top of the bus, in the luggage rack, and made me responsible for cargo. The luggage rack was piled higher than my head with packages and suitcases and bicycles and furniture. There were wicker baskets with live pigs grunting inside, baskets with chickens and ducks clucking and quacking, tightly woven baskets with live snakes and baskets with produce for the Phnom Penh market. At every stop, I lowered cargo from the roof to the outstretched arms of its owner on the ground, and reached down to pull the new cargo up.

I also helped with bribes. When Kruy came to government checkpoints, he downshifted, pulled over to the side of the road and stopped, while I scampered down the ladder on the back of the bus, adjusted my hat and walked into the sentry's hut.

Inside, the sentry pretended to scrutinize the bus for an overload, or for communist guerrillas, or for whatever he might choose to think was wrong with it. I took my hat off respectfully and placed it on the table next to his clipboard, moved the hat so the *riel* notes in the hatband fell out and pushed the money under the clipboard with my hand.

"Your bus does not look so bad today," the sentry said in a bored voice. "All right, you may go on your way." Kruy was already revving the engine. The wooden bar across the road lifted on its rope pulley, I ran for the bus and hopped on the ladder on the back as Kruy drove on.

I loved my new life. I had no shoes, no change of clothing, and didn't care. As long as I was working on the bus I didn't have to think about the beating my father had given me. The problem was, the bus stopped in the Samrong Yong market twice a day.

When fate caught up with me I was lying on my back on the luggage rack, watching the plume of dust rising behind. The engine noise changed as Kruy downshifted. As the bus slowed I turned my head to look forward. The road was so narrow that two vehicles could pass only if they pulled over to the shoulder and drove at a crawl. A vehicle was coming from the other direction.

It was a black and brown Ford truck.

Uncle Kruy stopped the bus so that his window was directly opposite the window of the truck. My father leaned across and spoke with him.

"Your son is up on the luggage rack," I heard Kruy say.

"Yes, I'd heard he was working for you. Tell him his mother wants him to come home," my father's voice said.

"No problem," said Kruy. "No problem at all. Tell me, brother, did you hear the king's in Europe, negotiating again? Do you think he can get the French out this time?"

"I wish him luck," said my father. "If we have real peace maybe the times will be good and I can get more customers."

"Well, if anyone can get those foreign bastards out the Royal Father can. . . ."

I buried myself deep in the cargo, next to a basket of ducks. I didn't want to talk to my father. He didn't want to talk with me. All he really cared about was his business, just like the rest of the grown-ups. Kruy too. It was all indirect, saying that my mother wanted me to come back. Probably they needed my help at home.

The next morning I dropped off the bus when it stopped at my village and walked warily toward my parents' house. Luckily, the truck wasn't there. When my mother saw me she began crying. She grabbed my wrist and she wouldn't let me go, even when I made a show of pulling away.

That wasn't the end of the problems with my family. Not at all. But it was the end of that stage of my rebellion. It was also the end of bartering in the countryside or working for Kruy. Something marvelous had happened: Just by negotiating, without firing a single shot, King Sihanouk obtained Cambodia's independence from France. Wild, spontaneous celebrations broke out in the streets of my village. Now we Cambodians could govern ourselves, as we always wanted to do. Now we would have peace, and perhaps we could prosper.

One of Sihanouk's first steps as sovereign leader was to increase the number of free public schools. I entered primary school, sitting with twelve- and fourteen-year-old boys just learning how to read, like me. In that first year I passed through four grades. The next year I passed through two more. From there I went to a public secondary school in the provincial capital, Takeo. In this school most of the classes were in French, because France still culturally dominated the thin layer of Cambodian society that was educated or rich.

I did well in this school, rising quickly to the category for gifted students. One of the reasons was a teacher named Chea Huon, a thin, pale, stoop-shouldered Chinese intellectual. Chea Huon believed in social equality. He invited all the students who wanted extra tutoring to come to his house on weekends for free classes. He was very kind to me. I didn't know about his politics then, and I never imagined the strange and fateful circumstances under which we would meet later in life.

In the last year of this school we had to take exams. Those who passed could begin the next stage of education, *lycée*, the equivalent of high school. I studied and studied. I prayed to Buddha that I would get good marks. When I passed, with high marks, there was only one thing to do.

I shaved my head. I shaved my eyebrows. For the few weeks required by tradition, I became a monk. In the induction ceremony, held in a *wat* or temple outside Samrong Yong, my parents put their palms together in the gesture of greeting and submission that we call *sompeah*. I nearly died of nervousness—my parents, *sompeah*ing me! But they were only saluting the Buddha in me, the holiness that resided in me while I wore a monk's robes.

Each morning I walked barefoot in a line of monks, keeping my eyes fixed on the pavement, silently chanting prayers. Housewives put rice in the bowl I carried in my shawl. The days were spent doing chores around the temple and in prayer. We novice monks sat in the temple on the floor with our palms together in the *sompeah* and our feet respectfully tucked to the side, because pointing our feet is im-

polite in our culture. We prayed facing the altar, which filled an entire wall. At the base of the altar were flowers and brass boat figurines with votive candles and sticks of incense inside. Above were statues of Buddha in ascending rows, gleaming softly in the candlelight. The largest of the Buddhas sat highest up and farthest back, looking down with a tranquil and mysterious expression.

Buddha was not a god but a wise human being. He left a series of steps for us to follow to lead a correct and moral life. He taught that after life comes death, and after death comes rebirth and life again, on and on in a cycle. If we follow Buddha's guidance, the next life will always be better than the last. Only by following his teachings can we ultimately escape the cycle of birth and suffering and rebirth, which we Cambodians call *kama* and other countries call karma.

A wrinkled old monk made sure I understood the essential points. "What is holy and divine," the monk explained, with his kindly smile, "is life itself, as it runs through your family. You must understand this clearly. It takes a father and a mother to bring a child into the world. They protect him when he is young. It is the duty of the child to honor the parents and to protect them when they grow old. You must also honor all the children of the family who came into the world ahead of you. You must always serve and protect them. Obey your elders, boy. If your family is happy, you will have a good life. If all the families are happy, then the village will be happy. If all the villages are happy, then the land will be strong and content."

I believe what the old monk taught me. And everything he said came true, only in reverse. My family was unhappy, my village was unhappy, and so was the country. And now I look back at it all and think about the connections, and wonder whether I myself was partly to blame.

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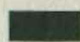

EDUCATION

WITH THE COUNTRY at peace, my father began to make more money from his trucking business and from the dry-goods store. In 1964 he bought a lumber mill located between Samrong Yong and Phnom Penh, just off National Route 2. By Cambodian standards the mill was technologically advanced—that is, the saw was driven by a motor rather than pulled by hand. But the motor, which had been taken out of a jeep, still had a manual crank starter.

The first time I tried to start the engine the crank went around for a couple of rotations until it built up compression. Then it kicked back suddenly in the other direction, nearly breaking my wrist. In a rage, I pulled the crank off and threw it at the engine as hard as I could. Water spurted from the radiator. My mother's dog, a miniature poodle, barked and yipped behind me. I turned around and kicked the dog, which sailed off in the air. My father saw the whole thing. He didn't say a word. He just turned his back on me and sighed, shaking his head as he sadly walked away.

I had been a monk but had not yet learned the monks' self-control.

The mill was a success from the time my father took it over. Soon he had added trucks to haul the logs to his mill. He hired men to cut trees for him in distant forests. He bought a place to live near the mill so he could spend most of his time working. Papa knew exactly what he wanted, which was to become a rich merchant, to have his sons working for him, and to have grandsons sitting on his knees when he grew old. He gave generously to charities, like the temples and the Chinese protective association, because it was expected of him, but his view of the world was fixed and narrow.

One of the things my father could not do was read and write Khmer, the native language of Cambodia, though he spoke it fluently. My older brother Pheng Huor could read and write Khmer but not well. Neither of them knew French. Most of the government documents were in both Khmer and French. On weekends I bicycled the five miles from Phnom Penh to the mill to help with the paperwork.

It was my duty to work for my family, but I never felt comfortable doing it. Early on, I found that Pheng Huor was tampering with the mill accounts and putting the money in his own pockets. He also signed some of the mill's assets over to his own name, without telling my father. There was no easy way for me to solve this problem, not when I was already known as the family troublemaker. On one hand, my father was the head of the family, the ruler. My brother shouldn't have cheated him. On the other hand, I also had to defer to my brother, because he was older than me. He worked hard at the mill and was nearly as essential to its success as my father.

Two French words, *honneur* and *bonheur*, express what is important to families like mine. Though my brother was violating the *honneur* or honor, at least he was doing it quietly. For me to have pointed it out would result in the family losing its *bonheur*, its happiness or good-hearted feeling. Cambodians will do almost anything to keep the appearances of *bonheur*. We try to stay polite even when we do not feel like being polite, because it is easier that way. To be in conflict forces us to treat one another as enemies, and then we lose control.

In the year 1968, the mill was prospering but my standing with the family was particularly low. I had failed an exam which, if I had passed, would have enabled me to go on to university. My father wanted me to leave school and work for him full time as a clerk, but my mother had persuaded him to allow me to continue my studies. So I was retaking the year's courses that led up to the exam. When I parked my bicycle outside the mill on a Saturday morning and walked in, he turned his back on me and watched out of the corner of his eye as I walked to my brother's office.

"How's the business going, brother?" I asked, dumping my satchel of schoolbooks in the corner.

"We make a little money, in spite of the government," Pheng Huor said gloomily. "But the bastards are getting greedier. Here, look at

these papers and tell me what they mean." I picked up the sheaf of papers on his desk. They were written both in the Roman letters of French and in the ornate, looping letters of the Cambodian alphabet, with no spaces between the words. I scanned them quickly.

"You have solved the problem of the government foresters, I notice." On the form listing the number of logs that my father's trucks carried was a figure far lower than the actual one.

" '*Bonjour, mon ami*,' " my brother said sarcastically, quoting one of the few French phrases he knew. *Bonjour* had two meanings. Literally it was a greeting like "hello," but the French practice of shaking hands offered a chance to pass folded money from one palm to another. In Cambodian slang, *bonjour* meant graft. My brother said, "The forester does not have his Mercedes yet, but every time I see him he wears more gold."

I read through the receipts and the taxation forms. How boring. What a waste of time. After I filled in the forms they would lie unread, tied up in bundles with string, in offices whose clerks moved in slow motion under slowly rotating ceiling fans. Government regulations had little effect on businesses like ours. The officials did not make their living from their salaries. They made it from bribes. It was an age-old system: Those in power took from those who weren't. As long as the officials did not take too much, there was no protest. But it made me angry just the same. For most of the week I lived in a world of idealistic students. We were young and believed in progress and honesty and change. We were also Buddhist, and the tradition of *bonjour* conflicted with an even deeper and older tradition of moral behavior.

I said, "If the government lowered its taxes it would be easier to pay the full amount. Then nobody would have to cheat."

"You think so?" said my brother. "The government loves to tax and tax. That's the problem. Look," he said, pointing at a map of Cambodia. "There's a new military checkpoint here and another one here. *Bonjour* and *bonjour*. Worse, the soldiers just bought motorcycles. This week they started going after the logging truck with their motorcycles, after the driver had already stopped at the checkpoints. The soldiers wanted more money." Impatiently, he returned to the table and flicked his fingers across his abacus. The wooden beads made a rapid clacking sound.

"Maybe we shouldn't give it to them," I said, reading through the forms.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, the logging truck is new and powerful. Tell the driver to pay at the checkpoints but to head the soldiers off when they come after him on motorcycles. If the motorcycles try to pass him on the left, he veers to the left. If they try to pass him on the right, he veers to the right. They'll never stop him."

"I think that's a terrible idea," said my brother gloomily. "Come, fill out these papers so we can finish here and go back to Samrong Yong." At the end of work on Saturdays we always returned to our native village, which was still our family's home.

I went back to work with a sigh.

A week passed. The next Saturday morning I rode my bicycle into the mill yard again. The logging truck was there, dust coating the cab and a load of logs stacked on the back. So were several unmarked automobiles belonging to the judicial police. The policemen had gotten out of the cars with pistols in their holsters. They had knocked at the office door. My father was just opening the door.

One of the policemen said loudly that the logging truck hadn't stopped on the road when the soldiers tried to pull it over. He paused for effect before telling my father the reason. "Your driver was afraid to stop because he was carrying communist literature. You have been distributing pamphlets for the North Vietnamese!"

In 1954, after a fierce war, France withdrew from its former colony Vietnam, which split into two countries, a communist North Vietnam with its capital at Hanoi, and a noncommunist South Vietnam with its capital at Saigon. In the early 1960s, the North Vietnamese began trying to take over the South militarily. The Americans sent in troops to protect South Vietnam, and later more and more troops, and by 1968 war was again at its height. Officially Cambodia was neutral, but neutrality was difficult to keep because the war was next door and many Cambodian officials were dishonest.

The police were very clever. Instead of being defensive about collecting illegal bribes, they accused my family of committing crimes against the state. The charge was hard to disprove even though it wasn't true. My father's logging sites were near the Cambodia–South

Vietnam border. The North Vietnamese communists had supply routes through the area. And communist sympathizers occasionally distributed their literature to the common people. I even knew a communist myself. The judicial police had arrested my ex-teacher Chea Huon for subversive activities. I had visited him in jail. But until then I hadn't known he was communist. I didn't have any communist sympathies and neither did my father or brother. They were businessmen. All they cared about was making money.

The police interrogated my father and then Pheng Huor. My father saw me standing around, watching and listening. He told me to go away. I answered that I wanted to stay around to watch in case the police planted communist pamphlets and pretended to find them.

A policeman overheard me. "So you think we are trying to trick you, eh?" he said. He took me outside and threw me into one of the police cars. They put my brother in another car and the truck driver in a third so we couldn't talk to each other and agree on a story. By then they were going through the mill and through my father's house, scattering equipment and upending furniture.

The police drove the three of us to their headquarters in Phnom Penh. They put us in separate cells. Then they began to beat me to try to get me to "confess."

I should explain that Cambodian society has a minor tradition of torture. In the early 1950s, when my father was kidnapped, the government soldiers tied him to a ladder, feet up and head down, and poured anchovy sauce into his nostrils. It was extremely unpleasant for my father, but he didn't suffer any permanent harm. In Phnom Penh, in the late 1960s, the police put my hand in a vise and kept tightening it as they questioned me, but they didn't actually try to crush my hand. When the vise didn't work, because I wouldn't admit to anything, they put me in a rice sack and hit me with sticks, but not very hard. As usual, the real reason for the torture was to raise the asking price for my release.

On the third evening, my parents bought my way out. The truck driver had already "confessed" to distributing the communist leaflets. To get my older brother out they had retained a prominent lawyer friend of Sihanouk's. Day after day, my father went to the lawyer to pressure for my brother's release. Eventually the lawyer, whose name

was Penn Nouth, managed to get an audience with Sihanouk, and Sihanouk, who had no part in the scheme, issued a proclamation that my family was innocent. In this way my brother obtained his freedom.

My father was discouraged. He had paid Penn Nouth 1.2 million riels, which was then worth about $85,700 U.S. Presumably Penn Nouth had kept some of the money for himself and spread the rest around to various officials, including the secret police and Sihanouk's hangers-on. Sihanouk himself was not especially corrupt, but he did very little to stop corruption and seldom punished those who were caught. So we could not expect justice from the government.

But at least the family was together again. After my brother and I were released, Papa wanted more than ever to have us living and working together as a unit. He told me gruffly that I ought to get married and come home. It would be better, he said, if I worked full time for the family business.

I answered carefully. "Papa," I said, "I don't have much expertise in business. Perhaps it would be better if I had more schooling first."

I didn't tell him my real thoughts. I hated business. I didn't like taking orders from bosses or giving orders to employees. Above all, I didn't want to have to bribe government officials all my life. If you gave them enough they just wanted more. If you didn't give them enough they put you in jail and beat you.

The eyebrows arched on my father's plump face. "You want to stay in school?" he asked incredulously. He didn't say what he thought either, but I knew. Papa thought the longer students stay in school, the greater fools they become. And in a way he was right. I'd suggested that the truck driver speed past soldiers to avoid paying a few riels, and look what it had cost us.

I told my father that I'd like to study medicine at the university.

"What? Seven more years before you can make any money?" He turned away, unwilling to look in my direction. "You expect me to pay for you to study while the rest of us are working?"

He sent me off and we did not discuss it anymore. I felt terrible. Somehow things were always going wrong and I was always getting the blame. And yet of all eight children in the family, except perhaps for my sister Chhay Thao, who was very religious, I was the one with the best intentions. Of five sons, I was the one who cared most about living honestly, not cheating anybody, and not being

cheated in return. I had never stolen anything up to that point, unlike Pheng Huor.

My mother talked to my father and got him to bend his views, against his instinct. Over the next few years my father gave Pheng Huor money to give to me for school. It was never as much as I needed. Even so, Pheng Huor, my rival, gave it to me reluctantly, like a rich man giving a gift to a peasant who does not really deserve it.

So I continued to live in Phnom Penh, where I had gone to lycée. It was a city of wide boulevards, overlooking the juncture of the Mekong River and the Tonle Sap River, which came together like a letter "X" and separated again on their slow, lazy course toward South Vietnam and the South China Sea.* During the dry season the rivers shrunk to narrow channels at the bottom of their banks. In the wet season the water level rose and grew, until at the peak of the floods the water from the Mekong reversed course and actually flowed *up* the Tonle Sap River, filling the basin of the nation's great freshwater lake, Tonle Sap.

I lived in a temple compound, under a monk's quarters built on stilts. There was something rootless about the arrangement, but it cost me little and I liked it. Everything about it struck me as natural and appropriate, from the discipline of sweeping the courtyards, to the sight of the monk's robes hanging on clotheslines in a dozen different shades of yellow and orange, to the wat itself, with its multicolored tile roofs and the curving golden ornaments protruding from the peaks like storks' necks. Most of all I loved the freedom, because the monks let me alone. Indirectly, with only an occasional word of advice, they helped me learn calmness. With my temper under better control it was easier to study.

I passed my exam the second time around and entered the medical program at the national university. The first year was premedical, with courses in biology, physics, chemistry and other basic sciences. The next year was the beginning of medical school itself, six years of clinical work, lectures and labs. All the classes were in French. The curriculum followed the French model, with one important difference: Because of the shortage of doctors in Cambodia, we medical students

*Below Phnom Penh, the continuation of the Tonle Sap River is known as the Bassac.

were allowed to practice before we got our degrees. So within a few years I would be able to get a part-time medical job to support myself. The only problem was getting enough money in the meantime.

I decided to teach. By then I had a thorough grasp of the subjects on the various exams. I became a remedial science teacher at several lycées, squeezing the class time into my busy schedule, racing through the quiet avenues on my bicycle.

I also became a tutor at private homes. A friend of mine from lycée, a girl named Kam Sunary, had two younger sisters who were having trouble with their studies. She arranged for me to teach them.

I arrived at the Kam residence, across an alley from a large temple called Wat Langka, and parked my bicycle. It was early evening. The house was set back from the street, behind a fenced enclosure holding several small dogs. Over the decades the house had settled unevenly on its foundations. The red-tile roof had become weathered and discolored. No *bonjour* here.

Mr. Kam, a low-paid veterinarian in the government service, came to the door. I greeted him respectfully and he showed me to a small room down a side corridor. There was a blackboard on one wall. The two younger Kam girls were sitting at a table. At another table was another girl, a cousin, who had come to Phnom Penh from her home in Kampot Province.

I stepped to the blackboard and without any of the usual courtesies began asking the girls why they were having trouble with their exams. I paced back and forth, trying to discover how much or little they knew, asking one question after another. I had to be impartial and correct with them—the door to the hallway was open, and everything we said could be heard throughout the house. But I also didn't want to be excessively polite as Cambodians often are, hiding excuses behind the mask of politeness, allowing failure for the sake of keeping face.

The girls didn't know much about the sciences. The Kam sisters, in particular, hadn't grasped the concept of chemical valences. So I stepped to the blackboard, drew a table of the elements, and began explaining how chemicals combine. Three evenings a week it went like this, reviewing basic concepts, steadily making progress. I began looking forward to these sessions more than to my other classes. There was always a glass of tea waiting when I arrived, placed there by the

cousin from Kampot. Her name was Chang My Huoy: Chang, her family name; "My" meaning beautiful; and "Huoy" meaning flower in Teochiew, the Chinese dialect most widely spoken in Cambodia, the same dialect spoken by my family.

Once I started teaching those girls I couldn't change my behavior. I was strict with them. They were polite to me. They called me *luk*, a form of address with a meaning like "sir" or the French *monsieur*. All the same, while lecturing them I sometimes felt self-conscious, like a man who accidentally sees his reflection in a mirror as he is walking down the street. Not much to look at, I thought. Acne scars on my face. Glasses. Sneakers. Unfashionable haircut. I looked like what I was, an unpolished bachelor who lived in a temple.

"So if you put carbon, hydrogen and oxygen together to make sugar, how will they combine?" I heard myself saying. I called on the girls for the answer. One of the Kam girls looked in her notes in confusion. The other had the wrong answer.

Chang My Huoy raised her eyes directly to me and said in her quiet voice, "It would be $C_{12}H_{22}O_{11}$, *luk* teacher, for sugars like glucose and sucrose."

"Correct," I said, "though those three elements also combine with others to form an entire class of organic compounds, the carbohydrates. Most edible plants, like cabbages and yams, are composed of carbohydrates along with proteins and minerals. If you burn these vegetables, the same thing happens as when you burn sugar. You drive off the oxygen and hydrogen, and what is left is carbon." I found myself babbling on like that without quite knowing why. Who cared about chemistry? I didn't. They didn't care either. I wished there were a way to take better advantage of being in a room with three attractive young women. I had learned something about women in Phnom Penh, though probably not enough.

Of these three in the class, My Huoy was the most conscientious. She was also the most shy. She never said an extra word, but she phrased what she said precisely, while her two cousins whispered and giggled. She wore Chinese-style pajamas. Ordinary house clothes. Her pajamas—Huoy's, I mean—were white with a tiny pink floral pattern. Though her cousins were pretty, Huoy, with her light, flawless skin and large, round eyes, had something special about her, a grace and gentleness, and something else I couldn't put a name to,

though I tried to, late at night, unable to sleep, in my room under the monk's quarters. During the break halfway through the class, she asked if I wanted more tea, and at the end of class she brought oranges for all of us from the kitchen, while her cousins chattered. The other girls were no match for her.

The classes came to an end as the exams approached. Chang My Huoy was going to return to Kampot. After the last class I lingered for a few minutes in the doorway, holding the pay envelope in my hand. The family had treated me well. I wasn't in a hurry to go. In Phnom Penh, I had nobody to go to.

At last I pedaled off through the warm, quiet streets. A Honda 90 motorcycle passed me, pulling a trailer with a cargo of firewood, the noise of the sputtering engine gradually trailing off in the distance. There were few cars. I stopped by a roadside vendor, bought a piece of peeled sugar cane and sat down to chew it.

From a nearby restaurant came the shouting of a high-pitched and unmistakable voice. It was the Royal Father, Sihanouk, giving a speech on the radio. He was a familiar presence. Several times a week he took the microphone of the government radio and talked about whatever was on his mind. Once he started he went on excitedly for hours about the honor and the role of the country.

Tonight the Royal Father was telling us about the dangers of the war in Vietnam. He said Cambodia mustn't get caught between the American imperialists and the Vietnamese communists. Cambodia must remain politically neutral, he said, an island of peace and prosperity. An "island of peace"—that's what he always called it.

Cambodia was the envy of its neighbors, he went on, a highly advanced country. Famous throughout the world. We Cambodians were too intelligent to get involved in the Vietnam war. We were a superior race, better than the Vietnamese and the Thais. After all, he shouted, we were the descendants of the builders of the mighty Angkor Wat, the most beautiful monument in the ancient world! We were fortunate to live in such a marvelous country, one of the most enlightened and progressive countries in all Asia!

All of a sudden in the middle of his speech the streetlights went out. The light bulbs inside houses and the strings of colored bulbs decorating the restaurants went out too, all at the same time. Another power failure. They happened all the time, and we were used to them.

Because of the unreliable power, most radios were battery run, and the radio station generated its own electrical supply. So the Royal Father's voice continued without a break.

He went on shouting in the darkness, but I stopped paying attention. Soon the dim yellow glow of lanterns and candles appeared in the houses. A sputtering of motors gave way to a steady throb as the large restaurants started their private generators, and their colored lights shone once again.

If the Royal Father said Cambodia was an advanced country, I supposed he was right. If he said we were lucky to be Cambodian, he was undoubtedly right about that too. But tonight the issues of national pride seemed remote and unimportant. I hadn't said an extra word to Chang My Huoy. She hadn't said an extra word to me. When she wore her hair up, it lay coiled over the nape of her neck. When she let her hair down, it fell thick and soft to her waist.

We had been teacher and pupil. Very correct.

3

ROMANCE AND COUP

IT WAS a year before I saw her again, and then only by coincidence. She was walking along the waterfront by the confluence of the rivers with an armful of books. "Hello, *luk* teacher," she said shyly, her face lighting up with a smile. I got off my bicycle and walked beside her.

In her home province, Huoy had passed the exam for which I had tutored her. Then she moved back to Phnom Penh to begin training to become a teacher herself. Just now she was returning from a meeting in the Chadomukh conference hall near the Royal Palace. She said maybe I could help her with an assignment, since I was in medical school. She was supposed to make some drawings of human anatomy to use as teaching aids. I said I would help her. Did she have drawing paper? She said she did, in the apartment she shared with her mother.

When we got outside her house, I asked if her mother would mind if I came upstairs. Huoy hesitated. For a man to visit a woman in her house, even for the most innocent reason, had implications. She looked away from me for perhaps half a minute, staring across the street. I watched her closely. Finally she said she would introduce me to her mother.

We climbed up the stairs to the third floor and into their tiny apartment. The mother and daughter had the same light Chinese complexion and large round Khmer eyes. Their surname, Chang, was Chinese. I wondered whether to bow my head to Huoy's mother in Chinese style or *sompeah*. I took a chance and raised my palms together

in the *sompeah*. She did the same to me, and I knew they were like me, a mixture of both races and both cultures.

From a glance at their apartment it was clear they were poor. They had a couple of chairs, a dining table, one bed for both of them and a small side table with a statue of Buddha. That was all their furniture. On the wall hung a photograph of Angkor Wat, the pride of the nation, built in the twelfth century, its enormous stone corncob-like towers rising in the air. Very Cambodian. The apartment was very clean. Not just clean but well cared for and comfortable. We began a peaceful and gentle conversation.

An hour passed before I knew it. Huoy's mother invited me to stay for dinner. With classes to teach that evening, the answer had to be no, but she asked me to come back when I could, and I accepted for a few evenings later. On my way out Huoy reminded me about the anatomical drawings, which I had forgotten about completely.

When I came back I was struck once again by how simple and yet how pleasant the apartment was. There were fresh flowers on the dining table and orchids in a vase next to the statue of Buddha. Huoy's mother, whom I politely called "Older Aunt," was even more shy than her daughter. She excused herself so that we two young people could eat together. She served stir-fried beef with ginger, snow peas with water chestnuts and several other dishes to go with the rice. After dinner Huoy and I practiced copying drawings from an anatomy textbook. We didn't flirt. That is, there was nothing we said or did that we couldn't have claimed was perfectly innocent, if we had needed to. But we established an unspoken understanding.

I came back the next evening, and the next evening and the next. Before long I was a regular presence in their apartment. It was the most natural thing, and yet it surprised me. Nothing like it had ever happened to me before. My previous relationships with girls were the kind best not described in public. My friendships with men were based on sports, jokes and quarrels. I was a raw young man. Yet here were two very shy and gentle women who put me on my best behavior.

It was hard to understand. I was hotheaded and stubborn, the kind of person who never changed his mind once he got in an argument, even if he was wrong.

Perhaps the explanation lies in a game that children play in Cam-

bodia; it is played around the world. The two opposing children make their hands into the shape of scissors, paper or rock and show the shapes at the same time to see who wins. Scissors defeats paper, rock defeats scissors and paper defeats rock. I was a tough guy, a rock. My father was another rock. Two rocks cannot defeat each other. My father and I were always battling and neither of us could win. But these two women were soft. They wrapped and cushioned me until hitting had no effect. The rock could not hurt anyone. Sometimes life is like that child's game. Sometimes soft and gentle people win.

It took me months to work up the courage for the next stage, which was inviting the two of them to a movie. When I finally asked, Huoy's mother excused herself and sent Huoy and me off together. Huoy's mother was a widow. A burglar had killed her husband shortly after Huoy was born. Easily frightened and withdrawn from society, she had sheltered Huoy, her only child, but now that Huoy was a young woman her mother wanted her to see something of the world.

Huoy and I had tea in the cafe on the ground floor of her building. We strolled through the smooth evening air down the boulevard to the Angkor Theater. We saw a sentimental love story filmed in Chinese with a Khmer sound track dubbed in. I didn't touch her.

We had begun our romance. We moved slowly, with exquisite and agonizing decorum. Both of us were shy. If we had anything important to say, we didn't say it. We sent messages by allowing our glances to linger, and by sprinkling our conversations with clues for the other person to interpret for hidden significance.

In Cambodia romance is always like that. In our traditional *romvong* dance, men and women move around each other without touching, gracefully waving their hands in the air to the music. Men and women don't demonstrate their affection in public. Even if Huoy and I saw one another every day, we couldn't have held hands on her street without shocking her neighbors and giving rise to sensational gossip.

Most Asian societies are chaste and prudish in their public behavior. The women don't provoke men as much as they do in the West. In Phnom Penh the women wore blouses with ruffles on the front; they weren't trying to show off their breasts. But they could dress modestly and still be attractive. A sarong, wrapped around the waist and covering the legs down to the ankles, or a *sampot*, which is a fancier version of a sarong, shows how a woman is built. Huoy

wore a *sampot* most days. I was a normal, healthy young male. I couldn't help sneaking glances at her, imagining what she looked like underneath.

Of course, other men watched Huoy too, and that was the problem. When she walked along the sidewalk by herself, calmly and slowly in the afternoon heat, there was something about her that would have made any sane man want to walk up to her and start a conversation. I began to watch her, from far away, just in case.

I discovered that Huoy did not talk to any other man regularly; she dropped her eyes and found a polite but determined way to walk on alone. But I was young and impatient and I needed to know what was in her heart. I was also tired of behaving well. So perhaps six months after going to her apartment for the first time, we had our first quarrel. I accused her of walking home with another man, even though she hadn't. I itemized the details of his appearance, the color of his shirt and trousers, his glasses. Huoy said it wasn't true but I said I knew it was. "Is he your boyfriend, or what?" I said sarcastically. "If he is, congratulations. He is very handsome. If you get married to him, it will be very good. Congratulations."

Huoy began crying. She had grown up without the teasing and arguing of brothers and sisters, and she had no defenses against the kind of game I was playing. She was very soft. Tears came to her eyes quicker than anyone I have ever known.

I said, "Okay, tonight I have to go teach a class, so I won't be back." I stayed away that evening and the two following.

On the third day Huoy went to the hospital to see me. She arrived at nine in the morning. I was polite to her but let her know by my expression that I was angry and jealous. I let her wait. At ten I summoned her to my tiny office. She was crying again.

"My mother has invited you to the house tonight," said Huoy. "She wonders why you haven't come the last few nights." It was Cambodian style to be indirect like that, using other people's causes to advance our own.

I answered, "Why aren't you in class today?" Huoy was still taking university classes to get her teaching degree.

"I skipped classes today because I wanted to talk to you. Why weren't you at my house?"

"I wanted to go but I was busy. You know, with the patients and

all the work at the hospital and the lectures. Please excuse me, I have a lot to do."

Huoy held up her hand as if taking an oath. "Believe me. I have no boyfriend."

I said, "I believe it."

"If you believe it why don't you go to my house? Come tonight. Don't let my mother be sad."

When I went to her apartment that night the food was ready on the table. Huoy gave me a hurt smile. I pretended that everything was normal. When Huoy's mother asked me why I had stayed away, I said I had been busy. She pretended to believe me but she gave me a wise, sidelong look.

She left the two of us to eat together and went into the kitchen as usual. Huoy and I sat down and began to eat. I kept my eyes on the food, not meeting Huoy's gaze.

We had rice with the usual side dishes. As always, excellent home-style Cambodian cooking.

Halfway through the meal, Huoy said, "Sweet, are you still angry at me?"

I helped myself to another piece of fish and put it on my plate next to the rice.

"No," I said.

"Then please, look at me."

"I know what you look like." I was still looking at the plate.

"Don't hurt me," she said.

I still looked down at the plate.

Startled, I felt the touch of her fingers on my cheek. I glanced at her arm reaching across the table and then into her enormous brown eyes. "No, I wouldn't hurt you," I said nervously. "I just asked you—"

"Hush," she said, and the gaze that answered mine held a depth of sadness and wisdom that I had never seen in anyone before. "Don't bring back bad memories."

I reached over to stroke her hair.

Huoy had shown she cared for me. The rock had tried to work loose, but the paper wrapped it even tighter than before.

She went to her classes, I went to medical school and we saw each other in the evenings. We were heading on converging courses, ones

that in normal times would bring us eventually to marriage. Engrossed in our daily lives, we could not imagine that an event was about to happen that would set off a chain reaction, push Cambodia into tragedy and affect us to the core of our beings.

In early March 1970 Cambodia was still an island of peace. Politically it was neutral. But all around it was war, or the equipment of war. To the east and southeast was South Vietnam, where the North Vietnamese and the Americans were mired in a struggle that neither seemed able to win. To the north was Laos, mountainous and landlocked, where the communists and royalists waged a smaller war backed by the same outside powers. To the west and northwest was Thailand, where the Americans based B-52s and other warplanes. In the middle of all this was Cambodia, a small country, roughly the size of the state of Washington or one third the size of France.

By Western standards Cambodia was poor and primitive. Most of our people were peasants living off the land. We waited passively for the rains to fill up our rice paddies. We caught tiny fish and foraged for wild foods. Even our wealthiest class, made up of merchants and corrupt government officials in Phnom Penh, wasn't really rich. For all its charm, for all its flower beds and wide boulevards, Phnom Penh was a quiet place where not much happened beyond the morning bustle in the markets and the long lunchtime siestas. And yet how lucky we were, compared to our neighbors! Cambodia was at peace. Nobody had to live in "strategic hamlets" surrounded by barbed wire. We could live where we wanted and do what we wanted. Few were oppressed, beyond the level of oppression and corruption normal for Asian societies. Life ran on in its age-old patterns. In the midmorning, the monks made their silent rounds collecting alms. In the middle of the day, the farmers came in from their fields to rest in the shade under their houses, and old women chewed betel nut and wove their own cloth on looms. At night the villages resounded with the music of homemade instruments and drums.

To me and the people I knew, the war seemed far away. Never mind that the South Vietnamese border was only a few hours' drive from Phnom Penh. We were used to that. Never mind that the Vietnamese communists had a network of hidden roads, the Ho Chi Minh

Trail, along the Cambodia–South Vietnam border. We were vaguely aware of it, but our press didn't remind us of it often. We had had no idea at all that communist supplies were arriving in the ocean port of Sihanoukville, that the Americans had been sending Special Forces teams across the South Vietnamese border or that U.S. B-52s had been dropping bombs in Cambodia for nearly a year. Nobody told us that. Most Cambodians were like me. We were from villages. Our horizons were bounded by rice fields and trees.

We had been at peace because of one man, Norodom Sihanouk. The French appointed him king when he was a schoolboy, expecting that he would be easy to control, but Sihanouk outmaneuvered them, just as he outmaneuvered everyone else. After negotiating our independence in 1953, by hinting at revolution if France refused, Sihanouk abdicated as king and ran for election. He won by a huge margin and continued to be the country's leader. Domestically he kept the support of the dark-skinned ethnic Khmers, who made up the majority of the population, by appealing to their racial pride and by telling everyone over and over how lucky we were to be Cambodians, descendants of the ancient empire at Angkor. But he also protected the rights of the light-skinned minorities, the ethnic Vietnamese and Chinese. In foreign policy he played the communist powers against the Western powers, accepting aid from all of them until 1965, when he cut ties with the United States after what he felt was an insult to his pride. He leaned to the left after that, but officially he kept Cambodia neutral and nonaligned. The American government didn't like him because he wouldn't let U.S. troops come openly into Cambodia to fight the North Vietnamese.

In Cambodia, Sihanouk was immensely popular. We barely noticed his faults, like allowing corruption to go unpunished, and keeping incompetent people in the government. Few of us were educated enough to care. When he spoke to us in his loud, high-pitched voice, shouting and gesturing wildly, eyes bulging with excitement, we listened with respect.

Sihanouk loved drama of every kind. He made movies starring himself. He supported the Royal Ballet; the ballerinas were his concubines. He held huge rallies near his palace, where he heard the complaints of the common people, then called the guilty government officials in and scolded them on the spot. And every year he held a

ceremony at the place where the Mekong and the Tonle Sap rivers join and then separate again. At the precise moment when the current reversed and the water began to flow uphill toward Tonle Sap lake, he blessed the waters, which made the water's reversal seem like something he had caused magically (though, of course, the moon's tidal pull on the rainy-season floods made it happen). Foreigners called him "Prince" Sihanouk, because he had officially abdicated, but we still called him "King." Many peasants believed he was a god.

The trouble began on March 11, 1970, when Sihanouk was out of the country and the press was playing up the North Vietnamese sanctuaries along the eastern border. I was attending a lecture when the protest march started. When I caught up to it later, rioting was under way. Young lycée students were throwing papers, filing cabinets, desks and chairs out of the second floor of the North Vietnamese embassy. They tossed bundles of currency on the street below. They lowered the North Vietnamese flag from its flagpole and burned it. They did the same at the embassy of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam, or Viet Cong, which was located nearby. "Vietnamese stay out of Cambodia!" the students shouted. "Don't invade Cambodia again!"

The riot had less to do with contemporary politics than with an old, old racial grudge against the Vietnamese. Cambodia and Vietnam had fought many wars over the centuries. We Cambodians remembered our defeats and waited for revenge—even those of us who were not "pure" Khmer but a mixture of Chinese and Khmer. We all knew the legend of the cooking stones. According to the legend, Vietnamese soldiers took three Cambodians captive long ago and buried them alive up to their necks with just their heads sticking out of the ground. Then the Vietnamese made a fire between the heads and set a kettle on top of the heads as cookstones. Whether this had actually happened or not, most Cambodians believed it as fact. And in this riot, the resentment against Vietnamese of all kinds, communist and noncommunist, from the North and from the South, and even against Cambodians of Vietnamese descent, got rolled into one.

The riot put Phnom Penh in an uproar. Here was the capital of a supposedly neutral country attacking the embassies of its neighbors. Sihanouk cabled from Paris to try to stop it. He knew what people like me didn't—that the rioters, for all their deep feelings, had been

manipulated by hidden organizers like puppets on strings. But in his absence officials of his government continued to push the North Vietnamese. The two highest-ranking officials were Sihanouk's royal rival, Prince Sisowath Sirik Matak, and General Lon Nol, who was prime minister and also minister of defense and minister of information. Lon Nol was a dark-skinned man who liked his troops to call him "Black Papa." He was proud of being Khmer, and he hated the Vietnamese as much as the rioters themselves. He gave the Vietnamese communists three days to leave their sanctuaries along the border.

Of course, the North Vietnamese didn't leave. If they could fight successfully against a superpower like the United States, why should they obey a government with a tiny military like Cambodia's? In Phnom Penh the excitement and uncertainty rose. The airport closed. Armored cars and tanks took up positions on the streets. On March 17 there was a big rally and parade. I was in it, carrying a sign, shouting for the Vietnamese to go home. Everybody on the street was anti-Vietnamese and pro-Sihanouk. We all felt the same—students, journalists, police, army. What we had forgotten was that Sihanouk himself had carefully balanced the Vietnamese communists and the Western powers to keep Cambodia neutral. He had also protected ethnic Vietnamese-Cambodians from persecution.

At lunch the following day I was having my usual bowl of sour-and-spicy noodle soup. My friend Sam Kwil, a journalist for one of the newspapers, and I were chatting when there was an announcement on the radio: The National Assembly had passed a vote of no confidence against Sihanouk.

Suddenly the food wasn't tasty anymore.

I looked around the restaurant. Everybody was staring with disbelief at the radio. Overthrow Sihanouk? Impossible! I took the radio from its stand and brought it to my table and turned up the volume. We waited. Then the announcement was repeated, and the hope that we had heard wrong disappeared.

Sirik Matak and Lon Nol were behind the coup. They had the support of only a tiny minority, the Phnom Penh elite, which couldn't become as rich as it wanted because Sihanouk and his family controlled all the top jobs. My journalist friend Sam Kwil, who was very well informed, told me that Sirik Matak and Lon Nol probably had help from the CIA. He said that Lon Nol wasn't smart enough to use

racism against the Vietnamese as a way to destabilize the country, and then use the instability as the excuse for a coup. I agreed. But nobody has ever proved that the CIA was involved.

In a short time a new government emerged, with Lon Nol as its chief of state. Soon the government-owned television and radio station and the newspapers that were friendly to it accused Sihanouk of corruption and other crimes. But the attempt to discredit Sihanouk didn't stop there. Back in Samrong Yong, my sister Chhay Thao's husband, a teacher, took me to see a pigsty. There, partially buried under manure, was a statue of Sihanouk, its head severed from its body.

My brother-in-law said the same thing had happened to the statue of Sihanouk in the neighboring town of Chambak. He had helped topple it himself.

"We got orders to destroy it," he explained. "I didn't want to, but the orders came from high up. From *very* high up. We had to obey."

Next, the regime gave an order to all the teachers in the country. Huoy heard about it in her teacher training and became very upset. The teachers were supposed to tell their pupils that Sihanouk was a corrupt traitor. The pupils were supposed to repeat this to their parents. And this was where the backlash began.

All across Cambodia that week, parents scolded and beat their children. It was not just because the parents were loyal to Sihanouk, though they were. It was because Cambodian society was like a family on a big scale. Just like a father who was the head of the family, Sihanouk was the head of Cambodia, the Royal Father. For little children to say that he was bad was disrespectful. Indirectly, it criticized their own fathers.

Anti–Lon Nol demonstrations began. This time the demonstrators were not students but dark-skinned, tattooed farmers and villagers, wearing shorts and kramas and Buddha charms. Sihanouk was their god-king. Even if he could not be restored to power, they wanted his statues restored. They held signs, and some of them had knives and hatchets and machetes, but they didn't have guns. They marched from Samrong Yong to Chambak, and in Chambak Lon Nol's army opened fire on them with machine guns. The dead were carried away in hammocks tied at either end to thick bamboo poles. It was the same in the rest of the country. Near Phnom Penh, the soldiers opened fire

on other demonstrators who were waiting next to a bridge. Up the Mekong River in the town of Kompong Cham, an angry mob seized one of Lon Nol's brothers. They killed him, cut his liver out and forced a restaurant owner to fry the liver and feed the slices to the crowd.

Surely the country had run amok. Surely peaceful, sleepy Cambodia was being overwhelmed by the forces of *kum*. But in a few weeks a kind of peace returned. Most Cambodians didn't dislike the new regime enough to fight it. And practically speaking, there was little to be done. Lon Nol, the former commander of the armed forces, used his military to enforce his rule.

Unlike Sihanouk, Lon Nol was on friendly terms with the U.S. government. He let it do whatever it wanted. In late April 1970, without even notifying Lon Nol first, American and the South Vietnamese forces invaded an area along the Cambodian–South Vietnamese border to try to destroy the communist sanctuaries.

At first the invasion was tremendously popular in Phnom Penh; we thought the Americans were strong enough to kick the North Vietnamese out. But we were wrong. After the Americans and South Vietnamese pulled back to South Vietnam, the North Vietnamese remained. A few tall, red-faced, long-nosed American advisers became a daily sight around the central government buildings and in the major hotels, and American equipment began arriving for the Cambodian military in larger and larger quantities.

For me, not knowing what was to come, the greatest worry was not my country but my family. I wanted my parents to accept Huoy. In the past few years my father had built up his business so much that he bought a second lumber mill. He was exporting lumber to Japan by the shipload. With the new American money in Cambodia there was a huge surge in construction, and that meant more orders too. He started a gasoline-delivery service and bought a fleet of trucks. My father was rich. He chose a girl from another rich Phnom Penh family to marry me.

I told my father that I had already met a girl I liked. Afraid what he might think, I brought photographs of Huoy to my sister Chhay

Thao and asked her to show the pictures to my parents, to test their reactions.

My parents glanced at the pictures, but they really didn't care what Huoy looked like or what kind of person she was. They questioned Chhay Thao closely and forced her to admit that Huoy's family was poor. After that, their minds were closed. They felt they would lose ground socially if I didn't marry someone from another wealthy family.

My parents didn't forbid me to marry Huoy. Then again, they didn't give their consent, which was necessary by tradition. And even though I was unhappy I didn't want to argue with them, any more than they wanted to argue with me. This was too important for losing our tempers. The government had left the middle way for the extremes of war, but we would keep the peace in my family. I would negotiate patiently, like Sihanouk used to do before he was deposed.

By the time of the coup I was fairly sure I wanted to marry Huoy. That my parents didn't approve of her made me want her even more. Only I didn't know which was worse: not being married to her already, which would have taken care of some of my frustrations, or that small, nagging doubt. I didn't know what to do. So I devised another test.

Huoy and I were alone in her apartment. We hadn't argued in months. Everything was fine. I told her to sit down. She sat. I paced brusquely back and forth, the way I used to when I was her tutor.

"Today is the last day of our relationship," I told her. "Today we cut things off. But please"—Huoy looked startled and scared—"just answer my questions carefully. This time you must tell me the truth. Just sit there, stay calm and answer my questions."

I was hurting her; I knew that. I loved her very much but didn't know how to say it. Somehow it was easier to pretend to be angry at her for something she hadn't done than to come out with the truth.

"Today you were sitting on the lap of a man in a cyclo," I said. A cyclo was a bicycle-driven taxi, with the driver pedaling in back and the passengers on a seat in front. "He had his hand on your shoulder, and you were talking with him sweetly and laughing. I saw you with my own eyes. It was the same guy you were with before."

Huoy's shoulders were already shaking, and her hand had risen to wipe her eyes.

I persisted. "So now you must tell me the truth. Do you have a boyfriend or not? I don't care one way or the other. I just want to know the truth. After all, I never said I loved you. And you never said you loved me. If you love someone else, no problem. You are free to love whoever you want."

Huoy got up without saying anything and went to the bathroom. When she came back, her head was bowed and she was dabbing at her eyes with tissues. She said, "I don't know how to tell you that I have no boyfriend! Why do you have to keep doing this to me?"

I kept my face set and my voice angry. "You're playing games! You have somebody else, and you want me to be number two!"

"I don't want to hear any more! It's too painful."

I paced the room back and forth. Then I took a deep breath and let it out. The time had come.

I moved close to her until my face was next to hers.

"Sweet, I'm sorry," I said in a soft voice. "Really I am. I promise. I just want to ask you one thing. Just tell me yes or no." I moved even closer and murmured in her ear, "I'll tell my parents we want to get married. What do you say, yes or no? Just one word, yes or no."

For a few seconds she disbelieved me. Then when I told her I loved her, she took my ear and twisted it, fiercely. And hugged me. She didn't say yes with words, but she meant yes, and she was laughing even as the tears streamed down her cheeks.

We embraced. Now I was 100 percent sure that this was the woman I wanted to marry. If she could stand up to my tricks, she would stay with me through any troubles that might come our way.

We heard her mother's footsteps in the hallway. I gave Huoy a last hug and told her to go take a shower so her mother wouldn't suspect. When Huoy's mother came in she and I had a polite conversation about unimportant matters. I asked her to accompany Huoy and me to a restaurant, but as always she decided to stay at home.

At the restaurant I asked Huoy what we were going to do about her mother. Huoy put her glass down and tried not to smile.

"I already told her that you love me," said Huoy.

"But . . . I hadn't told you yet."

"I just knew," said Huoy lightly. "And she knew even before I told her."

How embarrassing. How very embarrassing. They understood how I felt even before I did.

What a fool I had been!

I slapped my forehead with my palm.

Huoy and I went for a walk along the river. It was the dry season, and the water had dropped far down the sloping concrete embankment. We could see big cargo boats and ferries and the huge modern span of the bridge built with Japanese foreign aid, and dozens of sampans plying the water. We saw all those things, but we didn't really see them. They existed as a backdrop for our conversation.

"You and I," I said as we strolled along, "we must build *honneur* and *bonheur* together. We have a big responsibility, to take care of each another and create happiness in our families. We have a responsibility for tomorrow." Huoy didn't say yes to this but she was smiling. In Khmer, "tomorrow" also means "the future." We walked on thinking about our tomorrows together.

"Please understand about my family," I went on. "I have always had problems with them. It is like a war that never stops. They are rich now. They are upset because you are not rich. Tomorrow, someday, we will be married, but at least we already know what is in our hearts."

Huoy nodded, smiling again.

"I know my parents very well," I said. "We must work on them gradually to earn their trust. So if I ask you to do something for my parents, whatever it is, please do it. Do it for us."

"Yes," Huoy said. "Yes, I will." She understood this, that we could be happy only if we made our families happy. In our culture, the family as a whole is more important than the individual family member.

We walked along the promenade, not noticing anyone else. I had my hand around her shoulders and then on her waist and then her shoulders again. Her long hair blew across my chest in the breeze. The moon reflected off the river, and boats shuttled here and there, dark shapes on the surface of the water.

We walked to the Royal Palace and sat on a bench, looking at the river. We talked in low, contented voices about our happy years ahead.