as a second wife. And her family looked down on me because I was a refugee. So nothing ever came of it.

It was time to say, Okay, bye-bye. But by August 1980 it seemed that I would never leave Thailand. To me, and to hundreds of thousands less fortunate than me, Thailand had become a jail. We couldn't go forward and we couldn't go back. We were only a few miles from Cambodia; at night we could hear the rifle fire as factions of Khmer Serei attacked one another and the boom of artillery as the Vietnamese attacked the Khmer Rouge. In Khao-I-Dang security was tight. The fences were guarded. There were no trees left inside the camp and very little shade. It was a harsh, dusty place except when it rained, and then the red dust turned into mud. The terror was over, but our minds had not healed.

38

TO AMERICA

IT WAS John Crowley who rescued me. I went into the JVA to talk to The Tiger's replacement—by that time actually the replacement's replacement—and got nowhere. There were still problems with my case, though what they were was not explained to me. No, I wouldn't be going to the United States anytime soon. I walked angrily upstairs to John Crowley's office. John Crowley wasn't the boss of the JVA, but he ranked somewhere near the top.

He looked up from his desk. "Well, well. Ngor Haing Samnang. What can I do for you?" He always used my official name—I had added the "Samnang" when I got to Thailand, and it appeared in all my files.

"I vant to go America, John."

He flipped through some papers, ran his finger down a calendar. "The next flight is August sixteenth. That's in four days. Go back to Aranyaprathet, pack your stuff and go. You ready?"

"No. Next month I go. I haff too much to do. I haff many tings to buy."

He looked at me with a faint smile. "We have a lot of stores in the United States, you know. Don't worry about the shopping."

"No, no, no. Too expensive in United States. Too, too expensive. I buy tings here." I didn't tell him the real reason, which had nothing to do with shopping. Cambodians living overseas were sending money to me to bring to their relatives in the refugee camps. It was illegal for me to bring money into the camps, but I felt an obligation to do it, and I had to find someone else to take my place.

We bargained for time and agreed that I would go on the flight

the following week, on August 23. I thanked him, he shook my hand and wished me luck. I went to the Trocadero Hotel to get my paycheck from Susan Walker, the ARC leader. Susan was like John. She had never tried to patronize me and I had always respected her for that. She had always treated me like a fellow human being, and we had a good-hearted farewell.

Then I went out and bought everything I didn't think I would be able to find in the United States, like seeds for Asian vegetables, rubber shower sandals and a radio. (As it turned out, the same model radio was much cheaper in the United States, shower sandals were easy to buy and I never did get around to planting the vegetable seeds.) While in Bangkok I visited my benefactors, General Chana and Uncle Lo, to thank them for what they had done. Then I returned to Aranyaprathet to attend a party given in my honor in Khao-I-Dang. The ARC medical team was there, and so were many refugee friends, and there was music and dancing and happiness and some crying too.

The next night I went to a Westerners' party. There was an outdoor showing of an American film starring John Wayne as a cowboy who rode his horse through the desert and killed a lot of people. It was the first movie I had seen about America, and I asked one of my ARC medical colleagues, Dr. Dale Fanney, if America was really like that, with so much violence and shooting. Dale kept a straight face and said I would see for myself when I got to the United States.

From Aranyaprathet I went back to Bangkok and ran into John Crowley at the U.S. embassy. He sighed and shook his head. By then it was about August 28. I had missed my flight.

"Ngor Haing Samnang, you give me a headache."

"I sorry, John."

From then on everything was in a crazy rush. I never did get my predeparture medical inspection. Day after day my name had been announced over the loudspeakers in the Lumpini transit center, and my friends had been cursing me. They all wanted to be in my place, leaving for America, and I hadn't even bothered to show up for my medical appointment. Of course I wanted to leave for America, but on my own terms.

On August 30, 1980, I finally left. Like everyone else, I had a white plastic handbag with the logo of ICEM (the International Committee for European Migration), the agency that ran the flights. Inside the handbag were my documents, including a photograph of me holding a card with my T-number, or transit number, which was 33144, like a prison convict holding his identification number for the authorities.

It was not my first plane flight. During the Lon Nol regime I flew several times on DC-3s. Some of the other Cambodian, Vietnamese and Laotians refugees had also flown on military or commercial flights before the communist takeover. But for most of the refugees this was the first time inside an airplane. We were on a seven-hundred-seat Boeing 747 chartered from Flying Tiger Airlines. We filled every seat. Row after row, aisle after aisle, nothing showing over the seat tops but black Asian hair.

As soon as the plane took off from the runway, the airsickness began. Lots of noisy vomiting, sometimes in the airsickness bags, sometimes not. The children rushed to the side of the plane to look out the window, old women began praying in loud voices and H'mong babies squatted in the aisles and peed. One old Cambodian lady told everyone in a loud voice not to touch the seat-reclining buttons in the armrests in case it caused the plane to fall into the ocean.

I was the doctor on the flight and also the one who translated information into Khmer about fastening the seat belts, not smoking and using the emergency air supply. Someone else did the translating for Vietnamese and Lao. I got on the loudspeaker several times to remind the Cambodians how to use the lavatories. I told them not to be afraid. When they got inside the lavatories they should lock the door, because that would also turn the lights on. When they were finished with the toilet they should use the flushing handle. My advice didn't do much good. Some of the Cambodians were so rural that they had never seen flush toilets before. I could see the confusion on their faces. They were afraid to ask questions, afraid to touch anything on the plane in case it broke and they would be blamed for it. But they were also afraid to disgrace themselves for soiling their clothes. Slowly, inevitably, as the hours passed and as their bladders filled, they edged nervously toward the lavatories. Inside, I am sure, most of them squatted in darkness with their feet on the toilet seat in Asian style.

The airline made one concession to us, and that was serving rice

with all the meals. The stewardesses rolled their carts down the aisles and gave each of us a choice of chicken with rice or beef with rice. I peeled the foil off the food tray and looked at my meal, the chicken in one divider, the rice in another. There was something suspicious on top of the rice. I smelled it dubiously, tried a bit of it and didn't eat any more. It was the first time I had tasted cheese sauce in my life. Cheese is practically unknown in Asia. People in the seats around me remarked that the rice wasn't very good. We were all worried about the food in America if this was what it was going to be like.

We made a refueling stop at Hong Kong, then headed across the Pacific for Honolulu. In the cabin, dark except for the overhead rows of little lights, we stayed awake and thought about America, the country that could build huge jets but couldn't do something as simple as cook good rice. We sat in the darkness and listened to the quiet whooshing sound of the plane and the noise made by the refugees. Children cried and adults were throwing up, and the old ladies were still praying.

In the daytime we had a long stopover in Honolulu. The second night began while we were en route to San Francisco. We were wondering how far away the continental United States could possibly be.

On the second morning we saw the California coastline and a lot of houses close together and tiny-looking cars on the roads and then we landed at San Francisco. We stood in line for a long time to get our I-94 forms from immigration, which we put carefully in our white ICEM bags with all the other forms we were carrying. Then we obediently got onto the most modern buses I had ever seen. When the driver pulled a handle to open the front door, the back door opened too; when he closed the front door, the back door closed the same way. I sat in the front seat to watch. We drove up the freeway, across the Bay Bridge, along more freeway on the other side. It didn't look anything like the John Wayne cowboy movie. There were streets, houses and cars beyond number, but nobody was riding horses and nobody was on foot. I thought: How do people meet and talk if they don't see each other in the streets? How can I find a job in a place like this?

They took us to a former military base up in the hills to recover from the flight. Cambodians who had arrived a few months before were there to serve us Cambodian food and answer our questions. I

asked how to make a telephone call, and a man volunteered to make a call for me when he left because there weren't any telephones nearby. I asked him to call my cousin Try Thong to come get me. Try Thong lived in a place called Los Angeles. I was scheduled to go to Ohio, and wherever that was I knew I didn't want to go there.

The man who had offered to call didn't come back the next day. I paced back and forth like a caged animal. I didn't know where I was and didn't like being at the mercy of other people. I had helped rescue Try Thong's sisters and their children from the Thai-Cambodian border and sneak them into Khao-I-Dang. It seemed reasonable to expect that Try Thong could rescue me.

On my third morning in America my name and T-number were called on the loudspeaker system and I got on a bus that took me back to the San Francisco airport. At the airport terminal someone told me to sit and wait for somebody else who would show me where to go. I sat down with my two large suitcases and a heavy cardboard box full of medical books. Twenty minutes later a young curly-haired Cambodian working for my sponsoring organization, U.S. Catholic Charities (USCC), appeared and told me to follow him. He didn't use the courteous words that are normal when talking to an older person in Khmer. He started down a long corridor.

"*Luk*," I called after him anxiously. "Please wait. I have to take my luggage in relays."

"All right, but hurry up," he said. I ran after him with one suitcase, came back for the next, then the box of books. By the time I caught up to the first suitcase he was nowhere in sight.

My own countryman had abandoned me. Like the guides who had abandoned us on the way to the Thai-Cambodian border.

I had no idea where I was, or what flight I was supposed to take.

I waited.

A lady at a ticket counter nearby saw me sitting alone and discouraged and asked, "Where are you going?"

I said, "I don't know. I a refugee." I walked over to the counter and showed her my papers, my I-94 form, my photograph and T-number from Lumpini. This was to prove I was legally in America, so she wouldn't make me leave. She stared at my papers and didn't know what to make of them.

"Who's taking care of you?" she asked me finally.

I said, "Cambodia guy. My plane is a ten-thirty plane."

She started making phone calls to see what plane I was supposed to be on. Another lady came over and I showed her my papers too.

She studied them.

"Your plane's already left," she decided.

The women called USCC, which had an office somewhere in the airport. I waited nervously for another hour and then someone from USCC showed up. We walked down one long corridor and then the next and the next and finally into the office. Some other refugees were there speaking Vietnamese. Then the young Cambodian with the curly hair appeared.

"Where did you go?" he asked. "I waited for you."

I gave him an angry look.

"*Luk*," I replied sarcastically in Khmer, "don't ask me where I am going. Ask yourself where you are going. Do you know what you are doing, little boy? Don't forget, if there were no refugees, you would not have a job here. And your job is to help refugees."

The Vietnamese were trying to get me to calm down, but I was just getting started. I pointed my finger at the young man and shook it right in his face.

"I told you I had a lot of things to carry, but you didn't offer to help me!" I shouted. "You were supposed to take care of me. It was an easy little job, but you couldn't even do it. You pretend you're so important that you can't even be bothered! You've got to remember something, motherfucker: I know nothing here. I'm like an animal from the jungle. I'm a refugee. You have an obligation to help me. You're Cambodian and I'm Cambodian. We're from the same place. You should have helped me, but you didn't. That's why the country fell, because of stupid, arrogant people like you who only think about themselves!"

I was just getting started, but the American boss showed up. He invited me into his private office to talk. I didn't have the vocabulary to tell him everything in English that I'd told the young man in Khmer. But he got the general idea.

At eleven-thirty that evening I landed in the airport at Columbus, Ohio. My friend and co-sponsor Hay Peng Sy met me there. I knew him when he was a pilot for Lon Nol and then got to know him better in Lumpini. He had come to the United States ahead of me and had

gotten a job in Columbus as a caseworker for USCC, which is why USCC was my institutional co-sponsor. Following the Western custom, Hay Peng Sy had changed his name to Peng Sy Hay, with his family name last. Similarly, my name was changed from Ngor Haing Samnang to Haing Samnang Ngor.

We went to his house. The next day we went to the USCC office to do paperwork and then went out to look for apartments. I didn't say anything, because I didn't want to repay his kindness with ingratitude, but I had no intention of renting an apartment in Columbus. The place I wanted to be was called Los Angeles. I didn't know where Los Angeles was. I didn't know whether it was a state or a city, whether it was big or small, on the seacoast or in the mountains, hot or cold, or whether a lot of Cambodians lived there or only a few. All I knew was that my niece Ngim was there, Balam was there and so was my other cousin Try Thong. That was all I needed to know.

I hung around Columbus for a few days, watching the programs on a black-and-white TV. It was hard to understand what the TV characters were saying because they spoke too fast. I took a short trip on a Greyhound bus to South Bend, Indiana, to visit some Cambodian friends, then returned to Columbus.

I had left Thailand with about twelve hundred dollars, my savings from working as a refugee camp doctor. The money was already slipping away, with gifts and with the trip to Indiana. For three hundred dollars of my remaining money I bought a plane ticket to Los Angeles. My second cousin Try Thong picked me up at the L.A. airport. He had left Phnom Penh before the Khmer Rouge takeover and had been in the United States since then. He was quite Americanized: Instead of reversing the order of his names, he had changed his name to Phillip Thong. He was a smart fellow, younger than me, and he was doing well for himself as an accountant.

From Phillip's house I called my cousin Balam. Balam and I had drifted apart when I was working in Khao-I-Dang, but I had counted on staying with him until I found a place of my own. I was disappointed. Balam said there wasn't enough room in his apartment for me. He explained that there was a maximum-occupancy rule. His landlord didn't want more than four people living in a two-bedroom apartment, and there were already more than that, with Ngim. I thought: Whatever the landlord is like, he isn't Khmer Rouge. If we

break the rules he isn't going to kill us. But I kept my mouth shut and stayed the night with Phillip Thong.

The next day I went over to Balam's apartment, outside L.A.'s Chinatown. Balam helped me find and rent a tiny room around the corner in the same apartment complex. It was a ten-by-fifteen-foot room with a kitchen in an outlying alcove and a small bathroom. The main room had two sets of louvered windows beside the door and a view of the trash cans across the alley.

The deposit was $150, the first month's rent another $150. There was already a sofa-bed, which Ngim would use. Balam and I went out to buy a bed for me, a table and some other furnishings for a total of about $350. Ngim and I moved in that night. There was no food in the refrigerator. I had $4 left to my name.

39

STARTING OVER

IN AMERICA it never occurred to me that my life was in any danger or that there was any risk of starvation. I wasn't worried about having only four dollars.

Sure enough, the morning after Ngim and I moved into our tiny apartment two Cambodians appeared at our door. The woman had been my patient in Thailand; she brought her husband, whom I had not met before. These two good-hearted people took us out to eat and showed me around L.A. With money they loaned, I bought food and rice from a store in Chinatown. I bought bowls, pots and chopsticks from a flea market.

No doubt about it: We were going to get by.

Now that we had a place to live and a supply of food the next question was deciding how to make a living. I wanted to practice medicine, but to get a U.S. medical license I would first have to pass an English-language proficiency exam and then probably go back to medical school for refresher courses before taking the boards. I was willing to do that, but it didn't solve the problem of supporting Ngim and myself in the meantime. I could have gone on welfare, which would have paid $214 a month plus some extra for Ngim, but that didn't seem worth it. I decided to postpone medical school and get a job.

My first job was as a night security guard for a company outside of Chinatown. While looking for something better I took English as a Second Language (ESL) classes at Evans Community College, just a few blocks away. English is not a logical language, and I have always found it difficult. "Rice" rhymes with "ice" but not with "police."

The "gh" in the word "thought" is silent, but in the word "rough," "gh" sounds like "f." How is anybody supposed to understand the rules?

Slang made English even more mysterious. I used to wonder what it meant when an American shook my hand and said, "You bet." Did he want to make a bet with me? Had I committed myself to making a bet without knowing it when I shook his hand? Should I have kept my mouth shut? I could make myself understood in English, but I knew I was never going to feel completely comfortable. It was much easier for Ngim, who was in elementary school, because she was younger. She could already speak English almost as well as an American.

In November 1980 I became a caseworker for the Chinatown Service Center, which was within walking distance of my apartment. My office, called the Indochinese Unit, provided a free job-placement service to refugees. About half our clients were Vietnamese, a third or more Cambodian and the rest Laotian. Usually my clients and I could find a language in common. If Khmer or Teochiew didn't work, we tried French or Mandarin or English or even Thai. Generally we could exchange basic ideas, with the help of my co-workers if necessary.

Being a caseworker was satisfying. It didn't have the status or the money of being a doctor, but it allowed me to help refugees, which was what I wanted. I translated between my clients and their landlords. I filled out welfare application forms, enrolled children in public schools, arranged for adults to attend ESL classes, explained telephone bills and inquired about relatives in the refugee camps of Thailand. As I gained experience I was asked to buy a car. In my new Volkswagen I drove my clients to the hospitals, to the welfare office, to job interviews all over L.A.

Jobs were the main focus. As refugees we had to start over at the bottom and take whatever was available. I got my clients jobs as dishwashers, waitresses and waiters, cooks, cleaners, landscaping workers, common laborers, assembly line workers in electronics factories, zip code sorters, baby-sitters and piecework sewers. A few of the more educated ones were hired as secretaries and bank tellers. The average job paid only $4.00 to $4.50 an hour, but the starting pay wasn't as important as getting established and then moving up.

At that time there were six to seven thousand Cambodians in and around Chinatown and about the same number of Vietnamese. The Vietnamese adapted quite well and generally moved up the career ladders much more quickly than the Cambodians, who were shy and passive. Often when I set up job interviews the Cambodians didn't even show. They were afraid they would lose face because they didn't speak good English. They were afraid to take risks. They were unhappy in their personal lives. In Cambodian households, arguments, excessive drinking, wife-abuse and divorce were all common.

It was clear that there was a massive mental health problem among Cambodian refugees. I understood it because I had had my share of mental problems too. We had all been traumatized by our experiences. We had all lost parents or brothers or children. Many of us had horrible dreams, night after night. We felt isolated and depressed and unable to trust anyone. What made it worse was that we were in a culture totally unlike our own.

In Cambodia a way of life had evolved over many hundreds of years. It was much simpler than America, and that was part of its beauty. In Cambodia we didn't have welfare or Social Security. We didn't have day-care centers or old-age homes or psychiatrists. We didn't need them. All we needed were our families and the monks. Most households had three generations living together. The grandparents helped raise their grandchildren. The adults in the middle put the food on the table. When there were problems and arguments the monks helped take care of them. The monks helped teach the children proper behavior and taught them how to read and write in temple schools. They also took in orphans and old people with nowhere else to go. In exchange for conducting religious ceremonies and everything else they did, we gave the monks alms, and we sent our teenage boys to them to become monks for at least a short time. The system was not perfect, but it worked. Everybody had enough to eat. Cambodian society was stable. For generation after generation we followed our customs, until in 1975 the communists put an end to our way of life. We lost everything—our families, our monks, our villages, our land, all our possessions. Everything. When we came to the United States we couldn't put our old lives back together. We didn't even have the pieces.

In Thailand a smart Cambodian could figure out some of the words

on a street sign and understand part of a Thai conversation because the language and alphabet were similar. In the United States the language was totally different. Not being able to read the street signs, talk to the people or even understand the TV programs left the average Cambodian isolated, which made the depression worse.

There were no real temples to go to. There was a makeshift temple inside an ordinary house in a run-down section of Long Beach, southwest of L.A., where a lot of Cambodians lived. There was a Thai temple with traditional architecture and Thai monks. But for most Cambodians these temples were beyond walking distance. We had to drive to go anyplace, and we had to organize trips on the weekends, when those who had cars were free.

Almost everything was different about America. Men who used to be wealthy merchants and officers in the Lon Nol regime stayed on welfare. They didn't want to lose face among their friends by taking low-status jobs like driving taxis or working in warehouses. Men who had been brave in combat became timid, afraid of the blacks and Hispanics on the streets. They went into supermarkets and only saw what was not as good as Cambodia, that the vegetables were not as fresh, that there were few tropical fruits, that there was no bargaining over prices. They noticed that much of American daily life is impersonal. Shopping. Driving on the freeways. Watching TV. They found they could go for days at a time without talking to anybody.

I missed Cambodia too. The food and the bargaining and the market gossip. Praying in the temples and walking along the boulevards in the warm, quiet evenings. Most of all I missed Huoy. But I saw many good things about America. It was much cleaner than Cambodia. There weren't as many flies. The tap water was safe to drink. People were more educated. Ngim liked America too. She was getting excellent grades in school. Her classmates couldn't pronounce her name easily, so we chose a new name, "Sophia." It is Western but also Eastern, a name that came to Cambodian culture through Sanskrit.

I had a job, a car, a niece I was raising as a daughter. Life was very comfortable. I never had to worry about *chhlop* spying on me, or soldiers tying me up and taking me away. When I woke up in the morning, I felt no terror. I knew for sure that I would live through the day and through the week and for many years ahead.

Once, as I was driving along in my VW and stopped at a light, I saw a dog being walked on a leash. The owner stopped to pat the dog, the dog wagged its tail and I remembered what I told Huoy about dogs in America living better than people on the front lines. It was true: Dogs did live better. America was a prosperous place. Then the light changed to green and I drove off to my next appointment, amazed at my good fortune.

By March 1982 I had lived in America for a year and a half. I spent most of my time with fellow Cambodians. Through my work I helped refugees adjust to their new lives, and indirectly this helped them recover from the trauma of their old lives. But we didn't talk much about what had happened under the Khmer Rouge. We kept our memories bottled up inside.

One day in March two acquaintances of mine dropped by the Chinatown Service Center to see me. They were Sisowath Sourirath, of the minor branch of the Cambodian royal family, and Jean Fernandez, the younger brother of a general in the Lon Nol regime. We were all getting by, but none of us had regained the status or the wealth we had had in Cambodia. Jean Fernandez was selling life insurance. Sisowath was working for the Catholic Welfare Bureau in Long Beach. He had helped me fill out an application to buy a set of encyclopedias, but the encyclopedia company had turned me down because my credit wasn't good enough. When Sisowath and Jean came in that day they said they were applying for something else now, for roles in a Hollywood film about Cambodia. They said I had to apply. I told them no thanks.

They tried to get me interested in the film, but I really wasn't listening. Clients were walking into the office and I had to help them find jobs. My clients were real people with real problems, and I didn't have time for daydreams.

But rumors of the film swept through the Cambodian communities in L.A. and Long Beach. Everybody had heard about it. A lot of people dreamed about being in a Hollywood movie, and many had

applied. For them, I think, that was the real America, the money and the opportunity they'd wanted to believe in back in the refugee camps. I knew how their minds worked. Everybody who applied for a part in the movie secretly thought he was going to be a star and get rich overnight. They wanted to forget about the other America—working in a regular job to pay for rent and food and gasoline while never getting ahead, or only getting ahead slowly.

I didn't want anything to do with movies. In Cambodia acting had been a low-paid profession without any particular status. I had been a doctor. I had owned a Mercedes and part of a medical clinic. Maybe I wasn't a doctor now, and maybe I wasn't wealthy, but everybody knew that I used to be. There was no need for me to stoop to a low-class job like acting.

Some Cambodians who lived in Oxnard, up the coast from L.A., invited me to a wedding party. I really didn't want to go. It was an hour and twenty minutes each way on the freeway, plus the money for gas. It rained the whole way up there, the windshield wipers of my Volkswagen slapping back and forth. When I walked in the door, Jean Fernandez and other friends greeted me. Most of the wedding guests were Cambodian. The most obvious exception was a black American woman who said her name was Pat Golden. She was from the movie studio. She asked me to sit for a photograph and give her my name and phone number. But a live band was playing and the guests were dancing the *romvong*, gracefully and slowly waving their hands to the music. It had been a long time since I had danced the *romvong* and I told her no.

She didn't let me get away. Every time I left the dance floor she came up to me. She had already taken Jean Fernandez's picture. She had taken nearly everyone's picture. An old man who was drunk pushed me forward and told me to go ahead, it wasn't going to cost me anything.

I told Pat Golden I had come there to have fun and I hoped she wouldn't bother me.

"Keep cool," she said, patting me on the shoulder. She wore casual clothes, blue jeans and a white shirt, but she looked well dressed in them. She had a low, husky voice and a gap between her front teeth and a very strong, confident character. She said there were no forms

to fill out. All she wanted to do was take my picture and get my phone number.

I told her, "Okay. I let you take pictures if you give me vun for a souvenir."

The living room was crowded and she had me stand in the hallway, outside the bathroom door. She asked me to take my glasses off. She pressed the button on the Polaroid, and the flash went off and a shiny piece of paper ejected from the front of the camera. She took another picture, gave me one, and I stared at it to see what would develop. It just looked like me without my glasses. Not a handsome guy, not young, not a movie-star type.

Two weeks passed, then a month, then two months and three months without a word from her.

In the fourth month she called me on the telephone. She wanted to set up an interview about forty miles away from where I lived. I told her yes without meaning it. My friends had told me that she had asked other Cambodians too. They drove in from San Diego, Santa Ana, L.A. and Long Beach for the interview. But not me.

The next morning Pat Golden called me at the office and asked me why I didn't come. I told her sorry, I was busy. There was a pause and I decided to be more honest. I said I didn't want to go because I didn't think I'd get the job. She said, "We haven't made any decisions yet. Please come." She was very persistent.

She wanted to interview me that night in Long Beach, twenty-five miles away. "Is five o'clock okay?" she said. I said, "No, I work in office hours." "Six?" she said. "No," I said, "the freeway to Long Beach is too crowded then. How about seven?"

I got there at eight. She was waiting. I said I was sorry, that I had been busy. She didn't reproach me. She was conciliatory and polite—just like a Cambodian. She was a very smart woman and she knew something about our culture. She knew if she got angry at me I would use it as an excuse to leave.

Other Cambodians were there ahead of me. Pat Golden interviewed Long Boret's daughter—Long Boret was Lon Nol's prime minister at the time of the Khmer Rouge takeover—and finally called me in.

She said, "Okay, Haing, if you were with some Americans and

you had to convince the Khmer Rouge that the people you were with were *not* Americans, how would you do it?"

I improvised a scene for her.

After it was over, she said, "Thanks. I'll let you know in a week."

I said, "I don't believe you. If you say one week, maybe a month and a half."

"No, this time I'm serious," she said. And a week later she called me in for a second interview. This time it was in a studio in Burbank.

Then there was a third interview, also in the Burbank studio. At each interview there were fewer Cambodians than before.

A young bearded Englishman was at the fourth interview. He was Roland Joffé, the director of the film. Roland Joffé asked me about my story—how long I had lived under the Khmer Rouge, what happened when I was captured, how I got to the refugee camps in Thailand. I talked for an hour. He watched me with intense blue eyes and listened carefully.

Roland Joffé was at the fifth interview. This time he had a video camera for the screen test. He set up a hypothetical situation: A Cambodian doctor was very fond of an American nurse. The night before, the radio had announced that all foreigners had to leave Cambodia. How would the doctor tell the nurse she had to leave Cambodia to save her own life?

Pat Golden played the American lady.

I played the Cambodian doctor.

Roland Joffé changed the situation. The American lady believed the Khmer Rouge wouldn't hurt her, because she was foreign, but that they would almost certainly kill me. How would I explain to her that Cambodia was my country, that I would stay no matter what?

I acted the part to Pat Golden.

Roland Joffé brought the camera in closer and closer but it didn't make me nervous. I knew if I really put myself in the situation and believed what I was saying to Pat Golden, the camera didn't matter.

"Now," Roland Joffé said to me, "you have taken the American woman to the airport, to see her off. What are your last words before she goes away?"

"You haf to leave right now," I told Pat Golden. "You haf to listen me. Situation now very hard. You foreign people. Khmer Rouge don't like you. For me no problem. I'm Cambodian people." I wept on her shoulder and wiped my eyes and told her over and over again that she had to go and I would miss her.

When I finished they said thank you very much.

In interview six I went in front of the camera again. Roland set up another scene with Pat Golden playing my Cambodian wife. I had to tell her to leave because the Khmer Rouge were going to kill everybody. I broke down and cried again, only this time it was hard to stop.

As soon as I finished one scene Roland Joffé had me do another. All of the scenes were sad, except for the last one. In this one I was a doctor. A patient of mine was about to die. I operated on him, tried my best and against the odds the operation was successful. What did I do when I learned the good news? What did I say?

I acted it out for him.

Joffé said he would let me know, but he didn't know when that might be.

I went back to work and tried not to think about the screen tests. Seven thousand Cambodians had applied for jobs in the movie.

Three more months passed before Pat called again, from New York. She wanted to know what kind of passport or visa I was holding. I said it was a resident alien card, with my photo and thumbprint. She asked whether it would cause a problem if I had to go to Thailand with the company. No problem for me, no problem for my niece either.

She called back a few weeks later. What was I getting paid at the Chinatown Service Center? Four hundred dollars a week, I said. She said, how about if she gave me eight hundred dollars a week?

No problem, I said.

She called again with detailed questions about my visa and said, "How about a thousand dollars a week?"

"Don't worry about the money," I said. "Give me what you want. I just want the job."

And it was true. I had changed my mind. If I could be in the film, I decided, in any capacity, I could help tell the story of Cambodia. And that was important because it was a story nobody really knew. Most Americans didn't even know where Cambodia was. They had heard of Vietnam, but not Cambodia. Even in L.A., non-Cambodian Asians didn't know what had happened under the Khmer

Rouge regime. If we told them they just nodded their heads and pretended to believe us so we wouldn't lose face.

And really, the reason I hadn't wanted the job earlier didn't have anything to do with losing face, or with not being offered a part, or with looking foolish in front of the camera. I hadn't wanted to bring back the suffering. There were too many reminders already.

Ever since coming to the United States I'd had nightmares. If I thought too much in the daytime about what had happened, I had dreams that night. Huoy died in my arms over and over and over. I saw my father tied to the tree and trying to tell me something, but afraid to speak.

It didn't take much to set off my nightmares—the sound of water dripping from the faucet was enough. It put me back in prison, looking up at water dripping from a hole in a bucket.

Almost every night I woke suddenly and sat up to make the dreams fade. Outside the louvered windows the streetlights were shining on the hard pavement of the alley and reflecting off the metal and glass of parked cars. In L.A. there was always a background noise of traffic on distant streets and maybe a siren or honking horns. I felt more alienated than ever, and not sure how much better America was than what I had left behind, because I hadn't really left it behind, and I couldn't enjoy the best of America. So I decided to go back to the refugee camps and confront my past. To try to get rid of my nightmares.

Before we left for Thailand all the Cambodians who had been chosen for the film got together for a party. Pat Golden was there. All the other Cambodians knew what part they were playing, but when I asked Pat she just told me not to worry, I wasn't going to have to learn anything by heart. It sounded to me as though my part was pretty small. The other Cambodians began teasing me and saying that I had the co-starring role, but I just laughed and told them not to believe it.

When I got to Thailand I was given a script, but still nobody told me what part was mine. Then when Roland Joffé called a rehearsal I found that I was going to play Dith Pran.

"Oh my god," I said to myself, slapping my hand to my forehead. "How big I am."

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THE KILLING FIELDS

"THIS IS a story of war and friendship, of the anguish of a ruined country and of one man's will to live." So began a 1980 article in *The New York Times Magazine*. The author was Sydney Schanberg, the *Times*'s correspondent in Cambodia during the Lon Nol years.

Schanberg wrote about the relationship between himself and his Cambodian assistant Dith Pran. They were not equals. Schanberg was the boss. By nature he was angry and unsatisfied, always demanding more of people around him. However, he did not speak Khmer or know much about Cambodian culture. He needed Dith Pran to be his eyes and ears and nose. He depended on Pran when they ran into obstacles to their reporting or when they got into situations that threatened their lives. Pran, in turn, depended on Schanberg for guidance. The two men were very different, but they liked each other and they were close.

During the communist takeover Pran saved Schanberg and some other Western journalists from execution by the Khmer Rouge. With the communists in control of the city, all the Westerners and a few Cambodians including Pran retreated to the French embassy. Pran was forced to leave the safety of the embassy and join the rest of the Cambodians out in the countryside, while the Westerners were allowed to leave for Thailand and freedom. For almost four years, while the Khmer Rouge controlled the country, Schanberg heard nothing of Dith Pran. He felt terribly guilty: Pran had saved his life, but he, Schanberg, hadn't been able to save Pran. Finally the Vietnamese

invaded, Pran escaped from Cambodia and the two men met again in a Thai refugee camp.

The article moved the hearts and the conscience of people who hadn't known much about Cambodia or who hadn't thought about the revolution there in human terms. Out of the magazine article grew the movie *The Killing Fields*. The movie's producer was an Englishman, David Puttnam, who had made *Chariots of Fire* and other films. The director was another Englishman, Roland Joffé, whose background was in theater and in film documentaries. The lead actors were two Americans, Sam Waterston as Sydney Schanberg, John Malkovich as the cynical photographer Al Rockoff . . . and me, a Cambodian, as Dith Pran.

Studying the script I made a surprising discovery. *I was Dith Pran.* This is not to say that our stories were identical. Pran was a journalist; I was a doctor. He worked with Westerners; I worked with Cambodians. His wife and children left Phnom Penh on a helicopter before the fall; Huoy and my family stayed. When he lived in the countryside, Pran was beaten by the Khmer Rouge; but he never went to prison and never suffered as much as I did.

But the differences were much less important than the similarities. I was him and he was me because we were Cambodian men of about the same age and because we had been under the hammer of the same terrible events: the civil war, then the revolution, then the foreign occupation and finally pouring into the refugee camps and going to America. Surviving the Khmer Rouge years was the most important fact of our lives, the very center of our identities. And we had both survived without quite knowing why.

Turning the pages of the screenplay I marveled at our life paths, which ran parallel and sometimes crossed. Dith Pran had seen the senseless, barbaric civil war. As a journalist he'd gone to some of the same briefings and battlefields as my friend Sam Kwil. He'd seen the *bonjour* and the deteriorating conditions in the hospitals, the wounded patients piled on the floors. In the screenplay he and Sydney Schanberg visited Preah Keth Melea Hospital. In real life I had treated patients in Prea Keth Melea before the fall. Pen Tip was on the radiology staff there.

Both Dith Pran and I had an opportunity to leave Phnom Penh on the American helicopters. We didn't go because we didn't know

what the Khmer Rouge were really like. Pran went into the French embassy with the foreigners; I drove past the French embassy on my Vespa on my trip back into Phnom Penh and saw the foreigners on the lawn.

In the countryside Dith Pran and I were rice farmers, like all the other "new" people. We both pulled plows by hand, planted and harvested rice, dug canals and built earthen dams. We ate bowls of watery rice and gathered wild foods. We lived with the daily terror. When the Vietnamese invaded, we both escaped to Thailand through the minefields. Of the more than half a million Cambodians on the border, Dith Pran and I were two of the very luckiest. I had Chana to give me my freedom and Uncle Lo to give me money and clothes. Dith Pran had Sydney Schanberg.

But I had never met Dith Pran. I asked Roland Joffé how Pran walked and spoke and what his facial expressions were like. I asked him to introduce us. It seemed to me that playing the Dith Pran part meant imitating the real man as much as possible.

Roland was evasive. "Haing, don't worry what he looks like or how he would have done things," he advised. "Just be yourself." Roland encouraged the idea that Dith Pran and I were the same person on the inside. And I never did meet Dith Pran until the filming was over.

Roland knew that I had never acted before. He didn't try to make acting seem difficult or mysterious. He made it as easy for me as possible.

He sent a tall, bearded American to the Bangkok airport to meet me. The American was very friendly and polite. He said his name was Sam Waterston. A few days later, with the help of John Crowley, who was pleased and surprised to see me, Sam and I got our passes to visit the Thai-Cambodian border. Roland assigned Sam to write newspaper stories about the border, just like a real journalist. Since I spoke Khmer and reasonably good Thai, I was Sam's translator and guide. Roland was re-creating a relationship like the real Sydney Schanberg and Dith Pran.

Sam and I drove along the road to Aranyaprathet. In three years little had changed. I showed him my favorite market stalls and restaurants and the ARC house where I had lived. We drove south of Aran to a Khmer Rouge border camp that had been attacked by

Vietnamese a few days before. Cadre followed us wherever we went, never letting us out of their sight. Nothing had changed about the Khmer Rouge—the disdain on their faces, the atmosphere of menace, the thatched-roof houses with no walls.

I translated for Sam while he interviewed Khmer Rouge officers and wrote their answers in his notebook. Sam asked them if they had enough food, if their families were with them and so on. The Khmer Rouge kept telling Sam that all they wanted was to go back into Cambodia to fight the Vietnamese.

Throughout the interview I kept a detached, neutral presence, at least on the outside. While Sam asked the questions and took notes, I stayed as calm as a monk. Inside, my emotions were different. I thought of grabbing the cadre by their shirts and shouting, "Fools! You want to fight the Vietnamese? Look around you at the consequences of your fighting—at the orphans, the handicapped, the civilians with no homes!" I thought of grabbing a rifle and spraying them with bullets. But I didn't do anything like that, and I kept my emotions hidden.

From the Khmer Rouge camp we went to Khao-I-Dang, where many of my old friends were still working in the hospital clinics, living in their huts and hoping to be resettled in the West. Again, I was Sam's eyes and ears and nose, helping him understand what was there. Sam was a cultivated, educated man, but he had never been to Southeast Asia before.

When we returned to Bangkok, Roland sent Sam and me to Chieng Mai, in northern Thailand, near the opium-producing region of the Golden Triangle. With us were John Malkovich and a British actor named Julian Sands, who was going to play the journalist Jon Swain.

It was almost like a vacation. Our only assignment was to get to know each other. The four of us went sightseeing together. I negotiated with the taxi drivers, ordered the food at restaurants, explained the culture. They asked me about Thailand and Cambodia. They wanted to know why Cambodians wear kramas and Thais don't. They asked about food, Buddhism, corruption, history. Sam asked the most questions. Most of the time he and I spoke in French, since that was easier for me, and he could speak it fluently.

One evening after we had gotten to know each other, Sam and I sat down in a bar. After a few drinks I began to tell him things about

life under the Khmer Rouge that I had never told anybody else. Things that had always bothered me. About leaving the patient to die on the operating table the day the communists took over. About watching Huoy die and being unable to save her. About my Aunt Kim, who had risked my life by telling the chief of Tonle Batí my real identity. I told Sam that to the best of my knowledge, one of Aunt Kim's sons had been a hard-core Khmer Rouge officer. This same son had slipped past Immigration and was living in the United States. What was I supposed to do about that—a cousin who was probably a war criminal?*

Sam was easy to talk to. He was wise and polite, a real gentleman. We became friends. In a totally different way I also became friends with John Malkovich, who was very naughty and funny. John was always telling dirty jokes and making sly remarks about the young, beautiful Chieng Mai prostitutes. He got me to teach him to curse in Khmer. For me it was the best of both worlds: I could behave like a gentleman with Sam Waterston or a rascal with John Malkovich.

When we returned to Bangkok, Roland started us doing improvisation scenes to prepare us for the cameras. Right from the start I felt comfortable acting with Sam and John and Julian. Being friends in real life made acting with them seem easy and natural. Of course, that was what Roland had planned all along.

Roland was the center of this multimillion-dollar movie project. His partner was David Puttnam, the producer. Just by watching them with other people, you could tell that the two of them cared a great deal about telling the story truthfully. They went to great lengths to get details exactly right. They had negotiated for months with the Thai government to set up the filming locations in several parts of the country. They always had good food—Asian food for the Asians, Western food for the Westerners. Throughout filming they were friendly and approachable. Roland knew the names of most of the Cambodians

*Since then, I have attempted to get the U.S. government to start an investigation. It is a delicate business: On one hand, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) presumably wants to catch people who lied to it and who are war criminals. On the other hand, INS officials could use an investigation as an excuse for stopping all Cambodian refugees from coming to the United States. As this is written, about twenty thousand innocent people who want to come to the United States are stuck in Khao-I-Dang because the INS has falsely accused them of Khmer Rouge associations. The INS has tightened its rules so much that Dith Pran himself could not come to the United States if he were a refugee today.

in the cast, even the bit actors he hadn't yet worked with. His light blue eyes seemed to penetrate into everything. The Cambodians on the set called him "Buddha" because he was so calm and so smart.

The filming began with a scene of Sam and John sitting in an outdoor cafe in Phnom Penh in the Lon Nol years. A man held the clapper in front of the camera and announced, "Take One, Scene One," and then clapped the hinge shut. The assistant director called out, "Ready," and the cameraman answered, "Ready." Then the assistant director said, into his walkie-talkie, "Stop all truck movements." When the background movement had stopped he said to the rest of us, "Go!" and then, "Roll it!" and finally, "ACTION!" in a loud voice. The camera made its quiet whir, and Sam and John began the scene, making small talk, deciding what to order and then rushing into the street when a grenade exploded. Roland knelt on the ground off-camera. He had removed the little zoom lens he kept on his belt and was looking through it. Between takes he came in to advise the actors and change their positions a bit. Then the scene began again.

"Take Two, Scene One."

"Ready . . ."

Roland told me that when I went on-camera I didn't have to speak every word exactly from the script as long as what I said included the key words and phrases. When I spoke in Khmer I could say whatever I wanted as long as it was appropriate to the scene. He made the camera crew responsible for the blocking and the lighting, so the actors didn't have to worry about it. When it came time for me to go on-camera I was with my friends Sam and John, who knew just what to do. All I had to do was react to them and live out my part. There was no time to wonder what this meant, living out the part. Around me, everyone else was already doing it.

Roland told me to remember situations from my own life that were similar to the movie, and then use those emotions in the scenes. This made sense to me. I prepared for the rice field scenes by remembering how I had felt and walked and worked on the front lines. When I ate watery rice or caught lizards in the movie, I remembered what hunger was like in the countryside. The rural scenes were the easiest, because I had been in identical situations. From there it was a small step to similar situations, and from there another step to situations that were externally different but had some thread in common with my own

experience. For example, when Dith Pran argues with his wife about leaving Cambodia, that was me, not listening to Huoy telling me to leave the country. During the Khmer Rouge takeover scene, when Dith Pran pleads to the guerrillas to spare the lives of the Western journalists and he puts his palms together like a man praying and keeps asking them even when it appears hopeless, that was me in prison, begging the Khmer Rouge to believe I was not a doctor. Or if that was not exactly what I did in prison, that was what I felt like doing in prison, which still gave me an emotion to work with. When Dith Pran carries a young boy toward the minefield, that was me, carrying my young niece Ngim.

Gradually I began to build on the skills I had learned. With advice from Sam, and with pushes from Roland, who refused to accept my limitations, I did things I did not know I could do.

In the central scene of the movie, Dith Pran has to say good-bye to the Western journalists, leave the safety of the French embassy and go off into the countryside. It is a sad scene because the journalists have failed to protect him and he knows he has to go even though he will probably die. I prepared for it by remembering what it had been like to say good-bye to Huoy on the front lines. Every time we said good-bye it hurt, because we knew we might never see each other again. I dwelt on that sadness until it grew and the feeling took over, and then just before the cameras started rolling I reached into my memory and remembered how I felt when she died. On the set I tried to hold in my emotions as I shook hands with one Western journalist, embraced Sydney Schanberg and slowly walked downstairs, but the sadness and grief were beyond control. Between takes the wardrobe man handed me tissues without looking at me. "Roland," I said after the sixth take, "I don't think I can do this again." Roland paid no attention. He shot the scene a seventh time and this time everything was right. When I came off the set the cast and crew looked at me in absolute silence. The kind of silence that is louder than applause. I kept on walking, because in my mind I was still on my way out of the French embassy, heading toward death in the countryside.

What was strangest was going out to shoot these scenes during the day, believing in the part I was playing, and then going back to a luxurious hotel. The cast and crew ate well, lived well and were very sociable in the evenings. It was like a huge party. Then the next

morning I would wake up and wonder all over again whether the Khmer Rouge were going to tie me up and take me away.

Usually I could cross from the hotel to the film role and back again. But sometimes on location my defenses fell apart and I slipped back into the hunger and terror of the Khmer Rouge years. There was a scene where Dith Pran made an incision in the neck of a live ox for the blood, for nutrition. (I had never done that in real life, but I had cut the tail off a live ox—pretty much the same thing.) He is caught by the Khmer Rouge, beaten and kicked. In the shooting of the scene I wore padding under my clothes to protect parts of my back and my legs. Unfortunately the bamboo stick that was supposed to be used in the scene broke and was replaced by a heavy wooden stick. And unfortunately the actors playing the Khmer Rouge guards didn't hit me where the padding was. For a moment it was too real —the shock, the pounding of my blood in my ears, knowing that I was going to die.

Then there was the *chhlop*. She was a young girl who lived in a small refugee camp just outside Aranyaprathet. The casting people found her and the wardrobe people gave her just the right appearance, the baggy black clothes, the short hair parted in the middle with the ends tucked behind the ears, but she needed coaching. She was a shy young girl, and whenever she could she clung to her older sister like a baby to its mother. I told her in Khmer how to look at me like a real *chhlop*, full of anger and power. She should tilt her head back to stare "down" on me and her lower lip and jaw should protrude to signal her disdain. But most of all, she had to get the eyes right. "Look hard at me," I said. "Don't blink. Just stare at me. Like you want to eat me. Like I'm Enemy Number One."

When filming started the young girl was transformed. Only she didn't just resemble Khmer Rouge. There was something deep inside her character that she hadn't learned from me.

"Just like Khmer Rouge!" I shouted to Roland Joffé. "She is Khmer Rouge—100 percent!"

Roland looked at me and came over to try to get me to calm down, but I was still pointing at the girl and shouting. Maybe he misunderstood me. Maybe he thought I meant that she was Khmer Rouge in the technical sense, a girl who had worked for the Khmer Rouge administration. I don't know. Maybe that's what I meant too. All I know was that a lot of people had come over to restrain me. "You can tell by the eyes! Look at her eyes!" I was shouting.

Roland was fascinated. He did take after take, to watch her. Off-camera she went to her big sister and shyly hid behind her. On-camera she became a different person, resentful, surly, arrogant. It was like turning an electric light switch on and off. For Roland, who understood more about Cambodians than the other Westerners on the set, the girl was the solution to the mystery. The mystery was how the Cambodians, the most shy and gentle people in the world, had turned into mass killers. This is Roland's explanation: Cambodian children bury their anger deep. They are not allowed to be aggressive toward elders. They have to keep their heads lower than the adults' when walking past them. When sitting, they have to be careful not to point their feet. The anger stays suppressed when they become adults, because the society is so rigidly concerned with keeping face. When anger has a chance to come out, it is uncontrollable.

I saw it more simply. To me, when the little girl was "acting" she became her real self. Whether she had been in the Khmer Rouge or not, hers was a soul I had seen many times before. She had little schooling or religion. Little to train her away from the worst trait of Cambodians. The little girl was *kum-monuss*.

Besides acting the part of Dith Pran, I felt it was my duty to help Roland make the film as accurate as possible. Roland agreed to many of my suggestions. For example, the film shows Khmer Rouge putting plastic bags over people's heads, which is something not in the script. We did scenes of life on the front lines of transplanting rice, of pulling a plow by hand, and Roland was as interested as I was in making them authentic. He refused, though, when I asked him to show the Khmer Rouge whipping the men pulling the plow. I felt the film should be more violent, to show what the Khmer Rouge were really like, but Roland did not agree. In terms of historical authenticity, I was right; in terms of knowing what the movie audiences would tolerate, he was. If the film had shown how bad things really were under the Khmer Rouge, Westerners would have refused to see it.

We were in Thailand for four and a half months. It was a stressful time for me. I lost weight. My nightmares were even more frequent than before. I didn't have much chance to see old friends, like General Chana, Uncle Lo, John Crowley, Susan Walker and the Cambodians

I knew in the refugee camps. I missed my niece Sophia. But the cast and crew of *The Killing Fields* were excellent companions.

Before we left Thailand we had a big cast party in Bangkok. Everyone came prepared to have a good time. I did too. But I showed up in black trousers, black tunic and black rubber-tire sandals. In Khmer Rouge costume. To remind them that we were doing more than just making a movie.

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CELEBRITY

IN THE FINAL VERSION of *The Killing Fields* there is a scene, filmed in Thailand, where Sam Waterston and I, playing Sydney Schanberg and Dith Pran, visit Lon Nol troops and their U.S. military advisers. The Khmer Rouge launch an attack. Sam and I jump into a foxhole. The camera shifts to a close-up, filmed in England, of the two of us in the foxhole and me shouting, "Sydney, look! Khmer Rouge!" Without pause the movie shifts back to footage shot in Thailand. It is all so perfectly matched that the viewer would never know the difference.

Similarly, the evacuation of the U.S. embassy in Phnom Penh, filmed with actors in Thailand, is spliced with shots of huge U.S. Marine helicopters, filmed in San Diego.

It surprised me, but that's how movies are—put together from footage shot in different times and places, with reshootings, audio dubs, titles and music added in. The actors are only part of the illusion.

The first and longest session of shooting had taken place in Thailand from March to August 1983. In November 1983 we had another two weeks of shooting in San Diego and in Canada. In April 1984 I went off to Thailand for a few weeks to film the escape to the border. In August and September I was in England to shoot a few scenes, like the close-up in the foxhole, and do some audio dubbing.

I didn't mind the traveling. It was an opportunity to see new places and to be reunited with the cast and crew.

Each time I returned from filming to my four-hundred-dollar-a-week job in Los Angeles. Each time I came back I felt guilty. My colleagues at the Chinatown Service Center were wonderful people —some of them Vietnamese, some Cambodian, some Chinese from

Taiwan and Hong Kong. The work we did was important and practical. We had goals to reach. Each month we tried to place a certain number of refugees in jobs. Each time I left made it harder on the others.

Each time I went off, my supervisor granted me a leave of absence. She was very kind. And only she and the overall boss of the center knew the real reason for my travels. I didn't tell anybody else in L.A., except Sophia. To my friends and colleagues I explained vaguely that I was going off to work with refugees. Part of my reason for not telling them was to protect myself in case the movie wasn't any good. There was no sense in getting them excited and then disappointing them later. But the underlying reason for not telling them was that I had developed a habit of secrecy under the Khmer Rouge. It was still hard to trust people. I didn't even tell Balam, who lived a few doors away, or my brother Hok, who lived outside L.A., or my cousin Phillip Thong.

It was like leading a double life.

Around November 1984, while sitting in my cubicle at the office, a call came in from the Warner Bros. studio in Burbank. David Puttnam and Roland Joffé were there, and they wanted me to go to a prerelease screening of the film in San Diego. I sat with my Cambodian clients for the rest of the afternoon, explaining to them about registering for welfare and food stamps. I drove home at the usual time, and then a limousine pulled up outside my apartment. The limousine took me through the freeway traffic to the Burbank airport and onto the runway next to a small private jet. David and Roland and a few others were already aboard. The jet took off over the lights of L.A., the hostess served champagne, and I sat back to marvel over the direction my life was taking.

During the shooting of the film I had never allowed myself to believe that I was different from anyone else. David and Roland had always been down-to-earth and unpretentious. Sam was always pleasant and courteous to everyone. Those men set the tone. Working with them, I didn't daydream about becoming a "star."

I had never even wanted to be an actor. I knew who I was. In my mind I was still a doctor from Cambodia. But now, as the plane flew down the southern California coastline, I began to reconsider who I was and what I was doing. It was impossible not to compare my

miserable life as a war slave with this. Surely this was as luxurious as life got, traveling around in limousines and private jets.

I thought: The gods saved my life. They have given me opportunities beyond anything I dreamed of. Maybe they have some purpose for me to fulfill.

We got to the theater, but the screening was almost over. We only saw the last half hour of the movie. The audience filled out forms rating the picture in different categories, excellent, good, fair or poor. The forms I saw were all marked "excellent" for both me and Sam Waterston. People crowded around me asking for autographs. Nobody had ever asked me for an autograph before.

In the following weeks there were prerelease screenings in L.A. Because of one thing or another I always got there late. This was irritating, because I had never seen the entire film in sequence, just rough cuts of the scenes in Roland's editing room in England. The audiences clapped long and hard. As I was leaving the screening at the University of Southern California, a woman student threw both her arms around me and began hugging and kissing me. She said she wanted to marry me. She had never even met me before.

In December the film had its world premiere, in New York. Once again I missed the showing of the film. It was a confusing and hectic visit, signing autographs, having my picture taken, being led from one set of hot television lights to the next for interviews. My name was called out at a banquet, and people stood up and clapped. I shook hands with thousands of strangers. The whole time, I was asking myself, Why me? Why am I being treated this way? I just got to this country. What's going on?

For me the only good part of the New York opening was finally being able to meet the real Sydney Schanberg and Dith Pran. The real Sydney was shorter than Sam Waterston. He had graying hair, a gray beard and enormous round eyes. I liked him right away, and Dith Pran too. Pran was shorter than me. He was gentle and peaceful, not hyperactive like me. He was working as a photographer at *The New York Times*, where Sydney was working too. Pran and I spoke in English first, out of courtesy to the others, and then switched to Khmer as soon as we could. We had a lot to talk about.

I asked him what the Khmer Rouge had done to him in real life, because I knew the movie script had changed some of the details. He

said he had been caught for stealing rice. Khmer Rouge soldiers beat him. They were planning to send him away for execution but the village chief stopped them and arranged for him to be sent to re-education classes, where he later "confessed" his crimes to save his life. During those years his wife and children were safely in the United States, but of course he never heard from them, and he lost most of the rest of his family to executions and starvation. After the Vietnamese invaded he became mayor of a small town for a while to help the people. But the Vietnamese discovered he had an "unclean" political background from working with the American press. It got dangerous for him, and he escaped to Thailand, arriving in October 1979.

Pran and I agreed, in all seriousness, that we would have liked the movie to show more violence, to reflect what had really happened in Cambodia. Then we started joking about who had the worse time. He said he had eaten mice, snails and lizard. "You had *lizard?*" I said. "Very tasty. That's like T-bone steak here. The best meal I ever ate was termites and red ant eggs." He said he was sorry, he had never eaten insects like that. In fact my experiences were worse than his under the Khmer Rouge, but it didn't matter. Meeting him was almost like discovering a twin. I knew we would be friends for life.

Then came the London opening, in January. Sydney Schanberg, Sam Waterston, Dith Pran and I were all there, dressed in tuxedoes. The Duchess of Kent sat across the aisle from me, wearing diamond and pearl jewelry. For the first time I had a chance to see the complete film with all the scenes in order. When the film began the audience was still chattering and whispering. There was laughter when John Malkovich, playing the wild photographer Al Rockoff, explained that the ice bandage on his forehead to help his hangover was made from a sanitary napkin. Then as the horror of the civil war sunk in, the laughter subsided and the audience grew quieter and quieter.

At the scene of the American withdrawal, when my wife left on a helicopter, I began to cry. I cannot explain it. Maybe it was seeing it on a big screen for the first time, the size and the fullness of it. Maybe because it was like losing Huoy.

A lady in the seat behind me handed me tissues.

I cried again at the French embassy scene, seeing myself leave the Western journalists to go out into the countryside.

I couldn't control myself. The tears came rolling out and the lady

kept giving me tissues. I cried when the Khmer Rouge put a plastic bag over a prisoner's head. I cried when I sucked the blood of an ox and when I fell into the mass grave of bones while trying to make my escape.

I cried at the ending when Sydney and Pran, or Sam and I, were reunited in a refugee camp in Thailand. The ending was filmed in Khao-I-Dang, right in front of the ARC ward, where I had worked as a doctor.

But I wasn't the only one crying. So was the Duchess of Kent. When the final credits came on the screen, the people in the audience sat numbly in their seats, some of them still dabbing at their eyes. When the lights came on, Sydney, Pran, Sam and I were introduced. The audience gave us a standing ovation and long, long applause.

The Western media began running stories about *The Killing Fields*. Until that time relatively few people knew what had happened in Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge years—intellectuals and Asia experts had, maybe, but not the general public. The film put the story of those years in terms that everybody could understand, because it was a story about the friendship between two men.

To my surprise, much of the media's attention focused on me. Through the movie I had become a sort of symbol for Cambodia and its suffering. Or rather Pran and I became a symbol together, because people were always confusing our names. That I was a refugee who had never acted before made the film more newsworthy than if an experienced actor had played the Dith Pran part.

I kept going back to my job as a counselor at the Chinatown Service Center. By now my role in the movie was no secret. I kept having to leave to be interviewed, to travel and even to accept awards. First I won a Golden Globe award for best supporting actor. Then in March 1985 I went to London again to accept two British Academy Awards, for Most Outstanding Newcomer and Best Actor.

Sophia came along on that trip to London. She was an excellent student, with a straight-A average. She was very smart, just like her mother and father, but she had grown up too fast for my liking. She hadn't liked her straight black Asian hair, so she had it permed. She had often seemed restless and unhappy at home in Los Angeles. I didn't know why. Maybe it was because she was a teenager, or maybe because it was difficult for her to have me away so much. Maybe it

was also difficult because I was traditional and Cambodian in my thinking. I was strict with her, just as my father had been strict with me. It was the only way I knew to raise children. But she seemed happy to be traveling, to see new sights.

We came home from London. We had moved from our one-room apartment in the alleyway to a two-bedroom apartment upstairs in the same building complex, with a view overlooking the skyscrapers of downtown L.A. Our living room was already cluttered with trophies and certificates. I put the British Academy Awards on the table and didn't think much about them.

From everything the people at Warner Bros. told me, the American Academy Awards mattered most. The Oscars, they called them. I had been nominated in the category of Best Supporting Actor, but my reaction was to downplay the chance of winning. One of the other nominees was John Malkovich, for his role in the movie *Places in the Heart*. I knew how good John was. I had watched scenes from *The Killing Fields* over and over again in the editing room, and each time I saw some small perfect detail in his performance that I had not noticed before. Besides, I was still upset at Roland Joffé for not letting me meet Dith Pran before filming started. If I had, I could have changed my performance to be more like Dith Pran.

Two days before the Oscar awards, television crews showed up at the Chinatown Service Center and at my apartment. They began following me around with their cameras. I wondered if they were following John Malkovich too. I missed John and his dirty jokes. Nobody else had ever made me laugh as much as he had.

The day of the Oscars I called my supervisor at work and asked permission to take the day off. I was too restless to work. I told Sophia to take a holiday from school too. TV crews waited outside the apartment. They followed me when I went to rent my tuxedo and filmed it for the news. I wondered what was so special about somebody trying on a tuxedo.

When I got home there were three long black limousines parked on the street outside. Dith Pran had arrived in one, Pat Golden in another and Ed Crane from Warner Bros. Publicity in the third. They all came into my apartment. Everybody in the neighborhood, which was predominantly Asian and lower middle class, had turned out to stare at the limousines and the TV crews.

Pat Golden, Ed Crane, Sophia and I got into one of the limos to ride to the ceremony together. My neighbors waved me off and wished me well. The Oscars were being held in the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, which was not far away. The traffic was bumper to bumper. It took an hour to get there. We could have walked there faster from my apartment. I felt like walking, to get rid of my energy.

By the time we got past the camera teams and the police lines the ceremony had started and the first awards had already been handed out. Inside the auditorium sat rows and rows of dazzling women and well-dressed men. The usher took Sophia and me to some empty seats in the second row on the far left side of the stage. It seemed like only a few minutes later that a very short woman named Linda Hunt came onstage to present the award for Best Supporting Actor. She had won an award the year before, for her role in the movie *The Year of Living Dangerously*.

She said, "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. The five actors we're about to celebrate have each taken different paths. I know that none of them thinks of this evening as their final goal. The goal, if any, lies in the work and in a private sense of challenge and achievement. To be chosen the best for a piece of work is a welcome prize, and to know that you have done it in the way that is best for you is every way as sweet." She read off the names of the nominees. When she came to my name the television cameras panned around the audience but couldn't find me because the usher had taken us to the wrong seats. On the television monitors, a picture of me from *The Killing Fields* appeared.

I looked down the row of seats and saw Sam Waterston near the center aisle. I cannot remember what went through my mind except for being glad that Sam was there. He had helped me a lot. I was extremely nervous.

"And the winner is . . .

. . . Haing S. Ngor of *The Killing Fields*!"

I walked past Sam and pumped his hand and tried to get him to come up on the stage with me, but he motioned me on. When I got on the stage my mind went blank. I was holding the trophy in my hand and standing at the lectern. The stage lights and TV cameras were on me, but I couldn't think what to say. I had practiced a speech in the limousine but couldn't remember a word of it.

"This is unbelievable," I said finally, and then it came back to me. "But so is my entire life. I vish to thank all members of Motion Picture Academy for this great honor. I thank David Puttnam, Roland Joffé for giving me this chance to act for the first time in *The Killing Fields*. And I share this award to my friend Sam Waterston, Dith Pran, Sydney Schanberg and also Pat Golden, director of casting—lady who found me for this role."

There was laughter and applause from the audience, laughter because of my accent and grammatical mistakes, applause because I wasn't going to let them stop me. "And I thank"—more laughter and applause—"and I thank Warner Bros. for helping me tell my story to the world, let the world know what happened in my country. And I thank God-Buddha that tonight I am even here. Sank you. Sank you very much."

The audience was on its feet clapping and shouting, and a few were wiping their tears. I lifted the trophy over my head. There are no words to describe it. I felt as if I were floating in the air. My feet were off the ground.

I walked off the stage and the usher guided me to where I should have been, in the same row on the opposite side of the stage. Another usher was escorting Sophia there too. In front of us, in the first row, was John Malkovich. He looked at me with his sly grin.

"*Ach anh neh*," he said, pointing at the trophy. "*Rar boh anh teh.*"

Sophia's head snapped around and her jaw dropped open. I was sure I hadn't heard him right, so I smiled back at John and edged into my seat. It was good to see him.

"*Ach anh neh. Rar boh anh teh*," he repeated, still grinning, still pointing at the Oscar. This time it sunk in. When we were in Thailand I had taught John how to curse in Khmer.

He had just told me, "Kiss my ass. It's mine."

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KAMA

UNTIL MY NAME was announced and I went up on stage, I did not think I would win the Oscar. A man who had never acted before, who had just moved to the United States, who could not yet speak English fluently—the odds were too much against it. Even Hollywood movies do not have endings so unlikely. Nobody would believe them if they did.

But it had happened. I had won against the odds. I had the trophy to prove it, a tall, heavy, gold-plated figure of a man with a featureless and enigmatic face.

Or rather, I had won again. In the country of the real killing fields the odds against me had been worse.

When the miracles pile up one after the next it is hard not to think about *kama*.

Sometimes people are chosen to fulfill a mission they are unaware of. They are instruments of destiny, serving a purpose larger than themselves. So it had been for me. The gods had known everything in advance and I had known nothing. They had planned for me to suffer, planned for me to serve, planned for me to be rewarded. It was *kama*. Without knowing it, I fulfilled their mission. I had helped tell the story of Cambodia to the outside world.

The morning after the Academy Awards I came into the Chinatown Service Center at 8:00 A.M. as usual, turned right, walked to the end of the hall into the Indochinese Unit's office, and sat at my little cubicle under the fluorescent lights. I didn't get much work done. Everyone wanted to touch the trophy. Journalists and TV crews

crowded into the room, the phone kept ringing and the day was lost to interviews and congratulations.

In the following weeks I didn't get much work done either. There were appearances on network television shows, more interviews, trips to the Far East and to Europe to promote the film. Dith Pran and I went to the White House to meet President Reagan. Life was crazy-busy. In June 1985 I took another leave of absence from the Chinatown Service Center. This time when the leave was up I didn't go back.

I have a new job now, as a spokesman for Cambodians and as an organizer of aid to refugees. Much of my time is spent traveling, making speeches, taking part in conferences and talking with people in and out of government. In Los Angeles I work with the Khmer Humanitarian Organization, which helps Cambodians in refugee camps and in the United States, and with another organization called United Khmer Humanitarianism and Peace, which supports a makeshift temple in a house and is trying to build a real temple in traditional Cambodian style. Several times a year I go to the Thai-Cambodian border, where I am helping start a medical training center. There, in a bamboo-and-thatch building, the staff and I will teach public health skills to villagers who are going back inside Cambodia to resettle.

Like me, my friend Dith Pran makes public appearances and works with organizations that help Cambodians. He and I are close friends. We do whatever we can to help heal Cambodia's wounds. There are many of us, volunteering, speaking out, working at all levels, and there is a kinship between us because we all have lived through the same terrible events.

I am sometimes asked what winning the Oscar means to me. To me personally it means being able to admit that my acting in *The Killing Fields* was good. It means opening my heart and letting the praise flow in after shutting it out for so long. The recognition was sweet. I do not deny it anymore.

To me professionally, as a spokesman, the Oscar opens doors. Until the film came out the tragedy in Cambodia was not well known thoughout the world. Because of the film and the Oscar I am able to go and talk to almost anyone. Dith Pran can too. Many Cambodians have discovered open doors. This is good, that people listen to us now and become more aware of our country and our problems. Nobody listened before.

And, of course, the Oscar opens doors for me as an actor. It has brought me other acting roles, and not just in Hollywood. Between the time of the Academy Awards and the writing of this book I have played in two Chinese-language movies filmed in Asia, a French-language documentary about Cambodia, an advertisement for a pharmaceutical company, episodes of *Hotel* and *Miami Vice*, a miniseries called *In Love and War* and a pilot for a TV program.

I enjoy acting. It gives me an opportunity to use my natural gifts. It allows me to meet new people and explore many different locations. But acting is only a means to an end. It gives me the money and the free time to do my real job, which is helping Cambodians. In the future, perhaps I will make my living some other way. I have not given up my dream of working again as a doctor.

Whatever happens, I am not worried about my future. I have always survived. I still drive my 1980 VW. I still wear the clothes that Uncle Lo had made for me when I was living in Lumpini. I live in the same apartment I lived in before I won the award. I will probably move somewhere else, but there is no hurry. Whether I go on with acting, or become a doctor again, or return to my old job at the Chinatown Service Center is not terribly important.

What is more important than what I do, or what Dith Pran does, or what any Cambodian does, is the fate of the country we came from. Cambodia is now called the People's Republic of Kampuchea. Heng Samrin, the former Khmer Rouge commander, is still the puppet leader. The hand inside the puppet is still Vietnamese. Vietnamese "advisers" give the orders, and 150,000 well-armed Vietnamese troops make sure the orders are carried out.

Quietly and without formal announcements the Vietnamese have colonized Cambodia. They take huge amounts of fish from Tonle Sap, our inland sea, and truck it to Vietnam. They take our rubber and rice and other natural resources. They encourage Vietnamese nationals and Cambodians of Vietnamese descent to settle throughout Cambodia. Vietnamese men take Khmer women to be their wives, whether the women want it or not. Vietnamese crimes against Cambodians go unpunished. In the schools there is little study of Cambodian culture. Vietnamese and Russian languages are taught, and the brightest students are sent off to Hanoi or to Moscow for higher education.

Though the Vietnamese do not tie people up and throw them into

mass graves, the way the Khmer Rouge did, their system of "justice" has much in common with that of the Khmer Rouge. They arrest people for making remarks against the regime, for listening to unauthorized radio broadcasts and for marrying without permission. They do not give the prisoners hearings or trials. The prisons are filthy and excrement-filled. Torture is common. The interrogators beat their victims, whip them with chains and rubber hoses, attach electrodes to their skin and suffocate them with plastic bags. I know this from refugee accounts, but you do not have to take my word for it. You can read it in the reports of Amnesty International.

The Vietnamese use forced labor, not to build canals and dams like the Khmer Rouge, but to cut roadside trees to deprive anti-government guerrillas of ambush cover. The new war slaves clear land, build barriers and lay mines, particularly near the Thai border. In the labor camps malaria is widespread, and so is loss of legs from accidentally stepping on mines. Amputees are a common sight.

The war still goes on in Cambodia. When the Vietnamese army goes out in force in the daytime it can travel wherever it likes, but as soon as its troops pass or as soon as night falls, the countryside belongs to the resistance forces. Nighttime curfews are imposed in all the cities. It is a guerrilla war without fixed lines and with many different participants. The resistance forces get most of their assistance from mainland China. The Vietnamese get assistance from the USSR. So in a sense the war in Cambodia is a war between the two communist sponsors, China and Russia. Cambodia is a pawn in their struggle for power and influence in Asia.

The resistance has three factions. Over time the thieves and warlords of the Khmer Serei were joined by more and more Cambodians who were serious and patriotic. They formed the two anti-communist factions: the Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF) and the National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia (FUNCINPEC in its French initials). Sad to say, both factions have leadership problems. The head of FUNCINPEC is Prince Sihanouk, who lost credibility for siding with the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s and who lives now in China and North Korea. The head of the KPNLF is Son Sann, a frail old gentleman without much military experience. Their Thailand headquarters both have had problems—public quarrels and power struggles and many,

many reports of *bonjour*. But both the KPNLF and FUNCINPEC have good men in their organizations, particularly those who get out in the field and do the actual working and sweating and fighting. I admire these men very much.

The third and strongest resistance faction is the Khmer Rouge, who are now well fed and well armed once again. The Khmer Rouge claim they are not communist anymore, just nationalists who want to drive the Vietnamese out of Cambodia. They also claim that Pol Pot has "retired." Pol Pot has been seriously ill, but as long as he is alive he is likely to stay in command. After all, he has had years of practice pretending that someone else is in charge. His successor will probably be Son Sen, who was minister of defense when the Khmer Rouge ruled Cambodia and who oversaw the prison system, including the prisons where I was tortured. Son Sen's wife was minister of culture, responsible for the slaughter of the monks and the elimination of Buddhism as a religion in Cambodia. The other contender for the leadership position is Ta Mok, a notorious military commander who killed his main rivals to get the job of Southwest Zone commander while Pol Pot was still ruling the country.

In 1982 the three resistance factions' backers—China, the five ASEAN or noncommunist countries of Southeast Asia, plus the United States—forced the Khmer Rouge, the KPNLF and the FUNCINPEC to form a coalition government-in-exile. This coalition, which is called Democratic Kampuchea, the same as the old Khmer Rouge regime, serves a certain practical purpose. It has enabled the combined resistance forces to keep Cambodia's seat at the UN. The diplomatic presence has helped keep pressure on Vietnam to get out of Cambodia. Each year a resolution passes the UN General Assembly by an overwhelming majority calling on Vietnam to leave. Militarily, by working together, the three factions have made the occupation of Cambodia expensive for Vietnam. They have not been able to defeat the Vietnamese, but neither have the Vietnamese been able to defeat them. Someday this combination of military stalemate and diplomatic pressure might lead to a conference that will pave the way for a political solution. The first signs of yielding to the pressure have already appeared.

Morally, this coalition government is another matter. It is a terrible, terrible thing to have to accept the Khmer Rouge into a part-

nership to drive the Vietnamese out. Like the sign said on National Route 5, "Khmer Rouge—Enemy Forever."

Reluctantly I agree that it is necessary to fight on the same side as the Khmer Rouge until the Vietnamese leave the country. But I do not think it is necessary to wait to put the Khmer Rouge leaders on trial for their crimes. They have committed genocide against their own people and they should pay the price. Currently, an organization called the Cambodia Documentation Commission is trying to arrange for the trial of top Khmer Rouge leaders before an international tribunal.* I support this effort completely. Besides serving justice, the removal of the top Khmer Rouge leaders would have a practical effect on diplomacy: It would take away Vietnam's excuse for staying in Cambodia, which is to protect the country against the return of Pol Pot.

The previous phases of the war have left more than three hundred thousand people along the Thai-Cambodian border and in the remaining refugee camps inside Thailand. The Thais have closed most of the camps and would like to close the rest. The Western countries have tired of accepting Cambodians for resettlement. Unable to go forward, unwilling to go back, the people of the border live in huts. They eat handout food because they do not have the land or the security to grow their own. The boys become soldiers before they are men. In the hospitals and clinics, Cambodian staff and a few Western volunteers continue the job of medical treatment. The case load never ends: malaria, tuberculosis, dysentery, rifle wounds. You see men who have stepped on mines hobbling about on low-cost artificial legs. You see refugees suffering from depression, from the trauma of losing their families and from the powerlessness of their existence as refugees. When I am in the refugee camp hospitals and I see that almost nothing has changed, I feel powerless too. Because nothing I have done, from my medical work to my acting in *The Killing Fields* to my fundraising, has been able to change the basic conditions along the border. At times like this, when patients fill every

*The Cambodia Documentation Commission, headed by David Hawk, a former executive director of Amnesty International U.S.A., is a group of Cambodian refugees, legal scholars and human-rights specialists that has documented human-rights violations under Khmer Rouge rule. It is seeking to bring those responsible to justice in the World Court, under the terms of the UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

bed and the breeze barely filters through the split-bamboo walls, my Oscar award means nothing to me at all.

The Cambodian holocaust ripped through our lives, tossing us randomly, leaving none of us the way we were. You can blame who you want, the outside powers for interfering, or our own internal flaws like corruption and *kum*, but when the talking is over we still do not know why it had to happen. The country is still in ruins, millions have died and those of us who survived are not done with our grieving.

Of the Cambodians I knew, most died. That is the overall pattern. But it is hard to get information. I do not know what happened to Uncle Kruy the bus driver; to my doctor friends Pok Saradath and Dav Kiet; to Chea Huon, my former teacher and later Khmer Rouge leader; to Sangam, my friend from the fertilizer crew, and to many others.

This I do know: Pen Tip, who tried so many times to kill me, is now in medical school in Phnom Penh. I am sure he has many friends among his new masters, the Vietnamese.

My Aunt Kim, who told the chief of Tonle Batí that I was a doctor, has settled in a certain city in the United States. With her came her sons Haing Seng, who had the argument with me in Tonle Batí, and Haing Meng, who to the best of my knowledge (or as Americans say, *allegedly*) was a Khmer Rouge officer who managed to slip through his Immigration interviews without being caught. He has changed his name; I do not know where he is.

Of my other relatives, my brother Hong Srun is still in Cambodia with two of my older brother's children. My youngest brother, Hok, lives with his wife and child outside L.A. My cousins Balam and Phillip Thong still live in L.A. and are doing well. I also have cousins in Macao and France and one niece in France, the only surviving daughter of my sister Chhai Thau.

As for my niece Sophia, she was not happy living with me. Perhaps I was too traditional and Cambodian to understand what she was going through as an American teenager. I came home from one of my travels to find an envelope addressed to me. I never read the letter inside. She has never come back.

All the arguments I had with my father, all my quarrels with my brother, and now this—this last, painful blow in my family's troubled history.

I miss Sophia.

I live, for now, in my two-bedroom apartment with a balcony outside and a view of the towers of downtown Los Angeles in the distance. The walls are covered with awards I have received and pictures from *The Killing Fields*. Higher than the rest, in the position of honor, is a photograph of Huoy, enlarged from the ID picture I begged from the chief of Phum Ra so long ago.

I still wear the locket of Huoy on a gold chain around my neck. Her spirit still guides me. She would allow me to get married and raise a family, but so far I have not. It is not easy for me to find someone to take her place.

Someday, when Cambodia is free, I will return to the leaning *sdao* tree on the hillock in the rice fields. With me will be Buddhist monks. We will hold a ceremony and build a monument for her next to the temple on the mountainside. We will pray for Huoy and her mother and my parents and family, and for all those who lost their lives. Then maybe their souls will be at peace. And maybe mine will be too.

I remember walking with her along the riverfront in Phnom Penh, in the evening. The lights reflected off the surface of the water, and the wind blew through her hair. We strolled along without cares, talking about the future. How bright the future seemed then—working hard and prospering, having children, staying close to our families. How bright it all seemed. But our lives did not turn out the way we planned. Her life ended too soon. And I will never be forgiven by my memories.