

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



### The Nagarose

I have never been able to feel for Somerset Maugham the affection that he inspires in most of his readers. He has always struck me as an excessively English writer, not the slightest bit interested in Asia for its own sake but only as an exotic backdrop to his stories of whites.

It happened by chance – by chance? – that when the car was waiting for me at the gate of Turtle House, my eyes, as I searched in a last-minute dash for a book to read at sea, fell on *The Gentleman in the Parlour*, which was lying on the round Chinese table in the library. It was a first edition which I had bought in Singapore twenty years previously. The book had been attacked by the Bangkok termites, and had just come back after being rebound. I shoved it into the last empty corner of my rucksack and left.

So it was with great emotion, compounded not only of pleasure but also of that uneasiness one always experiences when confronted by a mystery to which one has no key, that when I came to open this book, sitting on a pile of ropes on the afterdeck of a small cargo ship en route from Bangkok to Cambodia, I realized that Maugham was describing the identical voyage, made on a similar ship in 1929.

The book began: 'I have never been able to feel for Charles Lamb the affection that he inspires in most of his readers.' Maugham tells how, on the point of departure, he looks for a book to take along; his eye happens to fall on one with a green cover, and subsequently he begins reading it on board ship . . .

What a bizarre year this was turning out to be for me! And life so splendid once again, so unusual, so full of surprises. Of coincidences?

Maugham had begun his journey in Rangoon, and was bound for Hanoi. And I, where had I begun mine? What was my destination?

And who was there pulling the strings of what happened to me? Because I had a feeling there was someone.

The chain of cause and effect that links human affairs is endless, and that means they remain without a real explanation. I was on that ship as the result of an infinite series of 'because's', of which it was impossible to establish the first. That is the maddening thing about destiny – and the wonderful thing.

There is always an inexplicable bridge of San Luis Rey, where different people with different stories, coming from different places, meet by chance at the moment when the bridge collapses, to die together in the abyss. But the first step of each of the journeys which end in that assignation cannot be retraced.

In my case, any starting point that I might fix – the fortune-teller in Hong Kong, the escape from death in Cambodia, the decision in Laos, even my own birth – was not it. Perhaps because, when you come down to it, there really is no beginning.

I called out to Leopold, an old friend who had offered to join me in this adventure, and the three of us – Somerset Maugham was by now a powerful presence – celebrated the fact that we were there, enjoying the calm progress of a ship called the *Nagarose*.

I had to be in Cambodia for the elections organized by the United Nations, and luck was on my side. The overland route was difficult and dangerous. The frontier with Thailand was officially closed, and the Khmer Rouge, having decided to boycott the elections, were threatening the road between Poipet and Battambang. The foreigner's only point of entry was the Phnom Penh airport.

One day, however, I had seen a small notice in a Thai newspaper announcing that a ship bound for the Cambodian port of Kompong Som was taking on cargo in Bangkok. I had telephoned: the ship belonged to a young American, a fledgling ship-owner. I invited him to dinner at Turtle House and persuaded him to take me on board. Leopold had joined me enthusiastically.

A fine character, Leopold. Born into an old patrician family, many of whom had given their lives for France, he had been a law student in Paris in 1968, and had 'made revolution'. Frustrated at the way it turned out, he had gone on the road: India, Nepal, Thailand, and then Indochina. I met him in Saigon in 1975, in the garden of the

Hotel Continental, after the city had been taken by the Communists. Of good bearing, elegant, always in a beautifully ironed silk shirt, Leopold was not in Vietnam for the same reasons as the rest of us journalists, businessmen or adventurers. He was an observer of life, and Saigon in 1975 was an ideal place to indulge that passion. Later, after years of wandering, he wanted to prove to himself that he too was capable of doing something. He went to Bangkok, where through a series of coincidences he started a jewellery factory. He gave it a high-sounding French name taken at random from the Paris telephone directory, and it made him a fortune.

'But one can't spend one's life making useless things like jewellery,' he said fifteen years later when we met again. He had decided to make the factory over to the workers as a co-operative, and to devote himself to something else. 'Giving is better than selling,' he said. 'In future if I need anything they'll help me. In Asia gratitude is more binding than any contract.'

Our departure was postponed from day to day. It was raining and the ship could not load its cargo of sugar. Then at last we were told to come to Quay 5 at Tomburi, across the Chao Paya, the great river of Bangkok.

An appointment with a ship is like one with a woman you have spoken to only on the telephone. You go to meet her, all curiosity and with an image in your mind, the product of fantasy, and regularly it fails to match the reality. Small, rusty, haphazardly repainted in light blue and white, her decks filthy and littered with cigarette butts, her Maltese flag blackened by smoke from the funnel and her main mast bent from some encounter with a crane, the *Nagarose* was not as I had imagined her.

Accompanied by a tall and distinguished young sailor who seemed utterly out of place on that old tin can, I stowed my sack in the cabin that had been allocated to us. It was minute, baking hot and with no ventilation. On the door I was surprised to see a portrait of Aung San Suu Kyi, the heroine of the Burmese resistance to the military dictatorship. 'I was one of her bodyguards,' said the young man in excellent English. 'I was in my third year of physics, but when she was arrested I had to flee.' All the crew were Burmese. Many, like him, were former students who had fled to Thailand to escape the repression.

We slipped our moorings at six in the evening. The *Nagarose* had

made barely a hundred yards when a glorious girl, wrapped in a beautiful close-fitting sarong, appeared on deck. Making her way to the stern she arranged a garland of jasmine flowers, some strips of coloured silk, sticks of incense and a bunch of orchids. 'It brings luck. It's our protection,' said the captain, also a Burmese. He was a man of forty to fifty years intensely lived, to judge by his face.

The ship glided away, hugging the left bank of the Chao Paya, passing the Naval Academy, several pagodas and a Chinese temple surmounted by a large yellow sculpture in the shape of a coin. Here and there rows of old wooden houses on piles could be seen, each with a ladder from which children were diving in to the water. In the old days, when the river was the main avenue of access to Siam, these were the first sights that greeted travellers before they saw the sparkling roofs of the Royal Palace in the distance.

At nine o'clock we reached the mouth of the river. We dropped our Thai pilot and made for the open sea. Ahead of us lay hundreds of fishing boats with lamps hung on long poles over the dark water. We seemed to be moving towards a city full of lights and life.

Our dining-room consisted of a rough table bolted to the floor and two benches, but the dinner would not have disgraced any restaurant. It was magnificent, like she who had prepared it, the girl we had seen before. She was twenty years old, dark-skinned, with high strong hips, and unusually full-breasted by Thai standards. On her wrist she wore several bracelets, one of which had a little gold bell that supplied a musical accompaniment to all her movements.

The captain had seen her selling T-shirts in a Bangkok market. She had just arrived from the provinces and this was her first job. He asked how much she earned, and offered her a thousand baht (₹25) more per month to perform the office of his wife. Done! Then he managed to hire her as the *Nagarose's* cook. Both seemed happy enough with the arrangement. The 'hired wife' is an old tradition in Thailand, and Leopold and I readily agreed that it was a most civilized one.

We sailed all night among the fishermen's lights. Sleeping below decks was impossible. The ship had been made in Norway, for northern seas, not the tropics. Big pipes belched heat from the engine-room into the cabins, turning them into ovens. You couldn't walk barefoot on the steel-plated floor of the corridor, it was so hot.

Only the big cockroaches scurried happily back and forth. The crew had their bunks below, but the captain slept in a comfortable hammock, hugging our cook and enjoying the cool breeze from the only fan on board.

Leopold and I abandoned our cabin and lay down on the upper deck at the foot of the funnel, but neither of us could sleep straight away. The night, the atmosphere of the ship, and once again the sense of being completely outside the everyday world, had dealt me that exhilarating feeling of freedom which is my drug. To Leopold it dealt a great desire to talk and laugh.

'Just think of that American who says: "I am the owner of the *Nagarose*." He's maybe never set foot on it, and spends all his time in an air-conditioned office sorting out problems of insurance and sugar-loading. And you and me? Here we are enjoying his ship!' said Leopold. The idea that the American had only a piece of paper declaring him to be the ship's owner, while we, without even a ticket, had the run of it, made me laugh too.

'In life one should always be as on this ship: passengers. There is no need to own anything!' he went on, as if to justify his decision to get rid of the factory.

I think it was then that Leopold first spoke to me of John Coleman. 'He's an exceptional man. You must meet him. He's really a great master, and he can teach you to meditate.'

We fell asleep where we were. Now and then, with a change of wind, I felt puffs of smoke blowing over me, but I was too tired to move. I was awakened by the sun.

I spent most of the day on deck. At the stern the ropes were coiled in big rings, forming nests in which a prehistoric bird might have laid its eggs. I stayed there sunbathing and reading Somerset Maugham, sometimes aloud so that Leopold could join in the 'conversation'. I did not spare him the story of how Maugham, when he arrived in Bangkok, went to stay at the Oriental Hotel and had an attack of malaria. The German manageress, rather than have him die there, tried to persuade a doctor to take him away. Poor Maugham! He would be turning in his grave if he could see how today the Oriental boasts of him as one of its illustrious guests, with a suite named after him, all his books, specially bound, in a showcase on the Bamboo

Veranda, and his photograph on the menu with suggestions as to what he might have eaten for breakfast and drunk at sunset.

In the afternoon the heat became unbearable, but it was the rainy season, and at three o'clock the daily storm punctually brought its cool relief. Afterwards the sky was like a vast fresco of blues and blacks and greys, with a few very white clouds, motionless like grandiose monuments.

The ship made slow progress – in fact sometimes it seemed to be motionless. Once the fire alarm suddenly went off, but nobody seemed to get excited. It was caused by an overheated accumulator, and the captain gave orders to reduce the speed even more: three knots at the maximum. We would reach Kompong a day late.

The sea was a desert. The only ship we saw for hours on end was another old freighter with a Burmese crew. Our sailors knew them, and tried to make contact by radio, but no one replied.

'Travel makes sense only if you come back with an answer in your baggage,' said Leopold. 'You've travelled a lot; have you found it?'

For him too the ship was a break, a release from routine. He spent the long empty hours reflecting on matters close to his heart, and I was like the sandbag at which a boxer practises punching. This time the fist hit me hard, because I knew I had not found the answer. Quite the reverse: along the way I had lost even those two or three certainties that I used to think I possessed. Perhaps that was the answer, but I refrained from telling Leopold so. Trying to lighten the tone of the conversation, I said that I travelled because my nature is that of a fugitive: sooner or later I always have to escape from where I am. Leopold was not satisfied.

'We've both spent half our lives in Asia, and we've had some pretty strange experiences,' he said. 'We must have got at least a clue from it all. We can't go home with nothing in our bags but a few yarns to spin, like old sailors.'

I have never thought about that baggage; still less about what to put in to it on the way home. If I ever want to return.

The ship was wheezing painfully, and every breath sounded like her last. Suddenly we heard a loud clashing sound, like stones in a grinder. The long-haired youth in charge of the engine scratched his head

and disappeared into the hot belly of the ship. This time it was a pump that had broken down. Fault put right. On we went.

For dinner the beautiful cook had prepared a stew of pigs' trotters, fried fish and vegetables with ginger, and rice. We all ate together except for the two lads who stayed on guard above, scanning the pitch-black sea where not a single light was to be seen. As if the food were not already spicy enough, the Burmese constantly helped themselves to red peppers from an old glass jar. After dinner the youngest sailor prepared little packets of betel for everyone.

The captain realized that betel was not our favourite dessert, so he sent for a bottle of gin and another of lemonade, and we spent the small hours together. For him we were the break, the respite from routine, and he wanted to unburden himself. He was forty-four years old, and had been sailing for twenty. He had been everywhere and had done a bit of everything, from smuggling cigarettes to smuggling electronics. His family were in Rangoon, but he could not go back there: he had taken a stand against the dictatorship and would be arrested. He had chosen the members of the crew one by one, and they were utterly loyal to him. The man looking after the ship's machinery was an engineer, two of the ship-boys were architectural students. Because of the military dictatorship Burma had remained backward and was now treated with contempt, especially by the Thais, he added.

The Thais, he said, think of nothing but money. Even their Buddhism is mercenary. In Burma, on the other hand . . . he put his hand in his shirt to show me his Buddha. Then he noticed that I too had one at my neck and, as is done in these cases, each of us took off his chain and in cupped hands offered it to the other for admiration.

His Buddha had saved him on a number of occasions, and I said the same of mine. Perhaps it was true, but I had never thought about it before. I had it around my neck that time in Poipet when the Khmer Rouge were about to shoot me, but neither then nor afterwards did I make the connection. For me that Buddha was not an amulet, it was a matter of habit, like the watch you automatically put on your wrist every morning. I had had it since 1972. When I first came to Cambodia I had noticed that in battle the soldiers would put the Buddhas they usually wore round their necks in their mouths.

They told me it helped to repel the bullets, and I decided that I needed one too.

I bought a little ivory Buddha and had it mounted by a Chinese goldsmith. It had to be blessed by a monk, and Pran, my interpreter – who later became famous when the story of his life under Pol Pot and his flight into Thailand became the subject of the film *The Killing Fields* – suggested that I go to the head of the most sacred pagoda of Phnom Penh, at the top of the mysterious hill in the middle of the city. He organized the ceremony and fixed the price: I would pay to have a scene from the life of the Enlightened One frescoed on the coffered ceiling which the monks were restoring.

And so one afternoon I found myself sitting on the ground in front of a dozen or so monks who intoned strange litanies designed to protect me.

'From what?' the head of the pagoda asked Pran, between one chant and another.

'They ought to know,' I whispered. Pran translated back and forth, but the monk still did not understand what I wanted to be protected from.

'Well, just tell me, what work does your foreigner do?'

'He's a journalist.'

'Ah. Very good,' exclaimed the monk, as if this finally clarified everything. 'Then he must be protected from fire, water and syphilis.' And he returned energetically to his chanting with the others. The little Buddha was handed back to me, I made the agreed offering, and since then none of those three dangers has troubled me.

But my Buddha also has its taboo: I must take it off when making love. Pran explained to me, however, that 'in urgent cases' it was enough to swing it round to my back by a simple tug of the chain. The important thing was that it should not see!

The beautiful cook began reading some comics in the hammock under the fan. Then, realizing it was hopeless waiting for the captain, she fell asleep. We carried on chatting. After the first bottle of gin the captain wanted to start a revolution to free Burma from the dictators, Leopold wanted to free the world through meditation, and I wanted to take everyone back in history to find the point where we had taken the wrong path.

At last I went to my sleeping place under the funnel. With a rustling sound the ship continued to cleave the phosphorescent waves. The

night was extraordinarily dark, and the sky, with millions of stars, seemed to have a depth that I had never seen before. I slept very well until a wonderful smell of incense and fried eggs reached me from the kitchen. The beautiful cook had been the first to get up; she had tidied everything, made her offerings at the little altar, and was now preparing breakfast.

'One day she too will free herself from her slavery to the captain, and we'll find her as a hostess on a Thai International Airlines plane, serving frozen omelettes,' said Leopold. She undoubtedly dreamed of such a future, but I could not wish it for her.

We entered the harbour of Kompong Som one day late. Somerset Maugham, more than half a century before, had taken a fraction of the time to cover the same distance. The beaches were whiter than white. Behind the crests of the palm trees there were no buildings to be seen, and from a distance Cambodia looked like a desert island. The sailors were ready to disembark, having showered and put on clean trousers and shirts. As we came closer we could see the port nestling in a bay, but the motorboat that should have delivered the pilot didn't leave the shore. '*Nagarose* here . . . *Nagarose*, do you read me?' the captain called repeatedly on the radio. Nobody answered. An hour. Two hours. Nothing. The crew got back into their work clothes and returned to their various jobs around the ship.

Stretched out on one of the benches in the dining-room, I read Maugham. On disembarking, he too had gone to Phnom Penh and from there to Angkor. Like so many other visitors he had been especially struck by Ta Prom, the temple that had been left to the jungle. There, in the nature that was reconquering the stones laid by man, he had felt 'the most powerful of all divinities'.

Personally, I have always been more impressed by the temples in which the work of man seems in itself to touch the divine. There are a few places in the world in which one feels proud to be a member of the human race, and one of these is certainly Angkor. Behind its sophisticated, intellectual beauty there is something profoundly simple, something archetypal and natural that reaches the heart without needing to pass through the head. In every stone there is an inherent greatness whose measure remains firmly in the mind.

There is no need to know that for the builders every detail had a

particular meaning. One does not need to be a Buddhist or a Hindu in order to understand. You have only to let yourself go, and you feel that somehow Angkor is a place you have been before. 'The ruins of Angkor had already appeared to me in the visions of childhood, they were already part of my museum,' wrote Pierre Loti in 1901, remembering how, as a child, he had looked out of the window of his home and tried to see those mythical towers.

In 1972, from a window in the Grand Hotel of Siem Reap, I too saw those towers, the towers of Angkor Wat; but I could not reach them. The Khmer Rouge had occupied the whole temple complex, and those grey pinnacles, rising above the green of the forest, were for me an unattainable mirage. The road that runs from the hotel to the temple was cut by a ditch after five miles. That was the front, and to go near it meant to put one's life in the hands of some sniper hidden in a tree.

Eight years later, when I managed to go the last four miles of that road, Angkor seemed to me even more moving, more tragic, more mysterious than I had imagined it. The Pol Pot regime and the Khmer Rouge had just been overthrown by the Vietnamese intervention, and the Cambodians I met, ill and starving, seemed like survivors of a lost and disoriented race that no longer had any connection with the greatness declared by its monuments.

Over the centuries the Khmer people had forgotten Angkor, the great capital built between the ninth and eleventh centuries and abandoned in 1431 after the Siamese devastated it with fire and sword. If it were not for Henri Mouhot, who 'rediscovered' Angkor for the world, and for the Cambodians themselves, the Khmer would not have a history to look back on.

And yet, in that immense complex there was everything. There was life: past and future. Yes, because Angkor was, among many other things, a sort of prophecy in stone left for posterity. Or at least so it seemed to me when I first stood there amid the screeching of monkeys and the chirping of cicadas. That impression has never left me.

I was the only visitor at the time. Accompanying me was Pich Keo, one of the old guides, who had survived the massacres of Pol Pot. Cambodia was a vast field of death, and in a strange way the grandeur of Angkor seemed to reflect the greatness of that tragedy. In one of the great bas-reliefs I saw the same scenes of torture –

people quartered, cut to pieces, impaled, beaten to death, or fed to the crocodiles – as those I had heard of while travelling through the country. The stories told to me by survivors of the death camps were there, carved in stone ten centuries before. A prophecy? A warning? Or simply the recognition of the immutability of life, which is always joy and violence, pleasure and torture? In the bas-reliefs it was so. Next to the scenes of frightful suffering were others of great serenity; beside the terrible executioners were sinuous dancing girls. Orgies of pain and orgies of happiness, all under the great stone smiles, under the half-closed eyes of those mysterious faces in the jungle. I had no doubts: the message of Angkor remained what it had been for centuries. On the lintel of a door, an ancient hand had chiselled a message that Pich Keo translated: 'The wise man knows that life is nothing but a small flame shaken by a violent wind.'

The hours passed. Night fell. From the radio room I heard the voice of one of the crew constantly calling: 'Nagarose here . . . Nagarose, do you read me?' No reply. Not until ten the next morning did the ship's radio pick up an answer. The pilot would come, but not immediately. We must wait. He came on board in the early afternoon, and at four o'clock Leopold and I said goodbye to everyone and disembarked. We were in Cambodia, free to go where we liked . . . but without an entry visa. That would be a problem when we left, I thought. The most urgent problem now was to get to Phnom Penh.

From Kompong Som to the capital is 185 miles. The asphalt road is one of the best in the country, but because most of the supplies pass over it, also the most hazardous. Government soldiers disguised as Khmer Rouge, real Khmer Rouge, and plain bandits lay tree-trunks across the road, sack the trucks and rob the cars. Once in a while, to make sure of being respected, they murder a couple of people.

We went to a hotel in Kompong Som. It had been opened not long before to accommodate officials of the United Nations and all the other organizations involved in the international effort to bring democracy to Cambodia. Our first impression was that democracy, marching to the tune of dollars, was definitely on the advance. Kompong Som, which only a year before had had only a few feeble lamps alight after eight in the evening, was now a *ville lumière*, with several

restaurants and bars open until all hours, and a big discotheque where scores of girls flocked from the nearby villages, dressed like dolls and made up like kabuki masks. Prostitution, I have come to learn, is the first sign of liberalization and economic recovery.

My room was right under the dance hall, and I did not fall asleep until one in the morning, when the pounding beat of the music stopped and a cheery crowd – girls for rent or already rented, experts in humanitarian aid, soldiers and international police, businessmen and election observers, all tired and sweaty – filed between two rows of Khmer beggars in old military uniforms, who appealed to their distracted charity with empty hats, amputated legs, arms without hands, and pathetic smiles. The international community, which had come to Cambodia to bring democracy, was finally going to bed.

In Kompong Som the most important United Nations unit was a battalion of the French Foreign Legion. A colonel received us: tall and elegant, with blue eyes and two scars on his cheek that might have been made to measure, self-assured and most civil. On hearing Leopold's unusual surname, he gave him a fixed stare: 'Like the lieutenant of Dien Bien Phu?'

'Yes. My cousin,' replied Leopold. The colonel stood to attention and gave him a smart salute, as if my friend had himself been one of the glorious dead in that battle and one of the Legion's heroes.

He invited us to breakfast, and after a little while he asked us the obvious question: why had we arrived by ship? I told my story, and the colonel observed: 'Too bad you weren't on that helicopter in Siem Reap. The fortune-teller told you: "If you survive an air accident in 1993" . . . Well, then! You should have been in that accident and survived. That way you'd be sure now of living to the age of eighty-four.' He found it very amusing that I had not thought of it before.

He advised us to leave soon for Phnom Penh, as the ambushes usually occurred in the early afternoon. He let us take an interpreter with us, an old Vietnamese whom we had already met at the market and who spoke Chinese, Khmer, English and French. He was a survivor, and had plied his trade as an informer for all the past regimes (except perhaps that of Pol Pot). The Legion gave him \$50 a month to make a daily report on the rumours circulating in town. Often,

he told us, the report consisted of just three letters: R.A.S., *rien à signaler* (nothing to report).

The old spy was a great help. He found a car with a driver willing to take us to Phnom Penh. For miles and miles the road was deserted, without a single car coming the other way. We sped past the carcasses of cars that had been ambushed. The heat created mirages in the distance, and at times it really seemed that tree-trunks had been laid across the road a few hundred yards ahead, and that armed men were moving about. Our silence was a sign of the fear that each of us kept to himself.

On reaching the outskirts of Phnom Penh we all drew a sigh of relief. 'Mission accomplished: R.A.S.,' said the Vietnamese spy. We burst out laughing.

As we drove past the airport I saw the Thai Airlines plane that flies daily between Bangkok and Phnom Penh coming in to land. I had an idea. Telling the driver to park the car, I took my passport and Leopold's, and went in to the airport. With an air of some importance, waving a UN pass that had expired months before, I mixed with the passengers queuing up at the counter where entry visas were being handed out for \$20 a time. I filled in the forms, signed for myself and for Leopold, paid the fee and presented myself at the immigration window.

'And this one?' asked the policeman.

'It's my friend's passport. There he is over there, looking after the luggage,' I said, pointing at the crowd. Thump . . . thump. Two stamps, and in no time I was outside.

And that was how, on 20 May 1993, I arrived in Phnom Penh from Bangkok – officially by plane.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Buddha's Eyelash

In Cambodia I never slept well. There was something in the air, something that haunted me in the silence of night, that hovered around me, that made me stay on guard, and never let me sink into a deep slumber. When I did drop off, it was for a brief, light nap, from which I kept waking to feel that presence again. During the war this had never happened to me. It began when I returned there shortly after the fall of Pol Pot.

What had happened in Cambodia between 1975 and 1979 under the Khmer Rouge regime defies any fantasy of horror – it was more frightful than anything a man could imagine. The whole society was turned upside down, cities were abandoned, pagodas destroyed, religion abolished, and people regularly massacred in a continuous purificatory orgy. A million and a half, perhaps two million Cambodians, a third of the population, were eliminated. I looked for those I had known and found no one. They had all ended up as 'manure for the fields' – because, as the Khmer Rouge said, even the 'counter-revolutionaries', or at least their corpses, must serve some purpose.

I travelled for a month through a tortured land, collecting eyewitness accounts of that folly. The people were so terrorized, so stunned by horror, that often they could not tell me about it, or did not want to. In the countryside I was shown the 'collection centres for the elimination of enemies' – usually former schools – where the traces of torture could still be seen. I saw wells from which you could no longer drink because they were filled with the dead, rice fields where you could not walk without treading on the bones of those who had been clubbed to death on the spot in order to save bullets.

Everywhere new mass graves were being found. There were

survivors who could not bring themselves to get on a boat since they had seen their relatives taken to the middle of a lake and fed to the crocodiles. Others could not climb a tree, because the Khmer Rouge had used trees to test their victims and decide who should live and who should die. Those who could reach the top were considered peasants, who could be employed; the others were intellectuals, to be eliminated.

Since that time Cambodia has never been the same again; the marks of that suffering were everywhere, and the invisible weight of pain which had built up during the four years of Pol Pot filled the air, made every silence oppressive and every night sleepless. Even I could no longer hear the voice of the gecko, the speaking lizard, without counting its cries and asking, as with the petals of a daisy, 'Will I die? . . . I won't die . . . Will I die?' I could no longer see a row of palm trees without thinking that the tallest were those most fertilized with corpses. In Cambodia even nature had lost its comforting innocence.

Leopold and I stayed at the Monorom Hotel in the centre of Phnom Penh. It was hard to find a room. The city was invaded by foreigners: soldiers, bureaucrats, experts in this or that, journalists. After years of ignoring the tragedy of Cambodia, at last the international community had intervened on a massive scale. Not, of course, to punish the murderers or to restore order and a minimum of decency in life. To do that was 'politically impossible': China, which had always supported Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, was not willing to abandon its protégés. And so, for little Cambodia, the 'Great Powers' had found one of those solutions that serve to justify any immorality: a compromise. With the Paris Agreements, signed with great pomp in 1991, the massacres were forgotten, executioners and victims were put on the same level, the combatants on both sides were asked to lay down their arms, and their chiefs to stand for election. May the best man win! As if Cambodia in 1993 were the Athens of Pericles.

By the time I had been in Phnom Penh for a few days, I had the impression I was watching a colossal show of folly. In a palace of the 1930s, once the residence of the French governor, the United Nations Transitory Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) had set up its general headquarters. Every day, standing on a beautiful terrace, a



young Frenchman issued information and instructions to the five hundred journalists who had come from all over the world to witness 'the first democratic elections in the history of Cambodia'. An American explained that it was forbidden to photograph voters at the ballot boxes or to ask them who they had voted for as they left the polling station.

On the upper floors, in small offices carved out of the large halls of former times, were other international officials, lawyers and judges borrowed from various countries, and university professors on contract to the UN. They sat at their computers and drew plans for the development and modernization of the country. They drafted a new constitution, wrote laws for the reorganization of the customs services and prepared regulations for the restructuring of the school system and the efficient functioning of hospitals. To hear them talk, one would believe that this was a unique opportunity for Cambodia to get back on its feet, to become a normal country again. The whole world was there to help it.

And on paper that was true. The United Nations had been in Cambodia for more than a year, with a force of twenty-two thousand military and civilian personnel and with \$2.5 billion to spend. The trouble was that with all those people and all that money, the UN had not managed to accomplish what the Paris Agreements had defined as the first step in the peace process: to disarm the combatants. The Khmer Rouge had categorically refused to lay down their arms. They carried on ambushing and killing, while their formal chief, Khieu Samphan, Pol Pot's number two, the man who had rationalized genocide, went on living in Phnom Penh and meeting UN representatives and Western ambassadors who all shook his hand and called him 'Your Excellency'.

But the international community could not accept defeat. The object of the whole exercise was the elections. Let there be elections then! Even if all the premises were lacking. The important thing, said the diplomats, was to get the economy started again, to begin the peace process. Surely the Khmer Rouge would join in sooner or later.

The 'international community' – a motley crowd of people of all colours, sizes and languages – seemed to have only one common interest: to receive their daily expenses of \$150, what an average Cambodian earned in a year. My impression was that they all wanted

to stay in Cambodia at the cost of any compromise. The fate of the Cambodians was not the great priority. For the UN it was to bring their intervention in Cambodia to a satisfactory conclusion so they could go and repeat the operation somewhere else.

But the United Nations, who were they? To judge by the news on the portable radio which I always have with me, the whole world was now in the hands of this omnipresent, wise and just government. The United Nations were in Cambodia, the United Nations had something to say about Iraq, they were going to intervene in the former Yugoslavia and in Africa. They were the first item in every news bulletin.

Then I went outside, on to the streets of Phnom Penh, and the United Nations were Indonesian soldiers (those responsible for the massacre of Dili on the island of Timor) and Thai soldiers (those who had shot at unarmed crowds in the centre of Bangkok) and policemen from various African dictatorships. All of them with blue berets on their heads, bearers of democracy and respect for human rights.

There was one thing the United Nations had achieved: their presence had restored business confidence. House prices in Phnom Penh were as high as in New York, and everywhere new hotels, restaurants, nightclubs and brothels were opening. The peace process had reintroduced that logic of the market economy which knows no principle but that of profit. In the course of a few months Cambodia had become a centre for speculators, mostly Chinese from Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore. Thanks to the widespread corruption in the local administrative apparatus, they had laid hands on the country's natural resources and its shadiest traffic, from expired medicines to smuggled cars and precious stones. One businessman – an American this time – was trying to bury in Cambodia the nuclear waste that no other country would touch.

Everywhere big new billboards had appeared: 'Angkor: The Pride of the Nation.' An invitation to visit the temples? Not at all! A new beer. The brewery that made it was financed by the only foreign investment in the industrial sector. Perhaps beer was not what the Cambodians needed most at that juncture, but the economy had its own logic. Like nature. After years and years of wars and massacres, life was returning to triumph over death, but it was doing so in the cruellest and most primitive way: the law of the jungle.

On the pavements of Phnom Penh bands of dirty, famished women and children went about begging. On the increase, too, were the numbers of shiny brand-new Mercedes, with smoked-glass windows at which those wretches vainly tapped with their bony fingers. Peace was rapidly recreating two Cambodias: that of the rich few and that of the poor many; that of the cities and that of the countryside. The situation of the past, the situation that Pol Pot had exploited, was repeating itself. His theory was that the city is corrupt, rotten, and cannot be saved. The only solution is to abandon it and start again from scratch, to return, as he said, to 'the purity of the grain of rice'. According to Pol Pot everything that had come from abroad had bastardized and weakened the Khmers, the true Cambodians. To return to the greatness of Angkor meant cutting all links with the outside world and expunging any foreign presence. Hence the decision to blow up the central bank, leaving wads of dollars fluttering about in the wind; hence the demolition, stone by stone, of the Catholic cathedral; hence the evacuation of cities, symbols of the modernity so detested by the Khmer Rouge.

And now just look at Phnom Penh! Alive and corrupt, risen from the ashes. Seen from the peasants' huts, still infested with mosquitoes and malaria, the city again seemed something to be eliminated, purged; and there were already those, especially among the young, who wanted Pol Pot to return. What was this but madness?

But was it not equally mad of the United Nations to think they could solve the whole Cambodian problem at a stroke with some elections? And were not these officials mad who imagined that with their computers, with new laws and new programmes and plenty of good will, they could, almost like Pol Pot, remake Cambodia?

If the international community had wanted to do something for the Cambodian people, it should have put them under a bell jar for a generation and protected them from their hostile neighbours, the Thais and the Vietnamese, and from the rapacious businessmen who had descended on the country like locusts. It should have helped them first and foremost to live in peace, to rediscover themselves. And then, perhaps, it might have asked them if they preferred a monarchy or a republic, if they preferred the Party of the Cow or the Party of the Snake. Instead of sending experts in constitutional law, economics and communications, the UN should have sent a

team of psychoanalysts and psychologists to deal with the ghastly trauma which this people has suffered.

There was a psychiatrist-anthropologist in Phnom Penh, but he was there in a private capacity, with a grant from his university and a video recorder. Maurice Eisenbruch, Australian, forty-three years of age, was convinced, as I was, that the UN, with their massive foreign presence and their logic, were sweeping away what little Khmer culture had miraculously survived the American carpet-bombing and Pol Pot's massacres.

The task that Maurice had set himself was to gather the last remaining traces of that world on its way to extinction. One of the ways of handing down the Khmer tradition was through the *knus*, or wizards, the village healers, and for months he had been travelling around Cambodia, seeking out the few survivors and putting together a sort of manual of their wisdom.

'According to the *knus*,' said Maurice, 'most illnesses are the work of spirits. A newborn infant thrashes around in its cradle? That's because its mother in its previous life is trying to enter its body and carry it away. For the Cambodians spirits are real in the way viruses are for us. Which of us has ever seen the AIDS virus? And yet we believe in it. The truth is that neither we nor they can determine our lives. They call it fate, we call it genetics. But what difference does it make?'

Maurice, speaking as a psychiatrist, would say the Cambodians were victims of a mass trauma. They were still frightened, and they did not know what of. 'Since time doesn't exist for them, they fear the death of years gone by when they saw so many people disappear, and they fear the life of today in which they see themselves as dead people.' According to Maurice not one UN official asked himself what might be the deep-down consequences of the policies being adopted. What would all the election propaganda mean to the Khmers? 'The Khmers are sick,' he said. 'But what doctor has ever prescribed democracy as a cure for the ills of the soul?'

According to Maurice, the tragedy of the UN intervention was that the Khmers would never become modern democratic capitalists: the only ones to profit from the situation would be the Cambodians of Chinese origin. In the countryside, populated by the pure Cambodians, progress would come only in the form of greater exploitation. 'With every new hotel, with every new supermarket that's

opened, the Khmers are being pushed another step further from their own civilization.'

I felt that instead of all those blue berets, all those development technicians, the UN would have done better to have sent Cambodia a few experts on ghosts in order to exorcize the ones that made the air so heavy and the nights so sleepless.

The only way of finding Hoc was to go and see him early in the morning. He had a house near the Olympic Market, where his wife ran a little rice shop.

Hoc was a journalist. He had a motorbike, and whenever I went to Phnom Penh he was my taxi driver and interpreter – not only of the language, but also of the politics. Especially the politics. I had a great affection for him: to survive he had had to perform all the somersaults of recent Cambodian history, but in his heart he had remained undefiled.

He was born under Prince Sihanouk, when it was obligatory to be a monarchist; he had studied law at the time when one had to declare oneself republican; he had escaped the killing fields of Pol Pot by pretending to be a Marxist-Leninist peasant. In 1979, when the Vietnamese intervened to put an end to Pol Pot's regime, Hoc had become a pro-Soviet Communist, and had been sent to study in Hanoi and in various Eastern European countries. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the arrival of the United Nations and all those other international bodies, Hoc, like so many of his colleagues, could have made another tack, could have changed his spots again and found a well-paid job. But no. He remained a member of the party, but free of mind. He kept away from the ever-widening circles of corruption, and for a small salary ran a political weekly.

I found him in his spacious cement room that opened on to the street, and asked him to help me with the story of the election and to find me the best fortune-teller in town. This time I was interested not so much in my own fate – I had already collected enough versions of that – as in the answer to a question that had been spinning in my head since the start of the year: if it is really possible to predict the future, if man does in fact carry inside him the seeds of what lies in wait for him, then Cambodia was the place to prove it. In the course of four years, one person in three had

died in this country, most of them violently. Had the fortune-tellers predicted it? Had there been someone somewhere to warn Cambodia of the coming bloodbath? If the palm of one's hand bears a sign that denotes an illness at the age of eighteen and the possibility of a heart attack at fifty-two, what must there have been in the hands of the millions of Cambodians who filled the country's mass graves? If no one had known how to read their future, it meant that whoever claimed to do so was an imposter, that the future was not written in anyone's hand, it was not in the stars. It meant that fate did not exist.

Hoc knew of a fortune-teller behind the Doeun Thkol market whom his wife consulted regularly. We went there in the late afternoon. His house was raised on wooden piles, in a street that was all potholes and mud. We climbed some steep stairs, took off our shoes and sat down to wait on a wide table-bed on the porch.

The fortune-teller was in a dark room lit only by one oil lamp. Written in chalk over the door was: 'Carnal passion, jealousy, violence, drunkenness, intransigence, ambition: if you cannot rid yourself of even one of these ills, you will never be at peace.' It struck me once again that here, as almost always around such people, there was a magnificent peace.

The man was attending to a whole family, and I was intrigued by the respectful way in which Hoc behaved in that house, making the appropriate gestures to the woman who brought us water to drink. He was a Communist, but he was still a Khmer, and to him the fortune-teller was a priest. Like all the Khmers, Hoc believed in the power of amulets. He had a very powerful one himself: a Buddha his mother had given him in 1979, which had protected him in the years of the war against the remains of Pol Pot's army. The taboo this amulet carried was that Hoc must not eat dog meat. Once, out of courtesy towards the Vietnamese military advisers, he had had to taste a bit of their dog stew, and at that very moment the Khmer Rouge attacked the village he was in. It was a miracle that he survived.

I showed him my Buddha, and he asked me how long it was since it had been recharged. Recharged? Yes, amulets lose their force with time and must be recharged. My Buddha had gone without being recharged for over twenty years. According to Hoc it must have 'expired' by now. He knew of a monk in a pagoda not far from the airport who was very good at restoring the force to amulets. 'He's

an odd monk. Sometimes he appears as an old man, at other times as a young one.'

The family that had been consulting the fortune-teller came out. It was now the turn of a woman who had come with her daughter, and we sat on the floor behind them. The woman wanted to sell a plot of land, and asked advice on how to proceed. The fortune-teller told her that within five days two women would come and ask her the price, but that it would be hard to conclude the deal because the property had no easy access. That was true enough, the woman said. Most properties have problems of access, I thought.

The woman wanted to know what to expect for the very young daughter kneeling at her side. The man said that for this they would have to return the following week: it is not easy to predict the fate of so young a girl. That struck me as fair: the less past one has, the harder it is to predict one's future. There are no signs; the face is without any history, and the fortune-teller, who is often nothing more than an instinctive psychologist, has little to go by.

Hoc whispered his translation in that delightful Indochinese-French *patois* of his, full of verbs in the infinitive and with much *monsieur* and *madame* instead of 'he' and 'she'. I noticed how interested he was in the whole process. It was the first time he had been there, and the fact that the fortune-teller was the one his wife consulted did much to arouse his curiosity.

The fortune-teller was about sixty. He had managed to escape death by leading the Khmer Rouge to believe he was a rickshaw driver. Sitting in the lotus position against a wall, he asked the date of my birth and which day of the week that was. He wrote down some numbers on a sheet of paper, arranging them in the form of a pyramid, and then, referring to them continually, he began:

*'In the march of your life you should already have died several times. Until the age of twenty-one you had great difficulties both with money and with your health . . .'* and so on, all the things I knew so well by now, partly true and partly false. Nothing interesting, nothing new, except that this year I would be the victim of a theft: I would lose something very dear to me. Not wanting to offend him, I let him continue.

Then I interrupted to ask him the question I had on my mind: had he ever predicted that Pol Pot would come to power and that so many people would be murdered?

The fortune-teller was surprised. He thought he had misunderstood my question, and Hoc had to translate it for him a second time.

*'No. But nobody back then asked me about anything of the kind.'* That struck me as ridiculous. *'Anyway, it was already all written in the prophecy of Buddha. The Khmers knew it. And it all came true,'* he added.

As we were leaving, the fortune-teller asked Hoc how his wife was. Hoc was stunned. He had given him no more than a couple of snippets of information about himself, if that, and the man had immediately realized who he was. Easy, I said to myself, in a small community, for someone with an eye for detail and the talents of a psychologist to identify various local characters. The rub comes with someone like me, an outsider of a different culture, with different ways of expressing myself and different questions.

*'What is this prophecy of Buddha?'* I asked Hoc as we put our shoes back on.

*'A thing everyone knows, in verses. I can't recall it all that well,'* he said. I insisted, and Hoc began to recite with some difficulty, as if he had to dig deep into his memory:

There are houses,  
but none live there.  
There are roads,  
but no travellers.  
There are stairs,  
but no one climbs them.  
The black crows seem unarmed,  
but within the fruit  
the worms are there.  
Only at Angkor there is feasting,  
but of humanity none remain,  
save those who stand where lies  
the shade of a rain tree.'

Extraordinary! There it all was: the evacuation of Phnom Penh, with the houses and roads left deserted; the Khmer Rouge in their black pyjamas, ostensibly bearing the fruits of peace, but in fact unleashing the massacre; Angkor, the only place not touched by the revolution; and at the end so few survivors that they could all stand in the shade of a large tree.

How far did these verses date back? Hoc had no idea. Before Pol

Pot? He did not remember, and I had a nagging suspicion that they were quite recent, composed *a posteriori* to explain the past.

It was already dark. In nearby houses we could see small fires on which people were preparing supper. We saw some joggers, sweating profusely as they jumped over the puddles: UNTAC officials out for their evening exercise, they passed right under the house of the Khmer fortune-teller. Two worlds, I thought, that will never meet, however they may run.

There was only one person who could give me an authoritative answer to the question of Buddha's prophecy: Olivier de Vernon, a scholar from the École Française de l'Extreme Orient, an expert on the Khmer language and on Buddhism. Olivier had been living in Cambodia for a number of years, and had taken a mission upon himself: to reconstruct the religious memory of the Khmers, which Pol Pot had tried to destroy. He travelled around the country, especially to the pagodas, collecting every banana leaf with writing on it, every old manuscript that had survived the bonfires of the Khmer Rouge. He photographed them and transcribed them on a computer. On the strength of these scraps found here and there, he was reassembling the classics of the tradition. He distributed copies to libraries, pagodas and the Buddhist schools that were reopening.

I found Olivier in his tiny office between the outer wall of the Royal Palace and the Silver Pagoda. The prophecy of Buddha? Of course he knew it! It existed in several versions, he said, and he had found traces of it in different parts of the country. The oldest manuscripts went back about two hundred years, but that did not mean that the prophecy itself could not be far older. Banana leaves do not last long, and one of the traditional tasks of young monks was to make new copies of old texts that were becoming illegible. He had never heard Hoc's rhyme before, but in his opinion it was possibly an updated popular version of the old prophecy, which, he said, ran more or less like this:

'Around the middle of the Buddhist era,' (the five-thousand-year era beginning with the birth of Buddha in 543 BC, so the exact middle would be in 1957) 'a palace of gold and silver will rise at the confluence of the four rivers.' (Where the Mekong and the Bassac rivers meet, forming four branches, Sihanouk had had a casino built.

Subsequently, however, the vicissitudes of politics got in the way and the casino never opened. It has now been turned into the Hotel Cambodiana.) 'After that there will be a devastating war in the land, and the blood of the victims will run as high as the elephant's belly.' (The American war and then the massacres of Pol Pot.) 'Religion will be eliminated.' (Pol Pot banned all Buddhist activities, destroyed the pagodas and killed most of the monks.) 'Then will come a man disguised as a Chinese,' (Sihanouk returned from Peking) 'accompanied by a white elephant with blue tusks.' (The white UN vehicles with the blue berets of the soldiers on board.) 'There will be another brief war, until a monk brings back the sacred scriptures from the Kulen Mountains,' (today one of the bases of the Khmer Rouge) 'and changes the name of the country from Kampuchea' (the Khmer name for Cambodia, meaning '*karma* of pain') 'to Nagar Bankat Puri. Only then will happiness reign, all illnesses disappear, every man have fifty wives and live to the age of 220 years.'

Sure enough, this prophecy seemed exact . . . with hindsight. But even so it was impressive.

The day of the elections began with a heavy and most beautiful downpour. It was Sunday. The Cambodians put on their best clothes and showed up enthusiastically at the polling stations. The atmosphere was festive indeed. Everywhere there were UN soldiers in their blue berets and the uniforms of their different countries; everywhere foreigners directing operations, observing, photographing; everywhere journalists, TV cameras, microphones. The act of voting itself was a novel and entertaining spectacle for the Cambodians. To prevent people from exercising their democratic right more than once, as soon as they had voted they had to dip their right index fingers in an invisible ink which made them glow under a special lamp. This was a piece of magic that left the Cambodians dumbfounded.

Who to vote for? The parties were legion. Each one was represented by a symbol on the voting slip: there was a snake, a cow, the face of Prince Sihanouk, the towers of Angkor.

The Communist Party, still in power, was the first on the list, and it had ordered people to make a good firm cross in the first square. But which was the first? You had only to turn the sheet upside down, and the first became the last. Many were those who stood

perplexed in the voting booths, turning the ballot this way and that, unable to make up their minds.

In the end everything turned out for the best, and the world's conscience, especially that of the West, could congratulate itself on another 'triumph of democracy'.

On Prince Sihanouk's return from Peking to become once again the head of state, the Royal Palace had been repainted and refurnished. It was passed off as the seat of Sihanouk's ancestors, though in reality, like all the finest buildings in Phnom Penh, the palace had been built by the French during the colonial period specifically to give the local monarchy a touch of regal pomp.

The famous Silver Pagoda was also of recent date, while the so-called 'crown jewels' consisted of a modest collection of small gifts presented to Cambodia by visitors at the end of the last century. The all-steel Napoleon III Pavilion had been built by the French to celebrate the opening of the Suez Canal. Having served its purpose in Egypt it was sent as a gift to the King of Cambodia, who had had it erected in front of the Throne Hall.

Only the three sacred jewels, symbol of the monarchy's power, were said to be antique; but these had mysteriously disappeared with the departure of the last head of the pro-American republic, General Lon Nol, shortly before the arrival of the Khmer Rouge. One of these jewels was a sword used in divination: whenever the king had to take an important decision, the court fortune-tellers would read heaven's answers to the problems of state in the patterns of rust on the blade.

Thus it was that Sihanouk, on his return to the palace which had seen him first as king, then prime minister and finally prisoner of the Khmer Rouge, found himself without any of the traditional emblems of power. But he did not need them. He had been on the political scene for more than half a century; most Cambodians revered him as the father-god of the nation, and that was enough for him. He reigned with a kingliness that was his own, over this palace furnished with hideous armchairs in fake Empire style, cheap carpets, and a few old portraits of him and his wife Monique which had been foraged from the cellars. Sihanouk had no need of trappings. He felt himself to be the direct heir of all the greatness of Cambodia.

'You're sitting at the table of the kings of Angkor,' I was told while lunching at the palace a day after the elections. The table was a long affair of polished wood, bought in Thailand; but it was true, as Sihanouk observed with pointed irony, that I had been preceded at this table, or another very like it, by such figures as Mitterrand, Tito and General de Gaulle – 'my hero', as Sihanouk called him.

As we ate we were constantly under the eyes of North Korean guards whom Kim Il Sung – 'my great friend' – had loaned him. The conversation was about politics, but I soon managed to introduce the subject of ghosts by telling Sihanouk I had gone to look for André Malraux's in the old Hotel Manolis. In that building on Post Office Square, now rotten and crumbling, the French writer had stayed with his wife at the time of his famous expedition to Angkor, from which he had stolen one of the great carved slabs of stone from the temple of Bantei Serei. He was caught and sentenced to three years' imprisonment, although he never served them.

'Malraux wasn't a thief, he was an art lover,' Sihanouk interrupted me. 'What he did wasn't stealing. It was an amorous abduction!' Sihanouk said his aunt had always refused to shake Malraux's hand on that account, but for him he was a great man.

I asked Sihanouk if any of the court fortune-tellers whom his aunt and his mother used to consult were still alive. I was interested in this tradition, I explained. Sihanouk referred the question to one of the ladies present and she, like all those addressed by him, joined her hands on her breast, bowed her head and whispered the reverential formula '*Pom Cha . . . Pom Cha*'; and my question was lost.

Not that Sihanouk was uninterested in the subject. From the moment he returned to the palace – entering through the 'Gate of Victory' and as first priority going to thank the spirits of his ancestors – he had had to concern himself with the world of the occult as much as that of politics. He had not been back long when there were rumours of a prophecy according to which he would die within a year. To avoid that fate – or so it was said in the markets of Phnom Penh – he had made a pact with the King of the Dead: his life in exchange for those of five thousand young Cambodians, many of whom were to offer themselves voluntarily. The palace had to issue an official communiqué denying both the prophecy and all the rumours that surrounded it. The story had been taken seriously to the point that many young people had begun tying white threads

around their wrists to let the King of the Dead know that they did not wish to be among the victims.

Another crisis had been provoked by Buddha's eyebrow. Forty years previously, Sihanouk had brought this precious relic back from his travels in India, where it had been given him by Nehru. The astrologers ruled that the most propitious place to preserve the eyebrow was in front of Phnom Penh's railway station, so Sihanouk had erected a *stupa*, a reliquary, in the middle of the forecourt. But he had a niece, a dancer and magician, who thanks to various premonitory dreams had escaped the Khmer Rouge massacres in which Sihanouk lost fourteen of his children and close relatives. In 1992 this princess 'discovered' that the *stupa* was in the wrong location, that all Cambodia's problems stemmed from the fact that the relic was disrespectfully housed near a dirty and chaotic place like the station, and, worst of all, that it was constantly exposed to the sun. 'As long as Buddha is in the heat the country will burn,' the princess said.

Sihanouk took heed. He had the eyebrow removed and placed in the shade of a great tree at the foot of the hill in the centre of Phnom Penh. He then began work on a great new *stupa*, 150 feet in height, which will change the skyline of the capital. The mysterious hill built by Cambodia's enemies to weigh down the head of the *naga*, symbol of the country's strength, will no longer be the highest point in the city. Sihanouk's new *stupa* will dominate it – thus changing Cambodia's destiny, according to legend.

After lunch, while Sihanouk gave me a tour of the palace and introduced me to Micki, his dog, one of the court ladies asked if I would like to meet the woman who had been the queen mother's fortune-teller. She would come to the palace at five that afternoon. I took my leave of Sihanouk and the Princess Monique, and with much discretion I was taken to wait in a building used by the secretariat.

The fortune-teller was a thin woman with very short hair, a long black silk skirt and white blouse. We sat on the floor around a towel on which she laid out her cards.

'You're the son of a very rich and powerful family,' she began, making me think that I might as well leave there and then. She went on for the best part of an hour: at the age of ten years and ten months I had been very ill; a couple of influential people had stolen an idea from me; in October I must beware of two individuals who would

try to ruin my reputation, one of them eight years younger than me, the other of my own age. She said that never in my life would I make money, and that if someone offered me a business deal I should stay clear or I would lose everything.

I wanted to thank her and leave, but I could not. From the window I could see Sihanouk walking in the garden with Micki. It would have been terribly embarrassing if he had seen me there after I had formally taken leave of him. In the end I asked the woman if she saw any dangers lying ahead. Yes: between 20 July and 1 August. 'That's the time when you shouldn't cross any borders. But if you really must, then take great care of your travel documents,' she urged. That was precisely the time when I was planning to leave, overland, for Europe.

Not much remained with me from that fortune-teller, except the fun of sitting at the feet of the woman who in her time, with her chitchat, had influenced the destinies of a court, not to mention the fun of hiding from the king as he walked in the garden with his dog. When I finally managed to escape without being seen through a side door of the palace, I felt as if I had just stepped out of a fairy tale.

One of the haunts where the representatives of the international community met in the evening was 'No Problem', a sort of club-café-restaurant which had opened in an old colonial villa. One evening, sitting next to a table of strangers, all UN officials, I heard someone talking about a German journalist who had been told by a Cambodian fortune-teller not to fly, and who had saved himself at the last minute by not boarding the Russian helicopter that had crashed in Siem Reap. By now the story had a life of its own; it would be told and retold, each time with new details and new additions, and thus would become more and more true.

I spent my last evening in Phnom Penh at the palace. Sihanouk was showing the diplomatic corps the latest product of one of his old hobbies: film-making. The film was a love story between a young man dying of cancer and a nurse. The title seemed designed to exorcise one of the many prophecies that concerned our host: *See Angkor . . . and Die*.

The palace, faintly illuminated by the warm glow of a few torches

against the ochre-coloured walls, seemed more and more beautiful and unreal. Sihanouk, on great form, was clutching a microphone and translating the Khmer dialogue into French and English. We were in the small open-air pavilion in front of the Throne Hall. A fresh breeze drifted lightly among the columns. Under the star-studded sky reigned a magnificent, surrealistic peace.

At dawn, Hoc and I left by taxi for Battambang, expecting to reach the Thai border by nightfall. The Khmer Rouge had been relatively quiet and the traffic was running smoothly as far as Poipet. The frontier post was theoretically closed, but we had heard that the UNTAC officials could go to Aranyaprathet in Thailand for shopping or dinner.

In Poipet the taxi set us down in the market square. I instinctively went to see the wall against which the Khmer Rouge had put me in April 1975. I stood there a few minutes in silence, as if it really were somebody's tomb. I thought of the many things that had happened to me since, of the many places I had been, the people I had known, the countless words I had written. I thought of all the things I would not have done had my life ended there – so much, and after all, nothing.

I saw a white car with the UN logo heading towards the border. At the wheel was a young Japanese woman on her way to Aranyaprathet to meet her fiancé. Both she and the military frontier guards thought that I too was from UNTAC, and in a flash I found myself outside Cambodia. I found a car, and during the last couple of hundred miles to Bangkok I slept, without nightmares and without dreams.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN



### The Destiny of Dogs

The month of June had passed without the prophecy of the virgin of Medan coming true. I had not met my *xiao lao pu* – the second 'little wife' she had promised me – or if I had met her I was not aware of it. I had used that month to prepare for my annual trip to Europe. Above all, I had been trying to obtain visas for the different countries whose borders I would have to cross by train. This was no easy task, because some of them, including Vietnam, would like all visitors to arrive at an airport. Only after long explanations and arguments would they concede an overland visa, valid only for the particular frontier post named in the passport.

I spent the last evening choosing what to take with me, knowing that where I was going there would be no trolleys, escalators or porters to make things easier. I had said goodbye to everyone and was already feeling the familiar thrill of beginning a journey, the sense of relief that always fills me when I know that I cannot be reached, that I am not booked or expected anywhere, that I have no commitments except those created by chance. How wonderful it is to mix with a crowd as an ordinary traveller, free from one's own role, from one's self-image, which at times can be a cage as tight as that of the body; to be sure you won't meet anyone with whom you will have to make conversation, and to feel free to send to the devil the first person who tries to start one.

In this mood, with only the weight of a backpack on my shoulders and one piece of hand luggage, I left Turtle House one morning to begin a great journey, one of the longest of my life and one of the slowest: Bangkok to Florence. Though I was heading west, I had to begin by going east. As it was impossible to cross Burma towards India, I had to enter Cambodia and then pass through Vietnam, China, Mongolia, Siberia, and on and on until I reached home.



'Even a journey of ten thousand leagues begins with the first step,' say the Chinese, who have a proverb for every situation. My journey would be about 12,500 miles, but that very first step seemed the most difficult: how could I get to the station in time? Sukhumvit Road was completely choked with traffic; in half an hour my car had moved barely a dozen yards, and there was no hope that the situation would change. I thanked the driver and jumped on the back of a motorcycle-taxi which, by zig-zagging between cars, cutting through narrow side lanes, going the wrong way down one-way streets and often mounting the pavement, got me to the station on time.

The train took five hours to reach Aranyaprathet, speeding through the 'kingdom of smiles' that smiles no more. The Cambodian border was crowded with people pursuing an extremely profitable activity: smuggling. Loaded with bags and bundles, hundreds of Thais and Cambodians went back and forth undisturbed from one country to the other, under the eyes of the soldiers of both sides. I tried to slip through by mixing with the crowd, but my white clothes betrayed me and I was stopped at once: 'No, no, foreigners cannot cross. It is forbidden,' said the soldiers. 'Foreigners must go by plane.' I knew the old refrain, but did not lose heart. In Asia no prohibition is absolute, no rule inflexible; and soon, for a very reasonable price, I was 'smuggled' into Cambodia on the back seat of an 'authorized' car.

Before the war the Cambodian railway line went all the way to Thailand; but with the country in ruins and all its resources up for auction, the tracks from the border have been sold as scrap iron. The train to Phnom Penh now starts from the city of Sisophon. The train? Well, not exactly. Two or three times a week a string of broken-down cattle cars, loaded with contraband and passengers, many sitting on the roof, braves the 206 miles to Phnom Penh. The time of departure is erratic and is never announced in advance, so as to confuse the bandits who regularly attack and loot the train. All it takes is a mine or a tree-trunk on the track; the bandits – or soldiers of the regular army? – open fire, kill one or two luckless passengers to scare the others, grab everything and leave. The news is given at most two lines in the local newspaper. Sometimes not even that.

I settled down among the baskets, bundles and passengers. They were all Khmers with very dark skin, the Khmer of the countryside and the forest, people of another age.

The simple, orderly beauty of the rice fields helped me to shake off the thought of the bandits, but when the train finally entered Phnom Penh I drew a sigh of relief, even though the station presented a disheartening scene, occupied as it was by an army of beggars, homeless people, desperate characters of every kind – those produced in the past by war and those produced now, with equal cruelty, by the free-market economy.

In Phnom Penh I remembered the monk that Hoc had told me about, the one who appeared sometimes as a young man and sometimes as an old one. With the journey I had before me, I thought it would not be a bad idea to 'recharge' the Buddha I wore on my neck. Hoc was not sure if the monk was still alive. His wife had heard that he had been killed by bandits who had robbed his monastery. We decided to try anyway the next morning, very early so that I could go on to Saigon.

It was the sort of dawn that leaves you with an eternal sense of nostalgia: the dark tops of sugar palms against the immaculate pastel sky, the water motionless in the rice fields reflecting the gold of the pagodas. We went on Hoc's motorbike. For the last three miles the road was full of holes, and we laughed at the idea that before 'recharging' the Buddha we were unprotected, and might get stuck out there in the middle of nowhere.

The monk had not been murdered, or at least not his youthful incarnation. More than a magician or guru, he looked to me like a paratroop commander. A strong, muscular man, he ruled his 120 monks with an iron fist.

Hoc explained my case to him: the danger of flying and my Buddha which had not been recharged since 1972. The monk said that for a proper job I should go to seven pagodas and have it recharged by seven monks, but since I did not have time, I should at least offer seven white lotus flowers to the great image of the Enlightened One enthroned in his temple. I did so, reflecting that the number seven has been magic in all cultures and all times: the seven days of the week, the seven dwarfs, the seven fat years and seven lean years, the seven-league boots, and the seven lotus flowers. Even in Cambodia!

The monk told me to lay out not only the Buddha on its chain

but all the other objects that I usually carried with me, especially when travelling. These too had to be 'charged' so they would protect me. Meanwhile he went to look after some other patients.

A group of young men, mentally disturbed or epileptic, were waiting for him. Brought from various parts of the country, they stood in a corner of the garden under a big tree, naked except for a *krama* around the waist. Beside them was a goatskin full of water. Some of them were too agitated to stand still, others were trembling. They all knelt down. With both hands the monk picked up a bucket, plunged it into the water, and with all his strength, reciting aloud some prayers or magic formulae, poured it over those wretches: one bucketful after another until the goatskin was empty and the madmen, whether by magic or just from the cold shower, had all quieted down.

Hoc told me the monk was expert in curing the traumas of war, and that all these men were ex-soldiers. Luckily my case was different: a 'half bath' would do, said the monk, but if I preferred I could strip naked like the others. I preferred not. He took the Buddha and the objects I had selected: my old Rolex, my old Leica, and a clip I use to hold money in my pocket. He put them in a silver bowl, scattered some jasmine flowers over them, laid his hands on top, said some prayers and sprinkled them – just as well! – with a few drops of water. But as for me, while I sat on a chair with a crown of flowers in my joined hands, he slowly poured a whole basin of water on my head. It ran in to my collar and down my back. And then another basinful, and another. Chanting the whole time. Instead of concentrating on the blessing, I was thinking the madmen had been much wiser to take their clothes off. By the end of it I was soaking wet.

When the ceremony was over the monk gave me a small image of Buddha on laminated paper. Whenever I felt in danger, he said, I must immediately press it against the centre of my forehead and strike it with the palm of my hand as if to drive it into my head. He demonstrated with a couple of whacks that set my whole brain spinning.

We made our offering and left. As we went out, Hoc translated an inscription I had noticed on one wall of the temple: 'Life is not yours, and it can be taken from you at any moment. Reflect on this.'

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The Cambodian railway, even in colonial times, had never been linked directly with that of Vietnam. The fastest way of getting from Phnom Penh to Ho Chi Minh City, as Saigon is now called, is by car. Dozens of broken-down vehicles, their doors held together by wire, run back and forth between the two cities carrying thousands of carpenters, builders, painters and Vietnamese prostitutes in search of fortune.

For the people of Vietnam, Cambodia has become a sort of Eldorado: the country is underpopulated, the rice fields are fertile, the rivers full of fish, and the cities full of people who have got rich quickly with the traffics of war and then of peace and the United Nations.

At Neak Leung all the cars, lorries and carts had to board a ferry to cross the Mekong. That powerful river, dense with mud and history, cuts Cambodia in two from north to south, and no bridge links the two shores. For centuries the great danger of this country has been that of being torn apart along this natural border: the west bank in the orbit of Thailand, the east in that of Vietnam. Today the demographic pressure of its two neighbours (Thailand with sixty million inhabitants and Vietnam with seventy-one) still threatens Cambodia with its present population of eight million.

The Cambodian border is marked by a great triumphal arch in pink stone, surmounted by a reproduction of the towers of Angkor. From there I had to walk about a hundred yards to reach an unadorned grey cement portal that demarcates the entrance to Vietnam. Foreigners are very rarely seen there, and my arrival aroused great curiosity, a detailed search of my bags, and an interrogation in which the recurring question was: 'Why didn't you take a plane?'

The difference from Cambodia is immediately striking. After the semi-deserted Khmer plains, Vietnam seems absolutely crammed with people. Everywhere you look you see nothing but people, people, people. People sawing, hammering, welding, sewing, cooking, in what looks like an obsessive preoccupation with survival.

The distance from the border to Saigon is forty-six miles – the last, until Europe, that I was to travel by car: another rickety, shuddering old banger.

On entering Saigon I realized that I was not prepared for the shock. I had thought about all the practicalities, but not about what the return would mean for me. The Saigon that came to meet me

was a bedlam of humanity. I felt lost and almost frightened. In that city I had spent some of the most intense moments of my life; but now I felt that the past was something from which I must keep my distance. I began by avoiding the hotels where I had stayed before: the Continental, whose lovely terrace overlooking the square had been modernized with an ugly glass enclosure, and the Majestic, whose view of the river now took in several huge advertising billboards. I took a room in a cheap hostel for backpackers. Some of my former friends were dead; Cao Giao, my old interpreter and teacher, had died of cancer after years in the prisons of the Communist regime he had supported. I was unsure whether to look up the others.

I walked for hours and hours at random through the city I had known, without recognizing anything or anyone. It was like walking in hell. At every turn someone tried to attract my attention, holding out a cap, or offering a ride in a rickshaw, a bowl of soup, a girl. Though it had changed its name, Saigon was again the old Saigon: a thoroughly Oriental city full of decadence, corruption and vitality – extremely materialistic, but even dirtier, more chaotic, more indecent and more lascivious than it had been during the war.

Memory can be a wonderful refuge, and if I ever live to be old, as the fortune-tellers predict, I shall enjoy rummaging around in it as in an old family chest forgotten in the attic; but it can also be a terrible burden, especially for others. As I walked, constantly haunted by one recollection or another, I realized how obnoxious I was with this memory of mine: obnoxious to people of my own age, because my memories of the past made it hard for them to lie about promises that were made and not kept; obnoxious to the young, who live in the present and do not want to hear about the world of yesterday. I was obnoxious, but at least harmless. In that war I had lost only some illusions – a loss that was not even visible. But what about those who in that revolution – a failed revolution, like all the others – had lost legs, arms, eyes, or even just their youth, and who now dragged themselves around the streets, begging? They were really obnoxious, with their memories so physical, so visible, such a burden for everyone.

On the morning of 30 April 1975 I had wept with joy to see the tanks of the Liberation Army rolling in to Saigon: the war was over, and the Vietnamese would now be masters of their own country.

When I returned ten years later I had wept with despair when I saw how the Communists had wasted their chance to make Vietnam a truly free country. Now I was even more heartsick. The failure was everywhere, in the life of every one of those who had won the war.

During the war years I had been greatly impressed by the revolutionaries I met: they were poor, tough, dedicated to a cause they believed in. Some of them reminded me of modern saints. In twenty years they too had lost their haloes and had become banal, commonplace figures. One had gone into business with some French Communists in the import-export trade. Another, in his own words (at least he still had some irony), was in the 'yellow slave-trade', recruiting Vietnamese workers for Korean building companies. A man who had been a mythical figure in the Vietcong told me the tragedy was that they had won the war: losers are forced to adapt, to change, and thus to improve; but winners think they have nothing to learn.

The S-10 train for Hanoi is called 'The Reunification Express', but by the looks of it, armoured as it was, it still seemed to belong to the time when the pro-American south and the Communist north were at war. All the windows were fitted with steel grilles to be lowered 'in case of need'.

'What need?' I asked.

'Bandits,' explained one of my fellow travellers, an ex-soldier. With a small tip to the conductress he had managed to smuggle in his young wife to share his bench-bed, so instead of six passengers in the compartment there were seven of us stretched out on those wooden boards, barely padded with soiled straw mats. Above me were another soldier and an old woman who talked all the time; on the opposite side were two strange young men with several days' growth of beard and no baggage.

The train was poor, dirty and primitive, as if it had been hastily cobbled together by a blacksmith. When we left Saigon there was already no water in the toilets. I tried to sleep, but it was not easy. Whenever the train stopped it was besieged by a howling mob of women, children and beggars trying to get on, to sell something or to cadge a handout. Many passengers got off to crowd around the women who carried pots of soup on shoulder-poles to serve on the

platform. In the darkness of the stations the flames of their oil lamps flickered like fireflies: a medieval scene. Poor Vietnam! The only modernity this country seems to have known is that of war: weapons, planes and missiles are products of this century; all the rest still belongs to the past.

The night sky was moonless and crowded with stars. Below the black silhouettes of the hills the presence of villages could be guessed from the light of the small fires on which people were cooking their meals. At every station the assault of peddlers and the uproar of bargaining was repeated. In the middle of the night the conductress entered our compartment, made us all get up, and began probing under our straw beds. A passenger had reported the disappearance of his baggage, and they were trying to identify the thief. They did not find him.

Dawn came, fresh and pure as if this were the world's first day, with not a cloud in the sky, the palms and hills mirrored in the still water of the rice paddies. For two days and two nights the train panted northwards up the coast: a long, rattling train of poverty. But for the villages we passed through, the train was a symbol of wealth and abundance. At every station a forest of skinny arms reached up towards the windows. Some of them offered things for sale: ragged youngsters sold hot water from battered aluminium teapots covered with straw, little girls offered pieces of sugarcane. Most offered empty hands. Amputees boarded the train to display their stumps, the blind to chant their singsong tales of woe. The police drove them all out again. They were undoubtedly victims of the war, but nowadays in Vietnam only the dead are honoured as heroes. For them there is a monument in every town and every village. For the lame there is nothing but contempt: they are a burden.

The conductresses and inspectors were also ex-soldiers. They were paid starvation wages (15,000 dong, about \$15 a month), but they got by thanks to various dealings which the train made possible. In Saigon they would buy a television set imported from Thailand, and resell it in Hanoi for a \$10 profit. The great problem was to have the \$700 to buy the first television.

The talkative old woman and the ex-soldier's wife were also doing big business. Both had bankrolls hidden in their blouses, and our compartment slowly filled up with baskets of grapes, skewers of dried fish, and medicinal plants bought at stations along the way. The old

woman would haggle over the price until the train started moving, and then, with the goods already in her hand and the vendor running frantically alongside, at the very last moment she would throw out whatever she chose to pay. Take it or leave it! In Hanoi she would resell everything at a handsome profit. The two unshaven young men without baggage had not a penny to invest, and thus no way of making any money.

The landscape outside the windows was movingly beautiful. Equally moving was the human landscape. At mealtimes, when the conductress came with a big pot to ladle soup in to greasy aluminium bowls, a few skinny and grubby children would creep along the corridor waiting for scraps, which they furtively stowed in plastic bags. They would climb in through the windows, and as soon as the train began slowing down they would jump out again, gambling constantly with death.

All through the second night the train ran alongside the sea. From my window, whenever the track curved it looked like a long, luminous snake. At dawn we arrived at Kim Lu. The population was already waiting with bowls of water on which cut-off beer cans floated to serve as cups. This water was for our washing. Dozens of women, children and old people with basins on their heads had been waiting for hours for the train to pass. So had the dogs who dived under the carriages, hoping to snatch a few crumbs of our wealth.

My ex-soldier companion and his wife saw how horrified I was, and explained that we were in the province most heavily bombed by the Americans. Gesturing with their hands, they mimed the B-52s which had dropped their loads of death on the people. The story was twenty years old, but it still seemed to justify the poverty of the present.

When we passed the city of Vinh the loudspeakers announced something I could not understand. My fellow-travellers rushed to lower the grilles over the windows. Why? We were crossing the region where Ho Chi Minh was born, and I wanted to photograph the people in the rice fields. Annoyed, I pushed up the shutter again . . . and was hit in the face by a handful of mud and manure thrown by the peasants. A hail of stones clattered against the train's iron sides and barred windows.

For the heirs of 'Uncle Ho' the train was the symbol of all the promises which the revolution had not kept. Loaded with party

bureaucrats, city dwellers and sharp traders, that train of luxury and comfort – as they saw it – passed by, as it had always passed, without a thought for them. The peasants felt betrayed and brushed aside, and now they took out their rage on the train, pelting it with anything they could lay hands on every time it passed.

I realized that for the past two days the Vietnam we saw from the windows had consisted of nothing but huts; that its cafés, its dentists', its bicycle-repair workshops, its tailors' and hairdressers' were all miserable straw roofs supported by four bamboo poles, that the people were all dressed in patched rags and the children were all barefoot.

The train rolled through that misery, whistling all the time. It ran parallel with the main road, crossing it now and then. Often there was not even a level crossing and the whistle was the only warning. A man on a bicycle failed to get off in time and was knocked down. It happened on every trip, they told me. At last the loudspeakers broadcast some patriotic music, and the mellifluous voice of a woman announced that we were arriving at Hanoi. The train slowed as if it had to break a path through the vegetable gardens and houses, bicycles and children, almost grazing shops and street stalls, and entered the city.

The station, built by the French when Vietnam was a colony, looked like a miniature Versailles – a pathetic contrast with the mass of scrawny, dusty people who slept along the tracks and on the stairways.

'Do you know where to find an opium den?' I asked a rickshaw driver in front of the modest hotel for Vietnamese travellers where I was staying. The man shook himself out of his weary lethargy, smiled toothlessly, motioned to me to climb in, and pedalled away through the Hanoi night.

Along the broken pavements, lined with old houses whose yellow paint was now peeling, under beautiful French trees strangled by electric wires and signboards, swarmed the usual poor, pale, sickly humanity in shorts and singlets. Sweaty, tired, angry. Every entry hall was a little shop, every stall sold cigarettes or newspapers or petrol. Two stools at a little table made a café, a pump and a bucket of water was a tyre repair shop. Every conversation looked like a

quarrel, and often it was. Everything seemed to be rotting: the roofs, the doors, the walls, the people themselves. The city smelled of mould. I have always liked walking around cemeteries, but the vast graveyard that was Hanoi offered no inspiration. The austere, silent, heroic Hanoi of the war was now just a city of poverty in which everything was for sale. A symbolic journey into the political illusions of my generation would begin from here, where the night again concealed a thousand secrets.

The rickshaw man had his own. He set me down in the city centre, at the end of a dark passage between two large buildings. A young man beckoned to me and led me into the ancient belly of Asia, which the fire of the revolution had wanted to destroy for ever, but which had come back to life. We crossed a court and went up the elegant wooden stairs of an old colonial house, past a row of huts built on what had been its balconies, around the edge of a terrace, along a gallery and up another small wooden stairway. Finally a little door brought us into the shadows of a beautiful room, its walls lined with bamboo, where the air was heavy with the sweet, familiar odour. On a little stove opium was being refined, boiling in an iron bowl. On the floor, covered with straw mats, lay some young people, each with his head against a wooden support. A beautiful, slim woman with very white skin moved from one to the other with the small oil lamp on which the pipe rested. By the light of that little flame I saw the shadows of other bodies stretched out along the wall, the outline of an inlaid frog on the pipe that passed from hand to hand, the tattoo of a butterfly on the naked shoulder of a girl lying beside me.

I spent about an hour enjoying that padded torpor, without memory, without weight, without disappointments. When I left I felt reconciled with the world, and when I saw that the opium den was only a few steps from the head office of the *Party Daily*, I had to smile.

The rickshaw was waiting for me, and I asked the driver to give me a complete tour of the city before returning to the hotel. No other form of transport gives the passenger that majestic ease, that sense of freedom, that cool air in the face. My rickshaw glided along the avenue skirting the Lake of the Found-Again Sword, in front of the Opera Palace and the Old Residence of the French governor, then back towards the river and the narrow lanes of the old city. I

felt as if I were on a spaceship floating between past and present, but with no more need to make comparisons or to judge. History and politics had nothing to do with me. I was fascinated only by the life that continued to flower, tenacious, greedy and lascivious, amid that decay. The rickshaw raced through streets that buzzed with vices and temptations, and I took in only some disjointed images: naked bodies in a cone of light, women talking together, laughter and obscene gestures from girls by a door, an occasional rat scurrying along those walls unpainted for decades.

That night – I do not know if I dreamed it, or imagined it with open eyes – I saw myself throw away a dictionary which I had been using until then, and get a new one that contained only positive words. Later, half asleep, for no reason I remembered the words: ‘Take great care of your travel documents.’ The fortune-teller of Phnom Penh! I went to check my passport and . . . lo and behold, my exit visa from Vietnam was not marked ‘surface travel’. The clerks in the Bangkok embassy had forgotten to write ‘Friendship Pass’, the Chinese frontier post. If I had turned up there I would undoubtedly have been sent back.

Though I was in Hanoi, it was not easy to obtain that visa. It took letters and recommendations, and two more days of waiting.

First the man cut away a little skin just behind the ear, then he plunged in the knife and slowly began probing for the jugular vein. When the blood began to gush out he collected it in a pot. The dog, its jaws tied, hung upside down by its feet from the door frame; it could not even moan. A crowd of children watched, most of them indifferent. The man skinned the dog and cut it up: the breast for stew; the legs, perhaps, to be roasted.

I had gone out for my morning run in the streets near my ramshackle hotel. The sight of that domestic butchering made me very angry. How could death – even a dog’s death – be so casual? I remembered a news item I had recently read: in Tokyo they had opened the first astrology shops for domestic animals, especially cats and dogs. In Hanoi they would have no problems of prediction: the destiny of dogs is to end up in the pot! Then I started blaming the dogs. They are supposed to have such a keen sense of smell: why do they not realize that these Vietnamese stink of the dog meat they

have eaten for centuries? Why do they not realize that man, whom they think is such a great friend, has no scruples at all?

But the life of dogs went on, in the same absurd way as all other lives. As I ran I saw many other dogs, exactly like the one I had just seen quartered, playing with children, scuffling together and digging in garbage heaps from which the beggars had already helped themselves.

I tried to get the address of a fortune-teller in Hanoi, but it seemed that it would not be easy. I was told that nobody believed in them and that they no longer existed. Then, through the usual chain of chance encounters, I met a woman who knew of one. She herself had consulted her a few weeks before: her son, a drug addict, had taken the family television and gone to sell it at the port of Haiphong to buy heroin. She did not know what to do. ‘Wait three days and the boy will return,’ the fortune-teller had told her. And he did.

My informant was the quintessence of everything that filled me with despair about Vietnam. She came from a family of great revolutionaries, she had been a guerrilla and had married a fighter. But when the war was over her husband had gone off with a younger woman and left her alone with her son and all his problems.

The fortune-teller lived not far from the Temple of Literature, and we went there by rickshaw. Her house was very modest, little more than a cube of cement. She was a thin woman of about fifty, with an unusual head of curly hair and a warm, friendly manner. She had begun to ‘see’ after a grave illness. She had been cured by a ray of light that fell on her one day.

We sat on tiny stools around a low table. She did not want to know anything about me. She took both my hands and caressed them, looked into my face, and began speaking in a very sweet, affectionate voice. She asked me in what years my wife and I were born.

‘That’s bad,’ she said. ‘For one of the tiger like you it is absolutely not advisable, indeed dangerous, to marry a rabbit.’ (The exact opposite of what the Singapore fortune-teller told me.) ‘It is your wife who has prevented you from making a good career and being successful. You should leave her, or at least stay far away from her for long periods, otherwise you will have grave problems of health.’

This was interesting. Using the system of interpreting each pronouncement with its own key, I could see some truth in this description of my relationship with Angela: if we had been together for over thirty years, it was partly because we had alternated long periods together with long periods of separation. When the children were small, if I was at home for more than two or three weeks Angela would say, 'Isn't there anything happening in the world? Isn't there an offensive in Vietnam?' And something would happen, and I would leave. I would be away a couple of weeks, and the return would be magnificent for all. Many marriages die simply of boredom. That is certainly not what the fortune-teller meant, but it was what came into my mind.

*'From now to the end of your life you will have no problems. There is only one, linked with the place where you live. Under your house there is a young dead man who prevents you from becoming rich.'* (So that's the reason!) *'Every time you make some money he destroys it. You need to appease his soul with an altar, or to open a new door in the south-west corner of the house, facing India.'*

A beautiful woman of about fifty had come in. She had listened to my 'destiny' and was preparing to present her own case. She said she often came to the fortune-teller, who had become her best friend. A railway engineer, she had studied in China, had been a member of the Party and had married a high official. Her husband had had a lover, and the fortune-teller had helped her with advice. What advice? To have patience, talk with her husband, understand him, confront the problem together. The advice which any friend would give, but which neither her colleagues at work nor those in the Party had offered her. Is this not also one of the functions of fortune-tellers?

Again I found myself sitting among fifty-year-old women with marital problems, before a simple charlatan. But I found the women much more agreeable and interesting than my saintly revolutionaries-turned-businessmen.

I asked the fortune-teller if she saw any risks for me in aeroplanes. No, absolutely none, she said, but I should be very careful about trains. Those were more dangerous for me.

'Too bad. Tomorrow I'm taking the train for Lam Son and the Chinese border,' I said.

*'Not that one! Don't take it. It's a train full of bandits and thieves.'*

*Often the police themselves pretend to be bandits and rob the passengers. Change your plans! Go by air! That train is dangerous for you!*

At that point I no longer knew if she was speaking as a fortune-teller or as a passenger of the Vietnamese railways. Either way, I was not going to take her advice.