eyes, moving his head in fits and starts, and then suddenly unleashed his boxer's jowls with a suction noise whenever one skimmed past us. I amused myself by getting his attention and making him listen carefully to the quiver of their motionless wings; with their imperceptible fluttering, it seemed they were saluting the last rays of the setting sun.

13

"*Chop!* Stop!"

Vigilant, eyes peeled, ceaselessly scanning every corner of the bleak alleyway, I rushed through the debris littering the ground, pretending I hadn't heard. Warm vapours and clammy smells rose from the soft, rutted asphalt. Broken windows and battered-down doors cracked the walls, criss-crossed with barbed wire . . . on the pavements, articles of clothing, smashed objects festering among the rubble, empty cardboard boxes moved about by rats . . . pools of water and mud everywhere leaking out of fire-damaged waste pipes . . . In front of me, in the middle of the alley, its lips curled in a grimace of suffering, bluish legs sticking up like a snail's horns, hide swollen by the recent hot sun, lay the pallid corpse of an enormous boar, covered with flies and emitting a revolting stench.

Suddenly, the indistinct sound of a chest being moved alerted me: I stood stock still and stopped my breath. I turned my gaze to a Chinese-made cabinet in the Portuguese style, with slatted panels which stood half open; it was set back in an alcove. Emerging from behind it, a shifty-looking kid was glaring at me slyly down the barrel of a gun. He was about to shoot.

I had left before daybreak without a word to anyone. I parked the jeep at the EFEO and continued on foot so as to make myself

less obtrusive. If I avoided the main thoroughfares, I reckoned I could complete my expedition in three hours; I would come back as if I had never been away. I first wanted to call on M. Yang Sun, a specialist in the rituals associated with the casting of Buddha statues, and save the precious work he had done over many years for a colleague from the school, Madeleine Giteau. Then I would go up to Vat Maha Metrei, a temple in the Serei Roath district, hoping to pick up some texts left at the home of my old teacher, You Oun, an endless fount of knowledge who had taught me everything: Pali, Khmer, rigour, doubt, curiosity, boldness . . . I especially wanted to retrieve a small exercise book where we had compiled a strange treasury of around forty Khmer words constructed by a transposition of consonants (*dangkap* → *kangdap*). I did not want to miss any opportunity to recover these irreplaceable documents while perhaps there was still time.

I had mentioned my plan to Nhem two days before, but he had dismissed it out of hand with the excuse that he could not guarantee my safety in a city still haunted by uncontrollable vagabonds. But now Phnom Penh appeared to me to be empty, and I believed I could avoid the barricades at the main intersections.

Straight after leaving the school, I was twice ordered to stop by soldiers from a distance, but I drove on, merely giving expansive and authoritative waves. I knew that they would be deaf to my explanations, whereas in the absence of any precise instructions they should merely be disconcerted by a show of self-confidence. Guns (mainly wielded by government troops) had already been pointed at me on several occasions since the outbreak of war, and a few days earlier, on the morning of 17 April, a Khmer Rouge officer had rammed the barrel of his revolver into my stomach. But I had never experienced what I felt here, in this empty, narrow alleyway: the fear that roots your feet to the spot, that freezes your blood.

The child held me in his sights. The left leg of his filthy

trousers was rolled up clear of a bandage spattered with mud and blood. I had been in his aim for several seconds; he followed me, like a moving target. Little by little, my corpse-like stillness – which I was not putting on – took his eye off the task.

"I'm on a mission for the Angkar!" I stated as calmly as possible. "The young comrade must let me pass, for I'm in a hurry!"

The young guerrilla finally lowered the gun he had been holding, with some difficulty, up to his eye at arm's length. He drew a hand over his forehead, which was half hidden by a greasy fringe, as if to remove a veil whose opacity was clouding his intelligence. He was a solitary, unresponsive youth, unpredictable and totally impervious to anyone else's thoughts or intentions. I looked at his grubby little face, raging at having stumbled across an insuperable barrier: his insanity. He came towards me, lurching through the rubble, and, without a word, kicked me. His pallor indicated that he had a vitamin deficiency and was probably suffering from chronic malaria as well. Despite his fifteen years, there were tiny wrinkles on either side of the pear-shaped bags beneath his eyes. He made me walk in front of him, pushing me along dark side streets and muttering inaudible words that were addressed to no-one. We passed houses whose porches had been knocked about; others had been destroyed by rockets; some were nothing but craters filled with yellowish water. In these still-unchecked passageways we twice had to circumvent isolated bodies, their limbs swollen beneath stretched clothing, their faces blackened and covered in city grime.

We reached the brightness of a boulevard, in the middle of which a squad of Khmers Rouges had set up an ambush; they were dozing in armchairs and a radio was crackling. Beside them, on a drawing-room table, were an AK-47, some cartridge clips, cigarettes and empty beer bottles. In the dull, still morning, we drew level with them. The as-yet-invisible sun filled the air with diffused light. With its rows of wild guava trees and empty houses, the flat avenue stretched away silently towards the

Independence Monument, which stood out in the distance against the motionless sky. In the other direction, the early dawn light had formed a gleaming halo around the turrets of three abandoned tanks that lay on the yellow grass of the long esplanade leading to the racecourse. In two sharp, short sentences, my guardian announced that he had found a Frenchman, and then he left me there. Unable to believe that my expedition had so quickly come to nothing, I wanted to be on my way again immediately. They tied my hands behind my back.

I was furious. I had failed so narrowly, I had almost been shot, I had foolishly missed my last chance to find my papers because of this kid. One of the soldiers was excited by my arrest and showed himself very keen to have my watch . . . In short, for much the same reasons as four years before, I found myself a prisoner of some Khmers Rouges who understood nothing at all about my story. In a long speech, I tried yet again to influence the younger elements in the squad, but I was wasting my time. One of them was dispatched by bicycle to find Nhem. Three hours later – I was becoming mad with impatience – the "president" arrived in a car; he wore a reproving look. I climbed in beside him, annoyed with myself, aware of my own helplessness, overwhelmed by the sense of absurdity that this appalling operation had imbued in me, and rather more ashamed of my disobedience than of my failure. Nhem was silent throughout the return journey, and I felt extremely grateful to him for not asking embarrassing questions. We arrived at the gate.

"Comrade Bizot!" he said, holding me back by my arm as I was getting out of the car. "We must now make arrangements for foreigners to be repatriated at the border with Thailand. I want to discuss this with the consul this afternoon."

It was ten o'clock. I entered the embassy as if nothing had happened. The gendarmes were gazing at a four-engine Chinese jet that was circling above the city, waiting to land at Potchentong. Dyrac came out with Maurin; both were lost in

speculation about Sihanouk's return. I joined them and told them all of our imminent departure: "Do you want the scoop of the year? We're going back by truck!"

At about midday, Nhem sent the consul the following letter:

Very urgent.

To: 01-ra. ra. ka. bha. ba. 75.

Addressees: the representatives of France, Switzerland, Spain, Germany, Italy, the USSR, Belgium, Holland (via the consul of France).

MEMORANDUM

At the meeting that took place on 25 April 1975, the Cabinet of the Government of the Royal National Union of Kampuchea decided the following:

Given that diplomatic relations with other countries have not yet been established owing to the fact that the GRNUK is busy restoring stability,

- *The Government of the Royal National Union of Kampuchea has decided to invite all foreigners still residing in the city of Phnom Penh to leave the country as of 30 April 1975;*
- *Later, when the situation has stabilised, the GRNUK will examine the question of re-establishing diplomatic relations;*
- *The GRNUK has decided to convey all foreigners by road from Phnom Penh to Poipet, and each of the countries concerned must take responsibility for their own nationals from Poipet onwards.*

Issued at Phnom Penh, 25 April 1975.

The Vice-President of the Northern
Command Front of Phnom Penh
with responsibility for foreigners
Signed: Nhem

"François . . . François!"

I looked around in surprise. No-one called me by my first name. Chantal Lorine was hurrying after me just as I was getting ready to cross the boulevard. The decoding clerk's wife was fresh and pretty, with lovely myopic eyes encircled by large spectacles that left a mark on her cheeks.

"Would you agree to be Olivier's godfather?"

"What?"

"You know we've just adopted a wonderful little boy!" she continued, seeing me hesitate. "Father Berger is going to baptise him, and Madame Dyrac will be the godmother. And so now I'm looking for a godfather."

I accepted wholeheartedly and then hurried off to the former Korean Embassy, where Nhem had sent a message to the gendarmes that he was waiting for me. All of a sudden, I caught sight of my motorbike. It had been "requisitioned" by the president's men and brought into the courtyard. Fast and sturdy, it was a fairly powerful machine, and I had always taken great care of it. It was ideal for sandy tracks. I noticed immediately that the headlamp was broken: they had pulled out the electric wires to form a contact and make it start.

"Comrade!" I said to Nhem, exaggerating my annoyance and pointing behind me. "I deliberately left the key in my motorbike so the revolutionaries could use it easily, without needing to damage it. I'm not one of those Americans who puts out of action whatever he leaves behind him! Well, look what happens: it appears that it's been smashed, like everything else."

Nhem took a few seconds to divine what I was talking about. His expression remained impassive, and he came to his point without batting an eyelid: "The embassy must suspend its broadcasts and receptions at once. I want a meeting with the consul before this evening."

He employed a neologism for "broadcasts and receptions" whose precise meaning made me pause. Since the French station

had a reasonably comprehensive radio infrastructure, I was not sure I understood what it was he wanted us to suspend: the Teletype, the telegraph or the BLU one-way transmitter. On the other hand, it was quite clear to me that he had something important on his mind. I may not always have been able to translate his words very well, but I was used to interpreting his gestures and codified facial expressions: to begin with, he looked at me with steely eyes, staring at me awkwardly; then the muscles in his face grew tense, and their involuntary fluctuations would cause the corners of his lips to curl up and twitch. I was inclined to think that he was once again obeying an order from the high command that (as with the refugees) had to be carried out without delay. If this order, which was a total violation of international agreements, was intended to sever completely the umbilical cord that still linked us to our mother country, we were dealing with a real catastrophe that would affect the morale of every one of us, not least the consul's.

Dyrac, flushed and motionless, pondered this for a long time, dreaming up and rejecting all sorts of explanations, unable to remember anything we had done to justify such a decision, except the foolish behaviour of one of the American "journalists", whom he had actually warned several times. With his own powerful secret transmitter-receiver, the man had been sending messages to a plane flying high above our sector, intending to organise a surprise evacuation by helicopter.

"I should have confiscated his radio straight away!" the consul moaned. "You can bet your life they've got detector vans! Of course they have! And then their Chinese experts must have come and unloaded a whole load of equipment . . ."

He decided to open the ambassador's offices on the first floor, so as to lend the meeting a more solemn setting. The president arrived in the afternoon, accompanied by the Malay who never left his side, two taciturn-looking officers and another character of fairly unpleasant appearance. Thanks to the gendarmes, whose

uniforms meant a great deal in the bluffing game we continued to play with all our visitors, we obstinately insisted that their armed escort remain at the gate. Having said that, we pretended not to notice the two officers stuffing the revolvers they had carried on their belts inside their shirts.

We entered the office adjoining Louis Dauge's former study with tense smiles and set expressions. The atmosphere was not good. Nhem's attendants consisted of disparate elements that seemed hostile. Dyrac had brought along Revil, Maurin and the coding officer, and I had asked that the interpreter who had been there on the first day be present too, so as to be sure of a proper translation. We sat down around Clotilde d'Harcour's desk, which Mme Dyrac had asked to be moved into the middle of the room. She had placed a pack of cigarettes on it and some bottles of cordial. Light streamed in from the large window, which was hung with dark, damask curtains, tied back. A cold draft issued from the holes in a noisy air-conditioning unit that was sunk into the wall, sending a musty smell into the damp air of the room.

In a solemn voice, enunciating each word in a sort of inaudible murmur, Nhem repeated the request I had already reported: an immediate stop to all radio broadcasts and receptions. He added that this was a decision taken by the GRNUK's council of ministers in response to the untruthful communiqués that had recently appeared in the press in Europe and the United States. I turned to my colleague in order to compare what we had understood. So that there should not be any misunderstanding, we asked him to specify what type of radio transmission he was referring to.

"To every single bit of your equipment!" he replied, at the same time letting it be known that our hesitation in the face of a clear order was causing a certain irritation.

Dyrac shuddered at the notion of being cut off from the ministry. Already inundated with difficulties, overwhelmed with

responsibilities and exhausted by fatigue, he was filled with dread at the idea of losing contact with the outside world.

"No! Tell him it's impossible," he answered. "I insist on daily contact with Paris. Anyway, there is no question of seriously contemplating any sort of evacuation, especially by road, without coordination with Bangkok, via Paris."

Nhem, who understood our language (Maurin told me that a few days earlier he had had a long one-to-one conversation with him, entirely in French), immediately turned a telling shade of grey. He waited, however, for the consul's words to be translated before giving vent to his anger. The blood ebbed from his lips; his mouth, then his cheeks and his forehead, grew pale. The expression in his sparkling eyes tightened like jaws, sending a paralysing alarm across the room. Revolutionary fervour, which authorises all crimes, had suddenly filled his gaze with the very basest instincts, from malice to sadism, cruelty to madness. The president began to smile; his show of forced calm became terrifying. We realised that he was irrevocably embarked on a course of anger, and that no self-respecting warrior could repeat such threats without carrying them out.

"The French are no longer in a position to refuse or to enforce anything!" he hammered out, nostrils flared, teeth clenched.

He slowly released his hands, which were clasped over his stomach, placing them on his knees, and I could see they were shaking.

"You must stop *everything*!"

His face was pale. He lowered his gaze and, suddenly rising to his feet, he shouted out, "No more need be said! Let us see the transmission post."

We went out, and Dyrac showed them the radio installation in the military office, then the decoding room where the Teletypes were plugged in. The Khmer Rouge ordered that from now on an armed sentry would keep watch over the two doors, day and night. This decision hit us like a bomb. Dyrac, vexed,

hissed at me between his teeth, "We must avoid that at all costs!"

I mumbled as I walked over to Nhem, making a supreme effort to control my anxiety, "Comrade! Er . . . we have heard the Angkar's instructions. I have a request, however, that I should respectfully like to put forward . . . on behalf of the consul, as well as all the French officials here present. Does the comrade president agree to hear me?"

He slowed his pace, casting his eyes over the things around him with a steady gaze, like a child dreaming. This man, though far from innocent, had an air of naivety that reminded me of Douch's dreadful inconsistencies. Refusing to grant my request – there was nothing left to discuss – but also not wanting to repudiate me, Nhem set off again down the corridor at a slow, dithering pace, without saying a word, as if inviting me to follow him.

"The elder comrade has ordered us to suspend all broadcasts," I resumed. "The representative of the French Republic has no alternative but to abide by this, and he does so unreservedly and without any ulterior motive. Everything will cease this evening; definitively. The doors of both rooms will remain locked. Given these conditions, why put guards in the chancellery, when we already find it hard enough to live together for lack of space? The presence of armed men among us will inevitably give rise to fresh difficulties and is not without a certain risk. Had we not agreed on this point? What good will it do to humiliate us further, comrade? Trust should prevail between our two peoples! You must believe us! The French don't make long speeches: when they say they will stop, they stop. I personally undertake to do this; you have my word of honour! Keep your sentries outside our walls. I promise you that everything will be closed down, from six o'clock this evening."

The president slowly crossed the courtyard, bent forward, staring at his bulging toes, seemingly enthralled by the comings

and goings of the thick yellow half-moons at the bases of his toenails. I had done my pleading over his shoulder, hopping along behind him. He passed through the gate without waiting for me to finish, obliging me to conclude my sentence hurriedly. It seemed like a good sign.

As dusk fell, we waited anxiously for the slightest movement from the boulevard . . . The sentries did not come.

Like a losing football team, we were genuinely delighted with our only goal and started to crow about it, trying out touching little dance routines in the first-floor hall and congratulating ourselves, attempting to purge ourselves of our crushing defeat. I felt very tired in the evenings but never slept for long. The unforeseen emotions, the strokes of bad luck and all the hostile reality kept interrupting my rest; my cocooned spirit emerged from its refuge, passing from sleep to a painful certainty of the dreaded Khmer Rouge victory. Then I opened my eyes in the darkness and went out to immerse myself in the stifling patch of the universe that fate had assigned to us: the perimeter of the embassy, enveloped in gloom. A dull glow came from the pallid globes attached to either side of the gate, matching those from the Cultural Department and making the shadows in the parking area overlap like long, dead phantoms. The grainy accent of insects superimposed itself onto melodious notes from an amphibian reed section, allowing a few beats rest here and there between the Ellingtonian riffs. Those few bars of silence seemed to swallow up night itself. The effect was so beautiful and melancholy that I let my own fears fall in after it.

The next morning, in the reception room at the chancellery, the consul and his advisers gathered the representatives of the press and the international organisations, the honorary consuls, the doctors and the department heads, to establish the list of people to be evacuated in the first convoy. The Khmers Rouges could

muster only around twenty trucks (Chinese Molotovas and GMCs). We therefore had to plan at least two journeys and their requisite sanitary and logistic arrangements. The operation would last several days and cover about 280 miles, most of it on bush tracks, since the bridges had been blown and the roads were pitted into the shapes of piano keys.

The population of the campus amounted to precisely 1,046 people, of whom 656 were French and 390 were foreigners, including 84 recently arrived Chams.* A first list of 513 refugees was drawn up, on the basis of twenty people per truck.

Many refugees were immediately gripped with terror. They saw this incomprehensible departure – the airport was usable – as a well-constructed pretence designed to get rid of us all. This is what had happened at the Olympic Stadium, where civil servants and military personnel had been assembled on the first day, selected according to rank and profession, and finally executed in separate groups.

But a greater number, impatient to be rid of the intolerable situation at all costs, were eager to leave the embassy as quickly as possible. Among these, mainly for reasons of rivalry, were the press correspondents (apart from two or three, who had resolved to cover events to the end). There seemed to be a network of secrets among them that went beyond the rules of propriety. These competitive interests created the sort of rivalry which could turn nasty. But those concerned were restrained by their professional conscience. They all agreed to an embargo on information, intended to avoid premature disclosure of alarming news stories: numerous eyewitness accounts of atrocities were beginning to filter through. All this risked provoking Khmer Rouge vengeance on those left behind in Phnom Penh:

*The Chams, or Khmers-Islam, are one of Cambodia's ethnic minorities. They are Muslims and speak their own language. [Tr.]

Phnom Penh, 28 April 1975

We, the undersigned, newspaper correspondents, freelance writers for the press, radio and television, and photographers, currently at Phnom Penh, undertake not to publish in any news media or to give any statement or testimony whatsoever before receiving confirmation that the last passenger from the last convoy has crossed the border to Thailand.

Furthermore, we undertake to use all our influence to prevent other news media from publishing news and accounts of events in Phnom Penh since 17 April, until the evacuation of persons sheltered within the precincts of the French Embassy is completed.

It is understood that the embargo on the broadcasting of news, articles, films, photographs and magnetic tapes will remain in force from arrival in Bangkok onwards.

The statement was ratified by eighteen journalists and opposed only by two American correspondents, Lee Rudakewych (ABC) and Denis Cameron (CBS), who, for reasons of their own, refused to sign. On the other hand, twelve of the journalists (mainly Americans, Germans and Swedes) put their signature that same day to the following protest, which was also delivered to the consul:

We, the undersigned journalists, protest against the French consul's decision not to include the only German correspondent, who also represents Eurovision, on the list of correspondents leaving with the first convoy planned for the thirtieth of this month.

We are astonished to note that half the list is composed of Frenchmen, two of whom are from the same press agency.

28 April 1975

Father Berger was not the kind of priest who distributed the sacraments far and wide. He had nonetheless agreed to baptise "little Fulro". In the circumstances, it would certainly have been

untimely to make the usual investigations of religious legitimacy. Is not baptism, after all, to do with the faith of the parents, adoptive or not? Yet for two days he had not stopped brooding over the notion that this child had already lost everything and was about to have his own religion, his only true identity, taken from him.

We were walking together towards the chancellery, where, with all due solemnity, Olivier's baptism was to take place.

"What are you talking about?" I said with exasperation. I was intrigued by his militant and paradoxical convictions. "His own religion! As if it were something innate . . . Come, now! The only appropriate religion is obviously that of his new country. Does the Church now deny pagans purifying ablution? Their right to cast off original sin? It's completely upside down!"

"My dear friend," he replied solemnly, "should I, in your view, behave like a vending machine? Have you not frequently told me," he added in a mischievous tone, "that I was here just for the converts, not for the Buddhists or the animists?"

I knew that the man loathed this way of confusing religion with social, cultural and human considerations, but I could not help stirring him up at the slightest opportunity. His simple faith in a single universal God – our own Christian one, of course! – drove me up the wall.

A former priest at Saint-Denis Cathedral outside Paris, Berger had arrived in Phnom Penh wearing the sheepskin jacket of the worker-priest rather than the missionary's beard. Driven, devoid of humility or hypocrisy, not at all the zealous evangelist, solely dedicated to the needs of the oppressed, this rebellious figure was all the more attractive because he did not try to beguile anyone. Above all, he never cheated, neither with himself nor with others, which made him a difficult, bitter and lonely man whose life somehow seemed fairly unhappy. His commitment to love his neighbour was equalled only by his intolerance of the well-to-do, as indeed of all those who were spared life's suffering. From this

point of view, my rising every morning with joy at the dawning of a new day was extremely suspect. Whenever he came to see me at the EFEO or when I paid him a visit at the presbytery, we spent hours arguing. In short, we soon became firm friends.

A great many of us were gathered in the vast, bright room that had until then been reserved for the permanent representative of the French State, whose ministerial desk, covered with a sheet, had been transformed into an altar by the addition of a cross, two candles and a silver platter. On the walls were photographs of Angkor, an engraving of the Bayon depicting potters at work, and, occupying a large space, one of those Aubusson tapestries – beige, yellow, grey and black – that the Mobilier National loans to our embassies to display the work of French artists. The chairs, lamps and smaller pieces of mahogany furniture had been pushed back to make room for the silent congregation. Hair awry, shabbily dressed, they had solemnly come to pay homage to this little fellow's tragic yet fortunate destiny: becoming both Catholic and French in one fell swoop. Turning his back on the menacing creatures that adorned the wall hanging – a mass of swords and horns, teeth and claws – that seemed to come out of a Picasso sketch for *Guernica*, the man who was to become the last priest at Phnom Penh Cathedral poured water over the newborn's forehead. He intoned the first words of the prayers that I still knew by heart from boarding school. I noted with surprise, however, that fashions had changed since then: it had become appropriate to address the Lord quite informally.

I left the new mother, already cosseting her child like a grandmother, under the doting eyes of some of the faithful who were bent over the little creature. I set off from the embassy with specific objectives, already checked out with Nhem: to roam the deserted streets in search of addresses that had been scribbled down for me on a map, where I should find, between a destroyed

shop and a looted commercial firm, one of those Ali Baba caves that still abounded in the city. Greedy as a pirate, I used an iron bar to break down the doors of a storeroom, a factory, a shop, and helped myself to dried vegetables, cans of corned beef, ham . . . to say nothing of the bric-a-brac I must have moved, stirring up odours that were indefinable in their complexity, somewhere between damp hemp, ashes and mouldy cheese.

Initially exciting, such excursions soon became harrowing. I increased them, however, to as many as four or five a day, because ultimately, despite my weariness, they took my mind off the miseries of our confinement. But as I carried these heavy food parcels on my back, I often had to make my unsteady way to the trailer through slippery refuse still floating on the water, blocked by the sandbags piled all along the walls. Alone amid the debris, I laughed out loud at the grotesque difficulties of the situation.

During these temporarily diverting moments, I would allow my thoughts free rein. They would rebound off a child's bicycle, or a neat row of tools, or they would fly off some carefully folded floral-pattern sarongs. Sometimes they would fly off so far into the sky that I would find myself suddenly alone, lost in my frightened body, weighted down like a coffin, a multitude of corpses piled up on top of me; and sticking out of the mass grave, the mangled bodies of Lay and Son.

In the embassy, the refugees were getting ready for their departure. Each of them was carefully sorting out his or her possessions to fill the one piece of luggage that was permitted. Those who were due to leave first were already waiting and talking among themselves. Suddenly, there was pandemonium at the gate. No-one had foreseen the danger: Nhem was demanding immediate access, together with a dozen soldiers armed with bazookas and machine guns. He wanted to make sure that the radio station was no longer operating. I calmly ran over to meet

him, while the gendarme on duty went to warn the consul. Nhem, who was very aggressive, set off almost at a run in the direction of the chancellery. Dyrac encountered him on the staircase. He looked so shocked at the sight of the Khmer Rouge commando that I felt deeply worried myself. Paying no attention to what the consul said, the president charged down the corridor and stopped in front of the door of the military broadcasting office.

"Open up!" he said, beating at the door and turning to the consul.

The guerrillas, with their weapons, had gathered on the gallery of the floor above and were watching the scene with unpleasant expressions on their faces. Dyrac looked as if he was losing it. He gazed vacantly at the Malay, who was looking back at him questioningly and holding out his hand to him, turning an imaginary key backwards and forwards. He started to walk off, then suddenly turned back.

"Tell the president that the keys will be here in a moment," he told me.

Dyrac had pulled himself together and was smiling and nodding reassuringly. In fact, he had every reason to be anxious, for the broadcasts – a fact of which I was completely unaware – had never stopped. Somebody brought the keys and tried them in the lock. The door opened immediately, on its own, released from the inside. Zink was in the room, trapped. Terribly embarrassed, he looked at us, trying to find a face to hide his fear. It was obvious that the two transmitters he was in charge of had just been switched off; they were still warm.

I was transfixed as I walked into the room with the Khmers Rouges. I couldn't believe my eyes: an ashtray was still smoking on top of one of the transmitters. Zink became bogged down in confused explanations: with staring eyes and wide gestures, he maintained that he was merely carrying out maintenance work. I stammered as I translated his remarks. Nhem was breathing

rapidly; he said nothing. Then he ordered the electric supply to both transmitters cut, and went to the decoding office. We looked him straight in the eye and swore to him that he was mistaken, even if appearances suggested the contrary.

I felt betrayed and humiliated. After the departure of the Khmers Rouges, I immediately demanded explanations. "How could you . . . you let me give my word that everything would be closed down . . . yet you had no intention of doing so, did you?"

On the embarrassed faces of the Frenchmen I saw surprised expressions that bordered on commiseration. Faced with my naivety, some of them preferred to go on denying everything. I remember that Ermini turned on his heels without saying a word, thoroughly upset to see my disappointment, although I was unable to tell from this whether he felt the slightest desire to reassure me. I learned later that we continued secretly to receive and send messages right up to the final day, and that there was even another radio station concealed behind the consular offices.

14

A Peugeot 203, crammed to the roof with all sorts of stuff, drew up with a screech of brakes in front of the gate. Not only had we heard the noise it made from afar, but its worn-out engine emitted spirals of smoke that could be seen from the Japanese bridge. A man in shorts, bathed in sweat, managed to extricate himself by pushing the door with both feet, causing parcels to fall out with him. He burst in upon us.

"My word, they're all mad!" he bellowed without any preamble, approaching as if he knew us. "You should see the shambles at Kilometre 6! And they all wanted to pinch my car."

"Where have you come from?" I asked in astonishment.

"A long way away! I live in the country," he replied, gesturing abruptly. "My family's still down there. So! What's it like here? Are you coping? Good God, I thought I'd never get through! They fire at you for the slightest thing. You should see the dead bodies along the road!"

Somewhat taken aback, we advised him to bring his car in before he attracted attention. But the thing was in a terrible state, and had only just managed to get as far as us, before packing up and refusing to start again. We pushed the car into the courtyard.

The man had friends among the group of Vietnamese old boys who, along with their Asian wives, formed an exuberant and

lively lot housed beneath the arches of the Cultural Department. He was immediately welcomed with jibes.

"Oh! So you've eventually decided to come and look around town!" one of them called out. "Manage to find the way, did you? It's an ideal time to do a bit of shopping. There are some great bargains at the market. And the beer's free!"

"Not a bit of it!" someone else interrupted mockingly. "He's not buying, he's selling. He's come to sell you his old crate! Hey, guys! Now there's a real bargain . . . ha, ha!"

He went straight from one person to another, laughing along with them, shaking hands, feigning punches. Too much sun had gouged his skin, and now furrows of affability were adding themselves to his face. He had an amazing mug, which would have looked perfectly happy if it weren't for the trembling crevasse dividing his forehead in two. The material spread out on his rocky skull, with folds here, pushes there, seemed to have been scraped by a chemical agent, and a bony puffiness deformed his nose, shining like an arch pitted by the rain. His head was perched between wide shoulders, on a hollow chest. A grid of thousands of fine lines cross-hatched the flaky skin of his neck.

"You're just jealous!" he answered. "Come on now and help me unload it!"

Everyone began to unpack his junk and we joined in. Then he started speaking at the top of his voice, rather like a madman, not looking at anyone. "Right! Mustn't hang around! My wife and daughter are waiting for me! I have to go back for them. I'm just the advance party!"

"What? But where are they?" I asked him.

"At Kilometre 27. I hid them there. They won't budge."

"Hang on! It's not that simple," I replied. "Once you're here, the Khmers Rouges won't allow anyone to leave! You'd need a special permit, and I can't really see – "

"But this is my wife and my daughter. They're French. I'm going to get them, and no-one's going to stop me!"

His friends watched him perspiring and working himself up as they helped him unload the paraphernalia wedged into the back seat. They were all casting glances at one another and nodding, looking worried. No-one understood why he had come alone or dared to believe that he would be able to collect his family.

"Where are they, exactly?" I asked him. "Can you be specific? I'll see whether it's possible to try anything," I said, turning to the gendarmes.

"No-one will find them without me!" he exclaimed humorously. "It's in a little village . . . on the outskirts . . . I can't explain where they are just like that! In any case, they won't come out of their hiding place unless they recognise me, unless it's me they see, understand?"

I crossed the boulevard with the intention of asking Nhem if I could go and look for the Frenchwoman and her daughter. We had no idea what was happening outside Phnom Penh, and I found the prospect of taking the Nationale 5 road along the Mekong for thirty or more kilometres very exciting. Above all, it wasn't totally unthinkable that I might find Hélène's mother and be able to bring her back with me. But I was immediately gripped by such excruciating anxiety that I hardly dared think of her or the house girls along the road. I also didn't want to get too excited, for I didn't think Nhem would allow me to make such a trip.

Two kids were cleaning some rifles in a corner of the hall. The Malay was dozing in one of the leatherette armchairs, his legs stretched out one over the other, kept half awake by the humming of a fan. Nhem had gone off somewhere, and he had been left on duty. I was cursing this unfortunate setback and preparing to return disappointed, when I glimpsed a possible advantage in the president's absence.

"Comrade, I have to go and get two French people!" I said confidently. "They're cut off on the road, near Prek Kdam. There's not a moment to lose!"

The Malay pouted and hesitated, then slowly rose to his feet, shrugged and asked me to wait until his boss returned.

"Impossible!" I maintained. "There's heavy traffic on the road. I need to leave right away. I must ask you to allocate me an escort with the necessary documents."

The Khmer Rouge stood in silence, looking puzzled and deeply confused. He then paced about the room, his eyes cast down, expressing his disapproval with continuous nods of the head.

"It is my duty to remind you that you are responsible for our safety!" I said resolutely. "In the absence of the president, if anything happens it is up to you to take the necessary steps. And nobody else. You're in charge, aren't you? I ask this of you, just as I would ask it of Comrade Nhem. Come now! We've already delayed too long."

Forced into a tight spot, the Malay gave way with a look of irritation, for fear that he might be making an even bigger mistake by refusing. This is the weakness of all totalitarian regimes. This instinctive man knew that responsibility was a surer way of killing the Khmer Rouge than the B-52s.

I emerged in triumph from the former Korean Embassy, left the young guard who had been designated to accompany us in the jeep, and dashed off to look for my Asian settler.

"Well, you've really had a stroke of luck. Come on, we're off to your place! I've got a permit . . . unbelievable!"

Surrounded by his pals, the old fellow had just finished unloading his car and was looking at me stubbornly. At times, his twisted features would crease up in an agony of worry.

"Yeah, wait, we're almost done!" he replied, as he went on struggling to close the boot.

"Hurry up!" I reiterated. "You can do that later. The jeep is ready, and our guide is waiting."

"Ah, but I'm going in my own car!" he vowed, looking daggers at me.

I couldn't believe my ears. The fellow was crazy. There was something so incurably stubborn about him that it was alarming. We all stared at him in amazement.

"What? You must be joking!" I replied, bewildered. "Look, it doesn't make sense!"

"I promised to leave it to my brother-in-law!"

As he said this, he jumped into the car to make it start. Nothing moved. The battery was dead.

"Fine!" I said to him. "Never mind. Come on now, quickly!"

But he refused to listen and went on working the starter to no avail. He then called out to his friends: "No, we're going to push! Come on, guys!"

He got out like a creature possessed and set an example by bracing his feet on the ground and pushing with all his weight against the half-open door. From his chest, glistening with sweat, there came repeated grunts that were so painful to the ears that several people came to give a helping hand. The 203 gathered a little momentum; he hopped in behind the steering wheel and engaged second gear but was unable to get the car going; it bumped along into the car park. He insisted on trying again with greater speed, and those who were pushing changed sides so as to move the contraption back to the middle of the courtyard.

More than half an hour had passed. Exasperation boiled up inside me. I turned my eyes to the heavens, grinding my teeth furiously, fists clenched in my pockets. The Khmer Rouge was peering from his jeep, not understanding what was going on. The gendarme looked annoyed as he held open the gate.

Brrm . . . brrm . . . brrm . . . With much misfiring and vibrating, the car finally started. It then stopped suddenly, releasing a cloud of smoke over the old boys who were wearily pushing before putt-putting away again. With the first roar of the engine, I started up the jeep and we drove round, past the Malay, who was crossing the street to find out what was going on. At this precise

moment, the president's minibus arrived in the boulevard. Nhem gestured to me. I ran over to explain the situation to him.

"It's out of the question!" he snapped. "The Angkar takes care of everything. We ourselves will go and collect the woman and the girl."

"But – "

"At oy té!"

Disheartened, I decided to pack the whole thing in there and then.

The gendarme ordered the poor wretch, who was waving his arms around, not knowing what was happening, to come back.

"What? What is it? What's going on?" he asked.

His friends took him away with them. Nobody wanted to explain to him. He left Cambodia alone and was repatriated to France, where he had not had family for many years.

The night of 30 April was short. The Khmers Rouges had brought twenty-seven trucks in front of the gate well before daybreak. The vehicles were covered in yellow tarpaulins flecked with red from the mud on the tracks. It had taken them hours to manoeuvre in the stillness of the avenue, and park them in a single neat line. A Molotova that had broken down was immediately towed away from the smoking column. Nhem was supervising operations himself; it was he who would advance the convoy to the frontier. On the French side, Maurin had been put in charge.

We had agreed that at the last moment before entering Thailand, André Pasquier, the delegate from the International Committee of the Red Cross, would hand a letter to Nhem. It would give us precise indications about the current conditions of the journey, in coded words which we had already agreed upon. In the worst-case scenario – and this was what a number of us feared – Nhem would not have any message to give us on his return.

Alerted by the loud cries of the assistant drivers, who were directing operations, the first group due to leave had gathered in the shade with their belongings. As well as the obligatory supply of drinking water, each traveller carried a single piece of carefully filled luggage. The Khmers Rouges would frisk everyone when they came to check the passports. The volunteer stewards did their best to deal with the crowd that had formed outside the chancellery, and stop them getting in the way of the loading.

By the light at the entrance, Nhem was leafing through the final inventory of names, typed on onionskin paper. Surrounded by armed reinforcements who stood watching us assemble, Migot was walking back and forth, nerves snapping with fatigue, buried in the lists that he and Monique had spent the whole night correcting and revising. At that very moment, behind the throng of people, I remember seeing their daughter, Vinca, leaning against the chancellery wall, alone and angelic, struggling to survive her sister's death.

The least mistake could set off a drama. Our guards paid minute attention to the slightest error in the names, the spelling of which had to be identical to that on the passports. The copies given to the Khmers Rouges had to correspond precisely to the originals we retained. They wanted them impeccable, carbon-copied in quadruplicate, without the slightest amendment made by hand. More than a rubber stamp or a signature, the type-written form of the document mattered to them, and this alone appeared to guarantee authenticity.

Nhem allowed us to proceed with boarding, truck by truck. The refugees responded glumly when Migot's gruff voice called out their names and they went to the boulevard to join their allotted vehicle. I myself had to carry out a further roll call as they boarded one by one, under the gaze of the Khmers Rouges who checked the pile of passports. Then I clambered on board myself, forcing my way to the back of the truck, bending under the dusty red canopies, amid the stench of grease and damp iron

that the canvas hoods gave off. I loudly counted the passengers one last time, ticking them off as I did so, supervised by a team of soldiers who scrutinised them from beneath the side panel: one, two, three, four . . .

With difficulty I made my way through tucked-in legs, bags and containers. My unsteady feet trod on impervious hands and bumped against motionless heads protruding from under the slatted benches. Frightened stowaways had crept beneath the packets and the baskets, right down on the greasy floor; photographers desperately anxious to avoid being searched, to the great displeasure of those passengers who had their papers and who were glancing at me anxiously; a certain number of trapped Khmers, mostly young women who had bravely stayed behind with their lovers, staggering with fear as they slipped through the rows of the "legally entitled" and climbed in with them under the tarpaulins, trusting to police inefficiency.

In fact, just as the military supervisors had shown themselves incapable of maintaining a protracted and methodical surveillance of the embassy, so the fanatical caution they displayed and the meticulous air they adopted as they picked over each list was nothing but a show designed to conceal their impotence when confronted with more than five hundred people whose papers and baggage had to be checked all at once.

Were they relying on our own efficiency in properly coordinating each of the tasks they allotted us? Did they ever really trust our arrangements? I believe that, above all else, they wanted to get rid of us quickly. In the end, we were not subjected to any serious examination.

The convoy moved off in a cloud of smoke. The light of dawn added a shimmering sparkle to the eyes of the occupants of the last truck, as they looked back solidly at us.

Everyone who was now setting off (we could see them in the distance, disappearing behind the cathedral) was going willingly; none of them, right up to the very last moment, would have given

up his place. Yet precisely when they were about to be launched into the unknown, they looked back at us there in the protected perimeter; many of them, without daring to admit it, may have felt that they had acted precipitately.

Light flooded down the straight line of the deserted boulevard, casting a blazing radiance under the fabric of the clouds. Huge streaks of gold trailed along the bluing sky, smearing a light diamond dust for the sun's first rays to disperse in an instant.

We found ourselves in unfamiliar new surroundings, suddenly deprived of a part of our community. We would feel their absence, like an amputated limb, for a long time to come, not merely because of the void left within us but because of the amount of newly vacant room.

It was the occasion for a major upheaval. All of a sudden, nothing had any value, and everything was turned upside down: our identities, our habits, our ways of making ourselves useful, our sleeping patterns. Then, beneath the sky's impassive gaze, in the stillness of the passing hours and the constantly fine weather, the routine resumed.

I returned to the EFEO to decide what to take and what to leave behind. Amid the surge of mutilation that sickens me to this day, I resolved to abandon the two hundred rubbings, several metres high, that I had begun to make upon my arrival in 1965. At that time, I had wanted to study the iconography of the historiated rinceaux or foliated patterns that adorn the piers of monuments at Angkor, hoping to find clues to the origins of local traditions.

Six years later, when Douch had released me – and my sense of freedom regained gave me a renewed vigour – I had returned to my research into Khmer Buddhism, this time in a new direction. My prolonged isolation and the obligation to define a

clear subject of study which would convince my captors, had triggered fresh enquiries. I had immediately embarked upon the study of texts written in the local language, thus reducing some of my interest in the rubbings. From my liberation in 1971 to just before 17 April 1975 – three good years, that is – I had never stopped roaming around accessible areas of the ancient kingdom, collecting and copying Buddhist texts preserved in villages and pagodas, and as a result neglecting my first pre-war love.

"Hey!" yelled Laporte, who noticed me in the courtyard. "I'm leaving with her, finally! That's it, it's decided," he said with undisguised satisfaction, in that slightly chastened and relieved tone that serious people adopt when they admit to yielding to an unreasonable but (to them) necessary pleasure. "We're leaving together. The problem is that she hasn't any papers. At the consulate, they say it's too late to add her to the lists. Nobody said anything to me. And then there's the little girl!"

Totally immersed in his own problem, as if resolving the difficulty depended on his decision alone, he had failed upon arrival at the embassy to draw attention to the presence of his partner and his child, or else had resolved not to mention them.

Tanned, with sleek hair and a thin Errol Flynn moustache, the man was famous because of his voice, which could be heard every morning reading the news on Radio Phnom Penh.

I had met his Cambodian wife even before I made the connection with him. She was a pure-bred Khmer, with that typical, unforgettable beauty. I had photographs of her dancing, possessed by the gods she represented, during trances inspired by a medium. Her feline grace made her movements ripple. The whites of her eyes were the colour of ripe corn, her teeth white as ivory; her lips framed the opening of her mouth like a red ribbon dappled with azure. Just as Nature had pulled up the corners of her slanting eyelids, it had simultaneously turned up

the tips of her eyebrows, the wings of her nostrils and the corners of her mouth. Their little daughter was ravishing; like her mother's, the darker area around the blurred base of her nose merged with the very top of her lip, disappearing into the contours of her mouth.

During the late afternoon, I asked Dyrac about the Laporte family.

"Of course," he replied with an air of consternation. "But what can I do? He only registered his Khmer wife and daughter yesterday! The lists are now closed. And you know what they're like across the road. They would never accept a last-minute addition."

"You know his problem," I intervened. "He's married in France, with children, and even if he no longer lives with his first wife, the idea of the second one becoming his lawful wife paralyses him. I think he wants her to leave Cambodia with him, but not as his wife. Later on, he could divorce and acknowledge the little girl . . ."

"Sir!" One of the gendarmes rushed up, slightly out of breath.

"We have some new visitors at the gate," he confided wearily, setting off again immediately.

We hurried off behind him.

"I want to see!"

We had not yet met the revolutionary speaking to us in French with a stern look in his eyes. His radiant smile beneath his Mao cap made him look like a Red Guard. He was proud, neat, tidy, and in good health. Two shoulder straps met across his bulging chest beneath a kind of cartridge pouch of faded fabric. He carried a revolver on his belt. The men behind him were also armed.

Agreeably surprised to see the Khmer making an effort to address us in our language, the consul himself replied, politely

inviting him to come in, not forgetting to ask the men to leave their guns outside. In actual fact, the revolutionary knew only a few words of French, and I had to repeat our demand in Khmer. The young rebel leader immediately looked surprised and uncomfortable, and the thought of having to try to convince him again suddenly made me feel weary.

To my great relief, one of the president's men, whom I had not recognised among the soldiers, came and whispered in his ear, explaining that this strange practice was now law. No guns in the embassy. Extremely ill at ease, but not daring to contradict Nhem himself, he selected five men, without their weapons, to accompany him. We urged him to keep his own gun, afraid to see him lose face in front of his men.

He strode across the courtyard with us. He had received orders from on high. His mission was to search our baggage, and in particular that of the journalists, to make sure that we had neither films nor photographs. Knowing his purpose now, Dyrac looked somewhat relieved. He was concerned about the fate of the photographers' work, but he knew that those who had stayed behind had entrusted some of their rolls to passengers on the first convoy and that the rest had been carefully hidden away.

We walked quickly over to the offices and at a sign from the Khmer Rouge, whose men were discovering our premises with great curiosity, the consul asked a gendarme to open a drawer, a cardboard box and a suitcase. We moved to another building and visited the Cultural Department's offices, where the occupants were now enjoying a little more space, before making our way to the residency, at the other end of the park, where some of the international delegations, the doctors and the press correspondents were based.

A little bored with finding nothing but underwear and souvenirs that were of no interest, our young inspector, whose primary objective may have been merely to keep us on our toes, gradually cooled. He and his escort scanned the rows of luggage

lined up in the rooms, beneath the windows and on the benches, and he became much less demanding than he had been at the beginning. We reached the room where the journalists were; along the walls they had set up cubicles, small individual spaces partitioned by assorted clutter. The Khmer Rouge stopped at random beside a large, flat bag made of a stiff fabric lying on the floor. Its owner, Denis Cameron, was standing in front of us, and he was asked to open it. The reporter calmly bent down, without the least embarrassment, to show what it contained. I did not react immediately myself, and I realised what I was looking at only when I heard Dyrac choke with indignation. "What is this?"

The case was full of the embassy's antique silverware, engraved with the arms of the French Republic. The expression on the consul's face was transformed, and his body swelled with rage. He picked up the heavy suitcase as if it were a wisp of straw and tipped its entire contents out over Cameron, standing speechless in front of us: a ewer, a candlestick, a gravy boat, a platter and a huge silver sugar bowl came clanging down and bounced onto the floor, watched by the Khmer Rouge, who had no idea what was going on.

On the morning of 5 May, we still had no news of the first convoy, even though we were meant to leave the following day. However, it wouldn't take us long to climb aboard; we were all ready, waiting for the moment to arrive, our belongings reduced to a minimum. We, too, would surely hurry off into the trucks, even without the guarantees we were expecting from Nhem, who should have returned the previous day. He did not make his appearance until the middle of the day, but he bore reassuring messages from Maurin and Pasquier, who were now in Thailand.

Revil came to find me. The surgeon-colonel was a small, bald, pudgy man with very alert eyes, in which you could read his

authoritative manner, and a playful smile, where you could read his wit.

"During the trip," he told me, "a baby died of dehydration. Many people fell sick and there were many injured, though not as seriously as they might have been. But we also have a pregnant woman, who could give birth prematurely through fatigue. I have asked the president to put an ambulance at the convoy's disposal. He seemed to agree. We thought of your Land-Rover. It's the only long-wheelbase diesel with a winch we've got. It could be fitted out with intensive-care equipment and converted into an ambulance. If you agree, you would be accompanied by a medic."

After a moment of silence, he added, looking directly at me, "I believe, er . . . that it would please Piquart to leave with you."

I had inherited the brand new vehicle from Roland Mourer, a friend who was a prehistorian and who had been forced to leave Phnom Penh a few months earlier, unable to ship it out. Within a few hours, the doctors from the Calmette had transformed it into a mobile hospital, with all the instruments and equipment necessary to carry out operations on the way.

An overall restlessness, mixed with emotion and excitement, came over our community both indoors and out. The Chinese trucks would come to collect us during the night, ready to leave first thing in the morning. At ten o'clock that evening, Dyrac ordered a small gathering, as brief as it was poignant. On the flagpole in the middle of the courtyard, which was sunk into a muddy lawn and surrounded by white pebbles, the French flag still fluttered. The gendarmes stood to attention as the colours were lowered.

We did our utmost to leave behind clean buildings and to take care that everything – doors, chests and cupboards – was left open. Symbolically, the consul handed over the keys of the embassy to Nhem.

*

We left Phnom Penh on the Nationale 3 road. In a few moments, the dawn behind us gave way to the sunrise. The rays of light projected their colours over the immense felted blanket of the sky.

The wide avenue was empty. We drove along smoothly, at the head of the slow-moving convoy. Along the roadway, the blooming flame trees had unfurled their languid vermilion petals over the asphalt. Stunned by this beauty but shocked by so much indifference – the fiery crimson was more an invitation to light-heartedness than an image of a wave of blood – I suddenly began to cry, pouring out all the tears that had accumulated in my body. Piquart's hand, tapping on my shoulder, came to my rescue.

Within a few minutes, we drew level with Potchentong airport, which had been virtually razed to the ground. Gaping with holes, the red-and-white control tower barely stood above a heap of rubble; the rockets and sprays of gunfire had failed to obliterate it entirely. It reminded me of an occasion that had profoundly affected me. At this terrible moment, I had a memory of immense resentment. Every detail of what happened came back to me and I rapidly unburdened myself to Piquart.

It took place, I believe, in January 1973. Spiro Agnew, vice-president of the United States, was expected to arrive at Phnom Penh at ten o'clock local time. For weeks no-one had spoken of anything else. The area around the airport was under constant surveillance; spy planes circled in the sky. The Khmer police, who had infiltrated everywhere, had made it a point of honour to control access to American areas very strictly. Together with the Criminal Investigation Department and the Intelligence Unit, they kept the American chancellery, the diplomatic office, the residency and the campus under tight supervision. The American policy office had even imposed double protection, under the authority of a group of experts who had been sent over. Several possible routes between the airport and the embassy had been studied secretly, signposted, cleared and searched, and in places

even gravelled and asphalted. Additional troops had arrived from Saigon to give the GIs a helping hand. For days, soldiers had been camping out in the streets, keeping watch over paths and approaches that were considered suspect, observing shops, the windows of buildings, tops of trees . . .

Faced with such paranoiac activity – comical when compared to the real dangers the government faced – the Khmer had not wanted to be outdone. Such a costly deployment meant that the sneers were somewhat silenced, to be replaced by the most genuine respect. They pulled out all the stops to welcome the prestigious guest, whom they had imagined as an imposing figure. All the traditions of Cambodia, from the oldest customs practised in the ancient kingdom to the most recent procedures, were to be represented for the occasion. They called upon the most renowned traditional masters of their crafts; if unable to locate them, a search was made in the remote villages of the hinterland. The largest orchestras, the best ballet and dance troupes, had rehearsed together day and night in productions conceived with airport and security constraints in mind. On the big day the ministers, dressed in their sumptuous ceremonial garb – white coats, loose green trousers, white stockings and shiny black shoes with buckles – were supported by several *phimpeat* orchestras, singers with wooden *tatrao* drums and flageolet players. Alongside the military chiefs in full regalia were hundreds of schoolchildren waving American flags and all standing to attention. The tarmac was covered with delicately woven matting. A red carpet led to the place where the presidential plane was meant to come to a stop. Some Brahmins had taken up their places, conch trumpets in hand, opposite trays laden with offerings made of lacquer and silver. The cars for the procession were ready, headed by an armour-plated sedan that had been flown in the previous day. Dozens of dancers, who had been sewn into gold-embroidered bodices, stood gracefully with baskets of petals. Across from the ministers, gleaming brass

instruments played a fanfare with great pomp and ceremony as the sun rose in the sky.

The eagerly awaited aircraft appeared, a little earlier than expected, coming to a halt at the exact spot that had been agreed upon. At that same moment, the sounds of the orchestras and the buglers, the voices of the singers and the words of welcome yelled out by the choruses of schoolchildren resounded in a fantastic cacophony. Even the long wail of the sacred conches could hardly be heard. The dancers started to perform while the ministers and generals solemnly stepped forward. The door of the aircraft opened, and some girls dressed in silk advanced with gold-painted steps, bedecked in flowers. At that very instant, and in less time than it takes to say it, the whirring of a helicopter's blades could be heard in the air, accompanied by a great deal of crashing and banging. Half a dozen GIs burst out of the plane and fanned out in front of the steps, pushing the schoolchildren and the dancers out of the way, their automatic weapons sticking out in front of them, their legs apart and a fixed expression in their eyes. Within a few seconds, the vice-president of the United States, carried by two giant men, was ejected from the plane and ushered into the helicopter, which took off instantaneously (to land later on the roof of the American Embassy) in a whirlwind of dust mingled with flower petals and paper flags, leaving the ministers, generals, Brahmins, dancers and musicians looking on.

Once we had passed the airport, a place of desolation in my memory, we turned northwards, cutting between the plots of rice and following tracks barely visible beneath the fallow fields. Sometimes the trucks drove through peat bogs filled with stagnant water and rotting vegetation, sinking into potholes from which we extracted ourselves only with the greatest difficulty; at other times we had to skirt tiny streams that flowed through the

fields between impassable ruts. On several occasions, we came within a hair's breadth of having to abandon the vehicle, the terrain was so obstructed. Yet we also felt an exalting feeling of freedom regained, as we struggled to manoeuvre through the *Licuala* bushes and the gnarled *Streblus* that grew out of mounds of white clay, trimmed vertically by the rains.

Without realising it, we bypassed Oudong and travelled through a village where men were digging under the supervision of a commando of Khmer Rouge women. We stopped there to regroup. I could see some soldiers in lively discussion with the soldiers escorting us. They approached the Land-Rover.

"There's a Frenchwoman in this village!" they announced solemnly, as if it was an order. "She must go back to France."

Beside the road, which passed in between the houses, a rather pretty girl was holding a city-dweller's suitcase with both hands in front of her. She might have been sixteen, but she had a strikingly stern and sorrowful expression, much in contrast with her age. She was dressed like a market trader in a close-fitting blouse that revealed the tops of her arms, and cotton trousers of a dark material gathered by elastic at the waist, whose creases twisted round her legs. Her somewhat square jaw gave her face a broad look, but her deep-set, widely spaced almond eyes covered the entire surface of her temples and stretched as far as her hair, which was not quite black. There was an almost imperceptible pinkness where her smooth lips met her teeth. When I looked at her, her childlike features took on an expression of tragic determination. She was trembling.

"I am French!" she announced in Khmer. "My aunt's house is here, my mother lives in Phnom Penh, my father's in France. I'm frightened. Please, I want to go to France."

"What's your name?"

"Malie."

"Marie?"

"*Tcha.*"

"And your father, what's his name?"

"Er . . . I can't remember," she said, smiling and shaking her head.

"Do you have any papers? Do you know his address in France?"

"No, but Mummy knows!"

"Do you speak French, Marie?"

"No . . . but I'll learn quickly!"

The Khmers Rouges, who must have been young people from the village, were following our conversation and nodding their agreement to the young girl's replies, proud to have taken the initiative in making her existence known.

"She must leave!" they asserted.

"She hasn't any papers," I replied.

"*At oy té!* Her father is French."

I wanted to consult Nhem immediately, but he was at the back of the convoy, which was about to set off again.

"Very well!" I said without giving the matter much thought. "We'll see . . ."

There could be no question of taking her with us in the ambulance. I made her climb into the back of the first truck. People made room on the bench, and she squeezed in between them.

We set off again through an area of intermittent bush alternating with patchy forest. Here and there, we passed small islands surrounded by swamps and dominated by large scattered trees. The trucks took up the entire width of the tracks, which disappeared beneath the mass of sagging shrubs and huge fallen branches. We passed through clusters of dwellings populated by "liberated" folk who lived in poverty, subsisting in a wartime economy, scarcely looking up as we went by. The row of their cabins was set directly into the sandy earth beside rare crops that had been abandoned and lay fallow. Still, small gardens of sweet cucumbers, dotted here and there with stumps charred by bushfires, seemed to have benefited from the storms that heralded the new season.

On the horizon, the orange disc was fraying at the edges as it dropped behind the forest-covered summit of Mount Aural. Suddenly weighed down by touches of gold, the carded wool of the clouds stretched into the outlines of a Chinese junk, then turned into some serene, majestic wave over the shore of the mountains, lapped by a sea of snowy peaks. In the west, the sky grew dark. In the east, the radiant moon was already high in the firmament.

Once night fell, we were forced to follow rough tracks thoroughly unsuitable for motor vehicles, bumping along by the light of our headlights. The majority of the twenty-two hunks of metal that constituted our convoy had no lights; they bounced about like water running over the rutted ground. The roar of their engines drowned out the noise of the Land-Rover. Above us, the moon disseminated a glow that shrouded the holes in the road.

We finally arrived at Kompong Chhnang at about eight in the evening. A group of soldiers on mopeds was waiting for us at the gates of the dark, deserted town to guide us to the old prefecture building, where we were to spend the night. The exhausted passengers emerged slowly from the trucks, shaking themselves as the burning, clanking engines released the last stenches of fuel before being switched off.

Against the light, bathed in pale reflections, the lofty architecture of the colonial building, which may have been ochre or blue, rose from the level foundations on which it had been built. Embellished with French windows and shutters, its façade towered over the columns of the porch, which housed a broad staircase. On either side, square-shaped wings, each with a four-sided roof, flanked the first-floor terrace. Piquart was immediately monopolised by dozens of people who were suffering from bruises or feeling faint. I opened the muddy bonnet of the steaming vehicle to check the water, oil and so on. Marie was behind me with her suitcase.

"Ah! Of course," I said, turning around. "Come on. We'll go and ask the person in charge of the convoy, and you can explain yourself. Leave your case in the car."

Nhem was getting into a jeep next to the Malay, who was driving. I ran up to him and produced the girl.

"She joined the convoy during the course of the journey," I explained to the Khmer Rouge. "Her father is French. She no longer has any papers."

The president asked her a few questions, but then the Malay started to question her in a nasty way.

"Comrade!" I interrupted. "You can see she's of mixed race. She has lost her mother. Let her at least find her father! What difference can it make now?"

"The difference is that she doesn't have any papers and she has to stay!" he cut in.

The jeep shot off and left us standing there. I had already observed how, in a few weeks, this little man, so full of energy, had gained greatly in confidence, and it now began to occur to me that he seemed to exert influence over his leader. He was the sort of man who is never deterred by obstacles, but as a consequence, like so many power fanatics, he looked on the suffering of weak and anonymous creatures with total contempt.

I deliberately turned round to the girl in front of them.

"Think carefully," I told her. "I don't know what to suggest. If the Khmers Rouges don't allow you to leave the country, you'd better retrace your steps straight away, before we're too far away from your village."

"It's not my village, and my aunt is dead," she answered. "I am from Phnom Penh."

I couldn't stop myself heaving a weary sigh. I silently returned to the car, dogged by despondency. Not wanting to waste time, I went and splashed my face with some water from a cement pot I had noticed in the courtyard. Piquart was getting ready to go to sleep in the car. I decided to settle down on the floor of the

prefecture, taking with me a surgical sheet (we had brought a whole pile) to use as a blanket.

In the darkness of the room, where other motionless bodies were already spread out, Marie came up and lay against me for protection. I froze, just as Avi used to do when Hélène placed a kitten between his paws, who would begin to sniff him, innocently exploring the folds of his muzzle. She fell asleep immediately.

It was the infernal noise of the engines that roused everyone the next morning. Seven more trucks had attached themselves to us during the night, laden with numerous Pakistanis, Indians, Filipinos, Indonesians and Laotians who happened to be in the province. As soon as I rose, I went to inform Dyrac about the girl who had haunted my sleep. During the night, a light dew had formed on the tufts of grass that protruded from the gravel. All around us, the six-wheelers were already shunting to and fro, the thrusts of their accelerators causing them to jerk forward, and we had to shout to make ourselves heard.

"Pfff . . ." he sighed, his lips vibrating exaggeratedly. "How does she reckon she's going to find her father when she doesn't even know his name? How sad! Personally, I'd like to take her with us, but I'd be amazed if it's that easy. It's like that journalist from ORTF – his wife and child climbed aboard with him. But I don't know what the Khmers Rouges would say if they realised . . ."

Squatting amid the blue smoke from the engines, which the soldiers warmed by revving them in spurts, several refugees were polishing off some tins of food that had been opened the previous evening before taking their places beneath the tarpaulins. Followed by Marie, who would not leave me, I set off without further ado to find Nhem and told him that France would accept the young Eurasian girl. The president replied, addressing himself to her, "Why do you want to leave? You have no education. What's the point of going to France to serve other people and become their slave? Your country is here!"

The last trucks were taking up their positions in the convoy, reverberating with the hollow sounds of their perforated exhaust pipes. I turned to the girl and forbade her to go any further. I just had time to see a sudden flush come over her face, causing her eyes to redden. I ran off to join Piquart, who was waiting for me in the ambulance.

We set off again, sometimes at the back, sometimes at the head of the thundering column, fording streams and negotiating the mud of the potholes, rattling about in the middle of hoed fields, through villages that had been razed to the ground, past burnt pagodas and destroyed bridges. As far as the eye could see, there was nothing but collapsed dykes and flooded craters where putrefying buffaloes lay. And then in places there were cars, motorcycles, mattresses and suitcases lying abandoned at the side of the road. We came across groups of Khmers Rouges, left to their own devices, who would often stare at us with expressionless faces, and numerous civilians pushing their possessions, hanging around in clusters along the tracks and waving us greetings as they moved out of the way. Empty-headed, we drove for hours, with brief stops, beneath a burning sun that caused the particles of dust we swallowed to glitter. The pregnant woman felt faint. Piquart made her lie down in the back and gave her an injection. I can see her, beads of sweat forming on her brow, trembling, eyes withdrawn, oblivious to everything apart from the child she knew lay curled up in her womb. I found myself envying her animal selfishness. Woman has this that man will never have.

At dusk we were within sight of Battambang, which we had to bypass in order to spend the night at the exit to the town. The trucks pulled up in the middle of the road, which at this point ran alongside the old monastery of Kbal Khmoc, now converted into a military headquarters.

With the aid of a torch I borrowed from Piquart, I set off to

look for Avi. I myself hadn't done anything about him, not so much because I didn't have time but because I had too much else to think about. I was leaving my family behind: I could hardly think of taking my dog (even if, in the sight of the stars, there is no difference between man and dog). But without saying a word to me, Migot had found a chaperone for him in the person of Rémy. In the midst of the bustle of travellers and drivers calling out to one another from between the trucks, I noticed Avi methodically engaged in spraying a tree.

"He's perfect, really!" Rémy assured me. "He's obedient and he keeps still. No problem. But this dog is sad. It's amazing how he manages to show it. Ah! I almost forgot. Here's his vaccination certificate for Thailand."

He handed me a roneoed form that he had already signed and carefully completed himself: "I the undersigned Yves Goueffon, Veterinary Surgeon, Director of the Institut Pasteur in Cambodia, certify that I have vaccinated against rabies a dog named . . . *Avi*, aged . . . *4 years*, coat . . . *tan*." I admired this man and his direct, straightforward character. He had managed the Compagnie des Terres-Rouges, and his hevea plantation produced the highest yield per hectare in the world. We exchanged a few remarks about life, in words whose simplicity did not in the least detract from their strength. (I have since learned that simple words sometimes convey more intense truths than others.) I did my best to respect the linguistic sobriety of colonial people, who use the same dull stereotypes to speak about their emotions or express a feeling, to describe a change in the weather, the ecstasies of love or the pangs of death. It's a universal phenomenon, but I am not sure whether, from one generation to another, language can always deal as pertinently with the profound expression of the commonplace.

"Bizot! It's done!" said Dyrac, who emerged out of the darkness and approached us. "I've married them. Nhem agreed. The wife and the child have been added to our two lists. Under the name of Laporte. It was the only solution."

By the side of the road, in the paddy field, all around the trucks and beneath the tarpaulins, the refugees were rolling out their mats and hanging up their mosquito nets for the night. Avi and I entered the precinct of the pagoda, where the courtyard, surrounded by a cloistered gallery that concealed some naive prints of the lives of the Buddha, was already full of people. The temple roof was shining in the moonlight; the large preaching hall, the tall stupa with its tinkling bells, the chapter room, the library, the large residential buildings and the smaller ceremonial ones; we might have been in a small, fortified village. I found a place for myself by the edge of a low wall that ran alongside the ambulatory.

When we got up in the morning, I came across Laporte, who was holding his Khmer wife affectionately around the waist. Sitting with her legs to one side, she was purring quietly with happiness, deftly combing her long hair out in front of her. She looked radiant. They had left the little girl with neighbours and had themselves slept on the pavement.

"Not very comfortable for one's wedding night!" Laporte called out, smiling contentedly.

"I know, Dyrac told me. Bravo, and er . . . well, congratulations!" I replied with a knowing air, caught somewhat unawares by the happiness they displayed.

At that moment, behind them, I noticed Marie weaving her way among the trucks. Taking pity on her, some refugees had offered her shelter in their meagre space.

After four hours on a narrow edgeless road made of ballast, full of potholes, more testing than any of the tracks through the paddy fields (we abandoned a GMC truck whose engine had fallen out), we stopped at Sisophon. We were nearing our destination. However, we needed a short break before embarking upon the gravel road, across arid bush country, which led to Thailand.

A team of Khmers Rouges were waiting for us at the entrance to the town. They had prepared food to help sustain our community of almost eight hundred people: buffalo meat, rice, tubers, coconuts, bananas and pineapple. Two new trucks and a more comfortable bus were also put at our disposal.

Summoned back to Phnom Penh, Nhem was about to leave us. He asked me to come over so he could introduce me to his successor, a smiling younger man whom the Malay would make short work of. Before bidding farewell to him, I decided to take him aside to discuss the girl of mixed race.

"Comrade," I said to him, dragging him along by the hand, "our roads part here."

It gave me no pleasure to hold his thick, soft fingers in mine and to touch their callused top joints.

"I genuinely wish you the best of luck!" I began again. "May you, too, be allowed to live in peace and to return to your family. I thank you for what you have done for all of us – "

"*At oy té!* Comrade Bizot will soon not think any more about all that!" he said in a friendly tone, teasing me in the Cambodian way. "In France, he will forget about the suffering of Kampuchea!"

"Do you really think so? I'm leaving my family behind . . . In any case, I shall not forget Comrade Nhem, without whom our ordeal would have been still more distressing! I am sure we shall meet again," I said, "even if we have to wait ten years!"

As I had often done during the past few days, I thought of my father. I saw myself once more back in Nancy, on a fine afternoon, as we were crossing the rue d'Amerval. With his hand on my shoulder, he stroked my ear. "You'll see the year 2000!" he said cheerfully. "Well, so will you!" – "Oh, you know, in my case it's not so sure . . . although I hope to live some good years yet!" – "How many, Papa?" – "Ah, I can't tell, but ten years at least!" he assured me, hugging me several times as we walked along the

pavement. "So few!" I exclaimed, troubled. Now, in the weariness of that long morning, as the azure sky grew pale in the heat, high above the convoy and the refugees who were eating their meal, I could see his dark eyes gazing at me from beneath silvery eyebrows, filled with love. I looked at him, as I had done countless times, sitting at his work table, bent over a pen-and-ink drawing; then, three years later, on his deathbed, his frozen features plunged into an unbelievable silence whose emptiness has never left me.

"But before saying goodbye," I continued, "I would like to ask one last favour. Comrade" – I took care to wait until there was silence – "I beg you to allow the Eurasian girl to come with us. It has been her dearest wish ever since she was little."

"She belongs here," he replied automatically. "Helping rebuild her country, working in the fields and taking part in collective offensives, in order to achieve national reconstruction. What use can she be to France? Here, her strengths are vital."

"She's only a child, and I'm not talking about usefulness!" I retorted, baulking at so much drivel. "I ask you about her, and you answer me with Cambodia. Let's leave the job of raising up the country from its ashes to the revolutionaries, and let's allow this little girl to rebuild herself in her father's footsteps! At the end of this war of brother against brother, can I not hope for one last outpouring of humanity from the comrade-president?"

I was fully aware that the Khmer Rouge leader had a short temper and was easily irritated by any opposition. Beneath his eyelids, which he had lowered so as not to see my anger, I nevertheless noticed more embarrassment than fury. He was silent for a while, absorbed (as always) by the sight of his feet, then looked at me for a few moments. He finally left me without saying a word, making only an awkward, unfathomable gesture which could equally mean "You haven't understood", "I don't give a damn", or "I'll see".

*

The scrubland stretched away in endless waves as far as the eye could see. Here and there, occasional clusters of gnarled bushes sprung up, choked with spurges, a bird of prey hovering over them. In the early afternoon, from quite a distance, we caught sight of the red flag flying over the border post. The air was stifling and humid. The heat of the day shimmered above the road. Tired of driving through the dust, Piquart and I had decided to position ourselves at the front of the trucks and to remain there. Between the abandoned paddy fields and the pollarded clumps of the sugar palms, there were now a few trees to shelter us, indicating that we were at last leaving this burnt and infertile region.

The entrance to the minute town was shut off by two rows of barbed wire stretched between wooden posts. It was defended by a small earthwork fort, reinforced by sandbags whose worn sacking had left shreds of material on the walls. The place seemed deserted. We got out of the car and entered. Along the sides of the circular embankment that formed the centre of Poipet, there were a few abandoned shops and restaurants built on stilts. Their backs overlooked an area given over to rubbish, chickens and pigs. On one side, some demolished barracks served as a billet for fifty or so soldiers whose uniforms could be seen at the back, drying on a wire. On the other side, the post office and custom-house buildings, with their tiles and their blinds, constructed with long-lasting materials at the time of the protectorate, still stood. In front of the immigration office was a barrier made of a long piece of bamboo and a block of stone that served as a counterweight; it guarded a patch of raised ground leading to a bridge whose framework, made up of three lengths of steel and a parapet, supported some heavy, bolted planks. The stream marked the border.

On the other bank, we were gratified and relieved to observe

a festive crowd milling about behind cameras and telephoto lenses. We suddenly became aware of the international importance of the events we had lived through. All around them, cars, buses and tents waited there in the sunshine. The red cross on a dedicated tent stood out against the pale colours all around. At the far end of the bridge, the Thai police had set up tables to check the evacuees. We recognised the representatives of the French consulate in their civilian clothes.

In the burning light, some Khmers Rouges came forward, almost reluctantly, to meet us. They greeted us with a smile and took down the barbed wire, allowing in only the lighter escort vehicles so as not to clog up the area. I took the opportunity to drive the Land-Rover in as close as possible to the bridge, hoping to be able to drive it away. Once they set foot on the ground, the refugees spread out into the ditches. Exhausted and dirty, eyes blinded by the dust, they formed an immense throng, adults and children swarming around, meeting one another, searching for shady corners in which to compose themselves and repack their cases, and advancing in indescribable disarray towards the leading trucks. A real fracas broke out among the first arrivals when the Khmers Rouges tried to make them go in one by one, according to the order on the lists. Many people found their way to safety in the resulting, uncontrollable mêlée. Unable to cope, the revolutionaries' control was ineffective. And those whose names were not on the lists – women, friends, children – miraculously slipped through the net. They then crossed as far as the bridge, where the guards, overwhelmed by the crowds and perhaps constrained by the camera lenses and the Thai authorities on the other side, let virtually everybody through without much difficulty.

Dyrac managed to cross the bridge, talk with his French counterpart from Bangkok, and hand over the list of immigrants to the Thais. France and the other countries involved, had sent along their representatives. These nations would stand as

guarantors of the couples and children who had no national identity papers. The very strict supervision by the Thai officials exposed several dozen illegal immigrants. They were taken away (but on the Thai side) to await transit permits and for their situation to be legalised. Migot walked back and forth to the middle of the bridge, trying to move people forwards.

Marie succeeded in infiltrating herself. She ran along to catch up with me. The Malay saw her. He was standing in the middle of the square with his new boss, observing the movement of the crowd. Behind them were some members of a women's commando unit and a dozen men from the garrison. I hissed at her between my teeth not to let herself be seen, but it was too late. A guard came and alerted the customs officers on the bridge. They eagerly turned around to identify her.

At the entry point the flood of refugees was held back to avoid a bottleneck at the final checkpoint. Laporte stepped forward with his wife and daughter. The Khmer hesitated over their identity, because their names had been added and there was no document. Dyrac assured them that the Laportes were indeed a married couple, drawing attention to the fact that the handwritten addendum appeared on both the lists. The matter was sent for arbitration to Nhem's replacement, who, under the influence of the Malay – who was antagonistic towards the French – spent a long time making up his mind. But the insistence of the consul and his assistant persuaded him to let them through.

Laporte, who was exhausted and looked distraught, stepped up onto the embankment and, with his family, passed the Khmer control point. At the other end of the bridge, the Thais were checking everybody individually. The Frenchman was invited to come forward on his own. His wife was frightened, wanted to follow him, and upset the entire procedure. The Khmer Rouge made her go back. Overcome by the situation, Laporte, like an automaton, also retraced his steps, but Migot summoned him

back again. A Thai NCO, who was supervising operations, came up to help him and to examine his passport.

"Are you married? She is your wife?" he asked in English.

Confronted by this officer, Laporte did not know what to reply.

"Are you married?" the officer repeated, all of a sudden looking at him in the eye to see if he was telling the truth.

I was three yards away. The expression on the face of the ORTF announcer was anguished, and he was in a cold sweat.

"Answer him, for fuck's sake!" I shouted, holding my breath.

"I can't bloody well say we're married!" he burst out, turning to Migot and me. "I just can't! No!"

The officer interpreted the expression on his face and sent the queue jumper back.

"You!" he exclaimed in a loud voice, pointing at her with his finger. "No!"

On the Cambodian side, the guards reacted quickly. They cleared the entrance to the bridge, just as they had been ordered to do when the first incident occurred. The panic-stricken wife clutched at her husband with a trembling hand. A squad of fierce female orderlies ran up. I can see them still: some thirty years old, others fifteen, all with straight hair, cut in the Chinese style. Clinging to her man, she cried as she implored him; her outstretched arms pushed and pulled at his belt, trying to rouse him into action. He barely stirred, adopting an enquiring look as if to exonerate himself. The women soldiers beat this girl, who was trying to escape her fate, on her back with the barrels of their rifles. But they had to twist her fingers one by one to make her let go. Then her whole body was wracked with sobbing, as if her heart had broken. They took her away.

Laporte's daughter let out a loud howl as she rushed to follow her mother, and the quavering of her little voice was like the moan of a funeral lament. Unconcerned, the line of refugees re-formed, blotting out for ever the sound of the child's wails,

whose devastating echoes still resound within me after many years.

On the bridge, our eyes wide with fury, we turned to the officers in all their finery to try to make them do something. They barely looked in our direction; our appeals met with no response. Crushed by his inconsistency, Laporte crossed to the Thai side of the border.

Marie called out to me. Two guards were trying to move her away from the entrance to the bridge. Once again I went to find Nhem's successor and walked straight up to him.

"Comrade!" I said to him with some force. "Our evacuation is all but done. I ask that it should end on a gesture of compassion. She is the daughter of a Frenchman. Authorise her to leave!"

My request made the Malay roar with anger, so exasperated was he at my insistence.

"*At oy té!*" replied the leader to whom I had addressed myself.

And with a wave of his hand that pacified his deputy's rage, he sent his wild Amazons to seize the adolescent girl, who was refusing to move from the gangway.

The girl was taken away and she passed by me, shoved along by the women; she looked at me, and her eyes, hollow with fear, bored two black holes into my brain that have never stopped deepening.

I returned to the bridge, not daring to focus my trembling gaze on that other shore, whose banks, treeless and sunburnt, nonetheless appeared to me as cool as a forest glade where walkers can take their rest. I longed for a new life, free of all violence. The last of the refugees were moving forward. My turn was approaching. I warned the Thais that I was bringing a car in.

The Khmers Rouges did not want to let me through. I leapt out of the vehicle in a fury and ran up the sloped path to where the two Communist leaders were standing, my regard still full of deadly hatred.

"When are you going to stop making a mockery of the orders of the vice-president of the command of the northern front of the city of Phnom Penh responsible for foreigners?" I yelled. "This business of the Land-Rover has been discussed and resolved. It must be allowed across the border! President Nhem was clear on this point!"

In the face of my bluff, the Malay once more did his best to assert his authority, but this time his senior officer would no longer listen to him, wanting to show he could make his own decisions.

Today I can't help thinking that if it had occurred to me to take the car over first before trying to rescue Marie, she might have reached the other side of the bridge.

I crossed over without looking back. Dusk fell over the land of the Khmers. Where the light had been swallowed away, a thickening darkness filled its space.

Falling upon a world abandoned to dark and terrifying powers, the primitive mob unleashed the hoard of dead in the storm we left behind. Their mechanical progress stamped and stamped the blood-drenched soil, pushing down the victims piled underfoot, for centuries past, to the deepest part of the earth.

Like a wandering soul that is freed – for the second time – by the judge of the dead, I emerged from the Cambodian hell by crossing the bridge of transmigration. I was expelled, like the newborn, in the torments of an unspeakable pain. The vision of my own corpse rises up from these loathsome scenes. My voyage to the other side brought me to the centre of a precious isle. I

entered the land of rose-apple trees to be reborn into a new existence.

But on this earth, there is no place of permanent refuge.

Epilogue

The foothills of the Cardamomes, January 2000

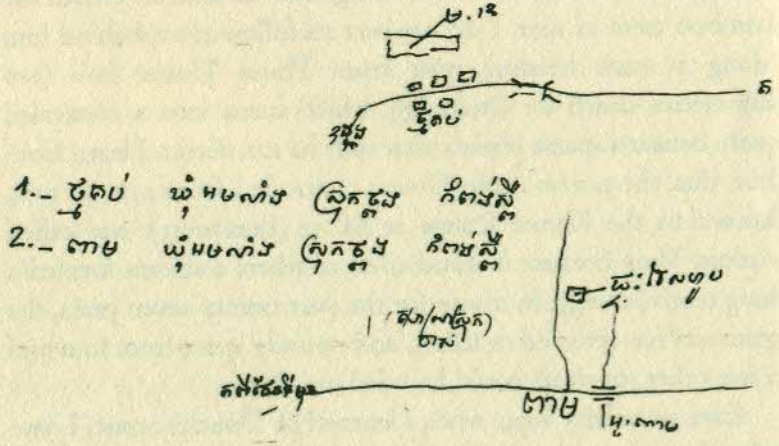
The rather uncommunicative villager who has agreed to take me to the Anlong Veng camp is my age and can remember seeing a bearded fellow with a "long nose" shackled beneath the bamboo trees in 1971. I do my best to follow close behind him along a track heading west from Phum Thmar kok (ten kilometres south of Omleang), which turns into a concealed path, between sparse bushes, that only he can detect. I learn from him that the prison camp Douch controlled from 1971 to 1973, known to the Khmer Rouge as M. 13 (Bureau 13), was called Anlong Veng because it stood close to where a stream formed a long reach (*anlong*). In disuse for the past twenty-seven years, the grim site has reverted to forest, and nobody apart from him and a few other survivors could have led me there.

Ever since May 1999, when I learned of Douch's arrest, I have felt an urgent need to go back in time, to revisit the other side of the gate of my life, which has never been closed.

In the depths of his prison, my one-time persecutor awaits trial for crimes against humanity. He can brood over that period of his youth when murder, pillage and lies were not only permitted but commendable. Setting off with a flower in his rifle

and a heart filled with hope, he had thrown himself into a primitive world filled with horror. Here, the dangers of war were slight in comparison to the dangers of revolution; in the most demanding confrontations, the warrior never stopped being wary of his neighbour. He was a child venturing among wolves: to survive, he had drunk their milk, and learned to howl like them, and let instinct take over. Terror, from that moment, became all-powerful. It seduced him by putting on the face of morality and order.

The old torturer has not forgotten me. Behind his bars, he replied with the utmost care to the questions I managed to put to him through intermediaries. To describe the site of the forest camp, for instance, he drew a precise sketch which enabled me to find the village of Thmar kok.



Beneath the burning sun, walking quickly behind my guide, I make my way among silvery bushes and large, glossy leaves like strange illuminated pages in the dust. I soon start to see

indications that we are approaching the place of my ordeal. It is as if, from the depths of life, I am rising to the surface.

But further on, surveying the remnants of the forest before us, I can no longer find my bearings. The big trees have disappeared; those witnesses that do remain are dying where they stand, already ringed by the charcoal burner's axe. On each side, as far as the eye can see, only a skinny copse, branches drooping with the heat, sparingly claims my attention. Everything, down to the ground we are treading, now seems to me alien and unknown.

Most disconcerting of all is the disorder in my memories. Beneath the blindfold that Douch put over my eyes, I had been able to examine every detail of the path. My eye had fastened on to the tiniest details, and I can remember some of the minute shrubs, not unlike mimosa, that grew in dense tufts among the dead leaves. Now I cannot recognise a thing. The landscape is nothing but deceptive appearances shimmering beneath the sky, like dead vistas seen in dreams. I seem to recognise some places with certainty (such as the stream, where I had tripped as we clambered out the other side), but everything after that, like the islands that have now appeared in the middle of the Mekong, is a new area of perplexing topography: old fallow rice fields, cart tracks, burnt terrain.

I cannot describe the effect on me of this strange walk in the vanished undergrowth. My thoughts, escaping from the hold of words, drift over dark shadows, meandering into indescribable regions like when the mind is gripped by a nightmare. Language can no longer bind my unfolding thoughts. All I have is a mobile mosaic, where the syllables fly around one another like lugubrious birds, and my dark reverie frays in the vague contours of a grave dug straight into the white dust.

In spite of the confidence of the sturdy fellow in front of me, I tread the stony ground warily, as if groping through a maze. In places, my feet sink into dusty holes, throwing up clouds of ashes. Ahead of us, a bird of prey rises silently out of

a thicket and ascends into the still air. A fly, bronze-corseted and humming like a cello, stirs the air beside my dripping temples.

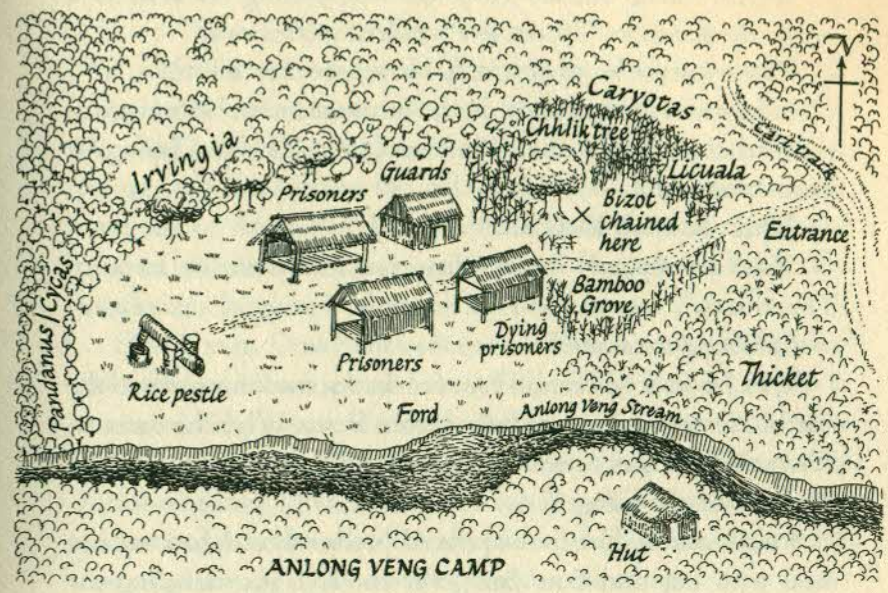
After an hour, we make our way through a cluster of grey brambles, to find some knotty and shrivelled bamboos marking the end of a path. We force our way through the unfriendly undergrowth. My guide turns to me and purses his lips at the ground.

Stooping beneath drapes of thorns, I step forward at once, cautiously, as if entering a chapel. The ground is covered with a thick layer of branches and leaves. The dry dust cracks as I step on it, and I see, sunk into the dust against an enormous anthill, three large charred stones. Further off, the bottom of a small mildewed pillar can be seen protruding from the carpet of twigs. And in front of me I notice the great trunk of the *chhlik* tree: its solitary frame is now thirty metres tall, whereas I had never seen it as anything other than a column whose summit was lost beyond the canopy.

"Where is the stream?" I shout without turning around.

The peasant sets off in front of me. As I hurry to join him, he holds out his hand, showing me where to look. I can feel a clawing in my heart: at our feet the clear waters flow over mossy pebbles. At this time of the year, they seem less deep and limpid, but the shimmering reflection of the stream's banks can still be seen in the water's grey-green mirror.

Now I am on the dug-out bank where I went every evening. In order not to slip, I find footholds on the bare roots, and feel I am finding old marks. A dreamlike awareness descends on me, and I become sensitive to a multitude of things at once. Behind my back extends the withered clearing, covered with elephant grass, which at its furthest point gives way to a thorn hedge. On this burning, shadeless dryness, the old field of oppression stretches out in all its ever-present infamy, for now I can see the shelters: their lines are clearly marked out on the ground, right



over to the mound the guards had cut away vertically, for drying their laundry, as dictated by the ideologues of the Angkar.

We sit beside the stream and catch our breath. My mind surrenders to the thoughts assailing me from all sides. From deep in the scrub, I hear the distant call of an oriole.

My guide tells me with a laugh that I am the only prisoner who can make such a pilgrimage, for no-one else escaped from this camp alive.*

"Where were they executed?" I ask him.

*Of the approximately thirty Westerners arrested by the Khmers Rouges before 1975, I was apparently the only one released. Two others, Reverend J. Clavaud and his son, Olivier, along with the son of Dr Baudelet, were fortunate enough simply to be detained: the first two at the village of Chumreah Pen (Takeo), from 18 November 1970 until 3 January 1971, and the latter in a village in the site of Angkor, during June 1972.

"In the bush, outside here," he said, jutting his chin in a northerly direction. "About five hundred metres away."

"But we never heard anything. How were they killed?"

"They were cudgelled to death. You were lucky. Let me touch you so that I can have a bit of luck too, *lok euy!*" he said, laying his hand on my arm.

"Did you know Douch?"

"No," he replied, "but I often saw him when he came to Thmar kok."

"To buy provisions?"

"No, he went to Phum Peam for that, seven kilometres to the north. He married a dressmaker from Peam. When he came to Thmar kok, it was to see Ta Mok, who lived in a house on the outskirts of the village."

I walk over to the foot-operated pestle where I had my last meal with Lay and Son. Bent over the soil, disentangling the flattened, concealing carpet of grass, I can smell the scattered blossoms, borne on the dry breeze, and I seem to see my friends' footprints on the fallow land.

As I run my hands over this unchanged earth, I also recall the ambergris smell of my friends the hens, which would waft over to me every morning when they jumped down from the branches.

Then all my former companions, skulls smashed in, rise invisibly. Barely recognisable, they crowd around me as I set forth on the path they took to the place of horrors. Before dying, all these phantoms strode resolutely past me, trying to dispel their fear; their expressions sunk in the morbid gaze of a man who has lost all hope, yet makes a last attempt to save face and drive away despair. And in my heart, like flying scraps hanging from a thousand pupils pushed out of their orbits by the beatings, their empty remains start to jump and dance. On the way back, I can still see their souls slipping away like whitefish among the blades of grass as the breezes cover them with the smell of dust.

*

We are soon once more at Thmar kok, a dismal jumble of dilapidated cabins constructed of black partitions and mouldy thatched roofs. This is where the families of the former Khmers Rouges who had joined the village militias – all of whose sons were sent to the front – live as wretchedly as they did during the time of the loathsome regime. Before I leave their hamlet, the inhabitants laughingly show me Ta Mok's house.

On his map, Douch showed me how to find the spot where my farewell dinner took place. I set off for Phum Peam. The site is surrounded by sugar palms, which I have no memory of. After Anlong Veng was abandoned, the Khmer Rouge leaders erected their banqueting room there, immediately next door to a detention and interrogation base built in the aftermath. The whole place was destroyed in 1979 by the invading Vietnamese troops.

I retrace my steps, taking the long, dusty white track, the same road I took thirty years earlier, having eaten my fill, returning to Oudong next to Douch in the 404. Bureau 13 was so close that when the wind blew I used to be able to hear from my shelter the rare trucks that came by. Long after the noise of the engine died away, I would keep listening.

On my way back, I cross an area of plots of land of uniform size planted with sugar palms – in images such as this, the beauty of this country affects me almost painfully – their endless, floating, domelike shapes standing out like silhouettes. From this distance, the water, the air and the earth sparkle like the fount of life itself. I shudder at the impetuosity which made me ready to attempt an escape through such large expanses of open land.

With hindsight, some of the other information Douch sent me from his military prison also sends shivers down my spine. My links with the former torturer are distant and infrequent,

conducted through intermediaries who prevent me from appealing to his memory as much as I want to. But he has often referred in his brief messages to the secret circumstances of my liberation.

The report he wrote on me, after ten weeks of questioning, had been duly passed to Sok Thuok, alias Von Veth, his immediate superior, who was then GRNUK's vice-minister of the interior and president of the special region. A copy was also sent to Ta Mok, himself a member of the military high command and of the party's Central Committee.

Some strange relationships were formed in the forest. The two men lived in different worlds; each had joined the partisans without previous training, as if setting off on an adventure. They had nothing in common: the former was a militant Communist from the fifties, passionate about ideals and justice; the latter was simply skilled in the use of force. A man of instinctive action, Ta Mok believed that doubts were resolved by swift decisions. In this respect – in that he despised theory – he was less equivocal than Von Veth. Von Veth's weakness arose from his belief that power was expressed primarily through ideas, and he was already getting bogged down in his duplicitous theories.

The document, which had been carefully composed, was based on a series of precise propositions. It cleared me of the accusation made against me, that I was a spy for the CIA. But Ta Mok rejected the conclusions of the report outright and directed (in about mid-December) that I be executed immediately. His reaction appeared to be based in particular upon an oral instruction given by the Angkar in 1971 that prisoners were no longer to be freed; in other words, once a dossier had been compiled, each prisoner was to be executed.

Von Veth had not supported me right away, originally thinking, like Ta Mok, that I belonged to the CIA.

"Look, comrade!" he said to Douch when he saw my first confession. "There's no such thing . . . no *barang* comes to

Cambodia to study Buddhism and Khmer pottery. He's a CIA agent!"

But during the course of my statements and explanations, the head of Bureau 13 succeeded in assembling a dossier which convinced the old revolutionary. In order to counter Ta Mok's stubborn intransigence, Von Veth, without saying anything and because of some deep-seated fair-mindedness that he still possessed, made up his mind to delay my execution and to call upon the arbitration of Saloth Sar (who would assume the name of Pol Pot in 1975), then deputy head of the military high command.

Upon discovering that my execution had been postponed against his instructions, Ta Mok grew all the more resentful because the decision had been left to one of his superiors. As bad luck would have it, Saloth Sar's response took a long time to arrive. Consumed with impatience and anger, the impenitent butcher ordered my death a second time. Von Veth turned a deaf ear and covered up for Douch's silence. Believing it was his duty to await the verdict from on high, he delayed carrying out the sentence.

I can remember Douch's comings and goings (probably to Phum Thmar kok) around this time. My impetuous outbursts were beginning to overwhelm him, and he didn't know what to say to keep me quiet. From his expression, I could tell (without understanding) that he was seeing things more clearly than before, but his eyes told me that he was never free of anxiety. Beneath the playful tone he affected to calm me, there was a profound worry which drove me mad.

Finally, in view of the detailed report Douch gave of our relationship, the future Pol Pot confirmed the verdict: release the Frenchman.

Ta Mok was quickly informed and summoned Douch in a fury, without disclosing to him any of the instructions he had received. His eyes were aflame. He urgently wanted to convince

him (using reason) of my guilt, then persuade him (using threats) to hand me over to the guards entrusted with the task. After my death, he could swear that my letter of pardon had reached him too late.

Douch stood firm, and Von Veth came to the rescue. During a tour in the south, the president of the special region came to Phum Thmar kok, to the shack built on stilts that Ta Mok and his sentries occupied, to discuss current matters. The main local chiefs had been summoned to meet him on the way. He suddenly noticed Douch, who was waiting there beneath the shack.

"Well! What's the young comrade doing here?" he asked good-naturedly.

"I have been summoned by Comrade Mok – for the umpteenth time. I suppose it's something to do with the Frenchman again."

When the meeting was over, Ta Mok took Von Veth to a nearby house and had Douch join them. He launched into him immediately.

"This bloody Frenchman is from the CIA! I refuse to collaborate with a spy working for the Americans! Those at the top want to free him. But here on the ground we see things more clearly. There can be no question of his release!"

Douch had decided to keep quiet. The taciturn old Communist intervened immediately.

"This bloody Frenchman is *not* from the CIA!" he replied simply.

Ta Mok did not dare expose himself any further by persisting, and so I was released. But his opponent's stubbornness incited within him an interminable rage that would abate only with the death of my liberator. Seven years later, he himself arrested Von Veth and sent him to Tuol Sleng jail. Douch was responsible for the prison. An unfortunate turn of events forced him to have his former protector executed.

Douch immediately suggested attaching a certain emphasis to my release in order to forestall Ta Mok. He planned to arrange a

farewell dinner and to chaperone me throughout. The preparation of the meal was entrusted to his mentor among the partisans, the executive head of the south-west regional office, Chay Kim Hour, alias Hok, like him a former maths teacher. He was the devil of a man who sat among the others and watched me eat, the man whose questions I had answered, trembling, never knowing the terrible secrets that this banquet concealed. Hok, too, would later be arrested by Ta Mok and taken to Tuol Sleng.

Douch also revealed something else. I hardly dare relate it: to do so provokes a sensation I cannot get rid of – it makes me feel morally and physically sick. In trepidation, I asked him what had become of Lay and Son. Had they been enlisted to fight (as I had expected)? Were they dead? Did Douch know? His reply, written in French at the bottom of my letter, was a shock which, in my thoughtlessness, I had not imagined possible:

"After Von Veth released Bizot, he gave me orders to kill Lay and Son."

Their execution, he states in Khmer on the back of the paper, had taken place at the end of the second month following my release. Having contravened Ta Mok's orders so resolutely to save me – no doubt at great risk to his own life – it was out of the question, he maintained, to try to protect Lay and Son as well.

I return to the market at Oudong and the following day set off along the track to Vat O, towards the pagoda where I had originally been captured, which I think of so often. Little remains of the old buildings; the monks, all very young, no longer know anything. I decide to pursue my quest three kilometres further on, at Phum Tuol Sophi, taking the road along which – my two companions already tied up – the Khmer Rouge militia had dragged me.

I retain a very precise picture of the empty lean-to shop where

I had been made to sit while waiting for an officer to arrive. Built at ground level adjoining the road, it used to stand beneath a large kapok tree a few metres from a trail leading due north. Now, recognising nothing, I spot a few peasants at the corner of a wooden house whose ground floor is used as a shop. They listen to me somewhat uncomprehendingly, then a little man of about forty, dressed in black, joins us and questions me excitedly. "The Frenchman who was taken prisoner at Vat O? The one who liked margosa flowers?"

In less than a minute, a crowd has gathered. Not only do people remember, but even the youngest ones know the story. The day of my arrest, a few days after my enforced departure towards Omleang, a large contingent of government troops had set out to recapture me. I remember that Douch mentioned this manoeuvre – which I knew nothing about – when we were in the Peugeot 404, and said that it had exacerbated the case against me. It had been responsible for two deaths and caused the Khmer Rouge column occupying the village to scatter. For fear of aerial reprisals, the inhabitants of Tuol Sophi had had to hide in the bush for over a week.

The man I am speaking to appears to know me well. His name is An. He is lively and friendly, but dark eyes are all that stand out from his dull and haggard face. He was fifteen at the time. Although I have no memory of him, he was fascinated by my arrest, and observed me from his aunt's disused shop, for the whole time I was held there.

"The person who arrested you lives very close," he tells me. "It's Duong!" he calls out for the others to hear. "When you arrived by car, with the two Khmers, a lookout from the monastery saw you and told a group of seven militia men. Duong's the one who was in charge of them."

They bring Duong along. The man was twenty-one when I was arrested. I take his callused hands in mine and we look at each other for a long time, laughing. Standing before me is the man

who was the cause of it all, the man who decided to detain me and take me to his leader. Time etches people from our past deep in our memories, and even if they have been an instrument of our unhappiness, they eventually arouse a sort of affection within us. This is what I experience as I meet him. He is stocky, with a coarse face marked with sparse but deep lines; a white resin tooth attached to a gold dental plate has been inserted between his incisors and tapers to a point in the middle of his gum. Mistaking my emotion for resentment, the poor wretch immediately does his best to minimise his responsibility, laying the blame on Ta Teng, the officer who frisked me and who is now dead.

"Then," An continues, pointing to the crossroads, "you set off along this track on your own with two guards and arrived in the village, where you feasted on margosa shoots."

As he speaks, everything comes back to me. When we arrived, after walking quickly for several kilometres along a twisting road, dusk was falling. From some distance, I realised that everywhere people were anxious. The fields were empty; we did not encounter a single soul. Some soldiers then emerged from the thickets and led me to a small house where a village woman had been asked quickly to give me something to eat. The woman hadn't been told, and kept apologising for the little she was able to offer. I was already deeply worried, but her kindness and the compassion in the way she looked at me made me feel worse. Terribly apologetically, she brought me some fish soup and, to go with the rice, some young *sdao* shoots, which I loved because of their bitter taste. I gulped down my meal hurriedly but still took care to crunch the last bite of the delicious stems and their minute white bell-shaped flowers. My appetite for margosa shoots immediately became legendary. It was this detail that was reported by the guards on their return to Tuol Sophi.

"What's become of the superior at Vat O?" I enquire of the people gathered around us.

"Ta Hieng?" asks everybody in unison. "He's over eighty and now running the Vat Vieng Chas at Oudong."

I ask to be taken there without delay, and An offers to be my guide. As soon as we arrive in the courtyard of the great pagoda (rebuilt by Prime Minister Hun Sen), the monks take us into an open, high-ceilinged room with a large gilded statue of a Buddha. The venerable old man is dozing next to a bamboo partition. Beside him, a teapot and several cups rest on an upturned tea chest. The cement beneath his feet is covered with a piece of dusty matting, a few printed books, and a stemmed dish containing a box and some candles. We sit down. The silent old man facing us automatically brings to my mind an upsetting, wordless scene.

After leaving Hélène with one of Son's uncles in Phum O Slat, we set off for Vat O. As we drove along the red track a sadness came over us, for there were already many signs of decline: the bleak landscape, the destroyed bridges . . . An old local man, who knew everyone in the area, had come along to put us at our ease. There was not a cloud in the sky; birds sang in every bush. Unseen insects emitted quick, automatic stridulating sounds. The calm of the day lulled us into thinking that everything was as it had always been. Danger is like a wind that blows, disappears and returns again.

When we went in with Lay and Son to pay our respects to the superior of Vat O, he had instantly frozen into a silence that none of us had known how to interpret. His restless eyes were looking elsewhere; he was not listening to us. I even whispered to Lay how surprised I was at this apparent lack of politeness. When I turned around, I noticed an armed man dressed in black sneaking away furtively and running behind the hedges.

Ta Hieng suddenly rises from his bed, squinting in the daylight. The monks have deliberately woken him by talking rather loudly. When I see him more closely, a sort of fear grips me, for his uncovered body looks so withered that it is difficult

to believe that there is still life within him. I immediately explain who I am. The old monk admits that he doesn't remember anything. I listen to his answer smilingly, finding it amazing but somehow comical that he should remember nothing of that grim meeting.

Refusing to believe that the old man could really have forgotten, An tells the story again, mentioning that I had also come to interview two *arak* singers, specialists in meditation rituals. The old man suddenly looks at me. A gentle glow comes over his soft wax face; his wrinkles come to life in a start of bewilderment. He has to be told several times who I am, the "Frenchman of the margosa shoots", and in his misty eyes, shining with a glaucous transparency, we see a glint of mounting surprise and happiness.

"Ah! *Gnom euy!* That's thirty years ago. I've been waiting for this moment without ever believing it would come. I thought you were dead. When you walked in that day, my blood ran cold. You were speaking, and I didn't dare say a word. *Pouttho!* Let me at last give you the blessing you came for, to your great misfortune."

"Well, hurry up then, Grandfather!" I say to him. I have to tighten my throat to control my voice. "And please don't stop. Because I, too, have been waiting for this moment for thirty years."

Crossing the gardens of the monastery, I leave Ta Hieng without noticing that the sky has changed. With wonder, I see the ground, cluttered with flower beds and pruned bushes, bathed in a strange light. The sun has now disappeared, but, behind us, its rays have tinged one edge of the clouds a vibrant shade of purple. On the other side of the clouds, as if made by untidy brush strokes, black stratifications smear the azure canopy. Like ink stains on blotting paper, they alter suddenly, in a process of erosion that covers the landscape with a mist of fine matter. When the blaze is almost extinguished, the moon rises, the

thinnest of golden crescents. It looks like the half-closed eyelid of a Buddha of Sukhothay.

In 1988, I returned to Cambodia. Like every visitor, I went to see the former high school at Tuol Sleng that the Khmers Rouges had transformed into a macabre waiting room: tens of thousands of prisoners were systematically numbered, photographed and questioned before being sent to their deaths.

The ground-floor rooms, where the interrogations took place, were furnished with an iron bedstead, upon which the victim was laid. If you bent over them and listened very carefully, you could hear the continuous drizzle of blood flowing from the tortured faces: their photographs covered the walls. Faces, split open at the mouth, pierced with a pain that had left no visible trace, not even rust or wear on the iron. I pondered the significance of this piece of ironwork: in places I thought I could detect the mark of suffering on it – the gasp of agony, the ravings of terror – when suddenly the cry of man itself struck me as distant, derisory, prehistoric and so pointless that it was hard to distinguish it from the stutterings of life, the screams of the newborn.

On the bare metal bed-base – where shreds of material still hung from the mesh, with some tarnished handcuffs that had scratched the framework and some bent rivets – the same ghosts arose that had come from the gate, so loathsome that I turned pale with terror. I had to hold my breath in order to brace myself against this vision; I could feel my tears welling up uncontrollably.

The groups of buildings had been converted into a "Museum of Genocide". The cells, which were covered in thick dust, were just as they had been left by the guards on the afternoon of 7 January 1979, when they had fled with the arrival of the Vietnamese. Pell-mell upon the yellow-and-white-tiled floor were scattered a chain, a plastic bottle (for urine), a munitions box (for the faeces mingled with blood), a short metal bit with

two stirrups, a desk and a chair (for the interrogator), a cotton floorcloth, some electric wires, a few instruments ranging from rattan rods to pliers, all as they were when pushed out of the way by the last of the mutilated bodies, dragged out over a floor spattered with black blood.

In one of the central rooms, a display had been set up by those who wanted to turn this place into a symbol. It featured the bathtub specially adapted for immersion; the sloping wooden partition used for suffocation; the cage full of spiders, centipedes, snakes and scorpions; the hooks; the bludgeons; the whips; the stained knives.

On the walls, among the tortured faces of a hundred or more martyrs, they had hung group photographs of a few of the torturers with their assistants. In one corner, in a prominent position, was an enlarged portrait of their master.

I had the greatest difficulty in recognising Douch. Not that the picture was bad: the laughing eyes, the bared teeth, the half-open lips, everything was true to life, even the big ears that I had forgotten. Above all, the picture showed the indiscernible bitterness that was always with him, as if all happiness were already lost to him for ever. But I could not bring myself to identify the man I had known, who so loved justice, with the principal torturer of this vile gaol, responsible for these atrocities. What monstrous metamorphosis had he undergone? I was plunged into torment; the stench of swamp and animal's den turned my stomach. Into my mind came the smell of the beast who had haunted them here.

There are experiences that make us reappraise everything. This pilgrimage into the sparse and remote bush, and the visit to Tuol Sleng the day after, is one such experience. Framed by barbed wire and sheet metal, I penetrate the scene in fear and trembling, to find the macabre march setting off again under the bamboos, and

thumping against my brain. My eyes are opened. The glaring pupils of my companions are fixed on Douch. Those of the tortured from the high school join them, and they all begin to dance.

From the forest of Omleang to Phnom Penh prison, my wretched friend has not undergone any transformation. Nothing has changed. He did ask, in April 1975, to be transferred to the industrial sector. But he was refused; and like the good pupil that he is, he unfailingly continued the same work in the familiar atmosphere of clinking chains and fleshless faces. His security objective, which he carried out without pleasure but always with rigour, was to purge the country of the enemies the trucks tipped out for him every morning, using the same means: the stick, the spade and the butcher's knife.

For me, on the other hand, everything has changed. Upon returning from captivity, I gradually rediscovered a "normal life". This explains why, when confronted with the instruments at Tuol Sleng, I felt brutally unable to equate the vision of its loathsome executioner with the image of my liberator. In my mind, he was for ever the young revolutionary.

Back then, when I was chained up in the dust, the cries of my fellow prisoners awaiting their turn tended to drift away into the distance. Death was so close that we grew used to its fetid breath and its hideous countenance. It was so familiar to us that no-one in the camp could sustain the same degree of revulsion at its ubiquitous presence. Like them, like Douch, like man on earth, I had secretly tamed terror.

I am purged of my ghosts. I have emptied my memory. I close *The Gate* behind me. Puppets, hung clustered on a rail, dangle in the twilight, an offering to the wolves. I turn back one last time; on the other side of the grille, Douch has joined them.

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