figurehead

Patrick Allington

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Although inspired by recent history, this is a work of imagination set in a parallel world. None of the characters, including those who share names with historical figures, should be mistaken for actual people. None of the events, scenarios or dialogues I describe necessarily conform to an agreed historical record.

The country names 'Cambodia' and 'Kampuchea' are Romanised derivations of the same Khmer word.

Trapped in the side-wheel of a ferryboat, saving himself from drowning only by walking, then desperately running, inside the accelerating wheel like a squirrel in a cage, his only real concern was, obviously, to keep his hat on.

—James Agee on Buster Keaton

The Confessions of Ted Whittlemore

Another day. A dull, insistent ache in my side—deep, deep within—wakes me before six o'clock. I am dreadfully tired. Although I retired early, it took me hours to find sleep. My dubious reward was a restless, dream-laden slumber. I sometimes think it would be more palliative to stay awake forever.

Nhem Kiry wakes at 5:15 a.m. He rises at this exact time every morning, although the only timepiece in the wooden house is his wristwatch, which he keeps in the bottom of a small chest of drawers near his mattress. His neck and shoulders are stiff but once he stretches and twists, and once his wife, Kolab, snaps his top vertebrae into place, he revives.

I sit in the shower for an age, trying to think of an excuse to buzz for a nurse. While it is one of life's indignities to shower sitting down, it is also luxurious. I wish I'd thought to do it when I could have chosen to do it.

In a sarong, Kiry stands and pours water over his head with a plastic ladle from a big stone bucket. He dries himself by standing still, arms making a 't'.

I eat a prescription breakfast: raw muesli with cashews and sun-dried prunes, with too much wheat germ and not enough coconut. It's softened—that's overstating it—with soymilk. With the aid of a weak cup of instant black coffee, I down five types of pills, four of which mute the side effects of the principal drug.

Kiry has chicken rice porridge for breakfast. He likes to eat alone but his granddaughter, Kunthea, crawls onto his lap. He tells her a well-worn story about a talking frog. Kunthea takes up the story once the frog's pond dries up. Kiry eats while she recounts the long trek to a new pond. He should take blood pressure pills at breakfast but they make him dizzy. The frog, having learnt the value of patience, returns to his old pond to await the rains.

In the morning I sit in the sunroom. I read the *Australian*—it's better than nothing—and tell Mrs Haynes and Joycie Bainbridge about the mess in the Middle East. Mrs Haynes expresses suitable disquiet but Joycie stares out the window at the rose garden. I avoid bingo—I never win anyway—but I attend session 209 of Carlene Smith's **Talk on My Life as a Missionary in Papua New Guinea**: 'Those poor people, I said to Harold, look at them, those poor, poor people.' I like to heckle Carlene. I think she likes it too, although she often complains to the Director of Activities about me.

In the morning, Kiry feeds the ducks leftover rice. Their wings clipped, they sit in a

shallow pond, dusty but serene. He prods the garden for weeds, though the rows of corn and beans are already pristine. A messenger arrives with a letter from a Japanese television journalist, a third request for an interview. The language, though still polite, is rather more urgent: the film crew is obviously tired of waiting in Battambang. Kiry feeds the letter to the ducks.

After lunch I lie down for an hour. My Sleep Therapist—that's an actual profession, I swear it—approves so long as I rest but don't actually sleep. She says I would benefit from aqua-therapy sessions at the nearby indoor pool. She bribes me by pointing out there are swimsuits there, with women inside them. 'I'll go if you go,' I say. I think she blushes—in my mind she turns the colour of the raspberry jelly they serve for dessert every Wednesday—but my eyes are watering so I can't be sure.

After lunch Kiry places a wet *krama* on his forehead and sleeps for an hour in a hammock. When he wakes, he lies, smudged with perspiration, daydreaming. For a while he thinks about the past and who is to blame for the present. He switches soon to inane matters. He muses over whether the big toe on his right foot, the nail blackened, is uglier than its compatriot, which has no nail at all.

In the afternoon I work for a while. I try to write about things that please me—Ho Chi Minh's delightful sense of mischief, or Zhou En-lai's love of banquets, or drinking beer in the late afternoon at a secret camp on the Cambodian border (the Viet Cong were always such accommodating hosts)—but Nhem Kiry interrupts my thinking, as persistent as a bad dream. Then I squint and squirm through Cornell's latest airmailed rationalisation, an incomprehensible yet offensive report on American-Vietnam relations. Accompanying the report is a scribbled note, seemingly penned by a different man, in which he asks after the health of my liver and offers a long, lewd assessment of Bill Clinton's staying power. I manage to concentrate for nearly four hours. That's quite an achievement, though once I thrived on fifteen-hour workdays.

After his nap Kiry splashes his face with water. His hair still damp, a pot of tea beside him, he sits cross-legged on the floor, facing the corner, and works on his memoirs. He has spent a long time, too long he knows, recalling the years of study in France. The descriptions are flabby and, truthfully, he is delaying writing about the victory time. Maybe, he thinks, it would be prudent to end his tale at 1974. But then he thinks, 'Prudence? What use to me now

is prudence?'

Dinner is hardly an event but that doesn't stop many of us gathering in the dining room an hour before the food arrives. I have roast pork and complain bitterly when they withhold the crackling (the option, no option at all, is spinach and leek lasagne). I sit with William, who has been stuck here even longer than I have and who seems healthier than most of the staff. We talk about the footy—mostly, we slander umpires. I take my poached pears to Beryl's room, quite a trek now that she's moved into high dependency. I chat to her about my day. She doesn't speak. She's not exactly asleep, not exactly awake.

Kiry sits on a large mat with those members of his family not estranged or dead: his wife, two daughters, one son-in-law, and three grandchildren. It is a joyful time. Although he would prefer less rowdiness, he loves the laughter. He eats his favourite food: sour fish egg soup, accompanied by green mango salad and rice. As he sits back and savours the flavours he whispers kind, private words to his wife, startling her with this rare dose of spontaneous affection.

Before bed, I watch television. A ninety second newsbreak—thirty seconds of news (unemployment rate drops, seasonally adjusted, and a car bomb explodes somewhereorother), thirty seconds of sport (another footballer has osteitis pubis, whatever that is), twenty seconds of weather, and ten seconds of the newsreader pouting—precedes an American cop show featuring a black lieutenant, two physically perfect detective-lovers and an Alcoholics Anonymous redneck senior detective, whose bleeding heart is well hidden under fat. Together they apprehend drug dealers and clean up after associated mayhem, although this usually requires more violence.

Kiry tunes his radio to the BBC World Service. He half-listens to a long, dull report on the global financial markets. It reminds him of a weather forecast, so quickly redundant. He unfolds a month-old edition of *Le Monde* but he can't be bothered even with the book reviews. He's so bored.

I gain respite most Sundays when Michael takes me home for lunch (he'll never admit it but he's lonely since Anne left). When the weather is fine we sit under the pergola and feast on trout and king prawns and cholesterol free coleslaw. Michael has screwed a metal rail to the wall beside the downstairs toilet so I can haul myself up unaided. I'm not allowed to stand and pee anymore.

Kiry makes the short trip to Pailin town once or twice a month, to buy fruit or a shirt or batteries for his radio, to telephone Phnom Penh or France. Sometimes he and his minder eat lunch at the market but mostly he prefers to get home quickly. Occasionally he slips into Thailand—the border is 400 metres from his home—for a meeting or a doctor's appointment.

Lia used to take me to the pub a couple of afternoons a week but she claims I can't hold my beer anymore. 'I'm sorry, Grandpa, but you can't talk to women that way,' was actually what she said. She visits whenever she can but she's going away soon. 'Why America?' I keep asking her, when what I really mean is, 'Don't go. Don't go anywhere.'

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I first wrote about Nhem Kiry in 1960, or 61: **Rising Left-Wing Intellectual Beaten in Street.** As I recall, the story was buried in the middle pages of the *Communal*, the once-great radical American newspaper that years later, in a fit of editorial bloody-mindedness, rejected my articles setting the record straight on the Khmer Rouge.

I was cautious:

Unknown assailants this week attacked the young left-leaning Cambodian intellectual, Nhem Kiry, editor of the Phnom Penh La Communauté. *He reportedly spent several days in hospital but will make a full recovery. He declined to comment on the incident, promising to address the matter in a future editorial.*

Well, I was in Vietnam and had no business sounding authoritative, not in print at least. Besides, I didn't want to implicate Prince Sihanouk, whose favour I was busy trying to gain. I did not attach my name but called myself, 'A Correspondent.'

Sihanouk once assured me that he had never actually ordered the assault. I believe him. Most likely he wondered aloud, in the presence of his enthusiastic helpers, whether Kiry was an entirely loyal subject. These helpers, who coincidentally were members of Sihanouk's secret police, took it upon themselves to drag Kiry into the street, strip him naked, and beat him. As Kiry lay counting his ribs, his left eyelids fused, they taunted him and laughed at his penis. They photographed him and distributed copies around Phnom Penh. I bought a copy on a plane from Hanoi to Paris for two packets of cigarettes but my editor said, 'I don't publish pornography, no matter how tasteless.' A few weeks later they confiscated Kiry's printing press and threw him in jail for a month.

Fifteen years later Kiry was a member of the Khmer Rouge leadership that threw a

vast sheet over Cambodia. The conjurers practised their tricks for nearly four years. When the magic wouldn't work they set about eliminating the audience. Then the Vietnamese came, pure and simple liberators so far as I am concerned. Although the Khmer Rouge fled west, Kiry's public life ran for twenty more years.

It would suit me to believe that Kiry's beating, his incarceration, led him to dedicate his life to Pol Pot. But two years after the bruises had faded he served in one of Prince Sihanouk's cabinets. Actually, I take some credit for Sihanouk's thinking at that time. In those early years of the decade I spent weeks and sometimes months at a time in Phnom Penh, writing articles but also advising Sihanouk as well as providing a subdued piano accompaniment when he was overcome by the urge to play jazz clarinet (and actually he wasn't nearly as woeful as the western press used to report).

Of course, Sihanouk was never a socialist or even a democrat. But like Ho Chi Minh he was a nationalist, albeit one unable to distinguish between his country's needs and his own desires. He recognised, briefly, around 1960—probably because I told him so—that the brightest young Cambodians were leftists. As Kiry was the smartest, most plausible and most placid of them all Sihanouk gave him a chance to fix the economy.

I sometimes saw Kiry ride his bicycle to parliament, his legs straining to stay attached to the distant pedals. At official functions, I watched him mingle. He talked to everyone, so earnest, so incapable of setting aside his urgent vision. He understood the political ramifications of his blueprint—the elite would no longer be elite—yet still he dreamed that his colleagues would glimpse the long-term benefits of pulling down the economic scaffolding of colonialism. 'Fat chance, buddy,' as Cornell would say. By 1962 Sihanouk dumped Kiry from the cabinet.

Kiry took a job teaching teenagers alongside his friend, Bun Sody, another Paris-trained thinker who Sihanouk promoted then discarded. Sody was a wonderful fellow. He had the kindest eyes I ever encountered—in a man, that is—and a deep laugh that arrived as if he was singing from a mountaintop. He was a strategic thinker who had the decency to simplify his economic strategies, usually by resorting to allegory, so that I could contribute to our political discussions. He was no less passionate than Kiry about the plight of the Cambodian peasant but rather more agreeable to the prospect of enjoying himself in the meantime. I got the impression that, amongst his peers, his popularity exceeded his

authority.

Sody and I met often in those years in the early 1960s, before the war in Vietnam turned its most rancid. He disapproved fiercely of my strengthening relationship with Sihanouk: 'I cannot understand what you see in him: he is a dunce, he treats the people with disdain, and his sycophants are madmen.'

Sometimes Sody brought Kiry to our get-togethers. Kiry sat quietly for long periods, listening, occasionally asking for clarification or, more usually, correcting a factual error. Then, eventually, he would enunciate a position, linking everything back to the economic development of the nation. These were sober performances made dramatic only because they were so detailed, so articulate, so steeped in context, so reasonable. Sody and I waited with great anticipation for these moments and the only time they didn't come was if Sody and I drank too much beer and became too jocular. Then Kiry departed, politely, his silent disapproval only apparent to me the next morning via a foul film of dehydration on my tongue.

I saw Kiry alone only once, in Phnom Penh. It must have been 1966, when he was briefly in parliament again, this time against Sihanouk's wishes. By then, the Americans were fully engaged in destroying Vietnam. Although I spent most of my time in the field with the Viet Cong or in Hanoi I still visited Sihanouk whenever I could. He was at his finest in those times, standing up to the Americans, who wanted to turn Cambodia into a military base like South Korea or Japan or Germany.

The night I saw Kiry I had been attending a gala presentation of one of Sihanouk's motion pictures—I think it was the one about a doomed love affair between a shapely young air hostess and a portly old politician. After an hour I could no longer bear the wooden dialogue and the over-acting (the lead roles were played by an air hostess and a politician). Walking back to my hotel, I stopped for a drink and came across Kiry, who was scribbling notes all over his copy of John Kenneth Galbraith's *The Affluent Society*. Although he looked sheepish, probably because I'd caught him in an up-market establishment, he waved me over. 'Listen to this,' he said. '*Even in the presumptively austere and dedicated world of the Third Reich, in the third year of a disastrous war, the average citizen had access to a wide range of comforts and amenities which habit had made to seem essential. And because they were believed to be essential they were essential. On such matters governments, even*

dictatorships, must bow to the conviction of the people even if—the exceptional case—they do not agree with them. The German standard of living was above what was physically necessary for survival and efficiency. The R.A.F. broke through the psychological encrustation and brought living standards down somewhere nearer to the physical minimum. In doing so it forced a wholesale conversion of Germany's scarcest resource, that of manpower, to war production.' Kiry paused and looked up. 'Interesting, don't you think?'

'I can't think at all,' I said. 'I've just been watching one of Sihanouk's films.'

'Now there's an issue of global concern.'

I ordered a bottle of beer but Kiry declined my offer of a drink. 'I'm fine,' he said, indicating his green tea.

'Sihanouk's not that bad,' I protested. 'Other than the filmmaking.'

Kiry looked around, leaned close and whispered in my ear, in a tone not at all contemptuous, not at all accusatory, 'You have absolutely no idea, do you?'

'Well, I agree, he's not perfect but he's doing a good job of holding off the Americans. It's no small task, maintaining neutrality.'

'Neutrality? If neutrality is agreeing with everybody one week, castigating everybody the next week, and in the meantime avoiding all reform, then he is a world champion neutralist.'

'That seems a trifle harsh. But, of course, you have more of a personal stake than I do. I don't blame you for that but—'

'Oh I am so relieved that you do not blame me.' Kiry now spoke so quietly that I could barely hear him.

'I simply believe that he represents the best chance of keeping the peace.'

'One man, walking, is struck by lightning. He dies. That is an act of nature. Another man, working, spends his days on his knees, stuck like a buffalo in mud. He dies so that his eminent countrymen can eat truffles. That is an act of a man. That is an act of a filmmaker.'

'You make him sound even worse than the Americans.'

'At least the Americans are predicable. Their arrogance and their stupidity are transparent. But Sihanouk changes his mind ten times a day: who knows what he will eat for lunch, who knows whether he will want to kiss next Ho Chi Minh or Mr Johnson next.'

'But that's brilliant: he leaves his adversaries flat-footed.'

'You assume he's brilliant only because he can't possibly be as incompetent as he appears.'

We talked for another twenty minutes or so (he fled when I insisted on buying him a cognac). Kiry firmly rejected my pleas in favour of Sihanouk but he did so with impeccable politeness. I cannot say the same for one of his clandestine colleagues, who stepped out of a shadow a few nights later. 'I am offering you the opportunity to meet the future leaders of communist Kampuchea,' he said. 'Will you come?' When I declined, citing my belief in Sihanouk and his brand of anti-American neutrality, he turned nasty—'Are you a believer or aren't you? Are you a reporter or aren't you?'—and then he slipped back into shadow.

I did not link this snarling man with Kiry, whom I could not imagine camping in a jungle. But a year or so later, fearing Sihanouk's retribution for a rural uprising he probably played no part in, Kiry disappeared. I agreed with the prevailing wisdom: he was most likely dead. I wrote a glowing obituary, leaving unwritten my own assumption that Sihanouk's police had assassinated him: *He was a skilful Paris-trained economist, a courageous editor, and a hard-working leftist but moderate parliamentary reformer with a justly earned reputation for scrupulous honesty. Though tending towards shyness, he proved himself a genuine and compassionate man who was revered by ordinary Cambodians. While perhaps not destined to lead his country he would certainly have devoted his entire working life to improving the circumstances of his compatriots.* Luckily, my editor wouldn't publish it: 'He's minor. Dead, he's insignificant.'

No one murdered Kiry. He left Phnom Penh, buried in a cart of rubbish. He escaped to his comrades in the marquis where a strange madness afflicted him: he became one of the craftiest politicians of his time. He was—he is—a man of contradictions: a leader and a lackey; a dreamer of revolution and a pragmatist; a communist and a loner; a man revered by peasants who conspired to kill peasants; a diplomat at ease displaying xenophobia; a smiling public face and a grump; a stubborn survivor.

My friend, Bun Sody, was not, it turned out, a survivor. He too fled Phnom Penh in 1967, a week after Kiry. The way I heard it, Sody was shocked when his comrades emptied the cities and towns and isolated Cambodia from the world. He saw the impending disaster, I'm certain of it, because he believed that ideology should serve, not dictate to, the masses.

Sody resisted loudly and stubbornly in the early days of the regime. So his friends

took him for a walk in the jungle, along a narrow winding path, to resolve their differences. They arrived soon at a shallow hole, freshly dug. Sody knelt in it. They pummelled him with an iron bar and shovelled dirt over him. They went about the important business of the day.

The truth is that Sody died and Kiry, just like me, survived to old age and he now, just like me, talks about Stalin and Mao through gritted teeth, although he will not discuss Pol Pot—and he always hated Ho Chi Minh who, he was certain, wanted to steal Cambodia just like every other Vietnamese leader in history.

I once admired Kiry—did he fool me from the beginning or did he change? Now I wish I could identify a single act perpetrated against him to explain or excuse his life. I want to absolve him with a single headline—**Nhem Kiry declared permanently temporarily insane**—but that serves only to get me off the hook. To offer him mitigation—chiding Sihanouk for not supporting the reforms and for allowing Kiry's beating, or blaming Nixon for dropping all those bombs—is more palatable than to confront an intelligent, quietly-spoken, educated man, once known for compassion and piety and incorruptibility who nevertheless helped shape and uphold the methods and the philosophy of the Khmer Rouge.

Kiry's morality warped again and again to accommodate the big picture, however abominable. When I look over his shoulder—that's my imagination, filling in the gaps—I glimpse a man who survived, who sometimes prospered, who caused great harm even as he slowly failed, not as a brave guerrilla or a canny military strategist but as a diplomat and a spokesman. And he understood the importance of his role, especially after the world knew the carnage that the Khmer Rouge had inflicted on Cambodians. He knew what to say and how to say it, and he knew when to shut up and smile. As the public face of a secretive clique, Nhem Kiry served the needs of the world: his genius was not in subterfuge but in his precise understanding, as if he was the last piece of a jigsaw puzzle, of how he fitted into the world.

Filling in gaps—that's what I'm doing. I still write what I see, as every decent reporter should, but now that I am sedentary I write what I see in my mind and what I see in Kiry's mind, in Sihanouk's mind, in Cornell's mind, in the mind of anybody who strays into my world. The world is constructed by—no, the world *is*—a series of episodes, snapshots, clichés, slogans, triumphs and tragedies, headlines. Everybody has their own history of the world, their own personal history. Everybody has their own history of Cambodia, a few lines or a lifetime. Everybody has a history of Angola, of Korea, of Iraq. We imagine the extras, the

spaces between and the details within each episode...if we are not pre-occupied, or if we can be bothered, or if we are compelled to form an opinion.

Call it conjecture, call it lying, call it a gratuitous fantasy, call it an avoidance of what communism became, call it a subverting of my own principles of reporting, this fleshing out of headlines. I call it a final act of resistance to the hegemony of the West. Information is as thin as the sheets of newspaper it arrives on, as invisible as the waves that carry awful images onto our television screens. To our experience, to our self-interest, we add the daily news. We conjure the rest: our lives depend on it, our society functions because of it, and we carry on happily so long as we don't notice that we do it.

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An angry crowd today forced nominal Khmer Rouge leader, Mr Nhem Kiry, to flee Phnom Penh just hours after his arrival in Cambodia's capital city. Forced to shelter in his newly acquired villa, Kiry reportedly suffered a facial injury and bruising when locals stormed the building. His colleague, the Khmer Rouge defence spokesman, Son Sen, was reportedly unhurt. The two men are the Khmer Rouge representatives on the Supreme National Council, the power-sharing body set up under the auspices of the United Nations peace plan for Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge, who most independent experts agree is still controlled by the secretive Pol Pot, has promised to abide by the conditions of the peace plan and to participate in elections projected for 1993. Highly placed western sources tonight indicated the UN's plan could now be in jeopardy.

—the Guardian, *28 November 1991, p.3*

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Nhem Kiry's face was a marvel, all things considered. Through decades of struggle and revolution—frustration, pain, fear and mud, victory disguised as defeat, defeat disguised as victory—his soft cheeks, mellow camera smile, gentle eyes, and pale full lips remained great assets in his politician's armoury. He knew it, too, and had for years cared assiduously for his skin. If these days he overdid the moisturiser and the wrinkle cream, he liked to believe that he was compensating for the years of jungle living, where no man's complexion is unaffected. He did not care to acknowledge that he enjoyed the routine, the wiping and smudging, and especially the sudden coldness of the regenerating agents filling his pores. All the preening made him glow, and allowed a sweet eleven-year-old boy to live within the tired sixty-two-year-old veteran.

After years of experimentation, Kiry established that his skin responded best to Marie Weston's No.5 Replenishing Lotion. It wasn't greasy. Even better, it was not tested on animals and it was fully organic. He could, in an emergency, eat it. But at fifty U.S. dollars a tub, the extravagance bothered Kiry. Of course, he could have shovelled the precious goo from its sleek packaging into some battered old pouch. But that had never been his way. He valued his reputation for austerity, so every second week he exposed himself to the doubtful benefits of a cheap vitamin E moisturiser.

Kiry was not vain. Rather, he knew that his work, his life, was about diplomacy and negotiation but also about image. At news conferences and ceremonies, especially when he

shared the rostrum with foreign leaders, and during photo opportunities, he had to present himself as a member of the global club of political figures whose differences could be endured, massaged, maybe ultimately overcome, by the fact that they all dressed the same.

Still, spending big on Italian suits left him agitated in the change rooms of exclusive Bangkok boutiques and nauseous afterwards. He usually compensated by selecting a size too broad for his wiry frame, hoping to imply that he relied on hand-me-downs: the world is well populated by ex-politicians.

At state dinners he not only had to look pristine, he had to be demure. He maintained a strict protocol. Especially, he never waved his cutlery around while he talked—there was usually someone in his vicinity who feared that his fork might end up embedded in their sternum. He avoided sudden movement, animated chat, or eating with his mouth open: you can't leave anything to chance when you're selling a million and a half dead people.

Half way between Pochentong airport and Phnom Penh, ready to join the interim government, ready to do everything within his power to help the UN keep the peace, Kiry pushed his wrap-around Ray-Bans up his nose, fixed his smile in place, wound down the window of the Toyota all-terrain vehicle and placed himself on display. Beside him on the back seat his nervous bodyguards, led by the quietly agitated Ol, pleaded with him to sit back.

'It's too windy.'

'You'll get all dirty.'

'You'll mess your hair up.'

'There might be snipers.'

Ol, whose war medals were his enormous shoulders, dead eyes and malaria, made himself ten years old again. 'Please, please, can I sit by the window? I've never been to Phnom Penh.'

Kiry raised a hand. They fell silent and snooty, except for Ol, who transferred his exhortations to his front seat colleagues. First, he pleaded with Akor Sok, Kiry's chief aide, to intervene. Sok shrugged, though he agreed that in a perfect world the window should stay closed. He then wound down his own window.

Ol then pleaded with Nirom, the chain-smoking driver, to slow down. A second vehicle, full of bodyguards and luggage, was stuck behind a swarm of motorcycles and a truck

full of pigs. Nirom, who had trouble keeping his cigarettes in his mouth while he talked, did not reply or slow down.

A young woman swept past on a motorcycle, her long black hair flying behind her. She braked suddenly and drew beside the vehicle, causing a truck to swerve and the thirty or so passengers in its open tray to hug each other. The woman stared at Kiry. He removed his sunglasses and nodded at the chubby boy who was nestled between the woman's thighs and the bike's handlebars. The woman sniffed, loaded her mouth and spat. She hit him on the bridge of his nose. Allowing for the wind and the speed at which they were travelling, Kiry had to admit she had a marvellous aim.

Kiry continued smiling at the child. Only when Ol, with a growl, leaned across and closed the window did he shake his head and wipe himself with his handkerchief. Sok's face turned red and Nirom chomped his cigarette in two, but the boy's smile consoled Kiry. As a rule, children liked him. He didn't talk down to them, or ruffle their ears like Americans pat their offspring and their pets, or harangue them.

He tapped his breast and a piece of paper rustled. This was no important document, but a letter from an everyday American, Brendan H. Margaretti of Barron, Pennsylvania:

Dear sir,

My young son Jimmy saw a photo of you in our local newspaper. He was delighted because he thought you were the real life Mowgli (the Jungle Book is his favourite video). Anyway, I thought you might like to know that your picture is now stuck to his wall, next to a drawing of Mr Snuffalufucus, an imaginary creature much-loved in this country. But I have to tell you, I know a thing or two about how you've lived your life. I am going to keep your photograph, even after my boy grows tired of you, because when he is older I want him to recognise the face of evil.

Kiry had cut the letter in half and thrown the nasty piece away. He did not need CIA Nixonites dissecting his character. And only in a world overrun by UN committees would such correspondence have ever reached him.

But he kept the stirring portion of the letter in the top pocket of his suit, amongst his ball point pens. Often when he met a diplomat or a politician or a UN representative—and during the peace talks he felt as though he had met hundreds—he took it out and read it, always adding, with a shy but mischievous grin, and a raising of one eyebrow, 'Of course, we

Asians all look the same.' At the end of one unproductive meeting—those sitting opposite were so worried he was going to garrotte them with his briefing notes that he was tempted to comply, just to put them out of their misery—he alarmed them further by waving the letter about and suggesting that the UNHCR fund his book proposal, *Children's Letters to War Criminals*.

Kiry's entourage was chaperoned by a police truck. Kiry had demanded a quiet entrance but once they reached the outskirts of Phnom Penh the police driver took possession of the very centre of the bumpy road. Horn squealing and lights flashing, oncoming traffic scattering, they became a parade.

The traffic was a tangle now. The genesis of a crowd easily followed them on foot. Kiry continued to fill the window, defiantly and proudly, though the blue-black glass now hid him. He spied quizzical looks, a glimpse of anger, a placard or two. If that's the worst of it, he thought, I'll be happy.

They were stuck for ten minutes on Street 182 near the Russian Market. A policeman with a lopsided grin dealt with the traffic by waving vehicles from all directions into the centre, where delicate, intricate callisthenics became necessary. The staccato honking of horns rang out, less road rage than a special language of negotiated settlement. As they inched forward Kiry played tour guide to wide-eyed Ol.

'That way is Independence Monument—Sihanouk put it up twenty years too early, of course, but it's a nice enough piece of stone. Down there and turn right, the Royal Palace. I once lived back that way.'

He paused to watch a one-armed man skirt around vehicles and run to them. The man slammed his fist on the hood and kicked a headlight. As he sprinted back to the footpath and disappeared into the crowd, the policeman applauded.

Eventually they reached the villa, a pleasant whitewashed two-story rectangle. The waiting crowd numbered ten thousand. They held up signs—in Khmer, in English, in French—made from thin bed sheets or flattened cardboard boxes: 'Khmer Rouge Killers,' 'Nhem Kiry Criminal,' 'Not Forgiven.' They chanted, 'Murderers, murderers, murderers.' They shook their fists. Some of them fell on their knees and howled. They jostled each other and pushed against the shabbily erected wooden barricade.

The crowd closed in; the police fell back. Kiry's gaze floated amongst the sea of young

men but he focused on an old woman with a bad hip and orange teeth. She limped forward, clambered onto the bonnet and stared down Nirom, who took solace in a fresh cigarette. She wrapped her arms and legs around the bull bar. The purpose of her particular protest was unclear even to her many admirers, who cheered her anyway.

Kiry put his hand on Nirom's shoulder and said, 'Whatever you do, don't run over her.'

Eventually, someone from the crowd—a hospital orderly who as a boy had fought for the Khmer Rouge against the Vietnamese, and as a youth for the Vietnamese against the Khmer Rouge—took hold of the woman's shoulders. It took a moment to extricate her: she had quickly ceased being an active protestor and had become a passive prisoner of her own intricate knots.

Finally, they passed through a narrow gap in the barricade. Nirom butted his cigarette on the dashboard—it was a UN-owned vehicle—and manoeuvred so that Kiry could step straight from his seat to the villa's front door. As they alighted, Kiry tried to sneak a glance at the crowd. As staged events went, he thought, these actors had passion. Ol pushed him inside. Sok followed close behind, leaving Nirom and the bodyguards to gather the baggage and evade flying stones.

Kiry was tired. He wanted to lie down before the reception, perhaps even snooze. He wanted to sit quietly with a gin and tonic and revise his speech, or plan what he might say to the media. He needed to ring his wife and tell her that he was really here. He wanted to read the newspapers or even a few pages of that Kissinger biography. He desperately wanted to wash his silver hair.

He greeted Son Sen, the Khmer Rouge's defence minister, who had quietly entered Phnom Penh a few days earlier. They shared a few words, a private moment, surrounded by lesser beings who contrived not to listen. Kiry nodded at the various aides and the villa staff who stood in a line trying to look cheerful. He shook hands with a couple of French photojournalists, who had been waiting since dawn to record this moment. He inspected the villa, pronouncing it pleasant, comfortable and, barring the thousands outside, perfectly acceptable. He briefly posed for a photograph with Son Sen, the two colleagues cajoling wary smiles out of each other.

As he began to climb the stairs, tailed by Sok and his bodyguards, a car battery came

through a window, shattering the glass into thousands of diamonds. He turned and watched the battery bounce end on end until a table leg stopped its progress.

'I think that's ours,' Nirom said.

Kiry sighed. 'I'm going to rest. Somebody sort this out.'

Outside, the crowd surged forward. The barricade buckled. They came at it again. The barricade did not merely collapse, it exploded, and some in the crowd armed themselves with its shattered remains. They ran to the villa, peering through the windows and beating on the walls.

Inside, Kiry unlaced his shoes. The leather was still new and hard; he feared that his overgrown toenails might blacken and drop off. He stretched out on a bed. Sok brought him a damp cloth to cover his face.

Outside, the Prime Minister, Hun Sen, arrived in a bullet-proof limousine. He made his way to the first floor balcony of the villa across the street. 'Calm down. Go home,' he yelled into a megaphone. 'There is no use in killing them now. Go home. Go home. Go home and remember not to vote for them.'

'He got here quick,' Sok said. 'What was he doing, waiting around the corner?'

'Oh well.'

'He's responsible for this. He planned this.'

'Probably.'

'Why are you so calm?'

'All this is to be expected.' Kiry sat up. 'Do you have a comb?'

As Kiry sculled water straight from a jug, lime slices bouncing on the surface, the crowd smashed the door of the villa and spilled inside, or began climbing the outside stairs. The police maintained order on the other side of the street. Their uncertain leader, unwilling to fight the people, sought guidance from a walkie-talkie. From above, Hun Sen pleaded, 'Please be calm. Please control yourself.'

Some of the rioters attacked the pyramid of suitcases sitting near the door. They ripped them open and flung clothes and documents and passports around. Some of them slashed the furniture, threw it against walls, carried it outside. One man swung on a chandelier. When it broke from the ceiling, landing on him and leaving tiny cuts on his body, he lay on the Indian rug roaring. He then carried the metal skeleton outside, holding it above

his head like a trophy, bleeding triumphantly.

Some of the rioters ran up the stairs, looking for Kiry. When they burst into his room he was waiting on a sofa, arms folded in his lap, legs crossed at the ankles, his face arranged at its most serene.

'Hello,' he ventured, before his bodyguards formed a shield in front of him. The French photographers, trying to locate a panoramic view, instead found themselves book-ending Kiry's line of defence, staring down an angry mob.

The protesters so tightly packed the small room that their attack on Kiry seemed to occur in slow motion. First, they dealt with the bodyguards. Someone shoved Ol against a wall. He hit his head on the sharp edge of a windowsill and slid to the ground with a groan. The other bodyguards fell down or became part of the throng, where they flailed about.

The attackers momentarily froze with indecision, stunned by the ease of their raid and intimidated by the reputation of the man who gazed at them demurely. Then one man, a road worker, stepped forward. Kiry straightened, still believing the whole event was for show. He smiled but it was a gloating smile, as if at that very moment he had killed the man's wife and children.

He was so surprised when the road worker's crowbar connected with his temple, opening a cut that ran above his eye, that he felt no pain. He slumped in the armchair, confused, and in the moment of stunned peace that followed he sought to re-assess his situation and re-arrange his face.

He stopped considering the implications for the peace process, or the wording of his letter of complaint, or the propaganda possibilities. He took note instead of the blood dripping off the end of his nose, and the loathing in the man's face as he took aim to strike again. His façade cracked and, trying to stand, he collapsed. He grabbed the ankle of one of the photographers, looked up at her and said, 'Don't let them kill me.' She nodded and patted his shoulder, but not before she snapped the photograph that later adorned page three of *Le Monde*: Nhem Kiry as if dug from dirty ice, eyes glassy, skin pallid, deep lines of naked fear running all over his face.

The road worker swung again but missed. Kiry bounced on his buttocks and scrambled on all fours into a wardrobe. Sok dived in after him, making it a tight squeeze, and pulled the door closed.

'Kill him,' someone cried, and then the chant commenced, down the stairs and into the street. 'Kill him, kill him, kill him.'

They ripped the wardrobe doors from their hinges and dragged Kiry into the middle of the room. One man pulled a reading lamp from a power point and cut its electricity cord free. He threw it over the ceiling fan and fashioned a crude noose.

Kiry's bodyguards fought back. Ol pushed Kiry into the bathroom, where the photographer vacated a chair for him. Government soldiers, in riot gear and now armed with instructions that Nhem Kiry must not die, rushed the stairs. They forced those engaged in the lynching down the staircase and into the street, where the crowd lauded them and Hun Sen counselled, 'There is a better way.'

Blood flowed from the cut on Kiry's head. 'It looks worse than it is,' he assured Sok. Bruises already rose from his elbow, his buttocks, his side. His shirt was ripped and bloody. His wristwatch was cracked. Ol, concussed and confused, berated Nirom for driving into a tree. The other bodyguards nursed minor wounds. One of the photographers reported a dislocated finger.

The crowd fuelled a bonfire with the villa's furniture, the paintings from the walls, the long table from the kitchen, the dried flower arrangements, the shredded luggage. They burnt Kiry's passport. They burnt his toiletries—Marie Weston's No.5 Replenishing Lotion bubbled and spat as its container melted. They burnt his ripped jacket and, within, Brendan H. Margaretti's letter. They burnt his briefcase, including his speech: *I cannot express how very happy I am to be here at the beginning of a new peaceful era for our country. I hope to be here for many years to come. I pledge to work with all parties who truly have the interests of the Cambodian people in their hearts.*

One by one, Kiry and his entourage climbed from the balcony down the stairs and into an armoured personnel carrier. As Kiry descended, Ol stood staring up with his arms outstretched to catch him should he fall...and gallantly fainted.

~*~

1. Respect for truth and for the right of the public to truth is the first duty of the journalist.

2. In pursuance of this duty, the journalist shall at all times defend the principles of freedom in the honest collection and publication of news, and of the right of fair comment and criticism.

3. The journalist shall report only in accordance with facts of which he/she knows the origin. The journalist shall not suppress essential information or falsify documents.

—from the International Federation of Journalists Declaration of Principles on the Conduct of Journalists

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Filling in gaps is different to being a reporter. Even a partisan reporter. What power, to be inside rooms I'll never enter, to witness events I didn't see, to track the shifting moods and motivations of people from within their minds. Want to give it a try? No need to dim the lights, burn incense or play mood music, though if you insist I recommend that awful Enya woman they pump through the air-conditioning system here as an anaesthetic. Look at the photograph on the front page of today's *Advertiser*: a disgraced businessman sprints from the Supreme Court to his car. If you know that he's fleeing out of shame—not because he's late for a dental appointment, or because he's training for a marathon, or because he's sick of standing still for all those photographers—then you already know how to fill in gaps.

I fully intended to be in Phnom Penh to witness Nhem Kiry's return to legitimacy in 1991 but my body defeated me. So I don't truthfully know what Kiry saw from his car on the way from the airport. For all I know he arrived on a donkey. I doubt that anybody, not even a local beauty with flowing black hair, spat on him. And don't bother to look for Brendan H. Margaretti in the Pennsylvania phone book, though you might look up Margaret Baker—or was her name Meredith?—who I once spent a week with in Singapore and who, I somehow recall, grew up in a town near Philadelphia (she must have been a fabulous kisser for I dimly recall promising to go and meet her family).

I don't know if Ol, Kiry's loyal bodyguard, sustained a concussion in the melee. Maybe he twisted his ankle. I'm unsure if Kiry said, 'Don't let them kill me,' to the French photographer. Maybe he said, 'Do something, you stupid woman.' Or maybe fear reduced him to cowering silence. The man who struck Kiry could have been a road worker but he could have been a pastry chef or a fisherman or an itinerant.

As for Akor Sok, Kiry's aide, maybe he was there and maybe he wasn't. I met Sok and others like him in Beijing in the early 1970s when I was raising Prince Sihanouk's spirits after the coup. Sok accompanied Ieng Sary from the Cambodian liberated zone. They came, they said, to pay their respects to Sihanouk, their partner in the struggle against the common enemy, General Lon Nol (traitor to his people, lunatic, American lackey). Actually, they came to tell Sihanouk what to say in his speeches. And although they needed him they came to insult him because it gave them pleasure.

Sok was a likeable enough young fellow. He plied me with questions about the Korean War and about kangaroos. He told me about a mythical Cambodian creature called the kouprey. 'It's real,' he insisted. 'My father had a skull.' In return, he was delighted when I described an Australian bunyip, a mythical creature that lives in waterholes.

Did Akor Sok have a wife and family? Did he fight and kill for the revolution? Was he proud of the Khmer Rouge's record? I do know that in Beijing in 1971 he looked across the crowded room at Sihanouk with violence in his eyes and that he spent the twenty-five years standing several steps behind Nhem Kiry, the man who taught him geography at school.

***

At the moment when the road worker split Kiry's head open with an iron bar I sat on a hard plastic seat in Saigon airport, waiting for a boarding call to Kuala Lumpur, where I was to connect with a flight from England to Australia. My side hurt, a dull pain that I was becoming accustomed to, but the knot in my stomach was not a physical complaint: it reflected my body's alarm at my imminent return to Australia, twenty years after my last visit. This time I could not set off firecrackers, watch the smoke and flames and then flee to Britain or France. This time I would have to stay, no matter who I offended.

A week earlier, in the Núi Café, Saigon, life was still fine. I sat at my favourite table, beside a wall of tatty-spined French and English paperbacks, near a window that allowed me to make use of the sunlight before it faded into diamonds of red leather stitched to the roof. A fat manuscript sat in front of me. Apart from chronicling the new Vietnam, and presenting the Vietnamese view of the UN peace plan for Cambodia (not that anyone, even the Russians, believed or cared what Hanoi said), I was finishing a biography of Ho Chi Minh. I had access to a virgin cache of papers from the Hanoi archives but since Ho and I had enjoyed so many long and diverse conversations my book was mostly a personal account.

I'd conceived the book when I realised that Ho was drowning by association in communism's mire. But I was making poor progress. The marketplace was aloof. None of my old publishers wanted to print it (several didn't even bother to reply). I was a Cold War relic. I was preaching to myself, a pointless exercise bound to succeed.

I suspected I might better revive Ho's reputation by writing a human-interest profile for a glossy magazine: **Ho Chi Minh: the man behind the legend**, or something equally inane: *Ho Chi Minh was attractive to women and admired by men. North Vietnam's victory lay in his charisma, his good looks and his high moral principles. If he was coming of age now, he might still be a revolutionary. He certainly would have been a political figure. But he might have been a jazz vocalist; or an actor, a Confucian Charlie Chaplain; or an Olympic boxer with a crisp right jab, fast feet and a sharp tongue.* Another two thousand words, a couple of touched-up pictures, one of him and one of his Hanoi garden, and *Woman's Weekly* was bound to publish it.

Hieu brought me a second pot of tea. 'Later you want beer, Ted?' he asked me in English.

'Yes, of course.'

'I have very excellent news for you. I have cleaned the basement. I have found beer especially for you: two bottles of Victoria Bitter.'

'VB? You've got VB?'

'This is your national beer?'

'Close enough. Bring them over, I want them.'

'You are very busy. You want to finish your working first?'

'Bring them now.'

'But Ted, they are not cold. I put ice with them, yes?'

'No!'

'My ice is clean, very clean, from a good factory. We collect it ourselves, no worries, ha ha. You have my ice many times; you don't get sick, not once even.'

'Never—never—serve beer with ice. My father taught me that when I was fourteen years old.'

'Surely that is a personal opinion. Surely it is a matter of taste.'

'Don't get all high and mighty with me, mate, it's a fundamental truth. I've told you

this before, and well you know it.'

'Please, Ted, please let me ice them.'

'You can put them in an ice bucket. That'll cool them nicely.'

'No ice bucket.'

'Why not?'

'Waste ice, too much ice.'

'You can still use it afterwards.'

'Will melt. Ice ix-pen-hive. I poor very poor. You not understand. You fat rich carpetelism man from Aust-raa-lee.' A smile broke onto Hieu's face, quickly suppressed. 'Ice, yes I think so.'

'I'll buy you some more ice.'

'Burr-ket for clean all onto floor. Burr-ket dir-tee.'

'Your English is deteriorating,' I remarked in Vietnamese.

Hieu doubled over, beat his hand on his knee, and exploded with laughter. 'Me no underhand you, Mister Aust-raa-lee, me no underhand YOU.'

The door opened, admitting a beautiful woman in a dress of blue sequins. I fleetingly wondered how she possibly squeezed into the dress—and, less fleetingly, what callisthenics she engaged in to extricate herself. Hieu stopped teasing me, and in respectful silence watched me watching the woman. At least I think he was showing respect. He might have been checking to see if I was going to dribble on his tablecloth. Again.

I like to think that the woman's exquisite curves caused the dizziness that suddenly overcame me. My head sagged between my knees and I vomited on my sandals. My knee knocked the table and warm tea ran into my lap. I closed my eyes, thereby avoiding the spectacle of an unconscious man slowly sliding off a chair.

I revived when Hieu doused me with ice water. I lay listening as they debated whether to lie me on my side or my back, to massage my neck or to slap my face. I felt like a beached whale waiting to be rolled back out to sea. When the argument became heated, and when they made preparations to douse me again, I opened my eyes and told everyone to be quiet. I sat on the ground for a few minutes, fanning myself with the introduction of my Ho manuscript, disappointed that the beautiful woman, now nowhere to be seen, had not rushed forward to cradle me in her arms. Perhaps she'd been late for school.

I rinsed my mouth with VB. It was hot, and tasted like it had been in Hieu's basement since the time of the French. Still, it was heavenly. Hieu wheeled his vintage Vesper out from the kitchen. I rode in the middle, Hieu's son perched behind me to stop me from falling off. We flirted with Saigon's traffic, reaching out to touch bikes and cars and trucks and people and then swerving, suddenly and frequently. Somehow, we arrived at my doctor's rooms unscathed. Hieu sent me inside with smiles and consoling thoughts but I could see that he was frantically worried that my weight had cracked the Vesper's axle.

***

Hanh Nguyen ran a general practice servicing foreigners and mid-level government officials. We had first met in a Viet Cong sanctuary in 1966. Twenty-six years old then, she was already a widow, and—though she didn't yet know it—three of her four siblings were dead. I was unconcerned by my paltry wounds but petrified by the child with the scalpel and the matter-of-fact bedside manner. She gruffly informed me, in exemplary Russian, that she had no drugs to spare me. She cleaned my leg of mud and several tiny pieces of shrapnel, and dressed the abrasions I'd mostly got from crawling through tunnels designed for humans half my size.

A few hours later, a crowd of wounded arrived. I watched her dig for bullets and seal holes and remove limbs and drag bodies away. I wrote about her in the book I'm proudest of, **Living with the Patriot Vietnamese**: *To say she works in tough conditions is an understatement. Somehow, perhaps through willpower alone, she maintains a sense of sterilisation, even though her operating theatre is in a swamp. She works without pause for several hours. Most of her face is hidden behind a mud-spotted surgical mask, so I watch her eyes. I have never seen such resolve. During an amputation, in the fifteen minutes that she works on the brave youth before he bleeds out, she doesn't blink once. She saves more patients than she loses, though she impassively informs me that some of the survivors will die in the coming days. She tells me this after she has taken her mask off and while I am still trying to comprehend how someone who has been through such a day can look so young.*

Over the years we had emptied many bottles of vodka together but this day Hanh didn't even offer me a drink before she cut me open with questions. When I protested—'I don't feel *that* bad'—she handed me a mirror and I stared, shocked, at my grey skin and my bulbous, bloodshot eyes.

'Were you planning to tell anybody? Or were you going to mention in your will that you weren't feeling too well?'

'I'm telling you now, aren't I?'

She stuck thermometers into me like acupuncture needles. She stared at my tongue for a very long time: 'I'm reading your fortune, shut up and let me do it.' She lay me on my back and massaged my side until I laughed so hard she worried I would crack a rib. She swabbed my cheek, stole blood, pointed an arrowhead light into my ear canals: 'Disgusting.' She weighed my testicles, one in each hand: 'Take that smirk off your face.' She made me touch my toes and then followed me as I floated around the room, ready to grab me should I faint.

I gave vague answers to her questions, tip-toeing around the truth, but I was resigned to bad news or I'd have found a stranger to examine me.

'So, what's wrong with me? It's napalm, isn't it?'

'No.'

'It's napalm: it must be, I know it is.'

'Yes, all right, it's napalm. Are you happy now?'

'Just promise me one thing: when I die make sure you write "American imperialism" on my death certificate.' She didn't smile. 'So come on then: what's wrong with me?'

'Lots of things. You're old, for one thing. You're wearing out.'

'You're not so young yourself.'

'I act my age.'

'Poor you.'

'Ted, I can't really say, not yet. You need better tests than I can give you here.'

'But it's nothing terminal, right? I'm flying to Phnom Penh on Tuesday. That's okay, isn't it?'

'No.'

'I've got to go. I've got a contract, at least I've been promised one, it's —'

'You're going to have to stop.'

'Stop? Stop what?'

'Everything. No more travel. No more wars, Ted. It's time you took life more quietly. Maybe it's time you went home.'

I stared at her. 'Home?'

'And no drinking.'

'Home? What do you mean, home? I mean...Where, go where?'

'Wherever you want. Wherever you think is best. Moscow. England. France, maybe. Australia.'

'Australia? Don't be bloody stupid.'

Hanh sat down and stared at the floor between my feet. When she looked up she had tears in her eyes. She opened her mouth but still a long moment passed before she spoke. I thought she was going to tell me that I was about to die.

'If I could get out of here, just like that,' she said softly. 'If I could pack a bag and leave and never come back, I'd be gone before dark.'

I couldn't believe she was thinking this way. I still can't believe it.

~*~

Vietnam is not a domino falling. It is a single seed, lovingly tended, carefully watered, protected in its infancy from wind and rain and zealous gardeners, now a healthy shrub sprouting buds ready to burst into flower. The fact is, since the middle of 1968 the military and political strategies of the American imperialists have been in practical disarray. This comes as no surprise to those of us watching events and personalities closely, for these strategies have been enacted by politicians and diplomats living in their own private moral quagmires. The Americans, of course, claim the situation is far different. They try to convince us that the communists will not recover from the disaster of the Tet Offensive and that in the north they are pleading, 'Please, Honourable Mr Nixon, no more bombs.' This doesn't explain why they dragged General Westmoreland into early retirement by his bootlaces. 'Victory is mine,' poor Westie apparently wailed. 'Just give me another week or another year, maybe a decade, give me more bombs, heavier bombs, and another 100,000 troops, and victory will surely be mine, er, ours.'

—from Edward Whittlemore, America Won't Win, *1971*

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In the elevator of the United Nations, passing the twenty-eighth floor, an American leaned close, his peppermint breath all about, and said in a firm voice, 'Mr Edward Whittlemore?'

'That depends.'

'On what?'

'On what you want him for.'

'Yes, please excuse me. My name is Larry Phillips. I am an aide of Dr Henry Kissinger, the US National Security Advisor.'

'Thank you, I know who he is.'

'Excellent. Dr Kissinger would be delighted if you would join him for lunch tomorrow. He understands that you have no pressing engagements.'

'Does he indeed?'

'He means no offence. He knows that you are a busy man. *Very* busy. But he would be delighted if you could fit him in to your schedule. Will you meet him?'

'Here?'

'No, I should have made that clear. He would like to see you in Washington. Will you go?'

'I don't believe I can.'

'No?'

'It's nothing personal, of course—'

'Of course.'

'But given that Mr Kissinger is so well informed about my movements he must also know that my visa stipulates that I stay within thirty miles of the UN building.'

'Ah yes. That.'

'It's very disappointing, of course. I was so looking forward to visiting Las Vegas. I understand that the showgirls dressed in neon lights are a sight to behold. And on top of that, now to miss the chance to meet the National Security Advisor.'

The doors opened. The speechwriter to the President of Zambia and an aide to the UN Ambassador to Sri Lanka entered the lift. I greeted them effusively while my new friend, showing admirable sensitivity for an American, retreated and hung his head. Five floors later, when we were alone again, he perked up and continued talking as if we had never been interrupted.

'*Dr* Kissinger feels certain that if you were to catch the 7:15 train to Washington that no adverse consequences regarding your visa would ensue.'

'7:15 in the morning?'

'Will you go?'

'Would he consider sending a car for me? And a driver?'

'Dr Kissinger feels it would be an excellent opportunity for you to see some of our great land. And indeed to gain some insight into the travelling habits of everyday citizens.'

His face betrayed no hint of humour. I caught the 7.15 train but I'm no tourist. I slept the whole way.

***

'I hate formalities. I'm going to call you Henry.'

'Welcome to the White House. And thank you for coming.'

'I'll eat with anybody if it's free.'

'Ha! You should be a diplomat.'

I'd expected him to be more like a committee than a single man. I imagined he, they, would encircle and interrogate me: 'Do you want Claret or Riesling?' 'Do you prefer your

bread rolls cold or at room temperature?' 'Do you think that Le Duc Tho is the best person to negotiate for the North Vietnamese?' 'Do you honestly believe that there is any way other than the American way?'

But up close Kissinger resembled a normal human being. When he smiled, which he did often, he exposed slightly crooked teeth while betraying no sign that this acknowledgement of imperfection bothered him. His eyes were creased not by tension or sarcasm but by playful intelligence. I'm ashamed to say that I rather liked him.

'I thought we might chat for a while before lunch,' he waved me to an armchair. 'Do you agree?'

'All right.'

'You must allow me to apologise for the quality of the coffee. It's true what they say.'

'They?'

'American coffee is the worst in the civilised world.'

'Surely you're in a position to do something about that.'

'*Me*? What can I do about entrenched, historical mediocrity?'

'The Vietnamese make fine coffee.'

'Indeed.'

'Actually, they do many things well.'

'Yes I agree. It's a pity that they—let me clarify, it's a pity that some of them—say one thing when they mean another. It makes it hard to praise them for all those things they do well. Such as coffee.' He paused and said, 'You understand that this is a private conversation not an interview?'

'I assumed as much. I will not tell anybody that I was here.'

'Well, I certainly require that you don't write about it. But you should also feel free to recount our conversation to any third party that you see fit.'

'Did you have any particular third party in mind? I'm not sure I'm privy to whatever inference you're making. Remember, I'm no diplomat.'

'No?' he laughed. 'Well, how about I put it like this: you can tell anybody you deem it worth telling that I am open to the possibility of talks.'

'The possibility of *further* talks, you mean?'

'Quite so.' He sipped his coffee and grimaced.

'Then I must tell you that I have a great deal less influence than you appear to think. I'm simply a reporter who happens to go to the North Vietnamese briefings instead of yours.'

'Oh come now, you're too modest. Simply a reporter? I read you all the time. You have access at the highest levels.'

'That's true: I'm here, aren't I.'

'Do you know the problem with the Vietnamese? I've been giving this a lot of thought.'

'The North Vietnamese, you mean?'

'Quite so. The problem with the *North* Vietnamese,' he swept his arm in such a way that he implicated me, 'is that they are impatient. They are extreme. They want everything all at once. They want the south handed to them as if it was theirs by right.'

'Many people—most people—agree that it *is* theirs by right.'

'But the Viet Minh won't concede a thing. And the way they talk: "You must do it this way," and, "We expect this of you." That is not the appropriate language to use with a great power such as the United States of America. They can understand that, can't they? Why not say, "We prefer...", or, "Would you possibly consider...", or—'

'How about, "With your permission?"'

Kissinger's eyes narrowed—I know, I wouldn't have thought it possible either—and then he leaned back and laughed. 'That's the sort of thing. But really, all we want is a fair settlement. We will not capitulate, no matter how many hippies march, because we want a real peace for all the people of Indochina including those who have put their trust in us.'

'What about Prince Sihanouk? Would you be prepared to meet him also?'

'Such a stock-standard question, Ted, you disappoint me. Very well, let's get our little press conference over and done with so we can enjoy our lunch: yes, under certain circumstances, of course I will meet Sihanouk.'

'You know your problem, don't you? You've picked a loser in Lon Nol. And now you're stuck with him.'

'We didn't pick Lon Nol. We were shocked by the coup that deposed Sihanouk and we were surprised to be confronted with the reality of the Nol Lon administration. We have dealt with him because we had no other choice.'

'Oh come on, don't give me the official line. They must be the most corrupt bunch of

cronies you've ever encountered.'

'Obviously I am unable to respond to such a provocative statement.' He was enjoying himself thoroughly.

'Did you know that Lon Nol determines policy by poking about in the stomachs of chickens?'

'As long as he eats the chickens afterwards it's no concern of mine.'

'He probably cuts their heads off, calls them ducks and sells them to the army at an inflated price.'

'But, really, the Vietnamese have left us with no choice. They took the war to Cambodia, after all: the Viet Cong sanctuaries, the arms shipments through Sihanoukville. We merely responded.'

'How very convenient.'

'Not at all. Many of our soldiers, our young men, died as a direct result. And Sihanouk encouraged the Vietnamese. One cannot be neutral merely by claiming neutrality; one must behave as a neutral. Besides, the United States is now obliged—let me clarify, we oblige ourselves—to do what we can to help the innocent people of Cambodia. They depend on us now more than ever. They have asked for our help. We must render it.'

'And that's just how you like it. You get to help out and wage war simultaneously. What could be better?'

'We could probably work with Sihanouk in the unlikely event that it proves necessary. But we cannot countenance a dialogue while he insists on this alliance with the communists. The United States of America expects a gesture from Sihanouk. Something that indicates he's trustworthy.'

'The Cambodian people trust him.'

'Sihanouk is no better than your Vietnamese. He refuses to negotiate with Lon Nol—'

'You surely understand that Lon Nol is not his favourite person. He did sentence Sihanouk to death, after all.'

'Sihanouk simply places many unacceptable conditions on talks so that he will not have to engage in them. Just like your Vietnamese friends—'

'Who you are happy to talk to.'

'Sihanouk's conditions are ridiculous and then he blames me for my intransigence.

The nerve. Does he really want a negotiated settlement? Or is he hiding behind his Leninist friends in the jungle? Is he sure he can control the Khmer Rouge?'

'You trampled all over Cambodia's neutrality and you—'

'Oh, come now, Ted, so simplistic. Don't be a journalist. Don't let's have a conversation that can be reduced to half a column.'

'Fair enough but let me finish. You trampled all over Cambodia's neutrality, you bombed neutral territory, and then you—'

'I hope you like fish.'

'And then you had the CIA help Lon Nol to get rid of Sihanouk.'

'We're having fish for lunch. If that's suitable for you.'

'Boneless?'

'Boneless. Spineless. Poached in white wine, I believe. Now, I don't want to argue, Ted, we can do that any old time and we certainly don't need to be in the same room. Let's talk.'

'I don't speak for anybody, you know, other than me. I hope you didn't bring me here thinking I have some authority just because you read it in some CIA gossip column.'

'Do you know what I want? Do you know what I hoped for when I asked you here?'

'Illumination?'

'Yes, of course, ha ha. But the other thing I wanted—I'm still hoping for it, call me a dreamer—is that you might listen to my viewpoint rather than dismiss me based on your preconceptions. Do you know your problem? Please, it's nothing personal but you have the same disease as all our own journalists who are sympathetic to the anti-war movement. You're all so caught up in the big picture—understanding the geopolitics or, rather, forcing the geopolitics to line up with your preconceptions—that it never occurs to you that I mean what I say. And President Nixon means what he says.'

'How can he? He doesn't understand what he says.'

'Now, now. Don't go falling for your own propaganda. All I'm suggesting is that you consider the possibility that we are interested in pursuing a moral and honourable outcome in Vietnam and that what we say in public is exactly what we mean. We are the strongest two anti-war Americans you will ever find. More coffee?'

'You're kidding, right? My tongue is already damaged irreparably.'

'Taste buds recover remarkably quickly. Trust me, I know from experience. But would you prefer a glass of beer?'

'What, now? It's 11.15 a.m.'

'We both know there's barely any alcohol in a Budweiser.'

'All right, then. I'll have one.'

'Good. I'll join you.'

While we waited he talked about basketball: 'It's like war—if only there was some way to only play the last thirty seconds.'

'The sponsors would never allow it,' I said.

Then he took a call from a *New York Times* reporter, offering a critical yet vaguely sympathetic comment on a group of peace marchers who were clogging the streets around a university in some mid-sized city. Only when the beer came did he settle down to continue our discussion.

'My point is quite simple. What are the North Vietnamese doing most successfully at present?'

'Destroying you on the battlefield.'

'No, Ted, no. Certainly they have their little victories, and I'm sure they seem marvellous if you're there to witness them. But no. Their greatest success is in their campaign to influence American domestic opinion. I know you won't tell me who's masterminding it but—'

'It's not me, if that's what you're suggesting. I pride myself as having never been in charge of anything in my life.'

'Whoever is in control is brilliant but desperately misguided. These are the very people who need to understand that we really are genuine.'

'You want them to like you?'

'No, no, don't be a simpleton. They are tying me up. They are asking me to think like a member of the public, that is, in the absolutes of right and wrong. But I will never work like that unless I am willing to fail the American people, politically and morally. I do not have the luxury of idealism or of conforming to a theoretical right and wrong. But your friends, by influencing my public against me, make me respond as if I was a member of the public. And then they wonder why there's no flexibility in our negotiations.'

'Why tell me this?'

'Come now, Ted. We can talk freely here. You're involved in an advisory capacity in the Viet Minh's efforts to undermine the American people's support for a fair settlement.'

'What could I possibly know about American domestic politics? It's been twenty years since I lived in Australia.'

~*~

On the causeway that led to Angkor Wat, on a sunny afternoon in 1973, Nhem Kiry and Prince Norodom Sihanouk waited while Akor Sok crouched beside a stone lion and with dusty hands inserted a new roll of film into his camera. A small crowd of thirty or so watched: Princess Monique and her attendants, several smooth-faced soldiers and those members of the leadership needed for that day's photographs: Bun Sody, Hu Nim and the famous sisters, Khieu Phonnary and Khieu Thirith.

Kiry was dressed in plain black cotton, a single ballpoint pen poking out of his breast pocket. His hair was freshly cut and combed back. He had shaved meticulously with a razor and a tin cup of water. After six years in the Liberated Zone he looked clean and healthy although he was thinner than the day he had fled Phnom Penh.

Sihanouk's rotund tummy pushed against his olive green shirt. He would have preferred more thoughtfully cut clothes. Actually he would have preferred to avoid such an arduous trip but he had to show the world that these rebels loved him.

'Everybody is very delighted,' Ieng Sary had whispered to Son Sen when Sihanouk had risen to speak at his welcoming banquet, ten days earlier, 'that His Majesty is finally pregnant. He has dreamed of being a mother for so long.'

Son Sen had nearly choked with laughter when Sihanouk began his speech: 'Thank you, my dearest friends, for facilitating this opportunity for me to visit the Liberated Zone. You have granted Sihanouk his most ardent wish: to again be amongst his darling children. I am so emotional I can barely speak.'

Sihanouk had heard them sniggering. 'I don't like to criticise,' he had whispered to Monique when they were alone later, 'but I don't think they really listened to me.'

'You don't like to criticise or you don't dare?' Monique had said.

'Some of them are so rude. Ieng Sary doesn't even pretend to respect me.'

'At least we know what he thinks of us. Nhem Kiry feigns love but look at his eyes: he hates you more deeply than any of the others.'

'Don't worry, my love. I know they believe that they are using me for their own purposes but I am wily. They underestimate me, especially Ieng Sary: he thinks I am an idiot but I am stronger than he knows. And who do the people love most, Nhem Kiry or Sihanouk? Kiry is weak. When I need to I will send him down the river.'

Sihanouk turned and faced Angkor Wat. He was bored and dehydrated. His new

sandals, presented to him by a youthful fighter, rubbed against his fleshy feet. A cheerful, vacant figure called Solath Sar, who seemed to hang like a loose thread from the hem of the leadership group, told Sihanouk that the sandals were hand-made from the wheels of a downed American spy plane. Sihanouk knew machine stitching when he saw it but he didn't bother to contradict the man who later renamed himself Pol Pot.

'To live so exposed to the elements, for such a long time,' Sihanouk said to Kiry as they waited for Sok to take their photograph. 'I admire your dedication.'

'I confess it is difficult sometimes. Occasionally I have a minor digestive complaint. Sometimes I contract a mild fever. But I am feeling rather sprightly given that—if you believe Lon Nol's propaganda—I've been dead for six years. In any case, dead or alive, it is an honour to serve you, Your Majesty.'

Sihanouk laughed. 'Six years, ha ha ha, dead for six years, tee hee; and what's more, it was *I* who supposedly killed you. What a terrible job I did of disposing of the body, tee hee hee.' He paused and then, perhaps under the impression that someone was on hand to record him, began an impromptu speech. 'It is three years since the ultra-traitor Lon Nol stole my country from me. Three years, three years: I love my friends in Beijing but I only can eat so many egg rolls in one lifetime. Lon Nol eats my suckling pig in my Royal Palace and he claims that he runs Cambodia when everybody knows that he follows Mr Kissinger's instructions. Anyway, how can Lon Nol take himself seriously when Sihanouk stands at Angkor Wat unmolested and he does not even know Sihanouk is in Cambodia. And where better in the whole Liberated Zone for Sihanouk to remind himself of the virtues of his people, all his little children, than by standing before the monument that proves what can be achieved when a great leader and a kingdom full of workers come together. What better place, what better person than—'

'I had begun to tell you, Your Majesty, about the many serious offences committed in the Liberated Zone by our Vietnamese brothers.'

'Yes, these stories upset me,' Sihanouk said. 'I am eager to hear more.'

'They go into our villages,' Kiry said, 'and they take whatever they want even after the peasants give them what they can because we have asked them, politely and humbly, to do so. They take more than they should: rice and chickens, buffalo, fruit. These are goods that our own soldiers require. And they take everything else, for no good reason: carts, clothes,

bicycles, anything they want.'

'Brother Son Sen, Sister Khieu Thirith, have told me this also.'

'And if the villagers complain, they rape the women and the girls, they beat and kill the men whose only crime is to want to survive and play their part in liberation. And that's not all, they also—'

'But we must continue to work with our Vietnamese brothers, if we can, mustn't we?' Sihanouk said. 'Are not the Americans our greatest enemy, and also the greatest enemy of our Vietnamese brothers?'

'Of course, Your Majesty, you are correct. That is why we endure the situation, complaining only quietly and with humility. But America will leave here one day soon—they no longer have the stomach for this war—whereas the contemptible Vietnamese will always cast a shadow over Kampuchea. They are imperialists first and good communists second.'

Sihanouk doubted that all these complaints about the Vietnamese could be true and he recalled the advice of his Vietnamese friends who had delivered him into Cambodia: 'Please, Your Majesty, do not speak too openly about all of the help we have been giving you recently. Our Khmer Rouge brothers will not approve.'

'Will we be finished here soon, do you think?' Sihanouk said. 'I am very tired.'

'Please forgive me, Your Majesty. We need several more photographs, but, yes, we will leave momentarily. I am sure that you are eager to spend some time alone with Princess Monique. And to eat. Comrade Sok, please hurry up. His Majesty is tired of waiting.'

'Yes, Comrade, I am nearly ready,' Sok said, fiddling with a light meter. 'Please excuse the delay, Your Majesty, the conditions are not ideal. Please stand close together.'

Sok looked through the viewfinder of his camera. He imagined that the small circle, designed to centre the image, was a rifle's sight.

'Please stand closer to Comrade Kiry, Your Majesty.'

Sihanouk took a short step to his left; the two men's shoulders briefly kissed.

'Please smile, Your Majesty.'

Sihanouk beamed and stood to attention, his shoulders pulled back hard as if someone was poking the small of his back with a pointed stick. The sun illuminated his face. He smiled, his moist lips glued together. His cheeks turned into crescent moons and shone.

Kiry's Chinese cap, slightly askew, cast a shadow that obscured his eyes. His relaxed,

almost cheeky grin resembled the look of a boy caught eating warm bread. Above them, the mid-afternoon sky bled into the tree line.

'Are you ready?' Sok said.

Kiry grasped Sihanouk's hand and called out, 'Liberation.'

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I truly believe that sovereignty rests with the people: didn't I abdicate as king so that I could rule as Head of State? There have been many wildly inaccurate accounts of the coup d'etat of 18 March 1970, the purpose of which was to depose me, the rightful leader of the Kingdom of Cambodia. What we can say for certain, despite the prevarications of the tame western media, is that the United States of America intervened deliberately in the internal affairs of my country. And there is no doubt whatsoever that members of the CIA planned and helped implement a series of plots to replace me with the compliant traitors Lon Nol and Sirik Matak. I responded by accepting the hospitality of my fraternal hosts, China, and by forming, not out of mere necessity but with pride and hope, an alliance with the left-wing patriots, who already have liberated vast numbers of grateful Cambodians from the imperialist Phnom Penh authorities. For this alliance the west castigates me but I can say that after we save the country from the imperialists our internal policy will be socialist and progressive but never communist. Private enterprise will work in partnership with state monopolies. There are Marxists and non-Marxists amongst my new allies and supporters, but all of us agree in the principles of social justice, equality and fraternity. All of us agree that the corrupt Lon Nol-ists, who love American dollars but care nothing about the fate of their countrymen, must be excluded from public life until they reform.

I have chosen to tell my story to a writer who has consistently shown sympathy, comprehension, and respect for our national dignity, contrary to so many of his peers who cannot comprehend that non-alignment is a matter of the greatest national necessity and pride because our needs do not coincide with America's needs. Edward Whittlemore shows the greatest concern for the hopes and dreams of ordinary Cambodians. He has been a loyal and passionate advocate of my own position.

—from the preface of The CIA Ambush of Cambodia—Sihanouk Recollects, *by Prince Norodom Sihanouk as told to Edward Whittlemore, 1973*

~*~

Adelaide will be the Australian capital for retirees by the year 2025, a leading demographer claimed at the launch of the joint government-community initiative, Adopt a Grandparent. *Associate-Professor Angela Boyd of the University of South Australia said, 'My research team has established that Adelaide has a population that is aging at close to twice the national average. My concern is that neither the state nor federal governments are planning for the very particular infrastructure needs, not to mention new social policies, that such a reality will impose upon the community.' A spokeswoman for the South Australian Minister for Health said that the state government was engaged in an ongoing review process of aged care services. She also questioned Associate-Professor Boyd's impartiality, noting she had failed in her bid to win a Senate seat as a candidate for the Australian Democrats at the last federal election.*

—the Adelaide Advertiser, *14 January 1992*

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Dispirited and nervous, I encountered an officious Customs Officer at Adelaide Airport. I ached everywhere and my ankles were bloated with the bottle of Shiraz I had drunk to farewell Asia. I wanted to get processed and retreat to the suburbs before the sun came up. It was two weeks after I had collapsed in Saigon, two weeks after Hanh had told me to sit out life and wait for death. Actually, all she said was, 'You've got to stop working,' but it amounted to the same thing.

I sauntered forward, smiling. The Customs Officer nodded stiffly. Although I carried nothing illegal, he looked capable of conjuring contraband from the purest of luggage. I wondered if he was an intelligence officer but I had to admit that ASIO had probably sent my file to the National Archives, or thrown it out, a decade or more ago. I declared a set of teak chopsticks. That didn't seem to help. I removed my boots and declared the dried mud embedded in the tread. A gleam appeared in the Customs Officer's eyes. He unzipped my case and fingered everything—books, papers, dirty underwear—as if rubbing the items might bring forth their criminal purpose. He found nothing incriminating: no marijuana brick, no asylum seekers, nothing but a half bottle of Mekong whiskey which he sniffed and returned, waterways hazard though it was. Mercifully, he spared me any banter about having your life in a suitcase: I might not have survived that.

I paused before the doors that led to the arrival lounge of austere Adelaide, the

capital of South Australia, my first and last home. I unfolded a photograph and studied my new family: my middle-aged son, Michael, his wife, Anne, their daughter, Amelia, a trainee photographer at the local newspaper, and their son, James, absent practising law in London. I was determined to avoid the embarrassment of walking straight past them.

The doors opened. I stepped onto concrete carpet and into harsh light. Michael walked towards me. I identified his single arrowhead eyebrow from the photo, but mostly I recognised him because he looked so much like me. He smiled broadly and, as genuine people will, let his mild gingivitis show.

I knew immediately, and with relief, that this encounter would not resemble the time Mary brought Michael to India. I can't remember what I was doing in Bombay or why I thought it was a suitable place for a family reunion: probably, it was my last chance to redeem myself. Four years old, Michael leaned against his mother, folded his arms, and stared at me as if I had stolen his lunch. When the train had pulled away, leaving a large and attentive audience on the platform, he yelled, 'You told me that my daddy was handsome.' We met a few times when he was a child, mostly in the presence of a disapproving chaperone. I remember with particular fondness one time in Sydney at the height of the Vietnam War protests; Michael, who was a teenager, was enthralled by the size of the crowd at the peace rally and agog when I stood and addressed them.

That time in Bombay was the last time I ever saw Mary. Strangely, she thought that six months of co-habitation across seven years of marriage was inadequate. Michael rang me when Mary died. I was on holiday in Russia and he had a dreadful time locating me. I clumsily expressed my sympathy but the truth is—why deny it?—I had to think back far too hard before my throat tightened and sadness took hold.

Grateful that Michael was not going to lecture me on the responsibilities of fatherhood, I dropped my bag on his toes and lowered my head onto his shoulder. He wrapped an arm around me and said,

'Hello, Dad.'

I sniffed my response.

'This is Anne, my wife.'

'Hi, Dad. Can I call you Dad?'

I nodded. Anne was taller than the photograph suggested and her hair had shortened

and turned auburn. It was lucky I didn't have to pick her out of a line-up.

'And our daughter, Amelia.'

'Lia,' said a woman in her early twenties with wonderful clear eyes. She kissed my cheek. 'Hello, Grandpa.'

'Grandpa,' I repeated. 'Bloody incredible.'

We drove through manicured streets—so many straight lines—to a suburb called Kensington, to a house with a four-sided veranda. My home was the granny flat, out the back beyond the swimming pool. 'What, no granny?' I complained as they showed me through, but it was freshly painted and the bathtub doubled as a jet spa. I felt like Ho Chi Minh in Hanoi: with victory came retirement, a simple house by a lake, daytime strolls if my wonky legs permitted, weeding the garden, afternoon retreats to the bomb shelter (Ho and I both enjoyed a daytime nap), and hopefully a steady trickle of visitors offering reverence. Of course, unlike Ho, my dotage was no triumph, but then Ho and I often pondered the limits and the costs of victory.

I lasted a couple of months in the granny flat. One day I sat under a tree watching Anne pull weeds from the herb garden. As I recall, I was telling her about the time Simone de Beauvoir mistook me for Bob Menzies.

'I'm sorry, Dad, I just don't believe you. I doubt she even knew who Menzies was.'

'All right, all right, it was Anäis Nin.'

Next thing I remember I was laying in an ambulance with a mask over my face. Anne held my hand, told me to relax and promised me that everything was going to be okay. Although neither of us believed it she was right: after a few days my condition stabilised. Still, I knew that my recovery was strictly relative. I stayed in hospital for two weeks, educating the hospital staff in the evils of napalm (one intern even read up on it). Then, with a suitcase of clothes, a box of books, a 34 centimetre television set and an electric typewriter, I delivered myself through the wheelchair access doors to Room 17 of the Concertina Rest Home. I could have complained and kicked and screamed but I wouldn't have fooled anyone, not even myself.

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I shook hands with the woman from the publishing company. She wore shimmering black hair and matching eyelashes, red-framed glasses, a black shirt set off by a red bra strap which

I caught sight of every time she tossed her head, a red skirt, black stockings, and red shoes with wide black heels. I wasn't sure whether or not she was attractive—I would have needed to see her out of fancy dress. She gripped a bulging black leather briefcase.

We stood in the foyer of the Concertina Rest Home—'Our shop front to the world,' as I once overheard the Chief Executive Officer describe it to a politician, that ex-trade unionist with gouged wrinkles, sculptured white hair, aftershave perspiration and a hand that extended spontaneously and shook whenever a new person to woo appeared. He'd come to open the revamped high dependency wing. After he cut the ribbon and pledged his government's commitment to solving all problems geriatric (he stopped just short of promising to cure us all) he spent twenty minutes pretending to drink tea. I circled slowly but he avoided me with finesse: market-force lefties are careful who they fraternise with.

The publisher was not diverted by the soothing apricot-coloured wall paint or by the comforting row of watercolour vistas on the far wall: wildflowers, vineyards and treeless green hills curved like buttocks. Neither was she lulled by the lavender air, which masked hospital antiseptic and the woeful stench of over-broiled vegetables. She focused exclusively on her task, which was to ensure that I did not collapse and die in her presence.

She steered me to an ergonomic couch. 'Do you need to sit down? Here, take my arm, ease yourself down here. Are you all right? ARE YOU COMFORTABLE?'

'I'm not deaf.'

'No, of course you're not. I'll sit over here, shall I?'

'No, no,' I said, lifting myself off the couch with difficulty. I didn't want to conduct my business in full view of the front office. Geraldine, who answered the phones, already knew too much about too many people. 'Come through this way. I thought we could sit in the sunroom.'

'Well, I don't know.'

'Or we could go to my room.'

'The sunroom sounds pleasant, very pleasant indeed, so long as it's not too far.'

'Why don't you take my arm?'

We set off along the Boyd Corridor. After a few metres I began to fake a limp—I didn't want to disappoint her by seeming too healthy and, besides, it was a pleasure to have a lady on my arm, even one dressed like a Hiroshima wasp. It was pure coincidence that,

suddenly, my left leg was as heavy and fixed as concrete and that by the time we reached the far end of the corridor I was panting. The publisher put her arm firmly around my waist and steered me to the handrail. It was then that I decided: she *was* attractive.

The Preston Sunroom was empty except for Marjorie Tabbener, who said to the publisher, 'Hello Lia, love.'

'Hello, dear,' the publisher said, accepting a sugar-speckled jube despite my whispered, chivalrous warning: 'Don't try to chew.'

I eased onto a two-seater and patted the cushion beside me, but the publisher chose to sit opposite on a straight-backed chair. We looked out the plate glass window at the Tucker Rose Garden. The publisher pulled a fat folder from her briefcase.

'Well, now: your name is still quite well known in Australia—'

'Quite well known? Only quite well known?'

'Still quite well known, at least amongst the older generation,' she finished. She handed me a paltry advance cheque. 'It'd be ten times as big if you'd been a cricketer.'

She paused to extricate the jube from her back teeth with her tongue. I watched her neck muscles contract as she pushed the whole thing down her throat. She coughed, once, and said,

'I'll need to talk to your doctor ab—'

'My doctor? Why? I'm fit to write, you can trust me on that. I don't need permission from anybody.'

'I want to talk to your doctor about an Author Tour. To see if it's possible, to see if you're fit to travel, to do readings, to find out what special precautions we might need to take.'

'Readings? Can't people read it for themselves? Isn't that the point of reading?'

'I'd like you to call it, *The Confessions of Ted Whittlemore.*'

'You make it sound like I've got some explaining to do.'

'I certainly hope so.'

Mostly she wanted flowery recollections of war-ravaged Indochina. You know the sort of thing. The author fills his days with political intrigue and with dangerous trips to the frontline, an hour's drive from the hotel. At night he encounters sweet, clean, unaffected prostitutes, or lies amongst silk pillows in a teak building in the back street of a spice market,

the musty smell of the Mekong River coming through the window, and smokes pipe after pipe of opium. He loses his innocence when he falls in love with a Eurasian woman working at the French embassy. She is beautiful, immaculate, assured and multilingual, but she is hiding something—who does she really work for?—and she disappears in mysterious circumstances.

'I'd like something controversial about Henry Kissinger,' the publisher said.

'Maybe I could argue that he was honourable.'

'And what did you get up to on all those trips to Russia? And did you really write propaganda for the North Koreans? Was Ho Chi Minh gay? What was Mao like—as a leader, certainly, but also as a husband? And I'd like a full chapter on Pol Pot.'

'But I never met Pol Pot. I never even laid eyes on him.'

'Are you sure?' She shuffled her notes, peered at a page. 'It says here you were quite close for a time.'

'Absolutely not. Of course I met some of them in the early days. The very early days. Bun Sody was my friend.'

'Who?'

'Bun Sody, Nhem Kiry. But Pol Pot? Never.'

'But you can write about him by writing about them?'

'Of course,' I agreed, holding tight to the cheque. 'And I did meet Kissinger.'

'All right then.'

'I also intend to offer my views on the United Nations peace plan for Cambodia: why it's a sham, why it's bound to fail.'

'Oh no, you—'

'*No*?'

'You don't want to write something that might be proved wrong two weeks after it's released. Or worse, something that's out of date. Remember, you're not a journalist any more. You can't change your story tomorrow. I do think it would be best if you concentrated on the past.'

'The past? My childhood?'

'Well—'

'How about this: *Dad used to get up before dawn, every morning without fail, and*

ride his pushbike from Maylands into the Adelaide Hills. Some days there was work, especially in the fruit picking season, but many days he had to ride home again.'

'You probably don't need to go quite that far back. Is it true you had an affair with Martha Gellhorn?'

'Me and Marty? I'll never tell.'

'That's a pity. But you used to be quite the ladies man, right?'

'Used to be? *Used to be*?'

I tried to wink but the whole side of my face contorted. The publisher snapped her knees together. Outside, Tom the gardener neutered a rose bush with a pair of razor sharp secateurs. The publisher moved closer to me and took my hand in both of hers, stilling my slight but persistent tremble.

'Of course, and I realise this might be painful for you, I need you to include a chapter on your journalistic philosophy.'

'I'd rather not.'

'People like that sort of thing these days. And in your case, of course, it's essential: you'll never get away with it if you don't justify your personal politics.'

'My, justify, what do you mean, justify? What do you mean, get away with it?'

'You'll have to explain your attraction to communism. You'll have to offer some sort of defence. That's the whole point of the book, obviously.'

'I'll tell you what I told Lewis Dellmann when he wanted me to write a philosophical appraisal of the American War in Vietnam: I don't do theory, I chase stories.'

'Oh I had no idea you knew "Dirty" Dellmann. Now there's a stroke of luck. And there's your hook: you can reflect on the terrible trouble he had abandoning Stalin, despite everything, and compare it with your own slow awakening to the truth.'

'My slow awakening?'

'To the truth, yes.'

'But what if I'm still asleep?'

She stared at me, aghast, and then she smiled for the first time since she'd put the jube in her mouth.

'Oh, Edward, are you? Are you still asleep? But that's wonderful, simply wonderful.'

~*~

Nhem Kiry reached the centre of Phnom Penh on the 18th of April 1975, a day and a half after the first Khmer Rouge troops. Fifty metres from where he stood, separated by an abandoned car and upturned cyclos, sat the convoy of jeeps that had borne him and his personal battalion into the city. A radio operator sat in one jeep, twiddling the dials of a box that occasionally stopped farting to relay a message. Four soldiers stood by, three boys and a girl, battle-hardened and clear-headed, guns trained north and south. The other soldiers, their weapons protruding like tentacles, surrounded Kiry and his awed aide, Akor Sok. This strange organism proceeded north along Monivong Boulevard.

Kiry paused in front of the twin-towered dirty white cathedral. Catholic architecture did not excite him—he had lived in Paris for three years without visiting Notre Dame—but he needed a reason, however flimsy, to pause. Not for the first time that day Kiry's body felt too light: his fingertips tingled, his kneecaps wobbled and the tip of his tongue kept catching the gap between his front teeth. He thought he might vomit or faint or float away.

He steadied himself by briefly touching Sok's elbow. Sok mistook the contact to be a command and obediently commenced a disdainful assessment of the four-metre statue of Jesus that stood above the cathedral's entrance.

'What's he doing there, imposing himself on our city? Look, he's all dirty. No one has washed him in years. What is that, dove shit? Look, the plaster's peeling off him. They don't care about him. Pathetic.'

Kiry drank from his water canister and tipped the last of it over his head. The flow ran dry at the base of his neck, where his top vertebrate bulged. Sok blinked, surprised by this uncharacteristic show of waste. He sensed that Kiry might be ailing and began, melodramatically, to fuss.

'Are you unwell, comrade?' He handed Kiry a fresh canister of water. 'Are you dehydrated?'

'No.'

'Have you got stomach cramps?'

'No.'

'Have you got a temperature? Is it malaria?'

'I'm suffering from exhilaration.'

'I understand,' Sok said, clearly flabbergasted.

Seeking respite from the sun, mostly seeking a quiet place to sit alone and gather his thoughts, Kiry pierced the circle of soldiers and moved towards the cathedral. He made stuttering progress up the widely spaced stairs. When he glanced at Jesus, who looked down his nose at him, he tripped. He broke his fall first with the palms of his hands and then with his ribcage. He lay half in sun, half in shadow, marvelling at the first thought that entered his head: finally, a legitimate war wound.

'Quick, get up, comrade,' Sok whispered. 'They'll think you're praying.'

Kiry laughed at that unlikely proposition. 'Praise be to God,' he said. 'I'm going inside.'

'We will stop here for now,' Sok called.

Several soldiers stayed with Kiry. Others sat on the road nursing the blisters on their feet. A couple more lobbed stones at Jesus. One young man entered a bakery. He emerged without bread, pushing a woman who half-turned to protest. He raised his rifle. She ran. As he lowered the gun it let off a shot; the soldier's stunned face, instantly hidden, suggested the rifle had come to life of its own accord. The bullet thudded into the woman's thigh. The soldier blinked and turned away.

Kiry stepped inside the cathedral. The air was heavy with the smells that encompassed the building's history: the lake of lemon oil rubbed into the walnut pews; waxy effluent from thousands of candles; the mustiness of damp, black-spotted hymn books which still sprouted like mushrooms on every pew; small pyramids of refuse left by refugees who were now filling the roads out of Phnom Penh.

'It stinks,' Sok said.

'It smells of the French.'

'That's what I said: it stinks.'

Discomforted by the silence, Sok quickly spoke again.

'So, we've done it, comrade. We've won.'

'So it seems.'

'You doubt it? Is there something more to come?'

'No. We are here.'

They sat for a time until Kiry grew tired of Sok's fidgeting.

'Did I tell you that I met Chou En-lai last month in Beijing?'

'No, comrade, you never mentioned it,' Sok lied.

'He was propped up in his hospital bed. He tried to smile when I arrived but it only made him lose his breath. Do you know what he said to me?'

'No, comrade.'

'He told me to pursue a gentle revolution, a gradual revolution. Can you believe it?'

'No, comrade.'

'He was probably delirious, poor man. I was polite but I did not lie to him. I promised him that our revolution would be like none that had come before: pure as rain.'

'How did he respond, comrade?'

'He didn't say anything. He sighed and one of the machines he was connected to lit up. He was so unwell: do you think I should have lied to him?'

'Never, comrade.'

Kiry peered through the gloom. 'Oh, look, a miracle: that baptismal font has arms and legs.'

Sok followed Kiry's gaze to where an old woman, despite abject thinness, failed to conceal herself.

'Quickly, comrades, over here. Grab her.' Sok's eyes widened with excitement as the soldiers obeyed his commands. 'The rest of you check the building. You, look there; you, check back there; you, through there.'

Kiry winced as Sok's bellowing bounced from wall to wall. He craved silence, an hour, even five minutes, to close his eyes and clear his mind. Instead, soldiers stormed the centre aisle in pursuit of an old woman incapable of flight. Above the beat of their footsteps on the floorboards Sok continued yelling. Kiry bowed his head and played deaf and dumb.

One of the soldiers approached the old woman, who cowered and continued to delude herself that she was invisible. She breathed heavily now, her chest filling the gaps between her protruding ribs. Finally, submissively, she commenced a coughing fit. The solder slung his rifle over his shoulder, lifted the baptismal font and threw it, bracken water flying, against the altar. The woman attached herself to Sok's legs, panting, clasping her hands together.

'You must go,' Sok said. 'You must leave the city. You must go to your home district. Stand up and walk.'

The woman hauled herself upright by grabbing a tuft of Sok's black shirt. 'Look at me. I am lame,' she said, swivelling in a tight circle anchored by her right leg. She finished where she had started and, unable to maintain her balance another moment, collapsed at Sok's feet.

'You are not special,' Sok said. 'Everybody must leave the city.'

'I cannot. Please, I cannot. The other soldiers I met earlier, by the river, they told me I could stay if I kept out of the way.'

'The Americans are going to bomb the city. You can come back soon, if you want to, but now you must leave.'

The old woman saw Kiry.

'Oh, oh, oh,' she stuttered and lost control of her breathing.

Though several soldiers converged on her she scrambled towards Kiry. Her sarong unravelled and threatened to stay attached to a wide splinter that reared out of the floor, providing Kiry with an unexpurgated view of the opalised ulcer that ran from her calf to her thigh.

'Honourable Uncle, is that really you? They said you were dead but I never believed them. I am so happy that you have come at last. Have you brought Samdech Sihanouk with you? Please tell these people that I cannot walk. Please let me stay here. Please tell them. I know you understand me.'

'You must leave, Auntie. There is no other way.'

'But I am not strong enough to walk. What will I eat? I have no bowl, no rice.'

She reached out to touch Kiry. Sok kicked her in the ribs. She whimpered as a soldier grabbed her by her good ankle and dragged her down the steps and onto the road. She did not scream or complain further. She stood and with a lopsided, comical gait began hobbling away.

They discovered a priest hiding in a closet.

'Careful, boy,' the priest said in Khmer to the soldier who waved a gun in his face. 'I'm French.'

As the soldiers crowded around the priest, Kiry turned his back and commenced studying a stained-glass window of Jesus ascending to heaven. He had met this priest more than once. He knew him to be a compassionate man who possessed presumptuous but

surprisingly perceptive opinions on the question of progress for the Khmer peasant. Kiry had no desire to talk to him.

'Take care of this,' he told Sok. 'Get him out of here. Take him to the French embassy. Do it now. Be polite, and don't hurt him.'

'Yes, comrade.'

'And while you're there, find out who's hiding inside the embassy. I want a full list, and I want to know if they've got Long Boret and Sirik Matak and—'

'Will you be all right here without me, comrade?'

'Then go and see that everything is under control elsewhere.'

'Elsewhere, comrade?'

'Anywhere. Just go.'

Meanwhile, the priest argued with the boy with the gun.

'But I just came to collect a few things. My stoles, I cannot leave without my stoles. They are precious to me. One of them comes from Mexico. Peasant workers made it by hand, using the same cotton that—'

'No.'

'And my bible. It's in the vestry, just back there. My grandmother gave it to me the day I began school. I won't leave without it.'

Sok stood so close to the priest that they could smell each other's mouths. 'Okay, but you have one minute. That is all. Then we will go to the embassy.'

'I can walk there myself.'

'We will escort you. The street is very dangerous.'

'I'll be fine.'

'I will take you.'

'Yes. All right.'

'You should have run away with the Americans.'

'Yes.'

Finally it was quiet. Kiry sat on a pew, breathed deeply, held the rank air within his lungs, counted to ten and exhaled through pursed lips. Nothing in his life, no minor triumphs or quiet moments of self-satisfaction, had prepared him for the elation that now threatened to immobilise him.

He remembered the excitement of his boat trip to France—he was twenty-two years old—and the sense of accomplishment he attained simply by arriving safely in Marseilles. That was a pleasant memory, he supposed, although the truth was he vomited the whole way and he irritated his cabin companions by implying he knew so much more than they did.

From his time in Paris he remembered a deep conversation with a young French woman about Lenin and Trotsky and the eternal revolution. His restrained delivery of his passionate argument so convinced her—he could no longer remember her name—that she followed him to his tiny apartment and stayed for a night and a day, an outcome he desired but would never have proposed. Now he thought that a moment of weakness had lost him thirty-six hours of reading time.

He recalled, with deep embarrassment at such juvenile behaviour, being joyfully mute when a panel of French academics heaped praise on his thesis. Now he recognised that the work was simplistic and out of date. His achievement, he now thought, was not in any blueprint he proposed for the future of Cambodia but in producing research which satisfied a panel of examiners who were themselves engaged in ideological warfare.

He remembered his elevation to parliament. How proud his irretrievably ill mother had been. Now he knew—in truth, he'd always known—that Sihanouk had chosen him because of his apparent meekness. Still, he was proud of the reputation for incorruptibility and hard work. It had won him a second seat in parliament, a useless and aborted time notable mainly because he achieved it against Sihanouk's wishes. But so far as the ordinary people were concerned he was an honest patriot: what a useful tool that had proved to be in the hard years that followed.

He thought about his brother Goy, older by one year. Goy was a burly boy who always had the shoulders of a man whereas Kiry was skinny and prone to falling over and skinning his knees. Inexplicably, Goy could never beat Kiry when they raced to the well, even though Kiry had the handicap of carrying the buckets. Kiry was twelve years old before he, too, learnt to lose on purpose. He wondered where Goy was now: probably limping to Kandal Province, assuming that his well-connected brother would rescue him.

Inside an annex at the back of the cathedral Kiry located a winding staircase. He began to climb and was pleased that his legs grew stronger and that he felt, at last, properly connected to the earth.

At the top of the tower he broke a couple of rotten wooden slats and leaned against the cold metal of a brass bell. As he admired the view his sandals crunched dried pigeon droppings. He was deaf to the sounds of the city expelling its inhabitants: the din of two million shuffling people, the crying toddlers, the murmured survival plans that families debated and disputed, the occasional burst of gunfire, the bodies lying in streets and homes and floating like logs in the Sap River, the raucous backfires as victorious soldiers taught themselves to drive.

He could see Calmette Hospital but he did now know—how could he?—that Akor Sok was inside herding the ill and the injured down a set of stairs and into the street. 'Come on, keep moving, keep moving,' Sok ordered a woman with a bandage covering a useless eye, then a hobbling youth (no one, now, would remove the shrapnel from his thigh), then a man with a stomach that would not drain who retched dangerously close to Sok's feet, then a woman holding a sleeping infant in one arm and a limp four-year-old girl, her operation aborted, in the other.

Kiry could see Wat Phnom, now abandoned. The smart monks had discarded their robes and transformed into peasants, just like the sensible soldiers from Lon Nol's army who shed their khaki skin. The beggars had left too, suddenly no more disadvantaged than anyone else, now indistinguishable from the privileged citizens who wore their oldest clothes into the street and strapped their jewels and their gold to their skin.

From this vantage point, Kiry gave in and allowed himself a single whoop of delight. Flying is flying, he now knew, no matter whose shoulders you leap from. Everything was different now. Anything was possible, he believed, so long as he kept in mind the big picture, for when you survey so much so suddenly no one can expect you to catch every detail.

~*~

The Roosevelt Apartments

Washington, D.C.

6 November 1992

Dear Ted,

I've got to tell you, buddy, I think I agree with your granddaughter this time: grabbing a nurse's arse is not on. And the fact that you feel 'compelled to do it' will not be taken as a mitigating circumstance, not in this day and age. My strong advice is, resist the urge! If they evict you from the nursing home where will you go? Who will look after you? Think about it.

Of course there's always space for you here. You and Father could sit in the library with the fire going. We'd have to get the whole first floor sound-proofed so you could argue but I've been meaning to do that anyway (Father sits in his leather chair and snores).

No, better to stick to getting food wiped off your face—that's a joke, buddy, I know you're nowhere near that bad. Yet. If it's any consolation, there's no law against perving, so long as you're discreet. Can't you just look at her? Or have your eyes gone too?

Tell you what: I'll send you a plastic doll for your birthday. You can do whatever you want with it. But there's one condition: you are absolutely not to try to blow it up yourself.

I came across an old article of yours while I was researching a report. I thought you might like to re-live old glories so I've enclosed a copy. Jeez, buddy, what were you thinking? It's even more hilarious than that book you wrote with Sihanouk, and who would have thought that was possible? Ask me nicely and I won't quote it.

Hey, I've got a question: what's the only thing worse than American propaganda? Answer: American propaganda that's absolutely categorically one hundred per cent true. See you later, buddy. Try to keep your hands to yourself.

Cornell

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Make no mistake, Prince Norodom Sihanouk has heard all the ridiculous rumours. For starters, he is supposedly dissatisfied with the new regime in Cambodia. More specifically, the communists have indulged in mass killings of those Cambodians allied with the former Lon Nol regime and possibly even of so-called 'class enemies.' Supposedly, there are widespread food and medicine shortages throughout the countryside. Further, Sihanouk's own position as Head of State is to involve purely ceremonial duties. Indeed, he supposedly

fears that his freedom and safety, and that of his entourage, will be jeopardised when he returns permanently to Cambodia this month.

Strangely, all of these slanderous rumours were spread by certain Western intelligence agencies even before the Cambodian resistance came to power, at a time when America installed then propped up and then abandoned the corrupt Lon Nol regime. The reality is rather different. Sihanouk recently spent two weeks in Cambodia and took the opportunity to visit and talk with his people. He is now taking a short break in the North Korean capital, Pyongyang, where he spoke with this reporter. Shortly, he will tour a number of countries as a mark of gratitude for the support offered during the difficult years after the 1970 Lon Nol-American coup. Then, voluntarily and with great optimism for the future of Cambodia, he will return to Phnom Penh to resume his duties.

Sihanouk scoffed at recent suggestions from U.S. Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, that reprisals against former Lon Nol administrative and military personnel have been excessive. Kissinger has made a number of dire warnings about the new regime, and this reporter understands he was personally responsible for leaking a report predicting that one million Cambodians will die in the coming year. 'Dr Kissinger is thoroughly bewildered about Cambodia,' the Prince says. 'Why else would he have tried to replace me with Lon Nol?'

Sihanouk rejected any suggestion that the so-called eight traitors should have been spared execution. 'Please remember that the super-traitors Long Boret and Sirik Matak and all their friends were responsible for the terrible suffering of my people. Please remember that they begged the Americans to resume the cruel bombings of our people. And please remember that we named these traitors before liberation.'

It is true that the Khmer Rouge have largely emptied the cities but most people returned to their home provinces, families were not separated, and no one was forced to leave Phnom Penh if they preferred to stay. Sihanouk says, 'I am so proud that Cambodians are the first in the world to create a classless society.' This reporter understands that the new government has eliminated rich and poor, oppressor and oppressed, money and markets. Everybody in the countryside is working, growing food and raising animals; creating and maintaining a reliable electrical supply; devising and constructing realistic and workable irrigation systems; making and repairing bicycles; weaving clothes; refining

sugar; transforming tanks into tractors.

Sihanouk scoffs at suggestions that the Khmer Rouge now have no use for him. 'The National Front over which I preside is the absolute essence of monolithic unity. Nhem Kiry and all the other leaders are genuine nationalists. They are working tirelessly to preserve the sovereignty of our country.' As far as the prince is concerned, Cambodia has regained the key principles that as Head of State he always fought so courageously for: economic independence and political neutrality. A fair summary of his position might be that if it takes a communist government to achieve these outcomes then so be it.

—Ted Whittlemore, 'Sihanouk Stands Firm', the Communal, *2 November 1975*

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I sat in a mini-van, simmering in my own diminishing juices, as we passed through the Vietnamese military checkpoint at Moc Bai and entered Cambodia. Our driver, Tung, rhythmically chewed a wad of gum. Whenever the flavour faded he would add another stick, switching flavours as necessary. Much later in the day he spat a golf ball into the Basaac River as we crossed Vietnam Bridge and entered Phnom Penh.

It was April 1979, three months after the Vietnamese army had brushed aside the Khmer Rouge and four years since I had requested permission to witness the birth of Democratic Kampuchea. I stared out the window at a countryside that had seemingly expelled all life. The pocked land was barren but for irrigation walls that reared out of the dust fields and an occasional pile of rubble that had once been a rest station or a village. The only signs of life came from inside the mini-van. We grumbled and panted and slithered in the vinyl seats.

An hour inside Cambodia the muffler on the mini-van came loose and began recording our route in the dirt. Tung manoeuvred us over a particularly large hole in the road, wriggled under the vehicle and set to work with a couple of tools and a roll of masking tape. We all piled out except for the shy (or sly) BBC fellow, who slept (or feigned sleep). Du, our Khmer-speaking guide from the Ministry of Information, stood guard at Tung's feet, devouring cigarettes. I peeled the sodden shirt from my back and held it above my head, hoping to catch a breeze. Phillip Fraigneau (freelance) touched his toes a couple of times then dropped to his haunches. Masami Itoh from the *Tokyo Daily*, fearing landmines, stood on the road facing Vietnam and pissed between his feet. Hugo Reisch, senior writer for a

glossy German weekly, rubbed cream into the stubble rash on his neck.

'Is that anti-fungal cream? Is it an antiseptic?' Phillip asked. 'Can I have some for between my toes?'

'It's toothpaste. It's all I've got.'

'All right, give me some.'

'Please.'

'All right, don't then.'

'Can't you show some respect?' I said.

'Stuff you, Mr Vietnam, we're coming too, you don't get Cambodia to yourself and there's not a damned thing you can do about it,' Phillip said.

'Oh, leave him alone, he's just embarrassed,' Hugo said.

'He should be too.'

I turned away from them and spoke to Du in Vietnamese. 'How long is it since you were last in Cambodia?'

'Do you think I want to be here? Do you? Do you think I want to go to the country where my brother died?'

The BBC man opened his eyes. 'What did he say?'

'He said that although he would prefer to stay in Cam Ranh, close to his family, he is proud to be serving the cause of liberating the innocent Cambodian people from the murderous Pol Pot clique.'

'Yes, correct,' Du said in English.

Tung emerged, shaking himself free of road dust, and got behind the wheel. 'Bad,' he said in Vietnamese. 'Very, very bad.'

'What did he say?'

'He said, "We go now okay,"' Du said.

It was another two hours before we encountered our first Cambodians. Tung braked beside them, showering them with dirt. They appeared to be the remnants of a family: two women of indeterminate age, a man perhaps thirty years old who continually wheezed, and three hollow children. The man and one of the women pulled a cart made of a house door attached to wooden wheels; two of the children pushed. On the cart sat a few clothes, a hoe, a small bag of rice, a cooking pot, and the smallest of the children.

Phillip got up on the roof of the mini-van, rummaged through his bag and came down with a large chocolate bar that had turned liquid in the heat. He gave it to the children. They rubbed their hands in the goo and licked their fingers.

We closed in on them, staring, blocking their path, honouring them with cameras and notebooks and tape recorders. Even the BBC fellow roused himself. We snapped photographs, recording for posterity, and so we could later convince ourselves that our memories were true, their protruding bones and furtive eyes, their bruises and scabs, their rags for clothes. They looked at us with polite, thorough disinterest.

We plied Du with questions. He and the older woman talked back and forth, his questions and translations taking longer than her replies.

'Ask them if they are okay. What they are doing? Where they are going?'

'They are walking from Pursat Province.'

'How long have they been walking?'

'Many weeks. They stop and start. They are returning to their home district. They hope they will be there very soon, two or three days more only.'

'Whose children are they?'

'Two of them are the children of her younger sister. She is hoping to reunite them but—'

'What if she doesn't?' Phillip asked.

'I do not ask her this.'

'And the little boy?'

'They do not know who he is. They found him on the way.'

'Who are the other adults?'

'Her neighbours.'

'What do they hope to find in their village?'

Du asked his question, listened to the answer and shrugged.

'What?'

'She says she has heard that her husband is killed, but she does not know for certain. Someone told her one of her children is still alive but she does not know about the other children. She knows one of her brothers is killed. Her other brothers, her other sister, she does not know yet.'

'How does she think they died?' Phillip asked.

'She doesn't know.'

'Didn't you ask her?'

'She says Pol Pot killed them.'

'Ask her who she thinks Pol Pot is,' Hugo said.

'Ask her what the difference is between Pol Pot and the Angkar,' I said.

'Here, show her this photo. Look, that is Pol Pot, see? What do you think of him?'

The woman looked at the grainy image and muttered a few words.

'She says he looks more Chinese than Cambodian,' Du said.

'Ask her if she's heard of Karl Marx?' the BBC man said.

'Did she witness any massacres?' Nikito said.

'I do not ask her anything more,' Du said stubbornly. 'We are running late.'

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Phnom Penh hummed in the 1960s: people laughed and argued and bartered; fish and poultry flapped to demonstrate their freshness and their joy at being alive, pigs squealed and pork fat spat from hot grills; cars and trucks chatted incessantly; cyclo wheels squeaked and their drivers called out, 'Where you want to go?'; rice pots bubbled; one dog barked and a thousand harmonised; the wind cavorted through narrow streets rattling windows and tin roofs; the sky was deep blue except for fluffy white opium clouds; wine bottles burped their corks free and glasses clinked along the riverside where beautiful women strolled under parasols. There were slums—Bun Sody never let me forget it—but Phnom Penh always seduced me.

Close to dusk, sick of our smells and small talk, dulled and dehydrated, we entered the city. The silence was all the worse for the individual sounds and movements that jarred and echoed. We saw pockets of people but no crowds. We passed by a row of shops that had once contained a delectable French bakery. It was a shell, its windows without glass, its interior stripped. Two blocks further on we paused to allow a truck laden with Vietnamese troops and sacks of rice to pass between us and the skeleton of a rusting car. Out of my window I saw a young woman standing in a doorway. At her feet, flapping about on a dribble of water on a pan were two small catfish. I pushed my window down and called out in my basic Khmer,

'Hello Miss. How much?'

She stepped back into the shadow of the doorway but first she rewarded me with a smile and a dip of her eyes. I was savouring the contact but Phillip ruined it: 'You're on there, my friend. If you buy the fish she'll probably sleep with you for free.'

Finally, we reached the Royal Hotel, which the Vietnamese had renamed the Samaki.

'They must have known you were coming,' Phillip said to Nikito.

'Samaki,' I said, 'is Vietnamese for solidarity.'

'If you say so.'

As we piled out of the mini-van Tung threw a bucket of water across the bonnet, which sizzled then fell silent.

'Ask them if I can have my old room,' I said to Du. 'It's Room 28.'

'Bloody favouritism.'

'Second floor closed for business,' Du said. He jumped onto the roof and began dropping our luggage.

'Where's the best place to eat?' Phillip said. 'Hey, careful, I've got all sorts of equipment in there. Careful, I said. Can you vouch for the food?—I don't want to get sick. Have you arranged my interview with Heng Samrin? Have you? Is there hot water? I was promised a room with an air-conditioner.'

I stepped onto the road to try and get out of earshot. The BBC chap appeared at my shoulder.

'Are you going for a walk? Can I come?'

'Sure.'

'It's a mess, isn't it?'

I nodded.

'Do you think things will improve now? Are the Vietnamese any better than the Khmer Rouge? Really better, I mean, or do they just hide it better?' he said.

'They have freed these people from something truly awful. Surely you can see that for yourself.'

'Yes I know but—'

'Nothing else matters. Nothing.'

'How long do you think they will stay?'

'As long as they need to. But is that relevant right now?'

'Yes, actually, I rather think that it is.'

A couple of children approached us. I greeted them in Khmer but quickly exhausted my vocabulary. We tried French then English then Vietnamese. The children laughed but did not understand. Phillip arrived with chocolate—he seemed to have an endless although sodden supply. The children left with a bar each, which I suspected would make them ill.

'ROOsee ROOsee ROOsee,' they chanted as they left.

The Englishman clicked his heels together and called out in a dreadful Russian accent, 'My name is Vladimir Ilich. You know me as Lenin, ha ha. I've come to eat you all up.'

'ROOsee ROOsee,' the children continued calling as they ran away.

'Come back, I want to take your photograph,' Phillip called. 'Bloody kids.'

The BBC chap and I had walked for less than fifty yards when I stopped suddenly.

'What's the matter with you?' he said.

'I, I—'

'What is it? What are you looking at?'

'The cathedral.'

'What cathedral?'

'It's gone.'

The cathedral was not damaged by artillery, not riddled with bullets and bloodstains, not rotting from neglect and high humidity, but simply erased. No rubble remained, not a single stone, no foundations, no pews or shattered stained glass, no trace of the statue of Jesus, just an empty block of land on which weeds struggled to establish themselves.

I stood where the arched entrance had been and walked slowly down the centre aisle to my usual seat, near but not too near the back, a place I used not to pray but to reflect and, sometimes, to sleep. I sat in the dirt. The BBC chap stood behind me.

'Just like Stalin,' he said.

'Shhh.'

In the grey light Du came running.

'You must not wander about like this. I worry that you will get lost. Please, you will come and check in now. It will be dark soon. We will all eat together.'

I looked up at him. 'But where's it gone?'

He shrugged, as if that explained everything, and said. 'It went away.'

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Room 17, Nolan Wing

Concertina Rest Home

19 November 1992

Dear Cornell,

Thanks for your letter, mate. I always look forward to hearing from my favourite misguided Nixonite, though you could make an old man happy by visiting him in person: God knows you can afford it. As for the article, which I might remind you I wrote blind, having not—I repeat not—gotten anywhere near Phnom Penh for more than five years, I encourage you to go ahead and quote it. Put the whole bloody thing in an appendix if it makes you happy. But while you're at it, don't forget to quote yourself too. At least I wrote my story out of ignorance not of my own making, which is more than I can say for that obnoxious report you sent me. I can't tell you how relieved I was to find out that the whole American exercise, from the time you started propping up the French in Vietnam to when you dropped enough bombs on Cambodia to flatten the whole Third World, was an exercise in bringing peace and prosperity to the region. I mean, thank God I know that now (and thank God I know that God approves). As for your comments about Vietnam, you really are the master of adding one plus one to get one thousand. Remind me again: who funds your independent views? Is it a certain Senator? Would he by chance be your father? And explain to me again—I'm easily confused, remember—if Sihanouk was on the nose in 1974 why was he suddenly the great hope of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness in 1984? And why, all of a sudden, were the Khmer Rouge bad but not really that bad. There's no excuse in the world that will excuse propping up that gang of murderers. All for the sake of grinding Vietnam into the dust. All for the sake of selling peanut butter and old movies to China.

Thanks for the advice on my love life. More and more, I realise I can learn so much from you on matters of the heart—how is the ex-wife? As it happens, I am completely capable of behaving like a gentlemen. I was simply pointing out it's not my preference. Nurse Diane washed my face only this morning. Very erotic it was too, if you like the feel of rough flannelette, but I would not dream of taking matters beyond ablutions. On that score I'm ready to take the next step: tomorrow, I'm going to ask her to help me blow my nose. I'll keep

you informed.

Look after yourself, and watch out for all those Americans,

Ted

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True, U.S. policy towards Indochina following the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in January 1979 was dictated by questions of global foreign policy and strategy rather than solely by the situation within Cambodia. The Edgar Institute of International Democracy categorically defends this position. Any American policymaker who seeks to ignore the global picture will seriously damage the compelling and legitimate interests of the U.S. in order to maintain some expedient, falsely honourable stance. The Edgar Institute does not doubt that the government of Democratic Kampuchea (the Khmer Rouge) was one of the most brutal, ideological regimes that the Asia-Pacific region, and indeed the world, has seen this century. Nevertheless, successive U.S. governments have maintained this fundamental position: there can be no justification for one country usurping the sovereignty of another. After their Soviet-backed invasion and occupation of Cambodia in 1979, Vietnam left the Carter and the Reagan administrations, as well as concerned Asian nations and indeed all nations committed to the upholding of international law, with no choice but to support the Cambodian resistance. Of course, it has been a fundamental and foundational principle of U.S. policy that support be strictly limited to the non-Khmer Rouge factions of the resistance: Prince Sihanouk's Funcinpec and Son Sann's anticommunist KPNLF. More importantly, as this report makes clear, the U.S. victory in the Cold War—see 'The Capitulation of Gorbachev' (Chapter 5)—cannot be separated from the strong line the U.S. and its allies have maintained against Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia.

Consequently, the Edgar Institute repudiates the plethora of revisionist arguments that claim that the United States acted immorally by choosing to fight in Indochina. Indeed, the United States was compelled to enter Vietnam in order to demonstrate its credibility as a responsible superpower but also, plainly and fundamentally, because the Cold War had to be won. As it turned out it was necessary, for military and domestic political reasons—but, fundamentally, as a tactical geopolitical manoeuvre—for the US to retreat. This was no defeat. On the contrary, we can identify a single continuous line from Johnson to Carter to

Reagan, in Indochina and elsewhere, that led ultimately to the U.S. victory in the Cold War. As such, in the late 1980s the U.S. finally won the Vietnam War, ironically at the very time when the Vietnam War revisionists were braying at their loudest.

—from Cornell E. Jackson, Towards a post-Vietnamized Cambodia: U.S. leadership and global responses, *Asia-Pacific Series Report No.19, Edgar Institute of International Democracy, 1991.*

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I'm famous, or infamous, for my reporting on the American War in Vietnam (as anyone who knows history calls it). But before Vietnam came Korea. My first war exposed me to the simplicities of the world and to the reality that, for men and for nations, a bare-faced lack of integrity can be a great asset. The whole event felt like a badly organised agricultural fair with exhibitors and animals roaming free but I suppose that's only because I had no idea what was really happening. I spent my days, when I wasn't immobilised by fear, faithfully recording those moments they allowed me to see: it took me a year or more to realise I had no autonomy. I was barely trained. My first editor, Clarrie Jenkins, waved me off with this advice: 'Don't go getting seduced by the enemy: commie propaganda is a woman, my lad, a woman with a painted face. Need I say more? And don't go getting killed. If you die you become the story and that's sloppy journalism.'

So I did what I believed to be the right thing. I took UN transport to set-piece battles. I attended official news conferences as if my life depended on it. I scribbled down the creative interpretations and the bare-faced lies of officials and I wired them home. I called absolutely everybody 'sir'. I was so impressed with myself.

My smugness—not to mention my worldview—came crashing down during the drawn-out peace negotiations of 1953. I got into a good routine. I went to the daily news conference of the UN spokesman; I copied down what he said, his complaints and expectations, his forlorn hopes, his artful alliteration. I took him at his word because he was negotiating peace, a laudable aim after all, and because I understood that he was the sort of person who Clarrie considered sound. Besides, it's what my mother would have expected.

One day, behind the Foreign Correspondent's Bar, I stumbled on a different news conference. It was being held by the legendary Australian journalist, Wally Ball, known to the Americans as, 'that lying pinko Aussie arsehole.' Wally was a renegade. He had reported the whole war from the North Korean side, offering up a wholly distinct version of events, and now he was offering a radically different version of the peace negotiations. Listening to him I began to think we were watching different wars. My routine changed: first I attended the daily UN briefing and then I found Wally, who told me the truth.

Less than ten years my senior, Wally was a seasoned veteran. In 1945 he had taken the train to Hiroshima and broken the story of radiation sickness: ***A WARNING TO THE***

***WORLD**, his famous headline screamed.*

'You know what?' he said to me. 'I got back to Tokyo and the Americans still called me a liar. Since that day, I haven't taken anybody's word for anything.'

'I asked Clarrie about you. He says you're not a reporter. He says you're a partisan, a propagandist.'

'He's right, mate, but I'm hardly alone. Clarrie's a partisan, too, because he believes, at least he tries to believe, that there's a difference between independent experts and western apologists. You're a partisan, too.'

'Actually, I think I'm just confused.'

'Exactly. And doesn't that make it more likely you'll write what they want you to write?'

'Clarrie says you're dangerous.'

'Ha, because I want Australia to nip at America's heels once in a while? Listen, here's the truth: objectivity exists so reporters can claim they don't have opinions and so people who only have a spare fifteen minutes a day can pretend that they are informed. Balance is for acrobats. Look around you: do you see anyone, can you find me one person, who is neutral? The only difference is that I don't mind admitting it.' He paused. 'But tell me, what's next for you?'

'Next?'

'After the war?'

'Clarrie wants me to go to Canberra. Cover the federal parliament.'

'No, don't do it. It's going to be very messy in Vietnam. That's the place for you.'

—Ted Whittlemore, unpublished manuscript

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I made a stuttering start on *The True-ish Confessions of Edward Whittlemore*. I tried to give the publisher what she wanted. I listed those aspects of my life that I imagined other people thought were distinctive or controversial.

'It sounds like you're trying to excuse your haphazard research skills,' Michael said. 'No, that's not right: you're not so much excusing them as hiding behind them. No, that's not it either: it's more like you don't trust yourself anymore.'

'Bloody lawyers,' I said.

'I didn't read anything libellous.' He paused and laughed. 'Unless, that is, you want to sue yourself for defamation. But why do you go on about that Wally Ball bloke so much? You're much more interesting than he is.'

'I've gone off the whole idea. I think I'll stop writing altogether and send the cheque back. It's barely even beer money, anyway,' I told Lia later.

'But, Grandpa, what will you do all day? Basket weaving?'

'I'm going to watch television.'

'Oh really? Tell you what, how about I take you to the pub. Would you like that?'

'Now? Yes, Christ yes, that'd be wonderful. You're a bloody miracle, did you know that?'

'Mother Teresa in a Mazda 323, that's me.'

She drove us to the Cabbage & Slug, a traditional English pub (Australian Franchise No.12) in an alley off North Terrace in the city. As Lia held the heavy wooden doors open for me, I balked, horrified, at the interior: wood-identical panelling, plush red carpet designed to hide ale stains and the blood of soccer hooligans, a framed copy of an eighteenth century map of Lincolnshire, a red telephone box complete with an 'Out of Order' sign, and a portrait of W.G. Grace above the fake fireplace.

'What's this, Disneyland-on-Avon? Can't we go to a real pub?'

But Lia had chosen the Slug carefully. It had leather couches, firm yet giving. It had a staff toilet downstairs which they let me use. Although it turned raucous and sweaty at night—I took Lia's word for that—in the afternoons it was quiet, which, to my distress, I desperately needed.

'And it's got twenty-three beers on tap so it's educational too,' Lia said. 'And my friends from the newspaper come here. They're all dying to meet you.'

And it had a publican called Jenny, an enchanting fiftyish brunette who inspired me to perch on top of a barstool, in contravention of several medical directives, to learn the art of pouring a perfect Guinness (and to look into her green-black eyes).

'You know what?' I said to Lia, trying to ignore the deer head that kept watch over us. 'I don't think I've enjoyed a beer as much as this in my whole life.'

'Why don't you show me what you've written?'

'No, I don't think so.'

'You know what you should do, Grandpa? Write whatever you want. If no one wants to publish it, that's their problem.'

'I've promised your mum and dad I'll talk to you about going back to law school next year.'

'Once I've got this "ridiculous photography diversion" out of my system?'

'Exactly.'

'Go on then, give it your best shot.'

'Let's agree that I lectured you severely but unsuccessfully for, say, half an hour, shall we?'

'That sounds good. But don't think I'm letting you off the hook. Tell me what you've been writing about.'

'I will. Promise. But I might just get us another drink first.'

'You've hardly touched that one.'

'But they take forever to pour. Trust me, I've seen it done.'

'It's a pity that you didn't know me when I was a baby.'

This was an unexpected turn in the conversation. 'Well I'm truly sorry about that, Love, you must know that I regret it very much. Have you been thinking about this? Are you very upset about it?'

'It's not that. I was just thinking of the women you could have pulled if you'd had me to carry around as a baby.'

'Pulled, what do you mean, pulled? That's a really awful thing to think. I never would have used you in that way.'

'If you'd been around at all, you mean?'

'Exactly.'

'I was a cute baby.'

'Your mum showed me the photographs. You were somewhat cute.'

'Maybe you should get a puppy.'

'I don't think the nursing home would be too impressed.'

'I read somewhere that old people—'

'Careful.'

'I read that old people find pets to be excellent therapy.'

'I don't need therapy. I'm not some lunatic.'

'No, but you need to write your book.'

'Maybe.'

'Don't try and wriggle your way out of it, Grandpa. You're disassociating yourself from those aspects of your past that—'

'Disassociating myself? *Disassociating*? Do you think you'll ever recover from your education?'

'My point exactly: the last thing I need is any more of it. But look Grandpa, from what Dad has been telling me—'

'You shouldn't believe a word he says. He's a lawyer.'

'From what he says you've spent your whole life upsetting people.'

'That's never been my intention. It's just been an added bonus.'

'Well, why stop now?'

'It's not that, it's—'

'You're doubting your own beliefs. You've gone all timid.'

'*Timid*? You're joking, right?'

'Take America—'

'No, I don't think I can.'

'What happens if America stops doing all those terrible things you say they do? What happens to the world?'

'Peace and harmony and goodwill in our times.' I took a sip of Guinness, mostly froth. 'Look, Love, it's quite simple. I can't sit still and write. I've got nothing to write about, unless you want me to describe what I've eaten for dinner and who doesn't get any visitors and—'

'I don't want you to write anything other than what you want to write.'

'Do you know that I've got no idea what's going on in Vietnam? I can tell you that Hieu's wife has been ill but she's all right now, Hanh and her husband have to move to Hanoi, Tran's daughter is going to Moscow to study.'

'Don't you care what's happening in your friends' lives?'

'Of course I do. But it's not news; it's gossip.'

'Welcome to the real world.'

I was losing the argument. Worse, I was losing the thread of the argument. 'Why aren't you married?' I said.

'Why aren't you?'

'A-ha. Got you.'

'You've got Dad's grin.'

'No, no, he's got my grin.'

'Well, whatever, no wonder you've irritated so many people in your life, if every time someone catches you out you flash that "I'm still smarter than you and there's nothing you can do about it" look at them.'

'Don't change the subject. I *was* married once, to your grandmother, which is why you exist. What have you got to say about that?'

'I say you should let me read what you've written.'

'I say I'm getting us another drink.'

'I say that woman behind the bar is half your age.'

'I say you'd make a great lawyer.'

'I say that you should write your book as if you're writing it for me.'

'I think that's the last thing I should do.'

~*~

Six months ago Vietnam liberated the Cambodian people from the Khmer Rouge, one of the most hideous regimes of the twentieth century. In March I sat through the trial-in-absentia of the Khmer Rouge leaders, Pol Pot and Ieng Sary, conducted in Phnom Penh. Of the litany of despair and awful incongruity detailed, the words of one old woman continue to haunt me. As she told her story tears streamed down her face but she kept her expression as fixed as a statue. Only her mouth moved: 'One day black-clad men came to the village and followed us everywhere, even when we were bathing. They asked many questions. They gathered some people and took them away, for re-education they said. That night there was a downpour, no one could sleep. The next day, Pol Pot soldiers gave back to the village spades, hoes, and baskets they had borrowed the night before. On those tools we could see traces of blood and hair, which frightened us very much. My husband was forced to carry firewood. Three days later he came back, pitifully fatigued. I asked permission to replace my husband in carrying wood. After four days of this work a tumour on my ankle burst and caused me serious pain. My husband became sick with malaria and diarrhoea. He was hungry and his body became swollen. A yellowish liquid oozed from his feet. He died.'

Astonishingly, the west has responded by castigating the liberators and rehabilitating the war criminals. Innocent Cambodians continue to suffer an ongoing civil war so that America and its allies can punish Vietnam, and so America and China can pressure the Soviet Union, who, if they in any way helped Vietnam oust the Khmer Rouge, also deserve the world's thanks and praise.

Now, as the extent of the humanitarian crisis within Cambodia becomes apparent, the Red Cross and UNICEF are attempting to reach agreement with the Heng Samrin government in Phnom Penh to provide urgently-needed food and medical aid. Three points are clear. First, the health and nutritional conditions in Cambodia are serious and in some cases dire; the dreadfully damaged agricultural system is not yet able to produce even subsistence harvests. Second, neither the new regime nor the Vietnamese liberators are in any sense responsible for this state of affairs. Third, criticisms by western governments and the media of the Heng Samrin government for its reluctance to trust the motives of the Red Cross and UNICEF border on malicious. In fact, the Cambodians are right to tread warily, given that the Khmer Rouge have already complained that the aid agencies should deal only with the UN-recognised regime, which, reprehensibly, continues to be the Khmer

Rouge themselves. I do not wish to blame the Red Cross and UNICEF for this situation. But let's not pretend that they are neutral organizations, free from the political wishes of those nations who hold the purse-strings.

—Edward Whittlemore in Dissent *(London), 13 August 1979, p.1*

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It seemed to Nhem Kiry, the new Prime Minister of Democratic Kampuchea, that the whole world wanted to talk to him. He had travelled incessantly in the months since the Vietnamese had captured Phnom Penh and pushed the Khmer Rouge west. First, he accompanied Pol Pot to the Cardamom Mountains where they skirted around Vietnamese patrols and lived rough while they tried to conjure a new strategy. In April, when Vietnamese battalions pushed hard into Khmer Rouge territory, Kiry walked into Thailand. From Bangkok he had flown to Beijing, Singapore, New York, back to Bangkok for a meeting with Pol Pot and Nuon Chea on the border, Beijing again, Florence and Belgrade. Today he was in Geneva. Shortly he would begin a tour of four African states.

Although he was tired he was gaining pleasure from being a grump. An hour earlier he had made Leang Sros, the Khmer Rouge's permanent envoy to UNICEF, completely clear his desk, even the drawers, just so Kiry could sit there for half a day and pretend it was his office. He leaned back on the chair and surveyed the desk, on which sat two telephones, a pristine blotter and an upturned metal stake onto which he had impaled several pages of briefing notes. He arranged his ballpoint pens, the lids slightly chewed, in a straight line on the left-hand side of the blotting paper, adjacent to a small flag of Democratic Kampuchea.

He half-listened as Akor Sok briefed him on his imminent meeting with Dr Corinna Zophan, Director of Operations for the International Committee of the Red Cross.

'By all accounts she is unflappable. She speaks seven languages—'

'Khmer?'

'No, Your Excellency.'

'Of course not. A good thing, too.'

'She speaks Spanish, German, English, French, Mandarin, Welsh—'

'I don't care.'

'I suggest that you speak to her in English, Your Excellency, as I understand her French is exemplary.'

'Yes, yes.'

'By all accounts she is a very determined woman. She will not be easily swayed.'

'I like this chair.'

'I like it too, Your Excellency.'

'Why? Have you sat in it?'

'No, Your Excellency.'

'I like that I can rock back on it. Do you think we could take this chair with us when we go? Do you think Comrade Sros will miss it?'

'I think they will have a chair for you in Africa. And I think it will be logistically difficult to take it to the border with us.'

'I suppose.'

'Dr Zophan recently gained considerable publicity for criticising the Pope.'

'Yes, yes. What is she a doctor of?'

'I, um, I do not have that information with me, Your Excellency. But I will check immediately.'

Kiry sighed. 'She has a doctorate in Chemical Engineering but it is fifteen years since she practised in her profession.'

'Yes, of course, I'm sorry. Please remember that in private Dr Zophan has criticised our revolution most severely. There is no telling what she might say.'

Kiry smiled. 'She's here because she has no choice. She will behave. It's her job.'

There was a single knock at the door. Leang Sros entered and formally presented Dr Corinna Zophan. Kiry abandoned the sanctuary of his desk to shake hands. Her touch was firm but light, her skin cool and dry.

'You can leave us now,' Kiry told Sros and Sok.

'As you wish, Your Excellency,' Sros said, unwillingly.

Kiry directed Dr Zophan to a couch and sat opposite. A coffee table and two glasses of water kept them apart.

'I must thank you again for taking the time to visit me. The whole government of Democratic Kampuchea—and I personally—have the greatest respect for the work of the International Committee of the Red Cross. You honour me with your presence.'

'Thank you for inviting me, Mr Prime Minister.'

She was business-like neat. Her starched white shirt was stiff as cardboard, her breasts a mystery. Her wool skirt—brown, almost black—followed the curve of her thighs all the way to her knees. She wore dull stockings, and sensible leather shoes that hid, Kiry felt certain, dainty feet.

'I understand that the Red Cross has received a letter from Mr Hun Sen in his capacity as Foreign Minister of the illegitimate Kampuchean government.' As he spoke, and despite realising that he was behaving undiplomatically, Kiry could not help but stare at the hem of her skirt. 'I understand that this letter requests Red Cross assistance.'

'That is correct.'

She had clear hazel eyes. Her skin was pale, enhanced by smudges of pink on her cheeks. She had imperfect earlobes: one was noticeably fatter than the other, even when half-hidden by wisps of brown and grey hair.

'As the principal representative of the government of Democratic Kampuchea I must point out to you that agreement on any such request would indicate that the Red Cross supports the illegal invasion and occupation of Kampuchea by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.'

'Indeed?'

'Indeed. Such support would, with respect, breach the political neutrality of the Red Cross. What is more, the Red Cross would place itself at odds with the United Nations, which quite rightly refuses to recognise Heng Samrin's illegitimate regime.'

He sensed that he should stop running his fingers through his hair. He laid them flat on his knees, spread them out like fans. A Bulgarian diplomat had once looked at his fingers and asked him if he was a pianist.

'With respect, Mr Prime Minister, the letter from Mr Hun Sen is a plea for help with a set of circumstances that are dire. The Foreign Minister predicts that many people will go hungry this season. As I am sure you know, I visited Phnom Penh myself in June, accompanied by Paragon Thompson of UNICEF. We were deeply disturbed by what we saw. The concern of the Red Cross is for innocent people not for the politics of the matter. That is the essence of how we intend to apply our neutrality to these circumstances. Subject to negotiations with officials in Phnom Penh—'

'Surely you mean officials in Hanoi.'

'Once certain issues are resolved I must tell you that I intend sending a larger delegation, as a matter of urgency, to further review conditions and to begin the transfer of material aid as soon as possible.'

'Very well, though I must re-state my objections. And I might remind you that any food shortage, any famine, that occurs inside the country is a direct result of Vietnamese imperialism.'

'Please understand me, sir, the humanitarian situation is my sole concern.'

'Of course. I simply wish to reiterate that we are not fighting an ideological struggle. We are defending our territory and we are defending the integrity of the Khmer race. This is our task and it is connected directly to the struggle of the Red Cross with regards to foodstuffs. That brings me to another matter. We are doing what we can for the thousands of our countrymen who have fled from the Vietnamese invaders. You are aware of the refugee camps near Thailand?'

'Of course.'

'The situation in some of our camps is dire. In the interests of humanitarianism, as well as neutrality, my government requests Red Cross assistance in our territory.'

'Of course, we will consider your request, and further—'

'Good. We have hungry children too.'

'And we have, as you might know, already spoken with Thailand and with various other interested parties. And as you are probably aware, we have taken initial measures in certain locations.'

'Yes. Good. Nevertheless, I reiterate that Democratic Kampuchea is the sole legitimate government so far as the international community is concerned. Therefore, we should receive all Red Cross aid to distribute as we see best.'

'Please permit me to ask you, Mr Prime Minister, why did your government never respond to our offers of help when you controlled all of Cambodia, when the situation, as I understand it, was also dire?'

'Yes, that represents an entirely different set of circumstances. And I hope you might recognise that perhaps the situation as understood in some quarters is rather different to the reality.' He paused and smiled. 'But I do not wish to impose political talk on you. I am very conscious of the difficult position you find yourself in.'

The door opened. An aide entered carrying a tray on which sat a coffee pot, two cups and saucers, and a plate of sandwiches.

'Would you care for coffee?'

'Yes, thank you, I will take a cup.'

'And, please, take a sandwich also.'

'No thank you.'

'No? Well, I will have one. Cucumber and creamed cheese: my favourite.'

After a moment's silence, Kiry said, 'I believe Pierre Dubrecilh works for you.'

'That is correct.'

'I knew him when I was a student in Paris. We had some very good talks. He was writing a thesis about Algeria, as I recall. Are you sure, no sandwich?'

'Very well, I will take one. Thank you.'

'Would you prefer tomato?'

'This is most acceptable.'

'Please pass on my best wishes to Pierre. I remember him as a good man.'

'He is the finest of men.'

Kiry watched her face closely. He found it wondrous that she revealed no hint of repugnance towards him; here was a woman he could respect. He imagined courting her: quiet dinners in the French-speaking area, strolls around Lake Geneva, mercy dashes to impoverished Africa. It would be so different, he felt sure, than the early days spent with his future wife. He had met Kolab in the Liberated Zone in 1971. Despite her bravery—she was especially revered for crawling so close to enemy snipers that she could lob hand grenades into their laps—Son Sen had pulled her from the frontline and set her to work teaching new skills, and new ways of behaving, to children who showed promise. When she and Kiry were alone, when she was certain that they could not be overheard, she was opinionated and feisty. Kiry found this appealing: when he undertook to instruct her in Marxist economics, she said, 'I know all I need to know about that,' and he found himself growing fond of her. He did not fall in love with her—then or later—but she continued to impress him: she was smart and tough. Besides, he needed a wife.

'If you will permit me to say so, Dr Zophan, if the Vietnamese want Kampuchea so badly why don't they feed the people themselves?'

'The situation is most complex. You know this, I am certain. And I say to you again, the politics of the situation are not my primary concern.'

'Please believe me, I am simply expressing the fears of the Kampuchean people.'

'Indeed?'

'My compatriots are keen students of history. Our survival has depended on it for hundreds of years. We are used to resisting the Vietnamese imperialists in any limited way that we can. Do you know that they stole the Mekong Delta from us, and Saigon too?'

'I hope you will understand that I will not take account of such matters, important though they might be.'

'Of course, I do not blame you for the fact of Vietnam. But be very careful about sending food and medical supplies to Phnom Penh. The Vietnamese are like birds circling fruit trees. They will fill their mouths and fly far away to where their own babies lie waiting to be fed.'

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After Dr Zophan had left, promising to consider everything Kiry had said, he sat behind the desk, doodling and dreaming. He imagined her leaving the building. She remained composed, almost aloof, as she descended in the elevator. She read a draft report on southern Africa as her driver took her home. She made a few notes and her thinking drifted to a friend in a distant city who was about to undergo a third operation on a knee wrecked in a car accident.

Only when she flopped onto a sofa and closed her eyes did she allow herself to re-consider Kiry. And with that, Kiry imagined, he came like bile in her saliva. She drank a glass of neat gin but his taste remained. She brushed her teeth and rinsed her mouth with baking soda dissolved in water. She stripped hurriedly, leaving her clothes in a pile on the floor, and stepped into a scalding shower.

'She saw through me completely,' Kiry told himself happily but then he sighed. Wasn't there a more agreeable way to imagine her naked? Why not this: instead of being discomforted by the politeness and savagery that were twins within him—who should really be surprised by that anymore?—perhaps she was distressed by the fact that she admired him anyway.

Now Kiry imagined her in a bathtub full of bubbles, licking a glass of Champagne,

her hair unfurled, loose strands of it steamed to her neck, her hand gently tickling her belly. She was, Kiry saw, thinking about him and what might have been in a world where people were not prisoners of perception, obliged to continually modify behaviour to avoid embarrassment. He invented a happy headline: **Red Cross Head Elopes With Khmer Rouge Mouthpiece**.

He shook himself back into the real world, back to the shell of an office he would shortly abandon. He admonished himself for his weakness: 'Lustful thoughts lead to evil acts,' he was forever telling Sok, which made Sok a very evil man indeed.

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Cuba's position on the problems of South-East Asia is crystal clear. For our people, Viet Nam is sacred. We once swore that we were willing to die for Viet Nam. No other people of recent times has paid such a high price in sacrifice, suffering and death in order to be free; no people has made a greater contribution to the national liberation struggle; no other people has done so much in this period to create a universal anti-imperialism consciousness. Now, when Viet Nam has been made the victim of intrigue, slander and encirclement by the Yankee imperialists and of betrayal, conspiracy and aggression by the Government of China, Cuba offers its firmest support. We recognise the only real, legitimate Government of Kampuchea, and endorse Vietnam's solidarity with that country. With all our energy, we condemn the genocidal Government of Pol Pot and Ieng Sary. Three million dead accuse them. Even Sihanouk has admitted that some of his relatives were murdered. It is a shameful thing for the progressive forces of the world that such crimes could ever have been committed in the name of the revolution and socialism.
—Fidel Castro, address to Sixth Conference of Heads of State or Government of Non-Aligned Countries, Havana, September 1979.

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Via four or five airports, with nothing to eat but dry sandwiches (fillings indeterminable) and nowhere to sleep but hard plastic chairs, with chubby ankles and a knotted neck, I made my way from Phnom Penh to Cuba. On the descent into Havana the advance gusts of Hurricane David rocked the plane. I felt faintly nauseous but, then, it had been a tiring trip and a sickening year. Inexplicable realities—the extent of the Khmer Rouge catastrophe, China's shameless persecution of Vietnam and its ridiculous spat with the Soviets—had shattered my worldview. Watching my friends argue I finally had to take sides. I chose Vietnam: it was the easiest of decisions but nothing could diminish my anger at being made to choose at all.

I really didn't know why I had bothered to come to the conference. It was habit, I supposed, but I was finally beginning to learn that some habits are bad. None of these so-called non-aligned countries were neutral. They probably never had been. They didn't care, not really, about Afghans or Palestinians or Namibians. And none of them had responded to the mess in Cambodia based on what was best for the Cambodian people. Some delegates supported the People's Republic of Kampuchea because they were allied to Vietnam, which meant that they were for the Soviets, which meant that they hated China. Some delegates

loved China, which meant that they endured the Khmer Rouge, condemned Vietnam and feared the Soviets. Mistaking cowardice for even-handedness, the non-aligned community of nations declared the Kampuchean seat at the conference vacant.

I took my irritation to my old friend, Castro, who had invited me to dinner at his private residence.

'A present for you, Mr President,' I said, handing him a purple and orange Hawaiian shirt.

'Thank you, Ted, how delightful,' he said via his translator, whose amused look indicated that she was not relaying his first, spontaneous reaction. 'I'm sure I'll think of some use for it.'

While we ate, I tried to explain my distress at the direction the non-aligned movement was taking. 'It used to be so pure, don't you think. But now, well, there seem to be a thousand or more agendas at play.'

'You're hilarious,' Castro said as he chewed on a chunk of charred steak.

'I'm pleased to be the source of such amusement.'

'I always thought your innocence was a weapon; well-aimed, too. Are you really so naïve?'

'I heard a rumour about you when I was in London,' I countered.

'Oh yes?'

'Apparently you've been dead for a decade or more. Your aides have stuffed you—"He's shinier than Lenin," according to my source—and lodged a tape recorder in your chest cavity. They prop you up—"When's the last time you saw him when he wasn't leaning on a podium?" my source said—and move your mouth with fishing line attached to your jaw every time you give a speech.'

'I'm immortal? So nice of you to say so.' Having finished his steak, Castro pushed his chair away from the table and clasped his hands across his stomach. 'I have a confession to make. I'm afraid I have accidentally dropped Mr Nhem Kiry's conference accreditation papers in a bowl of punch. They are wet and sticky. But I will certainly deliver them to him just as soon as they dry out.'

'Where are they now?'

'His accreditation papers? They are hanging from pegs on a rope in my garden.'

'It's quite windy outside. Have you noticed? The newspaper mentioned something about a hurricane.'

'Oh dear. Now that is unfortunate. I have another confession to make.'

'Do you need a priest?'

'Probably, but not now, I'm trying to confess: I'm afraid that the hotel is over-booked. I have, with great reluctance, been forced to house Mr Nhem Kiry and his entourage in another hotel. It is only a half an hour away, depending, of course, on the state of the road.'

'Cuban roads are terrible. I know, I read it in the *New York Post*.'

'It is the best I could do. I feel dreadful but as the leader of my country sometimes I am forced to make unpleasant decisions. Please believe me, the burden is heavy.'

'I'm going to do something radical.'

'You? Surely not? Don't forget you're a journalist.'

'Well, exactly: I'm going to talk to everybody.'

'Everybody?'

'You don't mind, do you?'

'And what if I do? You are Edward Whittlemore, fearless and independent. I am merely an eminent world leader and a famed revolutionary. What could *I* do to stop *you*? And why would I want to stop you? If you want to waste your time you should feel free to do so.'

'All I want is a dialogue. A real dialogue rather than all this mock consensus.'

'I promise you, we will all agree to hate the imperialist devils, the United States of America. Isn't that enough?'

'You know it isn't.'

'No. But it's good sport. And it's not unimportant.'

I resolved to be friendly and open to every delegate I encountered, no matter what bloc they pretended not to belong to. I especially wanted to pay my respects to General Tito, the Yugoslav hero of non-alignment. I scripted a carefully constructed tribute, taking great pains to avoid castigating him for his support of the Khmer Rouge. Neither did my words resemble, as did the official acclamations of delegate after delegate, a eulogy for the poor fellow, who was ailing but not yet dead.

On the evening of the third night I arrived at a Yugoslav cocktail party but I didn't get past the outer ring of bodyguards.

'I'm sorry, Mr Whittlemore, but this is a closed session.'

I looked past him. There must have been a thousand people crammed into the room.

'I've been invited,' I lied, but my new friend wrapped an arm around my waist and firmly led me away.

I visited the Cambodian delegation and met Hun Sen, the young man the Vietnamese had chosen to be foreign minister. Despite my best efforts, I stared with a combination of wonder and horror at his child-like face. I had hoped to interview him but I decided that it just didn't seem fair on the boy.

'What are your impressions of Cuba?' I asked him instead.

'It's windy,' he replied. 'My hotel room is very pleasant.'

I encountered Singapore's foreign minister drinking coffee at a table beside the indoor pool.

'Can I join you?'

'If you must.'

'Would you comment on the situation in Cambodia?' I asked.

'Again? Very well: if this conference legitimises the Kampuchean regime installed by Vietnam we will be sanctioning the right of a country to interfere militarily in another country because we consider him a savage. In doing so, we will set a horrifying precedent. There are many other countries that will be glad to label their neighbours savages when the right time comes and the money is right, when the interests are right. Remember, it was only after armed aggression against Kampuchea that Pol Pot was discovered to be a barbarous man. Who created and built the Khmer Rouge? Those who now accuse the Khmer Rouge of barbarism. The creators accuse their creation of barbarism.'

'I asked you if you would comment on the situation in Cambodia,' I said. 'I already know what people are saying in Cuba.'

'It must be wonderful,' he said as he stood to leave, 'to be completely and utterly without responsibility in the world.'

I wandered around buffets and cocktails parties, engaging in small talk while eavesdropping on as many conversations as I could manage. At one point I sat in a toilet

cubicle for two hours and got three stories that began, 'Sources close to the delegation confirmed today that—.' I was a close source, too: you're an intimate when you've listened to the almost human-like noises powerful men make when they relieve themselves.

I witnessed the signing of several Memorandums of Understanding, pieces of paper resolving some minor issue or other, the wording of which came after years of painful negotiation to extract any potential hidden meaning, indeed any meaning at all. If the issue was deemed especially important the parties would sign their documents behind a table with a white cloth and a bowl of flowers, after which they would swap pens and shake hands and, if they really hated each other, hug and kiss for the cameras.

And I sat through a hundred or more interminable speeches, from which I learnt nothing.

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On the afternoon of my last day in Cuba, when Hurricane David had blown itself out, and a couple of days before Hurricane Norman hit the coast, I convinced a reluctant local to drive me to Nhem Kiry's hotel. While I waited for Kiry to respond to my request for a meeting—in truth, I expected to be evicted—I sat on a sofa in the lobby, sipped a beer and read the speech that Kiry would have given had he been allowed to address the conference: *The current tragedy in Kampuchea fills us with sorrow but also with exasperation. We cannot comprehend how a certain country, posing as a non-aligned friend, has used brutal force to compel our country to join its faction and bloc. If our non-aligned movement rewards such disregard for non-aligned principles then the war that is waging in Kampuchea will undoubtedly spread to Southeast Asia and maybe throughout the world.*

'Good afternoon, Edward,' a soft voice beside me said. 'What a pleasant surprise after all these years.'

I half rose, compelled to take Nhem Kiry's extended hand and shake it. Although he did not squeeze hard, I fought to contain a shudder.

'Very nice to see you Mr, uh, Mr Prime Minister. Would you like to take a seat?'

'For a moment. Thank you for coming. I've been rather bereft of visitors here.' He paused then smiled. 'Apart, of course, from my many friends and allies from fraternal governments and from the world's media who have called on me to express their solidarity with my predicament and to reinforce our mutual commitment to the dear principles of non-

alignment.'

'Yes, I was just reading your speech.'

'What do you think of it?'

'Well, I haven't finished it yet. And it is such a detailed document that I confess that I might need to ponder its complexities before I offer comment.'

'Really, Edward, you surprise me. Will you not speak your mind?'

'Very well. I was interested to see that you predict World War Three.'

'You are right. You *do* need to ponder its complexities.'

'Mr Prime Minister, I have sent you several requests for an interview in the last week. Have you considered my requests?'

'It is impossible today, I think. I'm waiting for a car. I'm going to take in the sights, now that the weather is easing. I am keen to visit the former residence of the famous writer, Mr Ernest Hemingway, if it has not blown away.'

'Might I ask you, Mr Prime Minister, your opinion of Hemingway?'

'As a writer or as a man?'

'Let's say as a writer.'

'Off the record?'

'Yes, of course.'

'I think—' Kiry paused, and looked at me as if *I* was a fat, loud, self-serving, gun-toting American. 'I think he thought that war existed so that he could write about himself.'

'Can I clarify, Mr Prime Minister, do you refer to his reportage or his fiction?'

'It's all fiction, Edward. You of all people should know that.'

'You must be disappointed at not being allowed to address the Non-Aligned Summit.'

'Off the record? No, I'm not at all disappointed. I have found the last few days to be most revealing. And I have been gratified by the majority show of support for me and my country's sad predicament.'

'I have heard that Castro had Mr Hun Sen to dinner at home. I believe that they ate steak. What do you think of that?'

'I have nothing against carnivores. I have been known to eat steak myself. Although only very occasionally, of course.'

'What about Castro?'

'No, I have no desire to eat President Castro. You've been listening to too many nasty refugee rumours.'

'Do you have anything against him?'

'I think Castro was a very interesting man, in his time. But I never thought I would see a revolutionary hero use base political tactics to prevent a legitimate and honourable government from taking its place amongst the family of non-aligned nations. Still, I would not dream of telling him with whom he should eat.'

'And what do you think of Hun Sen?'

'Sadly, young minds are so pliable. I think Mr Hun Sen fits very well with a Kampuchea that is overrun with Vietnamese imperialists. You might even say that one is impossible without the other.'

'How do you respond to claims—to the mounting evidence, to the inescapable truth—of Khmer Rouge atrocities between 1975 and 1979?'

'I do not respond to misinformed rumours.' Kiry smiled. 'Not even off the record.'

'But I've been to Phnom Penh since the Vietnamese liberated Cambodia and—'

'Liberated? That's a curious way to describe a foreign invasion.'

'I've seen it with my own eyes.'

'You've seen misinformed rumours with your own eyes? Yes, I've heard that you are spending more and more time in Hanoi. Well, you should not believe everything you read about the government of Democratic Kampuchea, nor about me personally.' Kiry pulled a neatly folded piece of paper from his breast pocket, glanced at me, winked—I swear it—and read: '*In trying to understand the worst excesses of the Khmer Rouge let us look first to the psychology of the impotent intellectual, Nhem Kiry. Chronic impotence, unless due to physical factors, can result from profound hostility to an individual's environment. Nhem Kiry was a sickly child, a friendless, bewildered youth, and a meek, persecuted man. When power came his way in 1975 he was almost certainly overcome with vengeance.*'

'Do you have a response?'

'Fervour is the weapon of choice for the impotent,' Kiry murmured, apparently for his own benefit. 'Needless to say, my wife was shocked to learn of my condition. She cannot now understand how our daughters came to exist. It must be Immaculate Conception, I told

her. Books from the West never lie, I told her.' Kiry stood up. 'Please excuse me; it is time for me to go and be a tourist.'

~*~

New York City

15 July 1980

My dear Ted

I declined to publish your most recent submissions not, as you put it with your usual mix of misconception and bluster, because I am a 'fawning coward who would rather drown in shit than admit I've fallen in it'; I have rejected them because you have abandoned all objectivity. If I want official comment from the Vietnamese government I will print their press releases and quote their officials. If this observation offends you, please feel free to demonstrate your displeasure by making no further submissions. And please bear in mind that I am under no obligation to provide any explanation to you.

As for this "interview" with Nhem Kiry, what do you take me for? Suspicious does not begin to explain my response. Mr Kiry seems to answer a series of questions in a manner, and within a context, that is astonishingly advantageous to your beliefs. The subject conveniently confirms everything you might wish of him which makes me think you must be a very fine interviewer indeed.

Lest you accuse me of some sort of vendetta, be aware that I have shown your piece to several colleagues and specialists, not because I had entertained any possibility of publication but to confirm my suspicions as to how far you have allowed your professional and moral standards to fall. If I may quote one of those specialists, who I will not name so as not to drag him into this matter: 'This is a blatant fabrication, made all the worse because the author has interspersed invention with statements that are sufficiently similar to statements made by various Democratic Kampuchea personalities so as to be plausible. I condemn the author of this fiction unreservedly.'

I am sorry, Edward, and I say this with our memorable association in mind, and of course our friendship, but the fact is I have been far too tolerant for far too long. All of us here remember your outstanding and brave dispatches from Vietnam over many years. Nevertheless, this behaviour is reprehensible and unforgivable. Sordid, even. Apart from anything else, you do great damage to the cause you appear so eager to serve.

Regretfully,

Franklin Gatt

Editor-in-Chief, the Communal

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Interview by Edward Whittlemore with Nhem Kiry, Prime Minister of Democratic Kampuchea, in a transit lounge of Singapore airport, 23 June 1980.

TED WHITTLEMORE: How do you respond to the mounting evidence, indeed to the inescapable truth, that the Khmer Rouge committed massacres and other acts of atrocity in Cambodia between 1975 and 1979?

NHEM KIRY: The claims are ridiculous and unfounded. I will admit that we made some mistakes. We are not perfect. Many Kampucheans, one million maybe, lost their lives during the war. But talk of massacres during the 1975-79 period is propaganda spread by the western media. And by the Vietnamese to protect their own crimes. And by traitors who fled Democratic Kampuchea out of self-interest.

TED WHITTLEMORE: Mr Prime Minister, would you comment on the claim that Democratic Kampuchea was excessive in its execution of so-called 'war criminals' from the previous Lon Nol regime?

NHEM KIRY: Why must I answer this question again and again? Those criminals committed heinous crimes against Democratic Kampuchea and against the Kampuchean people. When we were victorious it was of course necessary to execute war criminals from the previous regime. The people expected no less of us. But any other killings were the work of Vietnamese agents and infiltrators and their supporters. I became a revolutionary because I love the people of Kampuchea. Why would I kill them?

TED WHITTLEMORE: What about your policy of emptying Phnom Penh and the other cities, and sending all the people into the countryside?

NHEM KIRY: Please remember first that when we arrived Phnom Penh was a city full of refugees, more than two million people. Many of those who left the city were simply peasants returning to their homes. And Phnom Penh was so riddled with vice and corruption that starting again was the best option.

TED WHITTLEMORE: Mister Prime Minister, you must have been disappointed at not being permitted to address the non-aligned conference last year in Cuba?

NHEM KIRY: I was disappointed, of course, but not surprised. Some countries are neutral in name alone: Vietnam and Cuba colluded to keep the Kampuchean seat empty, to exclude us from our rightful place as a fully committed member of the non-aligned movement. Of

course Cuba must conduct itself as it sees fit, but its active discrimination against Democratic Kampuchea, the sole legal and legitimate government of the Kampuchean people, and its imposing on the non-aligned movement of the Phnom Penh puppet regime, is a blatant attempt to legalise Vietnamese aggression against the Kampuchean people, who suffer gravely. Of course, I was heartened by the attitudes of so many sympathetic friends and colleagues, and I believe I persuaded open-minded leaders to look again at our record and judge for themselves. I sensed a great resolve to protect the purity of the non-aligned movement from the Cuba-Vietnam sabotage.

TED WHITTLEMORE: What needs to happen for you to improve your situation on the ground in Kampuchea?

NHEM KIRY: First of all, please note that the Kampuchean people, not just our guerrilla fighters but also the patriotic people, are already beginning to act against the Vietnamese. It is the duty of all Khmers to achieve the greatest possible national unity to fight the Vietnamese imperialists and to save our homeland. That means all patriotic forces should work together. I am prepared to meet Prince Sihanouk, and if he agrees to a union we will re-organise our own government so as to acknowledge Sihanouk's importance. The alternative is to compromise with the Vietnamese and this would not only be against the interests of the Kampuchean people, but also against the interests of Asia and of the West.

TED WHITTLEMORE: If you win the war against Vietnam can we expect a repeat of your past policies?

NHEM KIRY: Oh no, not at all. Our country had its chance for socialism but that time has passed. When we free Kampuchea from the imperialists, we will support capitalist enterprises, we will encourage local entrepreneurs, and we will gratefully welcome foreign aid and foreign investment. Please understand that it is impossible to scramble an egg twice.

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Hanoi

3 August 1980

Dear Frank,

'Sordid' certainly is the word. I can remember a day, not so long ago, when the editorial position of the Communal was to support the Khmer Rouge. I know this to be true because, to my shame and ongoing dismay, I wrote some of those articles. I cannot

comprehend how any decent editor—any decent human being—would not now do everything in his power to recant that previous position. And then recant again. And again. And again. That is all my articles have sought to do: set the record straight. It is of enduring regret to me that you would deny me the opportunity to reflect on the true nature of the Khmer Rouge, given that I once praised them in these same pages. I cannot comprehend that you have such indifference to your reputation, which you must realise requires immediate rehabilitation.

You seem to believe that the war in Vietnam finished when Henry Kissinger says it finished. I never thought I would say this about you, Frank, but you have turned out to be an American first and a radical second. Just like all the others. Sordid doesn't come close to describing you.

With my best wishes, despite everything, to you and to Jenny and the children,

Ted

~*~

I note with astonishment that the communist journalist, Edward Whittlemore—I use the term 'journalist' with great reluctance—is again planning to visit the United States of America, despite his public claim that our great land is 'the principal purveyor of evil in the modern world.' I can barely find the words to register my disgust at the extent of his effrontery: this is the very same man who during the long and difficult peace negotiations in Vietnam, when our opponents systematically undermined our administration's efforts to find common ground and end bloodshed, worked as an unofficial but key spokesman for the Viet Minh leadership. At the same time he donned black pyjamas and paraded around the Mekong Delta, such was his desire to become more Vietnamese than the Vietnamese. And he ensconced himself in Beijing in the entourage of the disgraced former Cambodian leader, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, and co-wrote with the prince that laughable tract, The CIA Ambush of Cambodia.

Remember that Whittlemore is an Australian. I have put on the record before, and I repeat it here today: Australia has been, Australia remains, one of our most loyal friends. Australia stood beside us in Vietnam because we asked them to. Australia understands what we are trying to achieve in the world because Australia shares our dreams and embraces our values. It is all the more shocking, then, that Edward Whittlemore behaved so appallingly in Vietnam, given that Australians fought and died defending democracy there.

Perhaps most damning is the revelation that Whittlemore met Henry Kissinger at least once in 1971. Of course, no adverse implications attach to Dr Kissinger in this matter. Indeed, the record reflects that Dr Kissinger, in those long years, undertook to speak to anybody from the other side who showed even the slightest inclination to at least consider a peaceful resolution. As Mr Whittlemore published no article following his meeting with Mr Kissinger we are left to wonder if he was conducting an interview or if he was negotiating with the American government on behalf of the Viet Minh. Was he, in short, journalist or diplomat? Was he Australian or Vietnamese or, more to the point, was he Soviet?

Today Mr Whittlemore asks to fly to our national capital—the home of democracy, no less. He plans to address an auditorium of our own young men and women. We must ask ourselves whether we want a communist polemicist telling red tales to our youth. More than that, we must question if his bumbling personality is a deliberate exercise to hide a more insidious and direct involvement in international communism.

Of course we must grant him his visa: in this country we don't just talk about free speech, we actually believe in it. But we also believe in the right to protest. I will be standing outside the Wilt Chamberlain Auditorium with a placard when he comes. Where will you be?

—Senator Alexander Bernard Jackson, Speech on the floor of the US Senate, Congressional Record, *9 March 1981*

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While the cricketers paused for lunch William and I watched an ex-footballer with a bald head and a peppery beard catching swordfish and telling bad jokes: fishing is not a television sport.

'That Beryl Makin doesn't like you very much, does she?' William said.

'Who's Beryl? Is she the one in the wheelchair?'

'No. She has a limp. I think she's got one of those fibreglass hips.'

'That's no help: everybody here's got a limp. Hello, Sunshine,' I said to Martha, the volunteer tea lady.

'Hello boys. The usual, William?'

'Thank you, my dear.'

'Which one is Beryl?' I persisted. 'Is she the one who wears the hat with the fruit on Sundays?'

'No, that's Constance. That's Beryl, just over there. See, she looks as if she'd like to murder you.'

William was right: Beryl wore a face of pure disdain. A burst of nostalgia warmed me.

'Nothing I can't handle,' I said.

'Oh, really?'

'I've spent my life enduring misguided criticism. Strangers were forever slandering me in bars or in the toilet queue on airplanes. "Commie arsehole," they'd say. Journalists were the worst. One joker held me personally responsible for the death of every South Vietnamese person he'd ever met. And that politician—what was his name, you remember don't you, William, he had those enormous ears?—tried to revoke my citizenship. And then there—'

'Well, everybody around here likes you,' Martha said. 'Don't they, William?'

'Everybody except for Beryl,' William said.

'But American politicians were the worst of all,' I continued.

William rolled his eyes for Martha's benefit but I carried on regardless. 'One time I went to the University of SomeplacemadetosoundAthenian to talk about America's shameful backing of the Khmer Rouge. These were young adults, quite capable of thinking for themselves, at least to the extent that anybody in the US does so. I was met by a motley-looking posse—trucked in from some prayer meeting, I imagine—who waved **IN DEFENCE OF DEMOCRACY** placards and chanted 'Traitor.' Traitor to what, I wanted to ask them. The chief cheerleader was my old friend, Senator Jackson—you'd remember him, wouldn't you William? He dipped his hands in a bucket of ketchup, which signified, I don't know, his love of hot dogs? He chased me through a fake acropolis and threatened to dump the rest of the bucket on me.'

'Weird tea for you, Edward?'

'It's jasmine tea. It's hardly weird. And I'd like a wedge of lime, too.'

'As you well know, I've only got lemon.'

'It's better with lime.'

'Snob,' Beryl called from across the room.

'I beg your pardon?'

'You heard me: you're an Asian snob.'

I stood and said, 'Excuse me a moment.'

'Oh dear,' Martha said. 'Don't spill your tea. It's very hot.'

'The cricket starts in five minutes,' William said.

I crossed the room, moved Beryl's aluminium frame from in front of the chair beside her and sat down.

'Hello.'

'I'll have you know my son went to Vietnam.'

'During the war?'

'Of course during the war. When else?' Her voice was rough around the edges—like a city actor playing a roustabout—yet she also sounded English upper-crust. 'He's had such a terrible time of it, you know.'

'No, I didn't know. But I'm sorry to hear it.'

'Are you? Are you really?'

'Obviously I don't know your son but I'm sure he was a very fine young man—'

'He *is* a very fine man, I'll have you know.'

'Well, that's good. I'm pleased.'

She stared, waiting for me to continue.

'It was a horrid war,' I said.

'I can read, you know.'

'I don't doubt it for a moment, my dear lady.'

'Don't you "my dear lady" me. I used to read every single word that you wrote about our boys.'

'I doubt that: I wrote so much.'

'Every word, I tell you.'

'Well, that was a long time ago.'

'You called my boy a criminal.'

'I never did. I never even met your boy.'

'Yes you did. I remember things. You said my boy was a murderer, don't pretend you didn't.'

'I said no such thing. I certainly opposed your boy going to Vietnam. I would have said so then and I'll say it again now. I was against him being forced to kill innocent Vietnamese. That doesn't mean I thought he was a murderer. I opposed him killing and being killed too. That's all.'

'That's all? That's all? I sat by the telephone, I'll have you know, every day for nine months. My husband, God rest his soul, was never the same again. Our Dennis was over there risking his life, and it's not as though we didn't have money because we did, and people like you were telling me that he was doing it for no reason. It was all very well those awful protestors saying it, but you said it in the newspapers. That made it official.'

'It was my job.'

'Some job.'

'It was nothing personal. Actually, I was on his side.'

'Don't be ridiculous.'

'Did you know that the Vietnamese call the war the American War?'

'Well they would, wouldn't they.'

'Would you like to come and watch the cricket with me and William?'

She reared back as if evading a punch. Then she drew close and whispered, fiercely, 'You're either a turncoat or you're a damned fool.'

~*~

Only one week ago Vietnamese radio in Phnom Penh broadcast a draft constitution supposedly produced by the Phnom Penh puppets. This is the stock-standard scam that the Vietnamese imperialists resort to every time the weight of world opinion against their criminal military occupation of Kampuchea becomes too heavy. Last year the 35th UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 35/6 by a staggering majority and so demanded the immediate withdrawal of all Vietnamese troops from Kampuchea. Only last week delegates of a number of countries at the 37th session of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, held in Geneva, Switzerland, condemned Vietnam's gross violations of Kampuchean sovereignty. Everybody knows that the Vietnamese troops are pursuing the heinous policy of genocide, and are carrying out acts of wanton destruction against innocent Kampucheans, including acts of arson, massacre, plunder and rape. The Kampuchean people have no choice but to continue to fight the Vietnamese occupier to liberate Kampuchea and to safeguard the Khmer race. Meanwhile, the peoples of the world recognise that they must give support and assistance to the Kampuchean people's struggle on the battlefield. Our aims are simple and honourable: the withdrawal of all Vietnamese fighters and illegal settlers; a free election supervised by the United Nations; and a Constitution written and endorsed by the Kampuchean people themselves.

—Voice of Democratic Kampuchea, *20 February 1981*

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Three hours from Phnom Penh, returning from the ancient capital of Udong in an old, cramped Mercedes van, I was in high spirits. I sat in the back seat behind Freddie, an old Vietnamese friend of mine who was the most skilful and artistic driver on bad roads I ever met. Beside me sat Rachel Walker, a thirtyish Australian filmmaker who was directing a documentary about post-Pol Pot Cambodia, for which I had been employed to offer an alternative viewpoint—or, as Rachel put it, 'If you're not going to be controversial you're no good to me.' On my left was Adam, sound recordist and Rachel's self-appointed personal assistant. He slept slumped against Rachel, rubbing his perspiration all over her white cotton shirt, his snores suspiciously uniform. In the front passenger seat sat Tom the cameraman, rendered sullen by an intestinal complaint that required him to squat on the road—a fear of landmines kept him out of the bushes—three or four times an hour.

Earlier in the day we had filmed on Udong Mountain: 'We all know the history of

America's crimes in Cambodia. Engineering the coup against Sihanouk, dropping more bombs than fell on all of Europe in World War Two,' I said, a brand new *krama* draped over one shoulder. 'But their behaviour now is, if such a thing is possible, even more reprehensible. Now nobody doubts the crimes of the Khmer Rouge yet the Americans, via their dependencies, and through conjuring tricks far less elaborate than they seem to imagine, now support the Khmer Rouge. In so doing, they continue to place their own misguided interests above the needs of the Cambodian people. And, of course, Australia falls into line behind America.'

'But the Australian Foreign Minister has recently taken diplomatic steps against the Khmer Rouge, don't you agree?'

'I do not agree. He does nothing more than flirt with his local constituency while ensuring he does nothing concrete to truly upset the Americans, who understand well enough his true position.'

As we drove back to Phnom Penh I said to Rachel, 'You really should go to Vietnam.'

'We haven't got the budget for Vietnam. Besides, you're the one who keeps insisting that Cambodians are running Cambodia.'

'You should talk to Nguyen Co Thach. He's a wonderful man. I could arrange it, if you like. He will tell you the truth. He will be happy for you to ask him anything you want. You can't ask for more than that.'

Freddie tapped the steering wheel and sang. '*It takes three years of graft and fret, It takes I ain't got no cigarettes.*'

Tom lifted his head out of his hands and said, 'If you don't shut up I'm going to open the door and push you out.'

'I'm a ma-hann of wonder, I'm the, ugh, ugh, king of the road.'

The first shots were high and wide. I heard dull thuds as the bullets embedded themselves into dirt and a sugar palm behind us. I gripped Rachel's thigh—well, my hand was already in that general vicinity. She swatted me away and said, 'You won't find much of a story up there.'

'Step on it, would you Freddie,' I said.

Freddie turned his head and met my eyes, suddenly realising what was happening. The air whistled and a C-40 rocket hit the road twenty yards ahead of us. Freddie accelerated

on impulse and nearly drove us down an embankment, where we would have sat like a tree waiting to be lopped.

Tom turned and screamed, 'I need my camera: now, NOW.'

An hour before, he'd reluctantly relinquished it so he could make instant exits from the car to relieve himself. I extracted it from between Adam's feet, which involved shoving him back in his seat and forcing him to stay sitting up. There was nothing but a clump of trees on the far side of a dry paddy field but Tom twisted in his seat, held his camera in front of his heart like a shield and commenced filming.

'Quick as you can, mate,' I leaned forward and said to Freddie, all the while patting Adam on the back and squeezing Rachel's quivering thigh with my other hand (war has its advantages).

'I wish I'd thought of that,' Freddie said as he accelerated around a ditch. We bounced and Freddie's window shattered.

'Faster, you little fuckwit, faster,' Adam screamed.

Another rocket landed behind us, closer, on the fringe between the road and the field. I ducked as we shook, for all the good that served: they either missed or they killed us. When I looked up Tom was filming Freddie, who was bleeding profusely.

'I'm all right,' Freddie said. 'It's nothing. I hit my chin on the steering wheel.'

More gunfire followed, but the popping noises became more distant. I heard a third rocket fall but this time we didn't shake. But when I looked out the back window I saw a truck with figures standing on the open tray rumbling across the paddy field towards the dust cloud that Freddie had whipped up.

'Faster, Freddie,' I said. 'They're coming.'

'What's the matter with you, are you fucking mental or something? FASTER.'

'For Chrissakes, Adam, will you shut up,' Rachel said.

Freddie's whole torso was red now.

'Jesus, they've shot you, haven't they?' Tom said

'I'm all right. It's just my shoulder. No problem.'

We reached a decent patch of road. Freddie accelerated; the Khmer Rouge quickly fell back and then disappeared.

'Tom, give me a shot of Ted. Can you get him? Good. Adam, are you right to go?'

Rachel said. 'Ready?' she asked me.

'Ready for what?'

'Describe it.'

'I, well, describe what?'

'Tell me what's gone on out there. Tell me what's happening inside your head. Tell me how you formulate your thoughts, how your decision-making works. Come on, Ted, paint me a word picture.'

'A word picture?' Adam yelled. 'Jesus fucking Christ, woman, are you nuts? They're trying to kill us.'

'Come on, Ted.'

'I can't, I mean, I'm thinking is Freddie all right to drive, how bad is the injury, if he's—'

'I'm all right. It's worse than it looks. There's a checkpoint soon.'

'He's slowing down,' Adam yelled. 'Why's he slowing down? Why the fuck are you slowing down?'

'But what else, Ted? Give me something more.'

'I'm petrified, all right? I'm petrified because we've got no options.'

'What are you doing, Freddie?' Adam screamed. 'Come on, what the fuck are you doing?'

Freddie twisted his head and snarled, 'I'm driving, you little coward. And they're gone.'

'We're still rolling, Ted,' Rachel said.

'All right.' I paused, restored calm on my face and said, 'For me, being in battle remains life's most astonishing experience. Time slows. The usual survival techniques don't apply because the whole point is to witness the action. In the field, something inside me tells me when to run forward, when to drop down, which soldier to be beside, when to hold my position and when to fall back. How was that?'

'It'll do for now.'

Ten minutes later we reached a Vietnamese checkpoint. As a medic dressed Freddie's wound—it was bloody but not serious—I told the captain what had happened. He waved soldiers into a truck and they set off to retaliate. Rachel stared wistfully after them: 'Is there

any chance they'd let us tag along?'

Later, when we'd left Freddie in the military hospital, when we'd showered (and when Adam had shaved), when they'd eaten and I'd downed ten bottles of beer in an hour, we filmed one last shot.

'Inferior war correspondents often say, "Whittlemore's a maniac. Whittlemore has a death wish." But actually, the opposite is true: I plan to work forever. If I ever get shot between the eyes I expect that the bullet will bounce off my skull or obliterate nothing more than that part of my brain that directs restraint—I rarely use it anyway. If I ever step on a landmine I'm sure that the explosion will throw me unscathed into a trench from where I will witness, on behalf of the world, another moment of American military excess.'

'But it was the Khmer Rouge, not the Americans, who shot at us today,' Rachel said.

'Exactly: I complain about America and, what do you know, the Khmer Rouge come after me. It really does make you wonder if there's a hotline between Pol Pot and the State Department. I've already spoken to one of my contacts about the attack on us, you know.'

'Who?'

'Well, obviously I can't disclose names but it was a Vietnamese military attaché with close ties to a Cambodian public servant with close ties to a Khmer Rouge military officer. Everybody knows everybody around here. There's no doubt that their brief was to kill me. "Get Whittlemore," Pol Pot told them, and that makes me proud to be an Australian, proud to be a citizen of the world.'

Tom's head came from behind the camera.

'Okay?' I mouthed.

He shook his head and said, 'I'm sorry, Rachel, there's something wrong with my battery. I missed the whole thing.'

'Oh no,' I said. 'I don't think I can remember what I said.'

~*~

Prince Norodom Sihanouk, former head of state of Cambodia and now head of the Funcinpec resistance group, will this week receive the so-called leader of the Khmer Rouge, Mr Nhem Kiry, in the palace that the prince's friend, North Korean leader Kim Il-Sung, has permanently loaned him. The purpose of the meeting is to discuss ways to form a common front against Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia. A third resistance leader, the KPNLF's Son Sann, has declined to join Sihanouk and Kiry for this round of talks. Perhaps he fears the poisonous atmosphere likely to prevail between his two potential allies, who share a convoluted history. In 1967, Nhem Kiry fled to the marquis as a direct result of Sihanouk's denunciations of his conduct. During the Khmer Rouge years Sihanouk was under house arrest in the Royal Palace for approximately two years. His sole contact with the Khmer Rouge leaders during that time was Nhem Kiry. Typically, Sihanouk has already downplayed this week's meeting. 'I cannot believe that these negotiations will achieve much. I will suggest that we resume negotiations another time, if my busy schedule allows it.'

—New York News, *25 February 1981, p.12*

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The furniture polish made Kiry's nose run. He dropped his propelling pencil. As he bent down to retrieve it he sniffed deeply and wiped his nose with the sleeve of his suit jacket. Upright again, he was drawn to the reflection in the redwood table, where his forehead merged with Sihanouk's ear. Sihanouk patted the table proudly—it ran almost the length of the rectangular room—and said, 'This was cut from a single tree. Can you believe that?' Hot air blew from vents in the floor. A portrait of Sihanouk and Monique, young and seductive and shiny, hung in a gold frame above the fireplace.

'What a gorgeous room this is, Your Majesty,' Kiry said, refusing to allow the opulence to unnerve him. He stood and could not help but admire the view from the panoramic window: a frozen lake in front of low, well-rounded, snow-covered hills; a single sentry, still as a statue, his weapon glinting in the sunlight.

Sihanouk's butler left coffee and a plate of croissants and fruit. They were alone now, free to read their lines, but Sihanouk procrastinated. He overfilled his coffee cup then used a teaspoon to return the excess to the silver pot. He stirred through one and a half teaspoons of sugar—'Sweets for the sweet, hee hee'—and added a dollop of thick yellow cream.

'We've got five cows. They've got their own shed—water, hay, straw, warm water. I wish I had their life, ha ha.'

He peeled an orange, giggling with mock apology when he squeezed too hard and sprayed juice all over Kiry's clasped hands. Kiry wiped himself with a napkin, his impatience barely suppressed.

'Sihanouk has concerns,' Sihanouk finally said.

'I know. I read about them in the newspaper.'

'Sihanouk has concerns about a union between the resistance groups. I am not optimistic that our negotiations will succeed and—'

'With the greatest respect, Your Majesty, why agree to this meeting? Why bother to invite me here?'

'And, as you see, we could not even convince Son Sann to join us to talk—merely to talk—so what hope is there?'

'Son Sann will do what he's told when the time comes.'

A chunk of croissant lodged in Sihanouk's throat. He commenced a coughing fit.

'I know the Heimlich Manoeuvre,' Kiry said.

Sihanouk shook his head, swigged coffee—'Ugh, cold already'—and miraculously recovered. 'You know why I invited you here.'

'With the greatest respect, Your Majesty, I cannot imagine why anyone would call a meeting that they didn't want to have. We're alone. You can speak freely.'

'Alone? Of course we're not alone. Deng Xiaoping is in this room. The Thais are in this room. Alexander Haig is here, Ronald Reagan is here. Alone? *Alone*? Pol Pot is in this room, and Nuon Chea and Ieng Sary and—'

'Perhaps we should call for more coffee.'

'I will tell you my concerns.'

'I read them in the newspaper.'

'I will tell you Sihanouk's concerns.'

'Tell me, Your Majesty, tell me all of them.'

'I want my flag back.'

'Your flag?'

'Sihanouk's flag. Cambodia's true flag.'

'Democratic Kampuchea's flag is a fine flag. Many patriotic men and women have fought and died for that flag.'

'Twenty-seven members of my extended family—'

'You want twenty-seven of them in the leadership? With respect, Your Majesty, that is impossible.'

'Twenty-seven members of my extended family went missing under your Democratic Kampuchea flag.'

'People go their own way sometimes, Your Majesty.'

'I know that some of them are dead. Some I do not know their fate. Here is a list. I want to know what happened to every one of them.'

'Do you have a Paris phonebook on the premises?'

'I want to know who is alive and who is dead, how they died, why they died. I want their remains. Not just any bundle of bones. I will test them. My doctors can do that sort of thing—'

'I don't doubt it, Your Majesty.'

'If any of them are still in your refugee camps—'

'You mean the independent settlements administered by various neutral international aid agencies?'

'You will locate them and release them to me.'

Kiry scanned the list. 'Paris. Paris. Don't know. San Francisco. Don't know. Oh, those two have defected to the Vietnamese imperialists—'

'Impossible.'

'He works for me. So does she. Ah...my commiserations, Your Majesty, but your niece, Thyda, died defending Democratic Kampuchea.'

Sihanouk's butterfly eyelashes fluttered.

'Sihanouk will not lead a coalition called Democratic Kampuchea.'

'You do not want to lead the coalition? What will be your role? Who are you prepared to serve under?'

'I will lead. No one else. But I will not agree to the name being Democratic Kampuchea. And I will be free to speak my mind, to say whatever I must, whenever I choose.'

'I know. I read it in the newspaper.'

'I must have freedom of expression.'

'If you would like to improve your oral expression, Your Majesty, we are happy to help you. Perhaps a private tutor would be useful?'

'It is Sihanouk's right to speak on behalf of his people.'

'Your people, I am sure, ask only that you denounce the Vietnamese imperialists.'

'I will give interviews and offer my personal opinions without shackles. I will not be bound by coalition solidarity. I must be free to write my books.'

'You will defeat Vietnam with words, then?'

'Sihanouk will engage the world in constructive debate. To counter Vietnam and to counter the wanton propaganda of others.'

'You will be free, I am certain, to employ anyone you choose to write your books.'

'I want arms for my soldiers.'

'Words *and* arms?'

'The Chinese will arm and train my troops. My army will receive equal treatment to yours.'

'But we will be one group. Therefore, we will be equal.'

'Sihanouk's soldiers will be armed and trained.'

'I cannot speak for China.'

'Not out loud, at least.'

'Perhaps we should ask them to join us here.' Kiry smiled. 'Or perhaps they could tell us later what we agree to. Then we could go to lunch.'

Sihanouk pushed his chair back and paced the room, interrupting Kiry's view of the frozen hills. He had gained weight, Kiry noticed, but his powerful legs still comfortably carried his ample belly. 'I must say, Your Majesty, you are the picture of health. In fact, you look almost like your picture.'

'After we achieve victory, after we have defeated the Vietnamese, after the Cambodian state and the Cambodian monarchy is restored, all our armies—mine, yours, the KPNLF—will disarm.'

'It will not take the KPNLF long to disarm. I believe that Son Sann has a nineteenth century French rifle and a box of wet ammunition in his storehouse. And two kilos of rice.'

'After victory, we will all disarm.'

'You do not think the new Kampuchean state will need an army?'

'We will invite the United Nations to guarantee security in the new Cambodia, and we—'

'Ah. Replace foreigners with foreigners: ingenious, Your Majesty.'

'And then we will hold peaceful, democratic elections.'

'I remember your democratic elections, Your Majesty. You must be very, very popular.'

'The people are my children. They adore me so they vote for me. Besides, have you forgotten that you won a seat in my parliament? Twice.'

'A lovely gift, that empty box. I can't ever thank you enough for it.'

'So,' Sihanouk said, 'we seem to be at an impasse.'

'I know. I read it in the newspaper.'

'I have told you my concerns.'

'You have, Your Majesty. There is nothing left but for me to wish you health and happiness in your retirement. I hear your cottage in Mougins is being renovated.'

'Oh no. No no no. Sihanouk will never abandon his children.'

'With my deepest respect, Your Majesty, you can have your concerns, your provisos, or you can have your children. You cannot have both.'

'And what then?' Sihanouk asked. 'What then, we will be communists together again?'

'We no longer think this way.'

'Oh no?'

'The world changes quickly. We change with it.'

Sihanouk clapped his hands, licked his lips and opened his mouth wide, allowing his laugh its full range. 'And they call me a joker.'

~*~

I found Lia's debut photographs on page 43 of the *Advertiser*: four youngsters with vodka and orange smiles, in dresses made for women not for girls, arms linked presumably so they wouldn't collapse, and a caption that told me that Becky, Carmen, Anne-Marie and Fleur were celebrating Anne-Marie's eighteenth birthday at the Stag Hotel; Ben and Carole Jamieson in the foyer of the Academy Cinema City before the premiere of the new James Bond film; Roberto Phillips and Ash Franklin at a cocktail party honouring the 25th anniversary of the law firm of Hewitt Player Stillman; Caroline and Melissa Beresford enjoying Champagne during the interval of the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra's 'Homage to Cinema' concert.

'Are you happy in your work?' I asked her.

She picked up the tone instantly. 'Careful, Grandpa, or I'll take your beer away from you.'

'I'm just asking. Don't get all defensive.'

'You sound just like Dad. That's how he starts when he wants to lecture me: "I'm just asking," or, "I'm only thinking of what's best for you; best for you tomorrow as well as today," or, "I just want you to be happy." Are *you* only thinking of what's best for me, Grandpa?'

'Your Dad can't be wrong all of the time.'

'Depends on what it's about. But don't hide behind him, Grandpa. It's not a good look. What precisely is it you wanted to say?'

'It doesn't matter.'

'Grumpy?'

'Certainly not.'

'Come on, Grandpa, it's not like you to turn away from a good argument.'

'Really, Love—'

She was merciless now. 'You never know, I might listen to what you're saying.'

'Okay, you asked for it: I think you should do exactly what you want to do with your life, really I do. But you've got to think about not doing this—' I held up the newspaper. 'It's not only wrong, it's wrong-headed.'

She didn't say a word. She just sat there, sipped her drink, and let me damn myself. I knew I needed to shut up but that's a skill I've never mastered.

'Don't you think, perhaps, it's just a suggestion, don't look at me like that, I'm just

thinking that maybe you could do something more with your talents.'

'Something more what?'

'Something more relevant. Something more important.'

'You really are starting to sound like Dad. You've got to stop bonding with him. It's not healthy for you and he can't keep up.'

'What does your Mum say?'

'She says it's up to me.'

'Isn't that what your Dad says?'

'Yeah, but he doesn't mean it.'

'But, anyway, I'm not the same as him. I'm not telling you to give up on photography. I'm suggesting—just suggesting, mind you—that you perhaps shouldn't spend your days shooting Jack and Maureen Smith posing in front of their favourite Pizza Hut. You're better at it than that.'

'Next week I'm covering weddings.'

'Now you're teasing me.'

'I'm not. I'm keeping you informed about what I'm doing because you're interested. I know how it is: you've got to have better Grandkid stories than anyone else in the sunroom.'

'That's right, we've got nothing else to talk about because we're old and grey.'

'You're not grey. More white.'

'Newspapers are the means by which we find out things. At least, they should be.'

'Exactly. Weren't you busting to know about that girl's birthday party?'

'Newspapers tell us important things.'

'Ah. Now we're getting to it. Define "important."'

'You define it.'

'Newspapers serve the needs of the community.'

'Is that what they told you?'

'Politics matters: is that what they told *you*?'

~*~

In order to strengthen the ability of the Kampuchean nation and people to fight the genocidal and imperialist clique of Vietnam, Democratic Kampuchea has been working for national unity for more than three years. A Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea is now established and a declaration on its formation has been issued. The declaration was signed by the Democratic Kampuchean side, the side of His Majesty Norodom Sihanouk and that of His Excellency Son Sann, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on 22 June, 1982. This coalition agreement reflects the deepest aspirations of the Democratic Kampuchean government based on the pleas of the Kampuchean people, that is, to forcefully strike at Vietnam and drive it out of our beloved motherland, Kampuchea. With this in mind, the Democratic Kampuchean side will work to ensure that the declaration on the formation of the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea will not remain on paper but will be translated into action for the strengthening of the resistance forces and the liberation of the Kampuchean nation and people. In the spirit of ardent patriotism, Democratic Kampuchea will continue to entrench its position of high standing amongst Kampucheans and the people of the world, and continue to fight the imperialist Le Duan clique of Vietnam.

—*Nhem Kiry,* Statement on behalf of Democratic Kampuchea, *22 June 1982*

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Nhem Kiry barely survived the seven minutes the signing ceremony took. As he took hold of the commemorative fountain pen another wave of heat broke over him—had Sihanouk and Son Sann finally given in to temptation and thrown buckets of boiling oil over him? The fever amassed in his head. His eyes expanded then burst, a messy explosion of muscle followed by a steady flow of brain fluid running down his nose and into his mouth. Or so it felt.

He signed his name and shook hands with somebody, then somebody else. Or perhaps it was the same man twice, he wasn't sure and he didn't much care. He was standing up now, although he had no memory of leaving his chair and he couldn't feel his legs. He wondered if he had stepped on a landmine: it was bound to happen sometime. Or had someone amputated his legs as some sort of bizarre anti-war protest? Was he going to have to sit like the Buddha for the rest of his life?

He suspected he was in another room now. He sat behind a table and put his hand on the white linen cloth, leaving behind a sodden imprint. He resisted an urge to pull the

cloth off the table and wipe his face and neck with it.

'Drink some water,' a shape beside him said.

He blinked at the shape but that didn't help. He squeezed his eyes shut and wiped away the fog with a flick of his arm, as if he was swatting mosquitoes. Blurry but unmistakable, grinning like a monkey, Sihanouk pointed at the jug. But the effort of getting the water into his glass and then into his mouth seemed insurmountable. He sighed, or burped, and Sihanouk said, 'Oh dear, Mr Vice President, you need to brush your teeth, tee hee.'

He felt like weeping. He felt like curling up under the table and going to sleep.

Somebody in front of him whispered something in an urgent tone.

'Who's there?' he said.

'It's me. It's Sok. Are you all right, Your Excellency?'

'Of course. Stop asking me.'

'Here, drink some water.'

'Where have you been?'

'I've been here with you, all this time.'

'Liar.'

'Can you answer some questions?'

'What do you want to know?'

'Not from me, Mr Vice President, from the journalists.'

Another wave of heat came across him. He shuddered and then said, 'Yes, yes. Go away, get out of my face.'

'I prefer to fly alone,' Sihanouk told a reporter, 'but without wings even Sihanouk will crash. We must remove Vietnam: the world is with us. We must start by repulsing the Vietnamese army before they turn every single Cambodian into a refugee. But I think my new Vice President for Foreign Affairs, the oh-so *Honourable* Nhem Kiry, will want to add something more to this answer.'

'We will abide by all of the rules of the coalition,' Kiry said. 'We will do everything in our power to make the coalition work—'

'If I may say,' Son Sann interrupted. 'The KPNLF finds itself compelled to join this coalition but the KPNLF does not support the Khmer Rouge.'

'I think I'm going to vomit,' Kiry whispered. 'Sok, where are you?'

'Hold on, Your Excellency, you can rest very soon. I promise,' Sok said.

'Wait one moment, hold the presses, I believe our colleague, our new Mr Vice President, has something to add,' Sihanouk said, rolling his eyes. 'He looks, in fact, as if he needs to add it as a matter of great urgency. Those of you in the front seats, I advise you to take evasive action.'

'I'm fine,' Kiry said.

'I think that Mr Vice President has been hot and cold on the question of the formation of the coalition. Is that correct, Mr Vice President? Have you been hot and cold but are you now boiling?' Sihanouk said.

'Democratic Kampuchea has been resolute in its determination to form this alliance of forces in opposition to the expansionist Vietnamese,' Kiry said. He began to shiver. 'We now believe with sober excitement that we can reclaim Kampuchea before it disappears forever into the abyss of imperialism. Now, if you will excuse me a moment.'

He pushed his chair back and stood up. Sok came forward, took his elbow and led him through a side door. He dropped to his haunches and retched.

'Well, I think we all know how he feels,' Sihanouk said, clapping his hands and winking, 'but nonetheless we will do everything we can to make this alliance work.'

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Phnom Penh

2 July 1982

Your Majesty,

I send to you and to Queen Monique my deepest fraternal feelings. At the risk of causing you homesickness I must report that as I write I am looking across the Sap River, drinking a bottle of beer (Vietnamese, I'm afraid, please forgive me). I see children playing in the water and a fisherman working on his net. Of course, I would happily drink a glass of Champagne in your honour but this place has only Russian wine and I cannot force the awful stuff down, not even for you.

Please excuse me, Your Majesty, but I am going to speak my mind. Believe me, I would prefer to talk face to face. I say again that I will meet you in any city you choose (so long as I am welcome in that city). If you do not wish to grant me an interview then I will be

delighted to simply reminisce with an old friend. In fact, that would be my preference.

For all my feelings of warmth towards you, I must tell you that I can think of no less edifying sight than the international community offering legitimacy to the Khmer Rouge. And for what? So that the west keeps China happy, and keeps Russia annoyed, and keeps Vietnam isolated. What any of this has to do with the Cambodian people, who suffer inside the country and in the awful refugee camps, and who, after everything they have been through, must now look forward to a revitalised and legitimised Khmer Rouge readying themselves to again take charge of the country? China is delighted. ASEAN is delighted. Ronald Reagan is delighted, or so his aids tell him.

You have been down this path before—please forgive me, Your Majesty, but I know it because I walked with you then—to the detriment of Cambodians and to the detriment of your reputation. If you are to be Cambodia's peacemaker it is time you stopped hiding behind denunciations of the Vietnamese, who might not be perfect but who invaded Cambodia out of self-defence and who, don't forget, chased away the Khmer Rouge. You cannot be President of the CGDK and pretend it does not mean you are falling into bed with the murderous Khmer Rouge. Son Sann is nothing, and his definition of anti-communist is now meaningless (not that it ever meant much). As for Nhem Kiry, permit me to tell you what one of your loyal subjects told me in Battambang province just this week: 'Nhem Kiry was a little bit of a bad man but that bigger bad man stood behind him.' I know that isn't right and you know it too. Nhem Kiry stands beside Pol Pot. And if you remain in this dirty coalition then you stand beside them both.

With my deepest regard and respect,

Ted Whittlemore

~*~

On Friday, from 2:00 p.m. until 3:00 p.m., there will be ballroom dancing in the George Angus French Games Room. All residents are welcome, regardless of ability and capacity. Please wear comfortable shoes and clothing. Our own Miss Olive Green, a former recitalist of considerable renown, has graciously volunteered to play the piano. Following the last dance afternoon tea will be served.

—from the Concertina Rest Home Activity News Sheet, April 1994

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Beryl has always been a small woman, I suppose, but now her shoulders had shrunk and her hair was so thin that Louise the hairdresser, who was a magician, could no longer make it burst forth like a cauliflower. But, still, Beryl was distinguished: her face had lined uniformly and her eyes, beneath thick glasses, retained a spark of anger or perception or amusement. And when she removed her glasses, which she did as I approached her, she still possessed a piercing and beautiful stare.

'Good afternoon. I see you're not using your walking frame today.'

'Not that it's any of your business.'

'May I have the pleasure of this dance?' I said.

'I suppose. If you must,' Beryl said.

Olive played a waltz, I think, but my circulation was playing up and Beryl's hip froze almost immediately. We danced a Lame Shuffle for a couple of minutes but I was grateful when she suggested sitting down.

'Thank you, my dear,' I said.

'I'm not "your dear." But thank you too.'

'You're a wonderful dancer. I enjoyed that thoroughly, I must say. But I don't think I can do it again.'

'Thank goodness.'

'I was wondering if you'd like to accompany me to the sunroom.'

'Why?'

'Well, I thought perhaps a cup of tea and a chat and a spot of sun?'

'All right. But no funny business.'

'The very thought had not even entered my mind.'

'It's not your mind I'm worried about.'

In the sunroom we commenced a long argument (never resolved) on the relative merits of tea and coffee. As with all the best disagreements in history, we could not agree even on the terms of the debate.

'High altitude green tea is extraordinarily delicate. Nothing compares to it. And the aroma is heaven. It's almost as fine as Vietnamese coffee.'

'Normal people drink normal tea with cream and sugar. That's all I want to talk about.'

Like a couple of teenagers we compared drugs. She took more pills than I did—which in itself I found remarkable—but my pills were brightly coloured and one of them weighed as much as all of hers combined. I suggested we swap prescriptions for a week: 'I've got a theory that they sell the drugs on the black market and serve all of us jelly beans.'

'Oh no, they'd never let me have that much sugar,' Beryl said, taking her glasses off and waving them at me. 'They're always on at me about it.'

'Did you hear? Maggie Thompson slipped in the shower. There's going to be an investigation this time,' I said.

'I heard Nurse Phyllis is pregnant again,' Beryl said.

'Nurse Brenda has left her husband. Or he's left her.'

'But she's such a pretty little thing. They don't stay together these days, do they, the young ones?'

'They've moved Elizabeth Simpson into High Dependency. And Ray Lock died.'

'Didn't he die before?'

'No, no, that was Max Klintworth. Poor Ray: one minute he was here, telling everybody how easy it is to work with wood, the next thing he's in a coffin.'

'I don't think that's at all funny.'

'I tell you what's funny: I never saw him with a piece of wood in his life but that's all he ever talked about. On and on and on he went.'

'You know as well as I do that his hands used to shake terribly. There's a new woman, Mrs Potripoff I think her name is. She's quite foreign but she seems very pleasant.'

I showed her a month-old copy of the *Advertiser*, the front page dominated by a photograph of a famous singer arriving in Adelaide.

'Lia's first ever front page,' I said. 'She had to wait at the airport for six hours.

Imagine it: six whole hours.'

Beryl patted the checked woollen blanket that covered her knees. 'My Carole knitted this for me. It must have taken her months.' She took her glasses off and laughed. 'Though why she went to all that trouble to attach a *Made in China* tag I really don't know.'

~*~

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) will this evening host a dinner at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York City to celebrate the 61st birthday of the esteemed Cambodian leader, Prince Norodom Sihanouk. The prince's fellow leaders in the anti-Vietnamese coalition, His Excellency Nhem Kiry and His Excellency, Son Sann, will be present as will a number of other dignitaries. The three leaders of the Coalition are in New York for a series of consultations with world leaders, and to attend the 38th General Assembly of the UN, where the Coalition's credentials as the legitimate government of Cambodia are likely to be re-affirmed. It is understood that President Reagan has agreed to consult with Prince Sihanouk and Son Sann but has declined to meet Nhem Kiry.

—the Guardian, *12 September 1983*

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'In America even the finest hotels with the best kitchens offer a special menu awash with fat and sugar,' Nhem Kiry spoke in French to the Foreign Minister of Malaysia, Rajesway Ampalavanar, who sat to his left, and Prince Sihanouk, who sat to his right. 'I believe that this is because all Americans watch sport on television—they have a station that is solely sport, can you imagine it?—and because they must eat poorly while they do so.'

'Fascinating,' Ampalavanar said.

'I've never thought about it like that,' Sihanouk said. 'You could have been an anthropologist.'

'They are now making a concession to us Asians,' Kiry said. 'For instance, the room service menu in my hotel has available entrée and main meal servings of spring rolls.'

'Ah yes indeed,' Ampalavanar said.

'Last night my assistant Akor Sok—'

'A fine fellow,' Sihanouk said.

'Last night Sok ordered a dozen, just to see what they were like.'

'And how were they?'

'They were drowned in grease. The insides were mashed: there was no way of telling what the filling actually consisted of. They claimed it was chicken but I've got my doubts. And it came with something they called plum sauce but it tasted like plain old tomato ketchup with added sugar.'

'What a finely honed palate you have,' Sihanouk said.

'Spring rolls make fine reception food. They think they are a safe food to serve guests because they think nothing dunked in boiling oil could possibly cause food poisoning,' Ampalavanar said.

'They're all going to die of heart attacks anyway,' Sihanouk said mournfully. 'It makes you wonder why they're so worried about the Libyans.'

An Indonesian official came past to wish Sihanouk happy birthday and to fawn over Kiry. When he left Sihanouk rolled his eyes.

'Sukarno visited me in 1960. He had the most oafish bodyguards I have ever seen. I had to lock up all the girls in Phnom Penh, for their own protection. And Sukarno himself was a crazy old man, he couldn't focus on anything other than virgins...am I revealing too much?' He didn't wait for an answer. 'I know this from first-hand experience. After my Royal Ballet performed for him, led by my beautiful daughter Bopha Devi, Sukarno was overcome by the quality of the dancing. He held my daughter so tightly I thought she might break. He wanted to marry her, at least for a night; and Monique, my very own Monique, he wanted to take her away, too. I'm not being indiscreet am I? And then, I wouldn't believe it myself if I hadn't seen it—'

Plates of crispy skin quail bursting with figs appeared in front of each of them. Sihanouk abandoned his story. He placed a hand on the quail and its breast opened for him. He lifted the figs one at a time to his lips and only when they were gone, leaving a purple stain, did he begin to tear at the wet flesh.

'On another subject,' Ampalavanar said to Kiry, 'I was hoping that we might speak in a frank way, as only friends can.'

'It is a delicate matter,' Sihanouk added, picking at a piece of meat that was caught in his teeth.

'I would like to take advantage of this opportunity to have an unofficial word—nothing more than a friendly chat, you understand—about several of your colleagues.'

Kiry wiped his hands and, with knife and fork, began to eat his quail from wing to wing. After a minute he set down his cutlery and indicated with open palms that Ampalavanar should proceed.

'I am hoping—my government was hoping and our fellow ASEAN members were hoping—that you might request, with great respect, that Pol Pot, Ieng Sary and Ta Mok

retire.'

'Retire?'

'Oh yes. What a wonderful birthday present that would be for me.'

'I believe it would be a wonderful moment for your country, a turning point. Not to mention a very clever manoeuvre for your coalition. All of us who wish this would of course continue to support a role for the Democratic Kampuchea movement, and of course, you personally, in your honourable struggle against the Vietnamese. You know that no one is pushing harder than ASEAN for the restoration of Cambodian self-determination. But we can put more pressure on the Vietnamese to withdraw if you consider our suggestion: it is a matter of perception, you understand.'

'Would you like more Champagne, sir?' a waiter asked Kiry.

'No. I want a glass of Riesling, cold and crisp.'

'If Pol Pot were to give up control of the army I would be very happy to help,' Sihanouk said, a pyramid of clean bird bones drying in the centre of his plate. 'My little villa in Mougins would be his for the asking. It's very quaint.'

'How delighted the French would be,' Kiry said.

'I can take care of them. Or my palace at Pyongyang—you have seen it, you would agree that your colleagues and their families could each take a wing and, should they desire, not see each other for weeks at a time. There is much recreation: an indoor swimming pool, a cinema that I had built to the exact specifications of the one in the White House, three chefs, a sanatorium, a squash court, which is also suitable for badminton, volleyball, ping pong. Or if that is unsatisfactory I'm sure our Chinese friends would be only too delighted to find them homes in Beijing or perhaps even, after the handover, in Hong Kong.'

Kiry pushed his plate away and fixed his stare past Sihanouk, where he made eye contact with a young Thai diplomat on another table, who was so discomforted he could not eat. He opened his mouth but then pursed his lips and made a face. Still silent, he unfolded his arms, took up his cutlery, and continued to methodically de-flesh the quail.

'For us, unity is everything,' he said eventually. 'You cannot separate us with promises of squash courts or ice boxes full of Moët. None of us concern ourselves with insignificant material possessions or comforts. Pol Pot will never abandon Kampuchea and nor will I. We care only about retrieving the sovereignty of our nation. That is all we have

ever fought for and we will not abandon the struggle now.'

Ampalavanar stared at his plate. Sihanouk picked at his teeth and held his Champagne flute aloft, waiting for someone to fill it.

'So much for Sukarno,' Sihanouk said. 'Then there was the time in 1966 when I entertained Charles De Gaulle. My daughter was safe but I must tell you, when the entertainment in the Olympic stadium went wrong—oh, the shame of it—and when the lights all went out, and I said, "Oh Mr President, I cannot see you: are you still here?" ooh-la-la, I thought he would step on me like I was a cigar end.'

~*~

The Second World Conference to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination, held in Geneva, Switzerland, ended yesterday. The conference reviewed progress and formulated measures to ensure the implementation of UN instruments aimed at eliminating racism and racial discrimination. The conference declared apartheid to be an abhorrent crime against humanity, and a threat to international peace and security.

—*Newsbriefs,* the Australian, *14 August 1983, p.26*

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The tall, broad-shouldered, chisel-jawed man bounded up the stairs of the auditorium with the enthusiasm of a missionary. Perhaps thirty-five years old, he was dressed in a pristine white shirt and a red tie with blue and white dots. He paused, one leg in the air, stable as a gymnast, and gave an effusive wave to the Soviet delegation. Chief Delegate Olag Katkov declined to respond. Normally he was the friendliest of fellows but that day he was, I happen to know, suffering from a severe hangover.

I had already picked the man for an American before he sauntered up to me and said, 'Hey there, buddy. Is this seat taken?'

'It is now.'

'Hey, that's really nice of you. "It is now": I like that.'

I scribbled in my notebook. He sat in convivial silence for nearly ten seconds.

'What are you writing there?'

'Not much.'

'Not much: I like that. Very dry. Very English.'

'I'm an Australian.'

'Hey, that's okay too.' He paused then whispered conspiratorially, loud enough for most of the auditorium to hear, 'I'll tell you something for free.'

'Go on then.'

'I hate Geneva. I absolutely hate it. Don't you hate it too?'

'*Hate* isn't quite the word I'd use.'

'Yeah, I know exactly what you mean. It's so dull. And I hate these conferences. They're just for show, everybody knows it. I mean, apartheid, Jeezus, who really gives a shit. Don't get me wrong, buddy: it's a scourge, it has no place in a civilised world. What I mean is, if any of these people really gave a shit they could do something about it other than talk

about it, couldn't they? I'm not offending you, I hope.'

'Oh, I'm very thick-skinned.'

'Good: I know that some people swear by these talk fests but that's just so they can sleep at night, don't you think? My name's Cornell, by the way. Cornell E. Jackson.'

'Ted Whittlemore.'

'Hi there Ted, really good to meet you. Hang on: you're Edward Whittlemore? You're *the* Edward Whittlemore?'

'I'm definitely *a* Edward Whittlemore.'

'You wrote *Living with the Patriot Vietnamese*, right? You wrote that funny little book with Sihanouk?'

'Well, yes, I suppose I've written a number of funny little books.'

'I gotta ask you. Did you go down in the Cu Chi Tunnels? You can tell the truth now, buddy, I'm very discreet: you didn't really, did you?'

'Of course I did. I was with the Viet Cong. That's where we went when the Americans bombed us.'

'Amazing, really amazing,' Cornell said, looking me up and down. 'How did they ever squeeze you in?'

'They're an ingenious race, the Vietnamese.'

'Ever get stuck down there?'

'I've been stuck many times in my life but, no, I never got stuck in the Cu Chi tunnels.'

'Hey, I know exactly what you mean.'

***

Nhem Kiry lifted his eyes from his notes and slowly gazed from one edge of the room to the other. It was meant, presumably, to be an inclusive act, to connect him with his audience. Given the prevailing attitude in the audience—his ostensible allies were bemused at his presence and the rest of us were appalled to be in the same city as him—it came across as a gloat.

The spotlight above his head grew brighter. Kiry shuffled his notes. I wondered if, like me, he wrote messages to himself in red ink at the top of every page of his speeches: slow down; don't get nervous; speak, don't read.

'We all agree,' he began, settling into a drone that indicated he would have been more at ease talking off the cuff, 'that at the root of the imbroglio in South Africa is racism. The minority white government in that troubled country have rigged the political system to ensure their dominance. They maintain this dominance with politics and with fear. The world rightly condemns these actions and these abhorrent philosophies.

'In 1953 Nelson Mandela, said this: *The racial policies of the Government have pricked the conscience of all men of goodwill and have aroused their deepest indignation. The feelings of the oppressed people have never been more bitter. If the ruling circles seek to maintain their position by such inhuman methods then a clash between the forces of freedom and those of reaction is certain. The grave plight of the people compels them to resist to the death the stinking policies of the gangsters that rule our country. Let us make the crucial link: apartheid and racism. This is the heart of the situation in South Africa, and we feel for our suffering brothers and sisters.*

'It is my duty to inform you that such a situation does not exist in South Africa alone. In Kampuchea, the imperialist Vietnamese are constructing their own version of apartheid. They continue to engage in a war of genocide and racial extermination against their weaker opponents, the ordinary Kampucheans who resist as best as they can by surviving. It is the intention of the Vietnamese not only to continue their illegal occupation—and that is bad enough—but to systematically bring in settlers who will be the privileged members of the annexed community.'

Amongst the audience, in the gloom, the Vietnamese envoys rose, collected their papers, and strode from the auditorium. Soon the Soviet bloc followed (emptying five rows), then Syria, then Ethiopia. Kiry, all the while, kept talking, kept invoking the example of Nelson Mandela, in a tone that grew ever more monotonous.

'The Vietnamese, of course, are hegemonic and imperialist but only towards tiny Kampuchea. In the global picture they are small. That is why they rely so heavily on the Soviet Union. Mr Gorbachev's people arm the Vietnamese and the Vietnamese come looking for Kampucheans whose only crime is to want to be free in their own country.'

I looked at my new friend, Cornell; he seemed to be focused on a spot well above Kiry's head, where the velvet curtains were clasped by a giant UN symbol. I followed his example. It seemed as good a way as any to pass the time.

***

Cornell and I went to a pizza restaurant on the first floor of a nearby building, directly above a curry house: where we sat aromatic fumes—turmeric and fresh ginger, deliciously burnt—rose out of the floor. 'Can't we eat down there?' Cornell said, finally distracted from his interminable explanation of the role of his think tank, the Edgar Institute for International Democracy, in US public discourse.

'No we can't,' I said, raising my glass of beer to him. 'It's dry down there.'

'Oh God. Surely not in this day and age? Now, what was I saying?'

'You were telling me about yourself.'

'That's right: we're still small but I'm aiming big,' Cornell said.

'Aiming big for what?' By then, I'd had several drinks.

'I want to stay hands-on, I want to write reports and conduct research, so I've employed an office manager and a fundraiser—that's my sister, Candy, she brings in the cash, she's a marvel, really, mind you it's not that hard, all she has to do is flash our name about and—'

'But why do you actually *exist*?'

'Well, we have a Mission Statement. Do you want to hear it?'

'God. I suppose so.'

He took a piece of paper from his briefcase. '*The Edgar Institute of International Democracy, funded in 1979, is a research body—a think tank—whose mission is to formulate and promote U.S. bilateral and multilateral foreign policies based on the principles of upholding America's national interest, notably a robust national defence, individual freedom, trade liberalization, and the upholding and spreading of American traditional values with the ultimate goal of furthering global democracy. Our particular focus is in the Asia-Pacific Region (APR) although we recognise the interconnectedness of other regions of import and influence.* Here, you can have this,' he said, handing me the page. 'Shall I sign it for you?'

'I suppose you've got a company motto?'

'Tell the truth, America, because Americans can handle the truth.'

'What about the rest of us?'

'In time, yes, we will win the day precisely because we are telling the truth; and

precisely because of the example of pragmatism and idealism that we offer to the world is so hopeful.'

'But let me clarify: the term "global democracy" is simply a euphemism for American domination, correct?'

'Well, you can put it like that if you want. I don't resile from it. Offer the world America, honestly and without adornment, and let them reject it if they dare. No one will dare.'

'No one?'

'No majority will dare; no majority of sound mind. Take the Vietnam War—that's my special interest, you know.'

'No, I didn't know.'

'The problem with the war is that nobody wants to say what it was really about: my father knows the Vietnam War had nothing to do with Vietnam, he'll say so at dinner, but he won't say so when it really matters. I think that's sad. And I think it's counter-productive.'

A waiter wandered past. Cornell waved him over. 'Do you want another beer? Of course you do. Do you speak French, my friend?' he asked the waiter in French.

The waiter nodded, mute.

'Good. Good on you. We'll have two more of these beers, what are they, Ted, Belgian? Two more of them, whatever they are, and I want a bottle of red wine: a Shiraz, whatever label you suggest, just make sure it's fine. And there's no water on the table. And Ted here dropped his fork. He'll need another one.'

We had started on a second bottle of wine before the food came: a pizza for Cornell—he poked it with his knife and whispered, 'Where's the cheese?'—and veal cannelloni for me.

'I have to make a confession. I've been trying to work out the best way to tell you this,' Cornell said.

'You hate and despise every ideal I've ever stood for?'

'Yes, of course I do, buddy, that's a given. But, no, that's not it. I'll just come out and say it, shall I?'

'Shamelessness: that's the American way. Well, let's hear it.'

'You know my father. You and he aren't exactly the best of friends.'

'Well, I argue with a lot of people. I won't hold it against him. Who is he?'

'My father is Senator Alexander Bernard Jackson.'

I roared laughing. 'Wacko Jacko is your father? Really and truly? Of course, really and truly, you deal only with the truth, don't you, and, anyway, who would own up to such a thing unless they had to.' I fought an urge to hug him. 'You have my deepest commiserations. If there's anything I can do to help you only have to ask. I'm sorry, I don't mean to be rude, but your father is a first grade bastard; he's borderline evil. '

'He thinks the world of you too. I can't wait to tell him that I've met you.'

'Has he grown another tail yet? No? Well, there's always plastic surgery, it's almost compulsory in America. You can tell him that from me.'

'I look forward to it.'

'We need another bottle of wine.'

'How about cognac?'

'How about who's paying? The Edgar Committee for the Enforcement of American Global Domination Institute? But tell me—yes, two cognacs, the Yank's paying—you're Wacko Jacko's son and you expect me to believe that you're running an independent think tank?'

'I'm not telling you, buddy, I'm promising you. We accept not one dollar of government funds.'

'Not even on the sly from Daddy?'

Cornell grinned. 'That's the great part. Father hates the whole idea, hates my ideas, but you know what? I've funded the whole thing with investments he made for me.'

'He funds it and he hates it?'

'You've got it.'

I was so delighted I fell off my chair. The waiter came towards us, waving the bill and pointing towards the stairs. Cornell folded his serviette, pushed back his chair and sat on the ground beside me, holding his Diners Club Card up for the waiter.

'I expect a discount,' he said. 'We haven't finished.'

'Hey Cornie?' I said.

'Yes?'

'Don't take this the wrong way but in my opinion—and I'm almost always right—your Henry Washington Institute for Robbing the World Blind with Honour sounds like one great

big joke. Sorry.'

He patted me on the shoulder. 'That's okay, buddy, I've got to tell you that I think communism is the plague of the twentieth century.'

'Don't approach, I've got a disease,' I yelled as Cornell helped me down the stairs. 'A twentieth century disease.'

I wish I could say that the rest of the night was a blur. But for me the problem with getting drunk in public has never been the misbehaviour itself—we're all better off for letting these things happen sometimes—but my irritating ability to remember the whole thing later.

Utilising the full expertise of the greatest military state in history, Cornell got me back to my hotel. When my legs ceased to exist, when I sat on a curb and started giggling 'Wacko Jacko, Jacko Wacko,' two marines appeared—I think they were marines, they were certainly dressed in white, maybe they were angels. They marched me across the road and into the lobby of the hotel, where we veered around a Chinese dissident, who I was due to interview the next day, and deposited me at the reception desk.

They herded me into the service elevator, Cornell on one side repeating to anyone who stared, 'I told him not to eat those goddamed prawns,' a nurse on the other side—I think she was a nurse, she was dressed in blue and she kept telling me that if I was going to vomit I should do it into the bucket she was holding.

'You're Bulgarian, aren't you?' I said.

'None of your business,' the nurse said.

'My lips have gone to sleep. Givvus a kiss?'

'Here, you hold the bucket, it'll give you something to do with your hands.'

'Would you like to spend the night with me? Satisfaction guaranteed.'

'Steady on there, buddy, the nice lady's just helping us out.'

I could walk, more or less, by the time Cornell led me to bed and pulled my boots off.

'Ted? Ted, can you hear me? Should I call a doctor?'

'Why? Are you sick?'

'Do you want me to take your trousers off?'

'Is it something you feel you'd like to do?'

'Not especially.'

'You could get me a beer. Have one yourself if you like.'

'I don't think that's wise.'

'Beer's for rehydration. Didn't they teach you that in Boston?'

I propped myself up on a couple of pillows and we drank a toast to US imperialism.

'Um, Ted, fella? Your nose is running.' He came close, brandishing a tissue.

It came on all of a sudden. My eyes welled up, my throat tightened, I blinked furiously. I turned away from him just as my shoulders began heaving. I probably would have gotten away with it if I hadn't lost my balance. He caught me as I toppled off the bed and held me like I was a sack of potatoes. I howled and howled until the concierge rang and said the rooms around me had all complained. I showered and emerged happy, sober and starving.

'Let's order sandwiches. I suppose you'd rather have a hotdog but I don't know if they stoop that low here.'

'But, Ted, are you all right? What was that?'

'That? That was the effect you people have on the rest of the world. If you're going to travel you're going to have to get used to it.'

~*~

Early one afternoon as I lay on my bed—I couldn't shake a headache and the Concertina Rest Home carpet bowls tournament was only two hours away—my telephone rang. I reached across without opening my eyes, knocked a glass of water onto the floor, and found the receiver.

'The Whittlemore Royal Infirmary. Hello?'

'Ah, Edward? Edward Whittlemore?'

'Yes.'

'Lucy Dupleix here.'

'You sound nice. Do I know you?'

'I'm from Lessmore Press.'

'Um.'

'Your publisher.'

'Yes, of course. You sound different, Lucy. You've dropped your voice a half an octave, I'd say. It suits you.'

'Yes, you're thinking of my former colleague, Felicity Hewitt. She's left us, I'm sorry to say.'

'Gone to have a baby, I suppose.'

'Gone to an academic position in Scotland, actually.'

'So you've been lumbered with me? How can I help?'

'Well, I'm ringing about the chapters and the outline you finally sent us. I have to be honest, Edward, it's not quite what we had in mind.'

'You'll adjust in time. Felicity did.'

'There are several points I'd like to go over with you, if you have the time.'

'Fire away. I'm just laying about.'

'Excellent. Now, first—'

'I do want to say that it's a very rough draft. I only sent you people anything because Felicity threatened me. I hope she's not going to be so fierce with her students in Scotland.'

'Yes, I read that in your letter, which I must say I found very illuminating.'

'The letter? It should have been, I spent a long time on it.'

'Yes, well, it *is* ten pages longer than your draft. But, look Edward, here's my problem: I don't know who this Nhem Kiry man is and while I'm hardly an authority on

Southeast Asia I pride myself on being reasonably well informed on current affairs. I know who Pol Pot is. I know who Sihanouk is. I really would prefer more of them and less of these other people.'

'But—'

'And another thing: the story is supposed to be about *you* not about Wally Ball. There have been three biographies published about Ball since he died, and his memoirs are still in print. You don't even appear to have known him very well. We really can't use any of it.'

'Felicity wanted context. She wanted me to explain myself, my formative years, my development. She was adamant about that.'

'I think she was trying to stoke your fires, give you—'

'She certainly did that.'

'Yes, well, she told me that she thought you were having trouble getting started.'

'That's bulldust. Everything I actually wanted to write she pooh-poohed.'

'I think what we need is a whole new approach.'

'Oh, Christ.'

'Now don't panic.'

'I'm not panicking but bear in mind that one of these days I'm going to wake up dead.'

'It's up to you, Edward, it's your book after all. It's your reputation. But I'm going to send it all back to you and what I suggest is that you put the outline and the chapters in a drawer and forget about them. And then I'd like you to keep writing the letter. Keep going until you've said everything you want to say. That's what I want you to send me.'

~*~

Hope Inlet, Maine

5 February 1984

Dear Ted,

Yes, I know it's a picture of Bangkok but I'm writing this on a bus on the way back from a day trip to the Cambodian border. It's a shame you've black-banned yourself, we could have gone together—you would have enjoyed it and you might even have learned something. We left Bangkok at 4:30 a.m. I don't suppose you would have enjoyed that, but I'm usually up about then anyway—no rest for the wicked. I know what you're thinking, buddy:it was a set-up. You're right, too, but I still got a real clear insight into things and, anyway, it was fun and that's what really counts in this world, don't you think?

Best wishes,

Cornell E. Jackson

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Cornell received his lunchbox, courtesy of the Thai military: shredded chicken (a hint of soy, no chilli), a hard-boiled egg, and a bread roll. He ate and closed his eyes. Two hours later the exemplary air-conditioning caused him to wake, shivering. His head had been resting against the musty curtain. He sneezed, and sneezed again, and a minder materialised with a box of tissues, a bottle of water, an offer of aspirin, and a promise: 'Don't worry, Mr Jackson, we will be there very soon.'

From the border, near Aranyaprathet, it was less than a kilometre along a hard-packed dirt road to Phum Thmei. When they stopped, Cornell was one of the first to exit the bus. Behind him, a narrow path, nothing more than flattened grass, led into thick jungle. As if on cue, a pair of teenagers, a beautiful girl and a handsome boy, walked by. They wore their Levis and T-shirts with pride. They tossed their hair and the girl glanced over her shoulder, daring Cornell to take a photo. They walked into the jungle. After a few steps the foliage swallowed them.

On the other side of the road there was a neat path, wide enough for three friends to walk side by side, weapons slung over their shoulders. At the head of the path, flanked by two neat shrubs, stood the welcoming committee, an entourage of Khmer Rouge identities. Cornell scanned their faces, remembering a couple of political strategists from a conference, and recognising a military commander from a photograph.

In front of them all stood Nhem Kiry, immaculate in a grey suit despite the heavy heat. He began shaking hands and offering salutations. As if connected to Kiry by a switch, the younger leaders adopted welcoming postures. The space between the buses was soon full of visitors, murmuring to each other, requesting water, requesting towels, requesting insect repellent, requesting permission to photograph buildings (permanent structures, some of them), admiring the flowers—inconceivably, the path was lined with pansies. With a smile and a nod of his head, Kiry singled out a man standing near Cornell.

'Do you know him?' Cornell asked the man.

'Oh no. I met him once, that's all.'

Slowly, the entourage followed Kiry along the path and through the model village to a clearing, where Sihanouk and Monique waited. Sihanouk clapped his hands and waved exuberantly, including the whole crowd in his welcome. Monique did her best, but Cornell sensed her discomfort.

Catching sight of a friend, Sihanouk burrowed into the crowd and embraced him fiercely.

'My good man, I think about you so often when I read your stories. Thank you for visiting Sihanouk.'

'Thank you for the invitation, Your Majesty. This place is very impressive.'

'Yes it is wonderful.' Sihanouk drew closer and spoke with discretion—Cornell, twenty metres away, heard every word clearly. 'This is not my own camp, you know. His Excellency, Nhem Kiry, doubts that it is safe for me to be at my own Funcinpec camp.'

'Why is that, Your Majesty?' someone asked but Sihanouk had seen a French journalist he knew and was gone.

A line of soldiers, soft-skinned boys dressed in brand new khaki uniforms, marched out of the jungle. Their shoulders made perfect squares. They did not smile, they were serious, but neither did they scowl: they were too young for that. Their virginal weapons gleaned in the sun, which was now beginning to burn a hole in the back of Cornell's head.

'What do you think?' someone beside Cornell whispered. 'Sihanoukist? Khmer Rouge?'

'They can't be KPNLF,' someone else said. 'My information is that they barely have that many soldiers left.'

Sihanouk emerged from the throng of journalists, his cheeks glowing. He gathered himself into a formal pose, and commenced a slow review of the soldiers. Nhem Kiry and the senior soldier followed a few steps behind, pausing whenever Sihanouk paused.

When it was done, Kiry walked to a building, opened a door and ushered forward, in turn, the Yugoslavian and the Egyptian ambassadors to Thailand. Each presented their credentials to Sihanouk. Both men, prostate before Sihanouk, seemed at ease. When he straightened the Yugoslavian blinked incessantly, but Cornell put that down to sweat in his eyes.

Champagne appeared. Cornell looked on longingly.

Sihanouk raised his glass and spoke. 'My heart breaks—Sihanouk's heart breaks, I tell you all—to see Cambodia becoming the newest province of Hanoi. I want to take this opportunity to thank Sihanouk's special friends for the delivery of a thousand new rifles to my soldiers though I must note that these friends prefer to be anonymous because Singapore and others are so shy, tee hee. I apologise to our eminent and honoured guests that I cannot currently receive them in my palace.' He paused, looked over his shoulder into the jungle, and said to the Egyptian ambassador in a conspiratorial whisper that everyone heard, 'I must tell you, our enemy is not so far from this place.'

'This is most interesting to me, Your Majesty: I am a soldier, you know.'

'A military man? Oh good: if things get desperate in the next ten minutes you can defend us.'

Soon they were on the buses again. Cornell ate an orange and considered how to report this day to his subscribers. He was sympathetic to the coalition and he also knew that he had been wooed. The proper and honest response, he supposed, was to highlight all that was comic and contrived—the buildings, the old peasants with colourful new sarongs and cigarettes to share, Sihanouk's antics, Kiry's calmness—but not to let the humour impede the central point: supporting the coalition was the only logical and honourable way for the U.S. to proceed.

At Aranyaprathet the convoy of buses slowed down and pushed to the side of the road allowing four Mercedes sedans to pass. The windows were black but Cornell—even Cornell—had no trouble guessing the occupants.

~*~

The recent announcement by the Khmer Rouge that Pol Pot has retired on account of ill health cannot be taken seriously. Nhem Kiry, in whose name the communiqué was read, remains a mere mouthpiece for his old boss. More troubling is the reaction of others to this farce. Spokesmen for the two other resistance groups—Sihanouk's Funcinpec and Son Sann's KPNLF—welcomed the alleged retirement. 'All Cambodians, at home and in exile, welcome this change,' a Funcinpec spokesman said. 'Everybody dislikes Pol Pot.' Although western governments cannot admit it, given their shameful support for the anti-Vietnamese coalition which includes the Khmer Rouge, privately they agree that the change is illusory. Officially, however, western diplomats are pushing the line that Pol Pot's retirement represents a genuine challenge to Vietnam's rationale for occupation. In fact, the Vietnamese will never abandon the Cambodian people while there is a chance that the Khmer Rouge could return to power. Cambodian leader, Hun Sen, puts it best: 'We demand the elimination of Pol Pot politically and militarily. This means that it is necessary to eliminate Pol Pot as an organisation as well as a person.' In the meantime the fighting goes on and the west responds by criticising Vietnam all over again.

—Edward Whittlemore, 'As I See It', syndicated column, 2 September 1985

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When I met Sihanouk in his expansive hotel suite I felt as if I had bumped into an ex-lover. I was polite but I had no intention of grovelling, nor of pretending that I respected his decision, whatever his motivation, to ally himself with the Khmer Rouge. I offered a western handshake. As he came to me I made a small concession, inclining my head, and bending my knees slightly. Sihanouk launched an embrace but mistimed his leap. I took evasive action. Our tummies briefly kissed.

'It has been a long time,' he said.

'Twelve years, thirteen years, Your Majesty.'

'Many things have changed.'

'Many things but not everything.'

Sihanouk fell silent. I wondered if he was about to throw me out before we had even begun. Or if he was going to tell me what he really thought of me. 'You've let yourself go,' he might have said. 'I had no idea, no idea I tell you, that your head was such a shape: is that bump from birth or is it from an accident or a war wound? Why don't you try a wig? Your

skin is too thin: it's not pleasant to see a man's veins. Have you lost more weight? Don't the Vietnamese feed you? And what about your career? I try to read your stories—they are wrong, of course, although you make me laugh—but it is getting harder and harder to find your words in print.'

Instead he said, 'It's so good to see you, old friend. Why don't we sit? Champagne?'

'Perhaps not—'

'I see. A formal interview, is it? I thought we might be two old friends renewing acquaintances.'

'No, I haven't made myself clear: I'd rather beer than champagne.'

'Tee hee: the Aussie wants a beer.' He pushed the coffee table aside and pulled his chair forward. He indicated I should sit and said, 'I think that you are disappointed in Sihanouk.'

'May I be frank, Your Majesty? I am dismayed.'

'Hmm. The Aussie speaks his mind. You want me to become a Vietnamese King, is that it? Like you are a Vietnamese Aussie? You understand, surely, that I cannot allow foreigners to move into my country as if they own it. My duty to Cambodians is clear. And why are the Vietnamese still here? Will they ever go now that they are here?'

'But you allied with the Khmer Rouge again, Your Majesty. After everything, after they fooled us, you are with them again and you are letting them use your name again. The world believes that you and Nhem Kiry are allies, best friends.'

'Nobody who matters believes that. And Nhem Kiry is irrelevant. He does what he is told.'

'How can you be sure?'

'Oh, come now, Ted, what are the Vietnamese doing to your mind? Nhem Kiry has his life written on his wrist. Before he opens his mouth, before he walks, before he eats or drinks, before he sleeps, he consults his notes to ensure he is doing good and doing right. I know my esteemed colleague is irrelevant because I, too, am nothing. I have been nothing for many years.'

'Your Majesty, you have never been nothing.'

'I have a new coat of paint but I am still a condemned house.'

'So absent yourself: retire, go to France.'

'Of course I wish I could. And it would make Monique so happy. But I cannot do it: I am nothing but I still have to do what I can for my country. I cannot leave Cambodia to become a Vietnamese satellite, not after everything I have endured. Besides, I do not know how to retire. But I will do it—believe me, I am serious—if you can find me a Cambodian leader who is worthy of praise and support. Sihanouk is not perfect but he is the best available.'

'But still, Your Majesty, if I may say so, surely you understand that people are confused when you ally yourself with the Khmer Rouge.'

'Tee hee, I confuse them, I know it. And I confuse you, too, yes, don't I? And do you know how I do it? Can you keep a secret? I tell the truth. Everybody says that Sihanouk changes his mind—Mr Flip-Flop, you called me that yourself, don't deny it, I read it—and so I tell the truth and nobody believes me. Sometimes I need to behave as President of the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea and sometimes I can be Norodom Sihanouk, an entirely different and private man but I tell the truth, ah, here are the drinks.'

A waiter, dressed in a red dinner suit, set down a silver ice bucket containing a bottle of Moët and a half dozen bottles of Stella Artois. While he wrestled with the Champagne cork I used my pocket knife to flick the top off a beer and swigged from the bottle. The waiter looked at me disdainfully. He withdrew, taking an ice-frosted glass with him.

Sihanouk eyed my knife and said, 'You're not going to assassinate me, are you?'

'Kill my gracious host? Of course not.'

'We still have one thing in common, I think: we avoid violence ourselves, we would not even know how to hit a man, but as for our friends, well—'

'In military terms, Your Majesty, the situation for the coalition is grave.'

'Oh, not at all. Your friends the Vietnamese are expert at propaganda, I will admit it, not happily, but I will admit it: they have a knack of appearing to win insignificant battles close to the border. When journalists hear battles with their own eyes—'

'Um—'

'And when they see men lying in pieces, and take photographs, alas, they think they understand the world. But when it matters—when it really matters—my soldiers hold their positions. And our allies in the coalition are doing better still.'

'Even if that's true how can you be happy: they are killers, thugs, criminals.'

'Do you think I don't know that? Do not speak to me like I am a child. I do not need someone who watches and never acts to tell me things I have always known. You tell me that Mr Pol Pot is a criminal, you tell me he is demented, you tell me he is a devil, and you expect me to look at you as if these things have never occurred to me before. I am not a dunce, Ted.'

'Please excuse me, Your Majesty, I mean you no offence, of course. But if you know—'

'If I know? *If*? They killed my family: how about yours? I sat in my prison-palace for three years while they massacred my people, all my thousands of little children. Sihanouk and Monique sat there like leaves on a tree, praying for cool weather and a wind to blow us off the branch.'

'But with the greatest respect, Your Majesty, if you know all this—'

'If, if, if.'

'Then how can you live with yourself for helping them? Why not abandon them? You can do it, the politics allow it, surely you know that now.'

'Oh, Ted, the whole world does not revolve around being friends with the Vietnamese.'

An aide entered and reminded Sihanouk he had an appointment in an hour.

'Who is it? No, don't tell me, I don't care. Cancel it.'

'But Your Majesty.'

'Cancel it. Tell them I have heard bad news from the front. Tell them I am awash with pain and guilt like at no other time in my life and I cannot possibly see them until after lunch tomorrow. Come on, old friend, drink up: too much talking, too much seriousness, you worry too much these days. You used to know how to enjoy yourself.'

'I am sorry, Your Majesty, but—'

'I know, you are frustrated. Too bad, I want to have fun. I want to play music. You will accompany me, yes? See, I had them bring a piano to the room especially.'

'But Your Majesty it has been years since I have played.'

'Then it is past time. Come, have another drink. I will prepare myself.'

While Sihanouk sucked a reed he assembled his clarinet and wiped it reverently with a soft cloth.

'What shall we play, Your Majesty?'

'Oh, Edward, can't you guess?'

I played and held a muted chord. Sihanouk closed his eyes, rested the clarinet on his trembling lower lip, and launched into what he called a free-fall jazz version of *Stranger on the Shore*. I watched his face as he turned the old standard into a whole new composition. His enthusiasm was infectious. By the time we had finished—at which time Sihanouk stood silent and immobile for thirty seconds, transported by the music to a higher consciousness—I had fallen in love with him all over again.

~*~

Norwood accounted comfortably for Port Adelaide at the Parade on Saturday. On the back of a best on field performance by rugged captain Garry 'Scotty' Scotland and a six goal performance by promising young forward, Marty Johnson, the Redlegs led at every change and defeated the Magpies by 38 points. Norwood broke the game open with a five goal to one first quarter and although Port's defence tightened, led by the veteran Jack Phelps, Norwood's midfield dominance gave Johnson, James Peckett (4 goals) and Liam Bensik (3 goals) many opportunities. Norwood coach Michael McGuiness praised his team's cohesion. 'Last week we were all over the shop. We had no system going forward, no run. The fellas worked really hard on the track this week and they've been rewarded.' Port Coach Jack Braithwaite lamented his weakened midfield. 'No excuses, Norwood's boys were just harder at it, and cleaner too, and we couldn't afford anything less than a hundred and ten per cent when we were already missing our three best on-ballers.'

—the Adelaide Advertiser, *16 April 1995, p.70.*

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'In my day football was kick and catch, kick and catch. Handball was a last resort, like drinking your own urine.'

'Here we go,' Lia said.

'Did you ever play?' Lia's colleague, a sports reporter, asked.

'Oh, don't Bazza, talking to him only encourages him.'

'I played for a few years. I had to choose eventually between footy and seeing the world. I chose the world.'

'Yeah, yeah,' Lia said. 'Hold still, Grandpa.' She pinned an **Official SANFL Photographer** to my chest. 'There, you're legal.'

'When the coach told me to play at full-back that's where I stayed. I did not "run off", that's the right expression isn't it, that's what the telly commentators go on about? I never, not once, left my man and sprinted to the forward pocket as a loose man looking to kick a goal.' I paused and winked. 'Of course, in my life I've often been accused of being a loose man. But that's a whole other story.'

'Bazza doesn't need to hear your fantasies, Grandpa. Come on, let's go.'

Lia and I sat on low fold-up chairs, hard against the boundary line, careful not to obscure a beer advertisement. 'Are you comfortable, Grandpa, you'll tell me if you're not,

won't you, are you all right with your legs folded up like that?'

'I'm fine. Don't fuss, Love. Just do your job.'

'Don't get too comfortable. We'll have to move in a little while. I prefer to watch the match from different angles. All right?'

'Fine.'

There was a smattering of applause and some good-natured heckling as the Port players came onto the ground.

'There aren't many people here,' I said.

'Three and a half thousand, maybe four: that's a pretty decent turnout these days.'

Lia hung a camera around my neck, a tiny silver box that, disconcertingly, beeped like a kidney machine. It was a brand I'd never heard of and that I couldn't pronounce. I pushed a button and a zoom lens unfurled itself. I peered through the viewfinder and was stunned by the magnification.

'Not bad,' I said.

'It's the latest,' Lia said.

'Even so, it's not bad.'

Lia brought out a camera with the biggest lens I've ever seen and screwed it onto a tripod.

'When I was in Vietnam I used nothing but a tiny little Canon Regulator. Did I ever tell you that?'

'I think you might have, maybe a hundred, a hundred and fifty times.'

Once the game started I watched Lia working almost as much as I watched the game, which at ground level moved too quickly for me. Mostly she stayed hunched over the camera, staring through the peephole. Occasionally she leant back and reminded herself of the bigger picture. It seemed such exertion for a single photograph.

'Cricket must be easier,' I said. 'At least you can rest in between balls.'

'Cricket goes on and on and on.'

'If you did cricket you could travel all over the world.'

Late in the first quarter, my knees aching, my roll of film all used up, I was leaning back against the fence watching Lia. Hunched over her camera, staring through the peephole, she was as still as a sniper. I followed the line of her lens back onto the field. A Port player,

tackled as he kicked, slewed the ball from the centre straight towards the wing where we sat.

Another Port player reached the bouncing ball first and accidentally soccered it straight towards me. He and a Norwood player sprinted after the ball. Close to the boundary line the Port player pulled up but by the time the Norwood player—a compact, hairy mass of muscle—realised, too late, that the ball would beat him out of bounds he turned his shoulder, narrowly missed decapitating a boundary umpire, and ran into the fence beside me. I ended up on my buttocks. He gave my shoulder a tap of apology as he stepped back onto the field, apparently unhurt. 'Well done, Scotty,' someone in the crowd called out. 'Keep at it. Show 'em who's in charge.'

Scotty pushed past several players and shoved the Port player who had soccered the ball. 'Hear the footsteps, did you?' Scotty yelled and shoved him again. The Port player collapsed as if he had been shot in the heart. He lay motionless. When he understood that the umpire would not award him a free kick he miraculously recovered. From the crowd behind us came the observation, 'If you're gonna hit him, Scotty, make sure he doesn't get up.'

Lia helped me back onto my stool. 'Are you all right, Grandpa?'

'All right? I'm wonderful. This is what I came for, the biffo. I like that Scotland fellow. He should be playing AFL.'

'He's too slow,' Lia said. 'He says so himself.'

From the boundary throw-in the Port ruckman dropped the ball at his own feet. A scramble ensued. Scotty was the fifth man to jump into the pack. I couldn't imagine what he hoped to achieve other than to inflict more hurt. The umpire was about to halt play when the ball, somehow, came free. A Norwood player, already running at full pace, scooped the ball up without breaking stride and wrong-footed a Port player, who turned and chased hard. After the Norwood player had bounced the ball twice, and as the Port player was about to catch him, he kicked. Ahead, a curly-headed lump-of-a-lad, an imposing physique emerging from young fat, ran forward. He arrived too late to mark the ball but he crashed the pack, his knee in the shoulder of one of his opponents. His fist connected with the ball, which fell at the feet of a tiny Norwood bloke who scooped it up, ran forward, looped a handball over a defender's head to a team mate who turned and kicked an easy goal.

'Good on'ya Scotty,' a voice called.

'Your goal, Scotty.'

I was perplexed. Gary Scotland was a hundred and fifty metres away, closer to me than the goals. 'What's it got to do with him?' I asked Lia.

'Brilliant,' she said, leaving me no wiser.

By half-time my legs were cramping but Lia had planned ahead. She settled me into a seat in the grandstand, fortified with a couple of cushions and a meat pie that broke several dietary rules, which didn't matter too much because most of it ended up on my lap. She coerced a ground attendant to bring me a beer and, later, to let me use a staff toilet.

My photos were mostly disappointing. I had tried to capture players kicking goals: impossible. I tried to convey how the lump-of-a-lad—'Destined for greatness,' Lia said—dictated the movement of every other player on the field, depending on whether he ran left, right, or 'down the guts', but my photograph revealed nothing other than distant statues standing in a field.

One of Lia's photographs—not the boring one of a smiling winner they put in the paper—was a revelation. It captured the moment when the pack of players formed directly in front of us, just after Scotty had leapt onto the others and at the exact moment that the ball came free. In the centre of the frame, emerging from limbs and torsos and flying green mud, was a tattooed arm, unmistakably Scotty's. The ball lay on a direct trajectory from his fist to the feet of his team mate who, running past, swept it up.

'It's a brilliant photo, Love,' I said. 'You should have it framed.'

She did, too. She blew it up, inserted it in a silver frame and put it on a wall in a café in Norwood. A businessman bought it for four hundred and fifty dollars. When Lia rang to tell me she was more excited than I'd ever known her. Her voice quivered with triumph. 'He asked me if I had any more.'

~*~

It is difficult to believe that the Jakarta Informal Meeting has furthered the cause of Cambodian peace, if indeed that was ever its true purpose. At Bogor, former President Sukarno's getaway palace, sworn enemies sipped cocktails and pretended that they could stand each other's company for an hour or two. They may have engaged in something resembling dialogue but it is highly unlikely that they allowed themselves to do what normal people do at cocktail parties: have spontaneous conversations. In all likelihood, they recited carefully crafted scripts. All very predictable. All very pointless.

Neither does the content of the dialogue give any cause for optimism. One example will suffice: the Vietnamese delegation, led by the redoubtable Nguyen Co Thach, reiterated that Hanoi is in the process of withdrawing all of its troops from Cambodia. Not that anybody doubts that the soldiers are leaving. Rather, Vietnam's opponents are engaged in an infantile exercise in pretending it can't be true.

This observer senses an even more worrying trend. Calls from various parties for some type of UN peacekeeping force are wrongheaded and perhaps even pernicious. This has never been a civil war or, at least, never solely a civil war. It is not the Cambodian people who are to blame for prolonging this war or for the continued presence of the Khmer Rouge as a guerrilla force. The principal combatants in Cambodia have always been China, the Americans and—as a defensive measure and against their personal wishes—the Soviet Union. Ask yourself this: when the UN arrives to make peace whose interests will they truly serve?

—Edward Whittlemore 'As I See It', syndicated column, 26 July 1988

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'This suit is a disaster,' Kiry said. 'And I hold you responsible.' He tried to smooth the wrinkled white linen. 'Oh, I give up.'

'You look so suave,' Akor Sok said. 'So statesmanlike.'

'I look like a tennis player sent out to save the world.' He took the paper orchid from his lapel—the purple dye was beginning to run—and threw it in the gutter. He acknowledged but waved away several reporters loitering in front of the hotel. 'It's so hot today.'

Two Cambodian monks, dressed in saffron robes and holding umbrellas to protect their shaved heads from the sun, stood waiting for traffic to pass so that they could cross the road. Kiry's bodyguards stepped forward and one of them yelled, 'Stay away,' but Kiry held

up his hand.

'It's all right. I want to speak with them,' he said.

'But we're late, Your Excellency,' Sok said.

'Late? I can't imagine what we're going to miss.'

'You cannot trust those monks. Talking will only encourage them.'

'When peace comes we must be a party for all Kampucheans. How do you propose I lay the groundwork for this if I cannot speak with anyone?'

'They want to castigate you. They will trick you into using words that they will then hold against you.'

'Do you know your problem? You have no empathy for the people. It makes me sad.'

Kiry stepped onto the road.

'Wait for your guards, Your Excellency.'

'If I do that then I might as well not go at all.'

'Please, look both ways before you cross.'

As the monks clasped their hands in greeting Kiry stooped as low as his travel-weary knees permitted. One of the monks sprinkled water from a plastic bottle over Kiry's head and blessed him.

'Thank you, Venerable Ones,' Kiry said, 'and thank you for travelling such a long way.'

'No distance is too great in the cause of peace.'

'I agree fully. Please know that I am genuine in my efforts to find a solution. But please be patient with me. Peace will not come today or tomorrow but I know it will come soon. Do you have any advice for me?'

'We would only want to remind you that Buddhists should always choose non-violent rather than violent methods.'

'Of course, but regrettably that is not always possible. I remember I once heard these words: "When I swallow a glass of water I kill living creatures. I admit it. But I do not consciously set out to kill. My act of will is concerned only with staving off dehydration." I feel as though I have been drinking from that glass of water for decades, all the time trying to end the fighting.'

'Please remember that to search for peace is not the same as to push for victory.'

'Wise men do not desire victory or defeat. He who thinks he has won has lost. Didn't the Buddha say that?'

'Something like that. He was talking about—'

'Thank you again. I am moved and inspired by your devotion to our country. My heart will remain heavy until I have achieved my goals for the greater good of our country.'

Kiry took his money clip from a pocket and handed fifty dollars to each of the monks. Then he crossed the road and got into the back seat of a long black car.

'There now, that wasn't so terrible, was it?' he said to Sok. 'Come on, let's go. The cocktail hour is upon us.'

~*~

At the invitation of the Government of France and under the Co-Chairmanship of His Excellency Roland Dumas, Foreign Minister of France, and His Excellency Ali Alatas, Foreign Minister of Indonesia, the International Conference on Cambodia met in Paris from July 30 to August 30, 1989. Participating in the conference were the representatives of Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Canada, China, France, India, Indonesia, Japan, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the United States of America, Vietnam and Zimbabwe in its capacity as current Chairman of the Non-Aligned Movement. Cambodia was represented by the four Cambodian protagonists. The Secretary-General of the United Nations and his representatives also participated in the Conference.

The Conference, mindful of the previous efforts made at the Jakarta Informal Meetings and elsewhere, achieved progress in elaborating a wide variety of elements necessary for the reaching of a comprehensive settlement to the tragic conflict in Cambodia. The Conference noted, however, that it is not yet possible to achieve a comprehensive settlement. It was therefore decided to suspend the Conference.

The Conference urges all parties concerned to intensify their efforts to achieve a comprehensive settlement. To facilitate these efforts, the Co-Presidents of the Conference shall lend their good offices as required to participating parties and countries who can facilitate a comprehensive settlement, including the reconvening of the Committees as appropriate.

—Final Declaration, *Paris Conference on Cambodia, 30 August 1989.*

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At 2 a.m., sometime in August, Nhem Kiry sat at an end of a long conference table, resting his forehead on his wrist while the fingers of his other hand rapped a fat thesaurus. A mess of papers lay before him. Akor Sok sat to Kiry's right. The rest of the entourage were spread out, some working alone at smaller, odd-shaped desks, some huddling in twos and threes having whispered debates on draft documents concerning the practicalities of repatriation for refugees or the rules of engagement for UN peacekeepers.

Son Sen, who had hardly slept for a week, lay on a couch, a newspaper on his stomach, staring at a bare wall (Kiry had demanded that the French remove several portraits

of former trade ministers). Ol stood by the door to the corridor reading Book One of *Learn English Now!*

Akor Sok read to Kiry from a handwritten draft. *'The inclusion of Vietnamese settlers in Cambodia is a violation of—'*

'No,' Kiry interrupted. 'Change it to *is in flagrant violation of.*'

'...is in flagrant violation of the Geneva Convention on the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War of 12 August 1948.'

'1949.'

'Yes. Sorry. *The most troubling aspect about the settlers is that they are part of a Vietnamese plan of continued occupation—'*

'Stop. I want to quote the Convention after the first sentence. Otherwise our point will be lost. Who has a copy of the *Geneva Convention on the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War*? Anybody?'

Vireak, a Beijing-trained lawyer skilled in international law and euphemisms, leant down and shuffled the papers on the floor beside his desk. 'Here, I have it.'

Kiry read for a moment. 'Insert this after the first sentence: *In fact, the final paragraph of Article 49 of the Convention states that, "the occupying power shall not proceed to the deportation or the transfer of a part of its civilian population into the territory occupied by it."*'

Sok continued reading: *'The most troubling aspect about the settlers is that they are part of a Vietnamese plan of continued occupation, a systematic attempt to Vietnamatize Kampuchea. In different places in the world the presence of illegal settlers is always condemned but in Kampuchea, where a million or more Vietnamese, as serious a part of the invading force as the battalions of soldiers—'*

'No,' Kiry interrupted. 'Too vague. Sharpen it. And be specific. '

Underneath a mound of papers a telephone rang.

'Yes?' Sok said. He handed the receiver to Kiry. 'Ieng Sary.'

'Yes?...Are you sure? I think that's too strong. At the moment we need only to remain firm that we require a genuinely quadripartite interim administration and...I don't agree...Why?...Yes...I have the Hun Sen position on the Supreme National Council right here. They say I am not acceptable as a member...No, not acceptable. They say they will reluctantly

agree to a moderate member of the Khmer Rouge...No, I don't know what that means either if it doesn't mean me...No, that's not necessary...No, that's too antagonistic. They're just posturing. Let me send a memo pointing out that Hun Sen's position amounts to the Cambodian People's Party maintaining effective control right through the election campaign, which is clearly unacceptable, and that the so-called solutions by Third Parties ...Yes, I do mean the French but I don't want to name them now...Well, I'm posturing too, of course I am...All I want to say at the moment is, *So-called quadripartite solutions by third parties amount to a bipartite arrangement between Hun Sen and Sihanouk*...If you want my opinion, that's too strong...That's counter-productive...All right...Yes, all right.' Kiry hung up. 'I want coffee.'

'Sir, Tony Birde is outside. He's one of the Australian Foreign Minister's aides. He wonders if he might make a suggestion with regards to the genocide question.'

'Ask him if he wouldn't mind waiting a moment. Who has the last Vietnamese statement on Vietnamization? Anyone? Read it aloud, whoever has it. Where's my coffee?'

'*The alleged question of "Vietnamese settlers" is nothing but a fantasy. The sole purpose of connecting the repatriation of Cambodian refugees and displaced persons from the Thai border areas with this non-existent problem is to prepare the way for a return to the genocidal policies and practices inflicted on the long-suffering Cambodian people, including repatriated refugees, and on foreign nationals in Cambodia.*'

'Irrelevant. Ignore it. Make it clear that "to settle" is the same as "to invade." Therefore "Vietnamese armed forces" is a term that must be given the widest possible application,' he told Sok. 'This coffee is stale. Somebody ring for another pot. And sandwiches. I don't care what's in them so long as they're fresh.'

'Sir, what about Mr Birde?'

'Who?'

'The Australian: might I admit him now?'

'What does he want?'

'He wants to talk about genocide.'

'Okay. Let him in.'

Nhem Kiry and Tony Birde shook hands and exchanged pleasantries.

'Come and sit down,' Kiry said and led him to a sofa (Son Sen had disappeared into

the bathroom to wash his face and change his shirt). 'I have fresh coffee on the way.'

'Thank you, Your Excellency, if it's no trouble. I do not wish to impose.'

'It is no imposition at all. I remain deeply grateful for the efforts of all our friends in the international community.'

'Thank you indeed. But on the question of the use of certain words, we are hoping we can find some way forward so that meaningful progress on other issues is not stymied.'

'Of course, although I must repeat—I have made this point to you previously, I think—that this is no peripheral issue for us. I simply cannot agree to support any document that has, as its defining spirit, an expression such as the "genocidal Pol Pot regime."'

'I understand.'

'It is an insult, especially coming from the Vietnamese, who are the root cause of the tragedy of Kampuchea.'

'Well, you understand, I do not wish to make any comment on root causes. But on the question of the use of the disputed phrase we would like to suggest that you consider agreeing to the use of an asterisk.'

'If I may, I will ask one of my legal colleagues to join us.'

'By all means.'

'Ah, here's the coffee. Vireak, Mr Birde is proposing an asterisk solution to the genocide issue.'

'I'm not sure I follow,' Vireak said.

'If I might explain. We include all the disputed phrases but we put an asterisk beside every disputed phrase, with a note at the bottom, in bold perhaps, saying, *The use of the word "genocide" is contested by some signatories to the communiqué, and indicates no criticism, real or implied, towards any involved party.* What do you think?'

'We will consider your suggestion, of course, and we are grateful indeed for your efforts to deal with this matter,' Kiry said. 'It seems to me, however, that by following this approach the offending phrase will appear in black and white, for posterity. I also wonder if adorning the word "genocide" in such a way—with a star, of all things—will actually call even more attention to its presence.'

'What if we were to adorn all disputed phrases with an asterisk? For example, the Vietnamese are dismayed about the words "colonialism" and "imperialism" appearing in

draft documents as descriptions of their occupation.'

'But those are statements of fact,' Vireak said. 'There can be no comparison.'

'Really, we would prefer that we arrived at an alternative wording less offensive to the long struggle of the Kampuchean people,' Kiry said.

'Such as?'

'Perhaps *steps to avoid any return to the dangers of the past.*'

'What about *incidents and outcomes that gravely imperilled the Cambodian nation and people between 1975 and 1979*?'

'Really, Mr Birde, you know better than that. Was there no war between 1970 and 1975? Did the Americans not prop up Lon Nol and did they not drop more bombs on the defenceless Kampuchean people than were dropped on the whole of Europe in World War Two? Have the Vietnamese, on behalf of the Soviets, not waged war every day since 1979 until now? Vireak, what was it that His Excellency, Mr Dumas, said when he opened the conference?'

'I believe he said *it should now be possible and urgent to put an end to one of the bloodiest and most unjust conflicts in history.*'

'Yes. We will accept that.'

'How about *the future absence of universally condemned policies and practices of the past*?'

'Not ideal. I would prefer, simply, *the policies and practices of the past.*'

The telephone rang.

'Excuse me, Your Excellency,' Sok said. 'The French have a question: will you accept a seating plan at tomorrow's afternoon session based on seniority? They are asking because it means you will sit beside Mr Hun Sen.'

'Does Hun Sen agree?'

'He does, apparently.'

'Oh very well. If I must.' Kiry turned back to the Australian. 'Where were we? Oh yes. We will consider your asterisk proposal. That is the best I can say right now. But, please, I want to assure you that, whatever we ultimately say, I personally think your proposal is absolutely ingenious. You should be very proud of yourself.'

~*~

Mostly, Beryl and I met in the sunroom for a cup of tea and a biscuit. Occasionally, if we were both up to it, we strolled in the garden. And she was delighted when I organised us a table for two in the dining room.

'How exciting,' she said. 'It's just like going to a fancy restaurant.'

'Apart from the food. And the service. And the decor.'

She loved our excursion to Glenelg, even though the uneven planks on the jetty made her walker bounce and even though the wind blew knots into her carefully crafted hairdo. Michael and Anne chaperoned us that day, which was just as well because when I got grumpy—I hate the sea and I hate people at the sea—Michael whispered, 'Keep smiling, Dad, or you'll be sorry.'

But it took weeks of pleading before Beryl let me see inside her room. 'Reds aren't welcome here,' she told me every time I came calling. I persisted, noting the gradual softening in her tone each time she slammed the door in my face. And then, finally, came the great day.

'Good morning, my dear.'

'Well, if it isn't Red Ted. What a surprise.'

'It's been two days since my last visit and—'

'I saw you this morning at breakfast. Have you forgotten already?'

'It's been two days since I visited you at home and I feel I must apologise for being so remiss. Perhaps if you allowed me to come in I might be able to express my regret in full.'

'Very well.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'I'm asking you in.'

Her room was larger than mine and she had a large window that looked out on a courtyard. I squeezed into a narrow armchair.

'My son wants to buy me a new kettle, one that turns itself off. He thinks I'm going to forget one day and burn the place down,' she said. 'I have some of that strange Asian tea you like. I had a devil of a time getting it.'

'Really?'

She dipped her eyes and I caught a glimpse of a mischievous twenty year old. 'Actually, I just asked the kitchen if I could have some of whatever it is that they serve you.

But I had to remember to ask them. '

'I'm touched that you made the effort.'

'It's important when you have guests to keep them happy. Now don't go getting any ideas: not *that* happy.'

'I've no idea what you mean.'

'We used to do so much entertaining.'

'We?'

'Formal dinners. And cocktail parties. I remember one day we had a marquee. There must have been two hundred people in our garden. Mind you, it was a very big garden.'

She brought the tea and sat opposite me in a matching chair. Between us sat a table covered with lace cloth on which sat ten or more framed photographs.

'That's my family,' she said. 'Aren't they beautiful?'

'Every single one of them,' I said. I pointed at a photo of a youth in an army uniform. 'Your son?'

'He hates that photo. Says it reminds him of Vietnam. But I like it because it reminds me that he came back.'

She lifted a large frame from the back and handed it to me. It was the image of a fit-looking man with a major-general's moustache. He wore a grim expression softened only by a kindly crease or two around his eyes.

'That's Thomas,' she said.

'Your brother?'

'My husband.'

'Oh.'

'My late husband, I should say.'

'If you don't mind me asking, when did Thomas die?'

'A long time ago.'

'What did he do for work?'

'He was an Executive. He had interests in wheat export and in a radio station.'

'Yes, but what did he actually do?'

'Aren't you listening? He was an Executive. He had a heart attack three months after he took early retirement.'

'That's the Australian way.'

She pursed her lips and blew her tea. 'I don't think that's very funny, Edward.'

'Sorry.'

'Well, anyway, I wanted you to meet him.'

'Pleased to meet you, Tom. Can I call him Tom? Or Tommy?'

'You may not. His name is Thomas.'

'Right then, Thomas it is. Do you want me to talk to him?'

'Don't be ridiculous, Edward, it's a photograph. I told you, he's dead. I just thought you should see him since we're—'

'Stepping out?'

'Precisely.'

'Can I kiss you?'

'Maybe tomorrow.'

'This tea is perfectly brewed. I've never had better, not even in China.'

'I said, maybe tomorrow. Don't ask me again.'

~*~

First and foremost, the US pressure on Vietnam, along with the efforts of our friends in ASEAN, forced Hanoi into meaningful negotiations. Our leadership in sustaining the diplomatic and trade embargo, backed up by our fierce adherence to the moral imperative, placed enormous pressure on Vietnam, especially given that the Russians, themselves forced into decline, were unable and unwilling to continue to prop them up. This left the US government free to pursue the next stage of its Indochina strategy. Secretary of State, James Baker III, announced the withdrawal of US diplomatic support for the CGDK at the UN, offered a small amount of strictly humanitarian aid to both Hanoi and Phnom Penh, and opened a tentative but direct dialogue with Vietnam specifically on the Cambodian settlement. Then, and only then, was America in a position to pursue the Khmer Rouge. Cynics, of course, claim that the change was all about US domestic pressure: specifically, the need to distance the government from any implication of alleged support, however tenuous, for the Khmer Rouge. This entirely misses the key point: it was the success of US policy, especially the sustained pressure we placed on Moscow, which allowed this shift to take place. Now we can make the peace on our terms. Now we can claim our victory in Vietnam. Now we can take over from those honourable souls who have opposed the Khmer Rouge on solely moral grounds. Now we can get the job done.

—from Cornell E. Jackson's Asia-Pacific Commentary, in GAP (Growth and Persistence), *the monthly report of the Edgar Institute for International Democracy, November 1991*

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Because I was in Paris anyway—I had stopped on my way to London after a short trip to the Urals—I attended the post-signing reception. A French friend from the foreign ministry accredited me despite the loud protests of an Australian colleague who, as if lying in wait for me, appeared from nowhere.

'Your type isn't welcome here. I thought you'd have learnt your lesson by now,' my compatriot said when what he really meant was, 'You're personally responsible for the deaths of all my South Vietnamese friends.'

'Relax, Frank,' I said. 'Today is a great day. We are collectively ushering in a new era of peace for Cambodia and Southeast Asia. And we are offering hope for war-ravaged peoples everywhere. Haven't you read your press release?'

Although confined to the outer ring of the reception I'm sorry to say I stood behind a

rope and from less than twenty metres witnessed Nhem Kiry and Sihanouk and Son Sann and Prince Ranarridh and Hun Sen embrace. As they posed for photographs they couldn't stop mauling each other with a playfulness that was either carnal or fake. All around them foreign affairs specialists and UN functionaries clutched Champagne and snatched sandwiches (no one ever knows how long the finger food will last at these events, not even in France) and congregated in groups of three or four to congratulate themselves and to break off and stare in wonder at the Cambodian protagonists, who stood in the very middle of the room and rubbed each other until underneath their clothes they began to bleed.

'Lots of baby steps are better than one giant stride,' I heard an English diplomat remark.

'This is a victory for saying "Yes,"' his Chinese counterpart replied. 'When a person says "No" and really means it, he is doing a great deal more than uttering a tiny word. His entire being, his entire organism—glandular, nervous, muscular—merges into rejection. Then follows a physical withdrawal, or at least a readiness for withdrawal.'

The Englishman, a convivial fellow who occasionally leaked me documents relating to Vietnam, came across to the rope.

'Did you hear what he said? Who was he quoting? Was it Mao?'

'Possibly Chou En-lai,' I said, 'but most likely it was Deng Xiaoping.'

'But don't you know? You of all people?'

'I must be overcome—I should say, I must be influenced—by the moment. Hey, you couldn't get me some of that skewered squid, could you. There's nothing decent to eat in here.'

Inside the ring Nhem Kiry and Son Sen retreated to a far corner where they whispered to each other and giggled like schoolboys. I was sorry they weren't closer, I was about ready to cause a diplomatic incident: now that I'd sighted a waiter with a tray of beer I would have been happy to pour my tart bubbly over Kiry's head.

The Australian foreign minister, a gangly man with a beard—what was he hiding under there?—emerged from the throng holding a piece of paper and a pen. He came to the rope and thrust the paper at me. It was a press release from the Department of Foreign Affairs: **Bevan Hails Signing of Cambodian Peace Deal**. A mass of signatures covered the page.

'Sign it,' Bevan said.

I did.

'What a day. What a great, great day,' he said.

I retreated to a pillar, gathering cheese on crackers and beer as I went. Bevan embraced someone with one arm while waving the piece of paper above his head with the other. When he disengaged and skipped back into the crowd—'Gotta get the Russians to sign'—he left Cornell standing in the afterglow of his affection. I waved and called out, 'Over here, comrade.'

In a spirit of fraternity—or was he gloating about his relative youth?—Cornell leapt over the rope and lifted me off the ground. Well, why not, everyone else was hugging.

'Hi there, buddy. Hey, who's the friendly guy with the beard?'

'No idea. Look at you, all dressed up, you look almost adult.'

'We did it, I can't believe it, we did it. You can't doubt our *bona fides* now.'

'Can't I?'

'You can't tell me that America doesn't keep its promises. Peace in our time, who was it who said that?'

'Jack the Ripper?'

'Who's he, buddy?'

'Just another English diplomat. Before your time.'

'Do you know what I just heard?'

'Some people don't like America?'

'I know that already, buddy, I don't get it but I know it. No, listen: apparently Pol Pot was at that Supreme National Council gathering in Thailand, in Pattaya, in June. Actually there. Can you believe it?'

'Yes.'

'The word is he stayed in his hotel room and the Khmer Rouge delegation had to keep breaking off negotiations to go and get his approval. Isn't that funny?'

'Funny? I think it's despicable.'

'Oh, come on Teddy boy, lighten up. Apparently he got bored in his room so they organised for him to go to the hotel's swimming pool. He put a towel over his head and staff lined up all along the route—with their backs turned, can you believe it?—so nobody would

bump into him. Do you know the best thing?'

'Tell me.'

'He got an ear infection.'

'Oh, joy.'

'Cheer up, buddy, none of it matters now. Come on, how about a smile? Tell me you're happy.'

'Am I the only person in the room who thinks this is a sham?'

'Do you know what? You're a sore loser, buddy. This is a classic CPL situation.'

'Cesspool, eh? *The Cambodian Comprehensive Settlement and Other Cesspools of Our Times.*'

'Can't Possibly Lose: listen, if the Khmer Rouge stick with the *Comprehensive Settlement* we've delivered peace.'

'We?'

'Grow up, buddy: no America, no peace. And the beautiful thing is, there's no risk. If the Khmer Rouge do the wrong thing, if they keep fighting, we can now take all necessary measures. Even the Vietnamese are happy. Come on, drink up, I'll get you another one.'

'Can't we go find a bar? I don't want to be here.'

'Jesus Christ, will you cheer up: peace is peace, buddy, no matter how it smells.'

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The Confessions of Nhem Kiry

Another day. I can't get out of bed. My legs are heavy, my arms are weak and my neck throbs. It hurts to swallow and to speak. I want to vomit. A nurse feeds me a tablet that I wash down with nutrient-infused water. A doctor flattens my tongue with a Paddle Pop stick and peers inside me with a torch. I expect the worst but the doctor says, 'You've got tonsillitis. Sorry, Mr Whittlemore, but you're confined to quarters for a few days.' I suck a lozenge, which allows me to mount a short but spirited complaint about lax standards of hygiene in Australian aged care facilities.

Ho Chi Minh died in 1969. He got his wish for a modest funeral: only one hundred thousand people came to Ba Dinh Square. Now Ho lies in a glass box. He is happy enough, I imagine, but embarrassed by all the fuss. He probably wishes that his successors hadn't renamed Saigon in his honour.

Nhem Kiry telephones Phnom Penh from a shop in Pailin. He speaks off the record to the principal legal officer of Cambodian Legal Aid Services (CALAS), requesting free representation should a United Nations trial proceed. 'It is a question of due process,' he says. 'It is a question of me receiving a fair trial. It is a question of legitimacy which, it seems obvious to me, is in everybody's best interests.' The principal legal officer tells him to apply formally: 'Your request, like any other, will be treated on its merits.'

Richard Nixon died in April 1994. Cornell watched the broadcast of the funeral while walking twenty kilometres on his home treadmill. He applauded President Clinton—really applauded, sending Boris the Golden Retriever running barking into the room—for praising his fellow Leader of the Free World so effusively. Cornell believes that a man should not be judged on one incident but on the full extent of his life and his achievements. He is adamant that no man's morality should be judged on an ideal rather than on what is achievable in the real world.

Fidel Castro stands in front of a mirror, as men expecting taxidermy upon death are prone to do. He debates the merits of shaving off his beard. Will the skin beneath be spongy? Red and raw? He sends for his personal physician. He wonders, while he waits, whether he has his priorities entirely well ordered. If he shaves once he will have to shave again and again. What a waste of his time that will be.

Hanh Nguyen, diligent Viet Cong doctor and my dear friend, died in her sleep on 12 May 1997. 'She had been feeling more and more tired but she never complained of being

unwell,' her son wrote to tell me. 'I cannot begin to calculate how many lives she saved over the years,' I wrote back. Mind you, I suppose most of them are dead now too. Lia says I should ask Reverend Burton to conduct a funeral. 'What for?' I say. 'For closure. I'll come. I'll bring Tim. Dad will come. And Beryl,' she says. 'I hate ceremonies,' I say, too crossly.

King Norodom Sihanouk sits in a cancer clinic in Beijing. He wears a white silk smock. Several of his aides watch as a nurse fusses over him. 'I am old—Sihanouk is old—so I suppose I must endure more tests. It is yet another example of my destiny: to endure matters beyond my control.' He is unhappy at being the king of Cambodia again. 'I have no power, no opportunity to improve the lot of my people. If I was younger—if I was Ranarridh's age—I could outmanoeuvre Hun Sen. But my son is a bad actor: he is not so good at being his father.' The nurse murmurs sympathetically, although she cannot understand his French, and injects him with a dye that will light up his intestine.

Corinna Zophan, former head of the International Committee of the Red Cross, died in the Balkans while working as a volunteer consultant for an aid agency. Unexpectedly caught in crossfire, she died instantly from a single bullet wound to the chest. Her death was reported around the world for a day and in her home country for nearly a week.

Henry Kissinger sits in a leather armchair in an office on the top floor of a New York skyscraper. He proofreads the seventh volume of his memoirs. His new motto is, 'Drown your enemy in words.' On the table is a tiny book written by a professional agitator (that's a compliment): 'Henry Kissinger must be tried in the International Court in the Hague by a panel of independent judges,' it begins. Irrelevant, Kissinger thinks, although he is irritated that a film of the book is in pre-production.

Cancer killed Chou En-lai in 1976. As in his life, in his death he was modestly omnipresent: he stipulated that his ashes be scattered across the land, and in the rivers and the territorial waters of the People's Republic of China. A gunship dropped some of his remains in the Taiwan Straits where he waits, even now, to reclaim the island. Once, Chou En-lai told Nhem Kiry, 'For the revolution one must be prepared to play the prostitute.' Kiry was offended by the analogy but, still, Chou taught him well: a mild man need never be meek.

Akor Sok, Nhem Kiry's aide for twenty years, now a senior bureaucrat in the Ministry of Health and Sanitation, arrives in his Phnom Penh office before dawn. He is conscientious and honest. He is fair to his staff, many of whom, he knows, receive inconsequential salaries.

'We have so much still to do but we are doing our best for the poor people of Cambodia.' He likes Phnom Penh restaurants, especially those across the river. He loves his young wife and is enchanted by his children, a toddler and a baby. But he misses travelling and he dreams of moving to Sri Lanka: 'It's such a beautiful country.'

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I don't know who killed JFK. Frankly, I don't much care. For what it's worth, I've never set foot in Dallas. I imagine a city of boulevards and concrete, tall buildings that block out half the sky, patches of barely-watered grass, assassination theme parks. Despite my ignorance, I have an opinion: I believe that after the shots rang out in 1963—after, not before—a conspiracy commenced. It began the same day the horses pulled the coffin, the same day that the newspaper eulogisers inaugurated the national project of beatification: a few men in pin-striped suits, the invisible bosses behind the politicians, gathered together in a leather-walled office in Washington D.C., gripping glasses of bourbon, and agreed that every setback is also an opportunity:

'There must be some doubt about whether that boy did this terrible thing all by his lonesome.'

'Well hell, the scrawny little fella didn't look capable of shooting road kill.'

'Goddamit, why don't we just announce to the press—Aye-nonymously, of course—that there were three shooters. Or four. Or five.'

'Mebbe. Or mebbe we could say Castro did it all by himself from a hot air balloon. Exonerate that little guy, what's his name, Osbort?'

'Shucks, we don't have to make it plausible. Just get the folks wondering what's what.'

'Nothing's certain in this world, thank the dear Lord.'

Well, maybe the conspiracy started more spontaneously than that (although, as I've been explaining to Lia, Americans, every single one of them, rich and aspiring, even the immigrants, really do talk like that). Most likely it sprouted simultaneously in fifty million lounge rooms and campervans, but that changes nothing: unless it's stamped out, an accidental conspiracy is a conspiracy just the same. Still, I suppose you can't blame ordinary Americans—by ordinary I mean those without the keys to the White House and, more to the point, those who haven't a clue who really does have the keys—for preferring not to see their

bright-eyed, randy young leader's limitations. You've heard the sort of nationalistic papering over of cracks that I'm getting at: 'Just imagine what a wonderful country he'd have left us if he'd lived for his full eight years,' or, 'He'd have pulled us out of Vietnam *and* put the commies in their place: he was that great.'

Nowadays, JFK is an entertainment phenomenon: Hollywood epics, documentaries (their repackaging an annual event), book depositories full of books, mock trials of Lee Harvey Oswald broadcast live on the Justice Channel. The end result of all these diversions—apart from turning JFK into a geopolitical Robin Hood, steeling himself against the warmongers to give peace to the world—is that people spend so much time wondering who really killed him that they haven't got any time left to de-bunk the myth. So it follows that if Kennedy was truly great then America is truly great too, all the more so because he bedded Marilyn Monroe on behalf of a grateful nation—and no, it doesn't matter whether or not it really happened, much less whether she enjoyed it (by most accounts, Jesus didn't enjoy being nailed to the cross). It's all about which gaps you choose to fill in. It's all about facing up to gaps you prefer to leave yawning. It's all about which means justify which ends.

If Cornell were here he wouldn't bother to defend JFK on the specifics of the Cuban missile crisis or on Vietnam other than to say that Stalin started the Cold War and Reagan ended it (mind you, that's his answer to everything). Instead, he'd say, 'I've got three words for you, buddy: Ho Chi Minh.'

Well, that's a whole different case: people are at liberty to love or hate Ho on his record, his humanity, his integrity, his love of freedom and his desire to see the people, rather than a putrid elite, control Vietnam's destiny. People don't love or hate Ho based on whether there's grainy footage of his death. I'm not saying Kennedy's to blame for his own shooting—now *there's* a conspiracy theory worth a two hour special on HBO—but I doubt that even Catholics, the most imaginative people in history, can claim that getting shot qualifies you for a sainthood. It's only a miracle if you survive.

I wrote my book about Ho because I wanted to yank him free from the Stalinist swamp, that grubby assumption that communism *is* a crime against humanity in the sense that nicotine *is* bad for your lungs. I wrote about a man who I knew and with whom I had often conversed: purposeful, gentle, fun loving, graceful, self-sacrificing. It's all true, every word of praise—yes, adulation—and I'll defend him on agricultural collectivisation or

guerrilla war tactics or re-education camps or boat people. Ho fits into my existing views—all right, he dominates them—just as JFK fits into Cornell's. So I suppose that if Cornell were here I might have to concede to him a little: when I wrote that book about Ho I didn't find cause to challenge myself and I felt no need to revise my version of history.

But when I thought about Nhem Kiry the gaps were chasmic. At first glance, he's easy: he presented his facade—he presents it still—to the west and for the west. He was the public face of the Khmer Rouge, a politician with a mild disposition and a dry handshake, his fingernails clipped and rubbed until they were blunt (and not a speck of dried blood in sight). He helped the world, the world's aim being to extricate itself from Cambodia, to pretend it had never even noticed Cambodia much less trampled all over it like a sex-starved elephant tied up in a garden or like a randy politician locked in a white house.

To me it was always obvious how badly the west needed Kiry. I suppose that sounds like another conspiracy theory but Kiry wasn't—he isn't—a seal balancing a ball on the tip of his nose: he was smart, hardworking, committed to his beliefs and his plans. I think of a young man in 1963, already a recipient of a political beating and a month in prison, telling his fourteen-year-old students, while they were learning algebra, 'An important American man was shot yesterday. Not nearly as important as people might say but somewhat important and very famous.' Thirty years later I saw a smiling middle-aged diplomat—it is decades since anybody called him an economist although reporters still note that he has a doctorate—who I don't understand because I can't fathom what's been in it for him all this time.

I wanted to close the yawning gap between young and old. Nhem Kiry should have abandoned the Khmer Rouge, even if it rendered him redundant, even if he wound up in a traitor's ditch with an axe hole in his head. His integrity—he had too much not too little—led him down a different path, but why? I can't say, but the answer, if one exists, does not lie in what we think of him but in what he thinks of the world. Sihanouk probably did push Kiry into Pol Pot's arms. But Kiry stayed for thirty years and he not only survived—surely no accident—he flourished. I will not blame Sihanouk for that.

Now that it is all over—at least for those of us who do not have an uncle or a sister living in a corner of our house, breaking days of silence to shake and moan at the oddest moments—Kiry should feel free to speak. I have written him ten or more letters asking him

for an interview, pleading with him to put his perspective on the record. 'Yes, I will ask you hard questions,' I wrote last time, 'but surely now you will be grateful for the opportunity to truly respond?'

One day, when his kindly face, through no fault of his own, has soured and stiffened because it is an effort simply to climb the steps of his house, Kiry will acknowledge the crimes of the Khmer Rouge.

'I know the truth now,' he will probably say, 'and it torments me every day. I have seen the evidence and there can be no doubt about the hardship and, yes, the callousness that occurred in the 1975 to 1979 period. But I can tell you that at the time I knew nothing of these excesses. I ordered no killings and I was party to no purges. I was a mere functionary and if I overheard strange and worrying comments I never connected them to events going on inside Cambodia. When I joined the Khmer Rouge I joined reluctantly, in fear of my life. When they made me leader I served reluctantly, and I was always mindful of Cambodia's future, Cambodia's sovereignty, which I honestly believed I was acting to protect.' That is not what I want from Kiry: he should take the opportunity to be honest because it is always better to talk than to stay silent and because the world is already bloated with people who acknowledge their distress but not their culpability. I condemn Kiry unreservedly but, still, I expect so much more of him.

For me, history is everything that happened before the day I collapsed in Saigon in 1991. So when I recovered enough to start writing—when I retrieved my pride as well as my health—I wrote about history. But when I was done with the past I found I hadn't finished the story. I had to continue writing the present and the future, except that I had become a mere spectator. I had nothing to go on but the newspapers and—no laughing—the television. Plus, for what it's worth, I had whatever titbits Cornell thought I needed to read for my re-education: 'It's never too late to learn the truth, buddy, not even for you.' But the fact was, I wasn't too interested in following a future I wasn't a part of.

Speculating from the Concertina Rest Home is like trying to keep your composure while standing in a cave: the mustiness, the slow-dancing shadows cast when you strike a match, the groans that might be the wind but that might be a wounded animal lying across your path. I resorted to this: I became Kiry, I gave him the voice he continued to deny himself, just for an hour or two at a time, sometimes half a day if I was feeling sprightly. It

was taxing work, and futile, but it wasn't as though I had anything else to do. I kept these mental excursions to myself. I didn't even tell Lia, who would have disapproved despite claiming to allow all things in all people. I didn't even tell Beryl, who is such a good listener, when they bother to put in her hearing aids, and who wouldn't have remembered a word of it anyway.

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An angry crowd yesterday forced nominal Khmer Rouge leader, Mr Nhem Kiry, to flee Phnom Penh just hours after his arrival in Cambodia's capital city. Forced to shelter in his newly acquired villa, Kiry reportedly suffered a facial injury and bruising when locals stormed the building. His colleague, the Khmer Rouge defence spokesman, Son Sen, was reportedly unhurt. The two men are the Khmer Rouge representatives on the Supreme National Council, the power-sharing body set up under the auspices of the United Nations peace plan for Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge, who most independent experts agree is still controlled by the secretive Pol Pot, has promised to abide by the conditions of the peace plan and to participate in elections projected for 1993. Highly placed western sources tonight indicated the UN's plan could now be in jeopardy.

—the Guardian, *28 November 1991, p.3*

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I blinked—once, twice—to clear blood from my eyes. The man wielding the iron bar swung it at me again but he was drunk on tenacity. Or maybe he was plain drunk. He lurched forward and swiped the air. Our arms brushed. I felt his skin, tough as a truck tyre, and I wished for a calmer, more rational atmosphere, an opportunity to sit him down, share a pot of tea, a bottle of beer if that's what it took, and remind him that I had sacrificed my whole life to improve the circumstances of people like him. 'Nothing is more important,' I would have counselled, 'than the fact that we are both patriots.' It was a fine sentiment, and what's more it was a truth that he'd clearly forgotten, but if I'd been stupid enough and composed enough to deliver it at that moment—let alone to add, 'Please vote for me next year'—I doubt anything could have stopped him from killing me.

Death—like malaria, like bad press, like stale food on an airplane—is an ever-present possibility. I've faced it a few times, I suppose, but I'll take my body's death, my mind's death for that matter, over the abandonment of my integrity any day. What I cannot abide is losing control: realising the water you've drunk is tainted because you can't drop your trousers and squat fast enough; cowering in a dirt bunker as American bombs drop and explode like Mr Nixon's credibility; being screamed at by Nuon Chea or intimidated by Ta Mok in front of witnesses; waiting in an anteroom before meeting Chairman Mao. Inner turmoil is bad, pain is unpleasant, but allowing other people to see your distress leaves the deepest scars.

As the man took aim at me again, I dropped to all fours and scuttled, like a

cockroach, into a wardrobe. Sok jumped on top of me and pulled the door shut—'I'll save you, Your Excellency,' he said, although I don't know who he thought was going to save him.

'I want to kill him,' someone cried. Young men without work, stuck in a city that offers them no prospects, will say anything for a couple of dollars. And, really, who can blame them?

The mob opened the doors of the wardrobe. 'Kill him,' they chanted, 'Kill him, kill him, kill him.' Someone threw Sok into a corner as if he was my dirty laundry. They dragged me into the middle of the room. Concrete thoughts eluded me. I can only remember knees boxing my ears, and hands somehow disconnected from bodies reaching down and grabbing at my collar to expose my neck.

Then someone lifted me off the ground—later I found out that it was Ol, my chief bodyguard—and threw me in the bathroom. One of the French photographers was already in there: aren't women brave? Her camera hung from her hip, its lens peering up at me. I retained enough of my wits to turn my back before I pressed a towel against the wound above my eye.

When Ol opened the door the room had miraculously cleared of rioters. That's when I lost all feeling in my legs. They led me to the bed. I lay on my side and soiled a pillow with blood.

Son Sen entered the room. He was shaken but unbloodied, although his hair, usually immaculate, took off in all directions. There might have been a thumbprint on his glasses.

Government officials and soldiers filled the room.

'You must go. You must go now,' one official said, waving a walkie-talkie around as if that was proof of something.

'We have every right to be here,' I said. 'Mr Son Sen and I are members of the Supreme National Council. We have come to Phnom Penh in our official capacity. We have the legitimacy of the United Nations behind us, the support of the international community, and we have the right to expect protection.'

'Yes, Your Excellency, forgive me, you are correct in every sense. And now, please, you will go to the airport.'

They bundled me into an armoured personnel carrier as if I was a piece of luggage. They put a black helmet on my head. I must have resembled a German paratrooper.

I could barely breathe, even before they started jamming bodies in around me. Obviously, I don't mean bodies. I mean living people, my staff, throwing their elbows about, complaining, whimpering in the most unseemly ways, comparing bruises, and expelling that terrible sickly sweet smell of abject fear. I shouldn't complain: I suppose I stank too.

As the personnel carrier rumbled out of the city I closed my eyes and pretended I was in an open field: soft dawn light, fresh air, a log for a seat, a mango and a knife. Sok thought I had fainted. He shook me by the shoulder. My helmet—made for a much fatter head than mine—banged against my wound and I started bleeding again.

At the airport I sat on the tarmac. Sok held an umbrella over my head to keep the sun away but his hands shook with residual fear. I made him give the umbrella to Ol, who had recent combat experience and who could cast a shadow that did not rock. Sok, who hated to have his limitations exposed, became sullen and then resorted to acute politeness: 'Would Your Excellency care for a glass of iced water?' and, 'Does Your Excellency require a trip to the toilet before we leave?' and, 'Are you hungry, Your Excellency? Perhaps something sweet, a banana or a Mars Bar?'

Hun Sen came. We had a pointless conversation on the tarmac. He faked distress at the day's events. I pretended to absolve him of responsibility for nearly getting me lynched. Son Sen stood beside me and tried to look as if he was involved.

'It is a terrible thing, I know, but it really is best for you to go back to Bangkok, at least for now,' Hun Sen said, mournfully.

'Yes, Mr Prime Minister, I agree entirely,' I said. I didn't need him, of all people, telling me what was self-evident.

We ended with a show of mutual love and respect. I looked deeply into his glass eye, rendering myself dizzy. He grabbed my elbow to steady me and we embraced. 'A minor setback, nothing more,' he murmured in my ear. Then he left, almost carnally self-satisfied.

Son Sen shook his head as Hun Sen's cavalcade drove away. 'Who could ever have predicted he would become so capable?'

'Other than the Soviets, you mean?'

'That was a lucky guess. Pure good fortune.'

'There's no such thing,' I said.

The commercial flight we took to Bangkok was only half full. Son Sen, sitting

opposite me, slept immediately. His arm dropped into the aisle. His glasses slipped right to the end of his nose, where they balanced precariously. They did not fall, even though his arm was bumped several times as people went past him to the restroom—Sok made a point of hitting him at pace. Son Sen was, all the rumours insisted, being eased out of both his political and his military roles. I agreed that that was probably for the best—though I couldn't, of course, pass judgement on his recent military decisions. Still, I opposed crushing him: he had done so much for us, once.

I failed to sleep. I stared out the window and in my head drafted protest press releases. Such a waste of words: there's only so much soft-hearted diplomacy, so much tip-toeing, a man should have to endure, especially when he's the one mouthing it.

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To my deep irritation, at Bangkok airport a helicopter sat waiting to fly Son Sen to Pattaya.

'See a doctor,' he called, suddenly authoritative. 'Try to rest.'

'Yes, yes.'

Sok read my mood easily enough and spoke on my behalf: 'You were the one who was nearly killed. Surely you're the one who should be rushed to the beach.'

'Oh well.'

'And your family is waiting there, aren't they? You want to be with them now.'

'Ha. If they are there I want to be here. Anyway, I need to be available.'

'Available to whom? Prostitutes? German tourists?'

'Don't be petulant. We'll go to the beach another day.'

Airline officials herded us onto a rusting red bus that smelt so heavily of gasoline that I told Ol not to smoke. A wide vein running down my forehead now kept time with my heartbeat.

The bus left us beside a building. A security officer led us along a winding concrete corridor and through a door that closed behind us. We found ourselves inside the main terminal but when we turned to retreat the door would not open from the inside.

'You imbecile. You stupid monkey,' Sok yelled at the security officer, who tried to salvage the situation by leading us towards the safety of the QANTAS Golden Club lounge. But in the distance several journalists saw me and came running.

'Quickly, Your Excellency, this way,' Sok said.

'Wait. I want to talk to them.'

'No, Your Excellency,' Sok said. 'Please, not today. You have not been told what to s—, what I mean is, Your Excellency, is that you are not ready, after such a shock, to know what it is best to say.'

'I will speak to them.'

'Your Excellency, you are a mess.'

'Exactly.'

Sok ran ahead like a schoolboy to brief the reporters, the same faces who had farewelled me at dawn. 'Please do not crowd in. His Excellency Nhem Kiry has suffered a terrible shock. He is not so well. No photos.'

'That's not up to you,' one reporter said.

'If you take photos His Excellency will not speak.'

Sok positioned himself at my right shoulder. I blame myself for this: I had set him the task, as the peace proposals took hold, of monitoring the public statements of the American administration: it was important, and it gave him something to do in the hotel rooms of the world other than watch pornography. Clearly, though, he had watched too many CNN news conferences: American politicians—'Bless them,' as American politicians would say—might be the most arrogant people in the whole world but, still, they cannot answer questions unless they have a row of faces—people, farm animals, cardboard cut-outs, it doesn't seem to matter—standing behind them braying in unison.

'This won't take long. Stand back there,' I told Sok, who looked aggrieved.

The reporters were like a pack of stray dogs, the sort you see roaming about beaches, a close community continually nipping at each other's heels, sniffing each other's arses. They came in all shapes and sizes and sexes. A couple of them were probably rabid. One bitch panted incessantly.

In the new era of peace these press conferences were frequent and monotonous. Whenever I spoke to the media they did their best to hold rapt, neutral expressions. But if my answer ever went for longer than, say, thirty seconds I saw flashes of exasperation—or was it revulsion?—on their faces, quickly wiped. None of them liked or respected me, any more than I liked or respected Sihanouk just because I scraped my nose bowing every time I pandered to him. Their disdain did not bother me nearly as much as it affected them: when

they wrote they tied themselves in knots trying to maintain the pretence of objectivity at the same time as they tried to trick me into damning myself.

'How are you feeling?' a fat American man asked.

'I'm feeling okay, all things considered. I am able to report no serious injuries.'

The corners of the American's mouth were flickering and his blue eyes gleamed: he could barely contain his amusement at my predicament.

'Who did this? Who is responsible?'

'Who? You ask *me* who? How can I possibly know? All I can do is join you by asking another question: is this an act perpetrated by Cambodians or is this the work of foreigners? Is this the behaviour of locals and lovers of peace or is this the behaviour of visitors, those lovers of imperialist mayhem who hate the very excellent Paris Peace Agreement?'

'Are you suggesting that the demonstration was staged?' asked a wiry Italian woman. As I had come to expect, she addressed me in a derisive tone, choosing to disbelieve me even before I spoke. I peered down at her and I couldn't help wondering, and not for the first time, why she bothered to be so aggressive in person when her articles were so tame and so lacking in insight.

'Of course it was staged, and more than that I—'

'But surely the Cambodian people have the right to reject the Khmer Rouge? Surely this is the essence of the democratic reforms the world is giving Cambodia?' an Irish woman interrupted (it's a national pastime).

'The people understand us. They know we love Cambodia. They rely on us, and us alone, to resist the outside aggressors, who everybody knows have not really withdrawn from Cambodia. In any case we believe that Cambodians of all stripes should not quarrel or fight each other any longer. We should forget the past which after all was not caused by Cambodians.'

The Irish woman persisted. 'Prime Minister Hun Sen says he urged you to take certain precautions for your own security but you refused.'

'What is your question?'

'Doesn't he have a point?'

'No.'

'But what about—'

'Does anybody have a relevant question?'

'What broader ramifications does the attack on you have for the peace process?' a thin Australian man asked. Beside him, the Irish woman, aghast at a question that she considered friendly, hopped from foot to foot.

'I do not want to say anything concrete about that right now. But we have been shamed today. And the Paris Agreement has been shamed too, for if the Supreme National Council, of which I am a rightful member according to all the nations of the world, cannot meet in Phnom Penh, there can be no peace process. If there are no guarantees of our safety in the future, if I cannot fulfil my responsibilities to my countrymen, then the peace process will pay a heavy price. But I believe, because I am an optimist, that we should maintain a mature and mild attitude to such setbacks, however troubling, and not give in to those who hate peace.'

'It is irony on a grand scale, don't you think,' the Irish woman said, 'for the Khmer Rouge to demand early deployment of the UN forces?'

'That is not a helpful question.' I paused and with self-restraint avoided scratching the scab on my forehead. 'I'm terribly sorry but that's all I can manage today. I'm sure you understand.'

In an ideal world I could have sat them down in a semi-circle, preferably in the fresh air, and given each of them a length of sugar cane to suck on (it shuts them up and gives them something to do with their hands). We could have convened under the shade of a Banyan tree—westerners go weak at the knees under Banyan trees. Or, to show my good intentions, I could have given them presents: a postcard of Angkor Wat with a peasant and a buffalo in the foreground; a spider encased in clear hard plastic ('People eat them deep-fried in Kompong Chhang'); a pamphlet co-written by Richard Gere on the essence of Buddhism.

Then, and only then, would I have told them the truth. 'I know that you imagine you are impartial,' I would have said, 'but believe me when I tell you that you are simply doing what the Americans and the Chinese and the Russians want you to do: disseminating information which is—please excuse my bluntness—well-crafted not by you but by them. The peace process is an international peace process. The Americans, even the Chinese, don't care whether the civil war carries on or not, so long as you people *call it* a civil war or, better yet, ignore it altogether. You're being duped. How can I be certain? Because I'm being duped

too— but, then, I've always believed that if you face facts you stand a better chance of dodging them.'

But reporters don't want the truth. They talk about justice but it never occurs to them that a row of impartial judges, assuming such men exist in the world, would consider the facts and then exonerate me.

***

I felt drained—literally bereft of fluids that might allow me to move without my skeleton scratching and bumping against itself—by the time I retreated to the privacy of my hotel suite. Sok was right: I shouldn't have talked to the reporters, not when there was a chance that I might have served up anger and impertinence. I needed quiet to retrieve my bearings and my self-control, without which I was no good to anyone. No such luck: Sok, himself tired and tense, irritating but somehow comforting, refused to budge.

'The medic said you were not to be left alone. I will not leave.'

While I showered he stood by the towel rack holding a pillow, ready to dive forward and cushion my fall should I slip or black out. Then, as I was preparing to rest, he admitted a succession of visitors.

First came my doctor, a Thai fellow who had been treating me on and off for years, and who smiled desperately whenever he saw me: apparently, I petrified him. He shone a pen light in my eyes. I shed a tear.

'What's your name?' he asked.

'Doctor Henry Kissinger.'

'What day is it?'

'It's my day of great triumph. It's a day when all Cambodians can finally and truly believe that peace has broken like the first rains in May.'

'Er—'

'Oh, for goodness sake, it's Tuesday.'

'Where are you now?'

'Purgatory.'

'*Where*?'

'Bangkok.'

As the doctor left the hotel manager arrived. He presented me with a bowl of fruit, a

get-well card on behalf of the citizens of the Kingdom of Thailand and a heavy hint that he could arrange for a 'special friend' to come and comfort me.

'Maybe later,' I said. Sok nodded eagerly.

As the manager left a UN delegation arrived.

'Please stay calm,' their spokesman said. 'The situation is being actively attended to.'

'Please accept this fruit bowl as a measure of my goodwill,' I said. I kept the mango but it turned out to be bruised.

As soon as I lay down the telephone rang. I faked a snore but Sok shook my elbow and said, 'Your Excellency, you must take this.'

'If it's not Nelson Mandela I'm not interested.'

'Please, Your Excellency.'

I lay on the bed with my eyes closed and half-listened as Nuon Chea harangued me for being a victim—'How can you have been so careless'—and for having spoken to the media—'You might have said anything.' Then he issued me with a set of instructions. I tried to ignore his contemptuous tone. Chea considered me to be a message boy. He did not comprehend that to do my job properly I had to understand everything.

Then Pol Pot came on the line and asked, 'Are you in much pain, old friend? Why aren't you sleeping?'

'I will rest soon, Big Brother.'

'Please choose your words with care in the next few days. I trust you, of course, but do not make the mistake of speaking through your wound.'

Close to midnight, finally alone, I lay unable to prevent waves of fear from passing through me. Sleep was inconceivable so I took a glass elevator—another opportunity to watch the ground disappear beneath my feet—to the Wild Rice Restaurant and Piano Bar.

I sat at a large table in the farthest corner of the restaurant and scattered the world's newspapers around me. Before dawn I had sat at this same table, with the same newspapers, and prepared myself with black coffee and papaya. Since then, I had drunk nothing but water and eaten nothing but paracetamol.

The restaurant was nearly empty. A businessman, a Malaysian, sat in a corner. Like me, he could not avoid listening to a young Australian couple recounting their expedition to the red light district of Patpong. They had, so we discovered, photographed each other in

front of a long line of school-uniformed prostitutes. They had bought Calvin Klein underwear. 'Cotton is cotton,' they decided, although the material was scratchy. 'It probably came from the same factory as the real stuff,' they agreed, although the labels read **Kelvin Clyne**. Clutching their knickers in a plastic bag, they had descended into a bar where they watched a naked teenager shoot ping-pong balls from between her legs into a half-full glass of beer sitting on the far side of the stage.

Ol and Sokhunawaddh entered the room. Ol's frown disappeared when he located me. I waved them to a table half way between the Australians and me. They immediately ordered steak and beer and recommenced their endless card game. One day, stuck in transit in an airport lounge, Ol had tried to explain the rules to me. My ineptness had stunned him.

Beside my table stood a large, bubbling fish tank. I tapped the glass. A decorative school of fish veered away but a fatalistic lobster ignored me (though it also held my gaze). It looked healthy but I couldn't be bothered hacking into the hard shell: I should have sent for Sok.

'I want a plate of Sambal prawns and a bottle of Moët.'

'An excellent choice,' the waiter said.

'And don't you go skimping on the prawns. And I want a jug of cold water with lime, no ice.'

The waiter retreated to the kitchen, no doubt to gossip about me with the other staff. I picked up a newspaper: *Nhem Kiry is widely considered a puppet of the notorious Pol Pot, but one unnamed UN source also described him as a 'savvy and dangerous political operator with his eyes firmly on the prize.' On his first evening in Phnom Penh Nhem Kiry is scheduled to attend a private meeting with Prince Norodom Sihanouk before attending a cocktail reception.* I let the paper fall and closed my eyes.

The Champagne came.

'It says here I am made of wood,' I said to the waiter, waving the newspaper.

'Oh no, sir, I don't agree. Not at all.'

'Me either. Wood doesn't bleed.'

The prawns came.

'It says here that I have my eyes firmly on the prize,' I told the waiter.

'Oh yes, sir.'

The prawns were so juicy and sweet that even when my stomach felt bloated—I filled up on rice, as I do most days—I kept eating. I departed for my room with a stomach ache, which I cured with a glass of Glenlivet.

At 1:00 a.m., lying in bed, the lights dimmed, the television on CNN with the sound muted, I remembered with a groan that I hadn't rung my wife.

~*~

Emerging Adelaide artist Amelia Whittlemore's new exhibition of photographs, ***SNAPSHOT gone****, captures the essence of the everyday and the extraordinary. But which is which? Whittlemore renders mundane moments thrilling: a drip of black coffee running down the side of a porcelain cup represents emancipation, a pyramid of frozen vegetables rails against the instant society in which we live. But then she unsettles us by subverting the importance of life and death moments: on the blurred image of a car accident she paints in colourful, naive strokes the window of an ice cream parlour on the far side of the street. Already, Whittlemore suggests, we elevate all that is pleasant and we choose not to focus on the violent. Whittlemore deserves the increasing attention she is garnering interstate and even overseas.* ***SNAPSHOT gone*** *runs at Greenlight Gallery until the end of the month.*

—Applause: the Adelaide Monthly Review of Arts, *June 1996, p.23*

***

'Make sure you're on time,' Lia said. 'There are drinks but not that many. If you're late, you'll miss out.'

It was her way of reminding me how important it was to her that I come. Once, when she first started exhibiting, I'd missed an opening. I was holed up in bed, the whole right side of my body trembling. She forgave me after she'd spoken to Nurse Wendy, who had spent four hours trying to ease my suffering (for her own sake as much as for mine).

Michael collected me at five-thirty. 'Where's Anne?' I asked as he helped me to the car.

'She can't come.'

'Can't come? Why ever not?'

'She's gone.'

'Gone? Gone where?'

'She's taken a job in Brisbane.'

'She's left you? Just like that?'

'Just like that.'

'Brisbane: bloody hell, that's half way to Jakarta.'

'Yes, well—'

'When's she coming back?'

'I don't think she will be.'

'But I really liked her. She had spirit.'

'She's not dead, Dad. She's just gone. Do you want to bring the wheelchair?'

'Don't change the subject.'

'I'm not. The subject is do you want to go in a wheelchair?'

'I'd rather we drove.'

'Dad—'

'But just like that? You had no idea she was thinking of it, I mean, did you know she was unhappy?'

'Of course I did, Dad, but that's hardly the point, is it?'

'No? No, I suppose not. If you say so.'

'Wheelchair?'

'No.'

'Walking stick, then.'

'Don't worry about me. I'll be fine. I'll lean against a sculpture. Or on one of Lia's sweet little friends.'

'Walking stick or you're not coming.'

I peered at Michael. 'Don't take it out on me. I didn't tell her to leave.'

'It's quarter to six, Dad. I don't want to be late.'

'Well, this is a new and fascinating experience, being fathered by my son. I don't think I like it.'

'What's it to be: wheelchair or walking stick?'

'I could get a taxi, you know. You can't stop me.'

'Oh just come on, will you, it's only a stick. Ho Chi Bloody Minh carried a stick with him everywhere, didn't he?'

'I can't argue with that,' I said. He looked almost relieved enough to burst into tears. As Anne always used to say, he gets upset about the oddest things.

He went to my room and came back with my walking stick, an ugly gnarled length of oak with a rubber bottom, last remnant of *my* father. When he handed it to me I leaned close, grabbed his shoulder and said, almost too quietly for him to hear, 'I'm sorry about Anne.'

Momentarily stripped bare, he faked an instant recovery. 'Me too, Dad, me too.

Here's your stick. Come on, let's go.'

Half an hour later we stood and stared at a photograph that was labelled **LIfE**. It was five feet by four feet, glossy blue with an indistinct object in the top left hand corner. It sat in an enormous gold frame, clinging to a wall.

'Well, I like it,' I said firmly. 'You could certainly use a couple of those around the house. And only two thousand dollars.'

Michael smiled. 'I'll get us a drink.'

'Do you think that will help?'

Lia floated into view, wearing an ankle-length dress that looked like one of Beryl's nighties (or so I imagine). She took my arm. 'You made it, then.'

'Nice tail you've got,' I said, indicating the men she dragged behind her and who, as she settled beside me, fanned out and each chose an image to ponder.

'What do you think? Be honest, now.'

'I think they're all too scruffy and too vacant. Especially him,' I pointed. 'And *he's* almost as old as I am.'

'What do you think about the art?'

'Well, I um, they're certainly originals, I'll give you that.'

'You hate them.'

'I don't hate them, Love, not at all. I think they're wonderful. It's just that—'

'Just that what?'

'If you'll let me finish—it's rude to badger your elders, didn't anybody ever teach you that? It's just that, well, I mean, for instance, if—'

'You're rambling.'

'Well, is this one called "life" or "ell-one-effEE"?"

'Whichever you prefer.'

'No, that's no good to me, Love, I need to know what to call my art. Otherwise I can't tell you whether I like it or not because I don't know what it is I'm looking at.'

Lia laughed. 'You haven't got a drink: are you ill?'

'Your dad's getting me one now. Now listen, why di—'

'I'm listening.'

'Stop interrupting while you're listening. Why didn't you tell me about your mum

and dad?'

'He's told you, then. About time too.'

'Why didn't *you* tell me?'

'It's his private life, his news, not mine.'

'But aren't you upset?'

'I suppose but, well, it's better this way. Better for everybody.'

'Better for your dad?

'Even him.'

'I don't think he sees it like that.'

'He will. Eventually. Come on, I want to show you something.'

She took my arm—half a dozen male heads jerked in our direction—and led me across the room.

'Close your eyes,' she said.

'I'd rather not. One of these days they won't ever open again.'

'Close them.'

'You'll have to hypnotise me.'

'Close them or I'll tell everybody you're senile.'

'Promises, promises,' I said but I followed orders. Lia led me another few steps and turned me.

'Okay,' she said.

I opened my eyes, waited the customary seconds for the fuzziness to fade, and was confronted by a large black and white photograph of an old man. All of a sudden I wished I'd brought the wheelchair.

'Um, that's me, right?'

'Of course it's you, Grandpa.'

In the photograph I stood in the ocean, my head and shoulders out of the water. Lia must have taken it that one time she convinced me to go to Semaphore with her. I had stayed in the water for ten minutes because she kept promising that I would find the experience pleasantly surprising: 'Just give it a minute longer.' My white hair was stuck askew across my head, which the salt water had expanded to twice its normal size. My eyes were closed, my mouth was open, my skin shone. A triangular crease had appeared across the bridge of my

nose, joining the corners of my eyes. It made me look as if I was communing with some lower form of life which is I suppose why Lia had called it **spiRit** because if you ask me she should have called it **Sea MonSter**.

'No man should have to see the shape of his own skull,' I said.

'You don't mind, do you?' Lia asked.

'Of course not, Love. But you know how much I hate the ocean.'

~*~

The principal Khmer Rouge representative on the Supreme National Council, Nhem Kiry, will tomorrow return to the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh. Although the advanced UN mission (UNIMAC) has so far established only a token presence, both UN officials and the Hun Sen government have guaranteed the safety of Kiry and his entourage. This is despite Nhem Kiry nearly being killed in November when he attempted to return to Phnom Penh and despite anti-government riots in December at which time the government used troops to regain control of the streets.

—the Australian, *3 January 1992, p.5*

***

I stepped from the plane onto a set of aluminium stairs. Below, an Italian career diplomat stood at the end of two feet of red carpet, imported as a putting green for the head of UNTAC (all Japanese men play golf). I knew the Italian quite well. He was adept at standing on the perimeter at diplomatic cocktail parties, shuffling his feet, looking lost, listening intently. He was smarter than he let on and more intuitive than he pretended; he was well-informed but his practical skills were limited. He had, so Sok told me, arrived two weeks earlier from a New York winter to help make preparations for the full arrival of the UN.

The Italian smoothed his shirt frantically as I came towards him. We shook hands and agreed how fine it was to meet again. He was wet to touch and his face, I now saw, was a mass of tiny red dots. Plainly, he was baking in the heavy air. His white shirt was creased and sodden. Its top two buttons were askew, revealing a hairy black and grey chest, pink skin and a crucifix hanging from a chain. Grey trousers—surely not polyester?—clung to his thighs. A silver wedding ring dug into a swollen finger. His necktie spilled out of his trouser pocket.

His crucifix seemed more animated than he was; silver, and held around his neck by a chain fit for a prisoner, it must have been twenty centimetres long. I wondered how the poor fellow kept his head upright but I suppose that's the power of prayer. Its detail was intricate: Jesus' head sagged and his eyes were squeezed shut in pain and distress yet his mouth was set in grim resolve. Bathed in perspiration, and bouncing fitfully as his minder gulped air, Jesus glistened then fell behind a shirt flap.

In deference to the Italian, or at least to honour his crucifix, I considered dropping to my knees and kissing the ground—I'd seen the Pope do it on television when he arrived in Africa though now that I think of it he was probably demonstrating a birth control technique.

But as there were no camera crews or photographers present, or not that I could see, there seemed no point. Besides, the tarmac was tacky underfoot. What if my lips stuck? What if I was forced to crouch there, enduring the roar of the planes ferrying all those foreign soldiers, overdue to keep the peace? What if I was still there when they departed with the undignified haste that invariably accompanies westerners being shot at?

'You are welcome,' the UN man told me in Calabrian-accented French. 'You are welcome and, rest assured, you will be safe this time.'

I resisted the urge to wonder aloud why a foreigner might feel at liberty to welcome me to my own capital city. I had no desire, unless it proved absolutely necessary, to insult him.

'I thank you. I am very happy to be here,' I said. 'But I had hoped that the United Nations peacekeepers would have been deployed by now. I want to say again that I am most displeased. What justification can there be for the delay?'

'Yes, I am sorry, you are correct. The wheels of World Government do indeed turn far too slowly.'

I laughed politely. For good measure I gave his elbow a quick massage, leading him to understand that I trusted him like a brother.

'They do turn slowly; they have been known to turn backwards,' I said. 'Still, I suspect if they don't soon turn faster then there might well be no peace to keep.'

'I venture to say, in all seriousness, that these things are complicated. But it is not for me to say. Might I respectfully suggest that you speak to my superiors with regards to the amended timetable for troop arrival.'

'Yes, yes. It is an issue for tomorrow,' I said, allowing him to lead me to a waiting car. 'Still, I would like some assurance that my presence here is welcome.'

'Please, you must believe me: the whole *Comprehensive Settlement* is predicated on the Supreme National Council being able to meet in Phnom Penh. You must be safe here or nothing proceeds.'

'Then you must deploy the troops without delay. And not just in Phnom Penh. The people still need protection from the Vietnamese aggressors or they will not be free to vote. The aggressors do not respect the peace treaty.'

The motorcade—a car for me and the Italian, mini-vans for my entourage and

luggage—moved through Phnom Penh without incident. As we chatted about where to get the best pizza in town—'Everywhere, the crusts are too thick,' the Italian complained—I felt safe: the situation simply did not allow for any more lynch mobs.

'If I may say so, I sense that you and I are of one mind on many issues,' I said.

The Italian looked alarmed. 'Perhaps not, but I am sure that we share a desire for peace.'

'I sense that you have seen a great deal of how the world really works and that you understand the root causes of suffering and hardship for the oppressed peoples of the world.'

'Well, I like to think so. Although "oppressed" is a strong term. I think that the expression "less privileged" is more hopeful and better reflects the progress of human history.'

'Only the privileged are at liberty to avoid the word "oppression," in my opinion.'

'No, please, I mean no offence. I wanted only to say that I believe life is always improving, slowly but inexorably. The UN presence here—the world's willingness to create peace—is a fine example.'

'I will tell you a story about being "less privileged." One day in 1974, in Takeo Province in the south of my country, in our Liberated Zone, when we were supposedly friends with our Vietnamese brothers, three of our young freedom fighters came across a Vietnamese patrol. Our poor Kampucheans offered to pool their meagre supplies and the Vietnamese said, "Yes, let us eat together but, first, let us share tea." The Kampuchean boys ran about and collected wood for this purpose. "We are sorry but we have not found rocks big enough to rest the teapot on. What do you suggest we do?" they asked the Vietnamese captain. "The solution is so simple that I cannot believe you did not think of it yourselves: perhaps you are stupid? Well, no matter: before we make our tea we must finish the day's work. Will you help us? I want you each to dig a hole, not too far apart, deep and narrow," the Vietnamese captain said—I will not identify him, diplomatic niceties do not permit it, but suffice to say he is now a very important man in Hanoi. The Kampuchean lads, assuming that the holes were to bury ammunition, eagerly commenced digging. They worked very hard and soon finished the holes. "Just stand in your holes so we can check the depth," the Vietnamese captain said. As soon as they did so the Vietnamese soldiers began shovelling dirt into the holes. When the three Cambodians were buried all the way to their necks the Vietnamese

soldiers piled the wood in the space between them. While the young patriots looked at each other and sensed trouble, the Vietnamese captain lit a match and dropped it between them. Soon the woodpile was ablaze and as the Cambodians burned alive the Vietnamese captain rested a pot on their heads and said, "Do not spill my tea." After a time, the kettle boiled, and all was quiet.'

The Italian unfolded his arms and scratched his chest. 'But I have heard this story before. The dates and the location change. This is a fable, yes?'

'A fable based on truth.'

'I must confess I find nothing constructive about it.'

'I am illustrating a point.'

'I do not think it will help your cause to re-tell it.'

'Perhaps not, but the Vietnamese are still in my country in vast numbers. I accept that you cannot agree out loud but I think you know that their desire to conquer continues unabated. I must be free to point this out but when I express concern—and I have specific, documented complaints—the world will turn away from me and say, "xenophobe." I might as well tell them my fable.'

'I believe that all *genuine* complaints will be considered and acted upon.'

'Do you really? Do your superiors agree?'

We passed my empty villa, wooden planks covering its broken windows.

'I am so sorry,' the Italian said. 'I should have instructed the driver to go another way. I am clumsy.'

'Please, the past is gone. I am happy simply to be in Phnom Penh. I feel as though I am waking up from a long sleep and discovering the joys of sunlight all over again.'

We drove to a quiet compound close enough to the Basaac River to smell the water, hidden from the world by tall white walls and an entrance with a manual boom gate and a sentry box. We were in the shadow of the Royal Palace: 'I'll be able to hear Sihanouk snoring. And fornicating,' I said to the driver, who laughed. The Italian, who had so far learnt only two Cambodian phrases—'Do you sell red wine?' and 'Can I smell it first?'—grinned and nodded.

I allowed the Italian to rush around and open my door—he seemed to get such pride from this aspect of his work so who was I to deprive him. I stepped out of the car and set off

across the sparse garden towards the main building, a two story colonial mansion behind which several squat buildings lay. When the Italian made to follow I turned and said, 'This is all most agreeable. Thank you again.'

'I haven't shown you inside yet.'

'It is ideal. I would be most grateful if you would collect me in time for the reception at the Royal Palace.'

'Very well.'

The garden was sparse. There was a green tinge on some areas of the ground, several mango trees, and a pond that was home to a family of enormous catfish. A gardener, raking dirt, was watched by several security guards. A single lost duck, desperate for a swim but petrified of the catfish, wandered about aimlessly.

I greeted the gardener. The poor old fellow bowed low, probably so he didn't have to look me in the eye, but he needed help getting up.

'Please feel free, Uncle, to take that duck home for your family's dinner,' I told him. He shook with what I took to be gratitude.

***

I was wrong: there *was* a photographer present, hidden somewhere near the airport terminal, waiting to record my arrival. He captured the Italian and I shaking hands and smiling, my hand gripping his elbow. He captured the red carpet. He captured, so it seemed, genuine warmth between the UN and the Khmer Rouge: as one scathing editorialist commented, 'They are looking into each other's eyes like star-crossed lovers.' I almost felt sorry for the Italian fellow. Anybody would have thought he'd been caught committing murder, or sleeping with his Prime Minister's wife, or urinating against a wall of the Royal Palace.

~*~

I sat in the dining room, my hand on Beryl's arm, coaxing her to open her eyes and to drink her tea.

'Come on, Beryl love, before it gets cold. And how about a lovely scotch finger: they're your favourite, remember?'

Beryl's eyelids fluttered, out of time with the tremor in her hands. Her head rocked slightly, which I took as a rebuke for speaking to her as if she was three years old.

'Lia's coming to visit us today. That'll be good, won't it?'

'What?' she said, her eyes fixed closed.

'Amelia's coming. I'm looking forward to seeing her. It's been nearly two weeks since she visited, she's so busy these days. But that's good.'

Beryl sighed, her face set harsh.

'Do you know what? You look beautiful today, absolutely radiant.' I said. 'Do you know what else? Maureen told me her grandson is going into politics. He won't be talked out of it. I had roast beef for dinner last night. The bus drivers are going on strike again. Steve Waugh scored another hundred.'

Beryl opened her eyes and blinked. She sniffed the tea suspiciously. After a moment her eyes narrowed. I had hold of her hand but she pulled it free and held it aloft, as if she was airing it.

'Nurse? Nur-Hurse. I want you here right now.'

Susie, a lovely brunette, petite and friendly, came running. 'What's all this racket, Beryl? What's the matter?'

'There's a strange man here.'

'But Beryl, that's Ted.'

'He's bothering me.'

'You remember Ted, don't you? Red Ted? He's your special friend.'

Beryl folded her arms. 'Don't be ridiculous: that's not Ted.'

'It is, Beryl, I promise. Take another look.'

'It's me, Love. It's really me.'

'He's annoying me. Get rid of him.'

'It's okay. I'll go,' I said. 'I don't want to upset her.'

'And good riddance too.'

***

'You know that she's been deteriorating for a while now,' Lia said. She found me in the sunroom, where I was staring at the roses, pretending to read the *Advertiser*.

'I was hoping she was just tired.'

'I think it's a little more than that.'

'You seem remarkably well informed.'

'Don't you agree? Really?'

'I suppose so.'

'Let's go and see her together.'

'No, I don't want to. It'll only make her worse.'

'It'll be okay so long as you're careful.'

'No sudden movements? No loud noises? No standing where she can actually see me or hear me?'

'Come on.'

We found Beryl sitting in her chair looking out—or at—the window.

'Hello, Beryl,' Lia said.

'Ivy, is that you?'

'Yes, it's Ivy.'

'I thought you went to England.'

'Well, I did, but I came back.'

'Australia's not good enough for her, that's what we all said. You're nothing but a snob. You're nothing but a—'

'I came back, didn't I?' Lia said—she wasn't one for backing down.

'Don't interrupt, girl, that was always your problem, you just know better than everybody else, you know so much you have to interrupt and never let anybody finish what they're saying. Everybody agrees that you're a snob so you must be one.'

'Everybody?'

'She's better than us, or so she thinks, that's what we used to say.' She paused for breath. 'Who's this man? Is he with you? Is that Dennis?'

'Yes, this is Dennis.'

'Don't be stupid, girl, don't lie to me: Dennis died years ago. If you've gone and found

yourself a new husband you should say so. Why pussyfoot about? Are you ashamed of him?' She turned to me. 'Is she ashamed of you?'

'Probably.'

'What's your name then?'

'Wesley.'

'Wesley? *Wesley*?' She turned to Lia. 'You're gone and married a Methodist? You've—'

Abruptly, Beryl changed, as if a fog had cleared from inside her head. She smiled and the stiffness left her face. She recognised Lia and me. But then she turned her attention to herself: she realised, instantly and fully, the extent of her confusion, as surely as if someone had shot her hand off and she was staring at her wrist. Horror flashed across her face. I whispered, 'Close your eyes,' but she was compelled to keep looking at herself.

Clarity passed as quickly as it came. 'Dennis was short—short of stature, you understand, not caught short, he never wanted for money in his pocket although I don't know, I really don't, quite where it came from. We all told him he should join the circus. He didn't much like us after that.'

~*~

The international community has pledged US$800 million to Cambodia at the ministerial conference on the rehabilitation and reconstruction of Cambodia. The conference, attended by government agencies, U.N. aid personnel and non-government organisations as well as representatives of the four Cambodian factions and by the neutral head of state, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, concluded yesterday in Tokyo, Japan. Although the agenda of seeking aid contributions was successfully completed, the conference was overshadowed by the Khmer Rouge's refusal to commence demobilisation or even to allow UNTAC personnel to enter Khmer Rouge territory. International observers and diplomats continue to doubt the motives of the Khmer Rouge.

—4 July 1992, Asia Weekly, *p.12*

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Dear Brother Pol Pot,

I can barely bring myself to write this report. I am so angry I could weep; I am in such despair as to the future of our movement, and the outlook for our poor country, that I feel like lying down in the corner of this hotel room and never moving again; I am so disappointed in my own incapacity to alter the events of the day, and the year, that I feel like running to a river, jumping in and going wherever the current takes me.

Forgive me my bluntness, Big Brother, and please recall that I try never to wallow in self pity, but today when I sat in a hall of two hundred delegates I was the only one interested in the truth. My sober assessment is that we are in trouble and that we are being set up by the same people who once sustained us. Now that the Americans no longer pretend to fear Russia, now that the world believes the Vietnamese when they say they have withdrawn from our country, we are redundant and I doubt that we can do anything about it. UNTAC is reneging on the safeguards of the Paris Agreements; they are allowing Hun Sen to keep his power, and they will call us spoilers and worse because we decline to disarm in the face of such provocation. It is a giant conspiracy and the fact that many of the delegates from smaller countries and from aid agencies are not overtly a part of it is of no help: the complicit innocents are living in a world and under a set of principles that is passive in the face of American domination.

I arrived at the conference early so as to mingle but when I entered the hall the crowd spread and allowed me a direct passage to my seat. Everybody, even friends and allies,

stared at me with contempt: the one clothed man is always shunned by the naked mob, I suppose. I smiled at an Englishman, one of those officials who has met me frequently in private but who refuses to shake my hand before witnesses. I gazed bluntly at Wang Jen-Chung from the Chinese foreign ministry. I know that was probably inappropriate, Big Brother, and I apologise, but we have shared food and family photographs and now, suddenly, he was fascinated by his shoes. I caught the eye of a Romanian fellow—do you remember, you probably don't, but he once said to me, 'You are one of the most impressive men I've ever met.' Today he shook my hand and said hello but he would not stop to talk. I outstared the Vietnamese General Tran Quang Hai. You would have been proud of me although I must confess he wasn't at all frightening: he had yellow teeth and a fat neck and he looked hilarious in a business suit. I attached myself to a circle: the Singaporean head of a Christian aid agency was shaking hands with the New Zealand Minister for Defence and International Development (an ex-rugby player but aren't they all?) who was squeezing the shoulder of the head of the Mozambique delegation (as if *they* have money to spare *us*) who was offering to show the Deputy Director (Asia Pacific Region) of the World Health Organization the sights of Maputo when she next passed through. 'It's a fine city,' I said. 'Make sure you visit the Bazaar Central. And the Museum of the Revolution is an absolute must.'

They sat me next to Ranarridh who was next to Hun Sen who was next to Son Sann. We all embraced. And I raced across in front of the lectern to genuflect before Sihanouk with sufficient gusto that he was in no doubt that I was making fun of him. He was imperious, I am sorry to report, Big Brother, and horrifyingly confident.

On his way to the lectern to open the conference the Japanese Minister for Overseas Aid stopped to speak to me. Early this morning, when I was attempting to enjoy a quiet breakfast in a corner of the hotel restaurant, he had, via his translator, arrived unannounced and politely harangued me about disarmament: 'Please think hard: this is the only way for you now, I repeat, the only way.'

I did not ask him to join me but do not worry, Big Brother, I was polite—I cleared my mouth of pineapple before I replied: 'We will certainly comply fully with Stage 2. We will do so when, and only when, we are satisfied that the Paris Agreements are being fully implemented—*fully* implemented, do you understand?—by all parties. You know as well as I

do that this is not now the case.'

'This is a marvellous opportunity for you to atone. You must realise this and grasp the opportunity.'

'Atonement is irrelevant. I am pursuing peace.'

But he didn't listen. When he stopped to speak to me in the conference hall he asked, 'Am I able to make any announcement on your behalf? It will set a wonderful example for the remainder of the conference.'

'You may report what a fine city I think Tokyo is.'

He sighed and turned away. I was perhaps too sarcastic—I try always to remember your advice that I should not appear superior—but at least I did not tell him how Japanese soldiers used to steal from my mother's vegetable cart every day they occupied Phnom Penh in 1945; and how my friend's uncle disappeared when he complained about a sexual assault on my cousin by a Japanese sentry.

I don't think my response influenced his speech, Big Brother, which was written down in English and which he appeared to follow very closely: 'This is a golden chance for all of us to do something concrete rather than simply to talk about a better future for Cambodia. Cambodians have suffered egregiously for many decades, especially in the mid to late 1970s, and it is time for the international community to do what it can to fit the problems. Today we talk of practical responses: the challenge of effective health programmes, clean water, the eradication of land mines, the development of essential infrastructure. Sadly, as everyone in this room knows, one of the Cambodian parties is refusing to comply with the disarmament timetable, and is not allowing UN personnel to access areas of land still under its control. Let us not forget what is at stake here on a day when I ask the global community to affirm its commitment to Cambodia.'

I leant past Ranarridh and whispered to Son Sann, 'What's the Japanese word for egregious?'

I'm sure I caught a glimpse of a smile on Hun Sen's lips, Big Brother. He is completely in control of himself. He does not need to fool anybody—remember, we had allies who hated us too—but I saw his nose today and it's far too clean.

'I think it's *daisoreta*,' Son Sann said, 'but don't quote me on that.'

'I never do,' I said.

'You shouldn't play around,' Ranarridh said. 'You should tell them what they want to hear, at least for today.'

'It's okay: we are four partners in peace sharing a joke. That's good for business.'

'It's all very well for you but I expect to be Prime Minister.'

Hun Sen, I must report, did not respond to this statement other than to fold his hands neatly in his lap. I detected no flicker of amusement or even acknowledgement that he had heard Ranarridh's declaration.

'These people want to throw money at us then we will take it: why not?' I whispered to Ranarridh. 'A road built by Japanese engineers and all the extra business for the brothels and for that new Australian brewery, is better than no road at all, granted. But today is cosmetic, isn't it obvious? The world these people are devising requires us to remain at the bottom with nothing more than the promise of development—BE NICE AND YOU CAN BE LIKE US—but if all the third world became like them their wonderful system would cease to function. The French, then the Americans, then the Russians and the Vietnamese, butchered us: now they gang up, and they even have the Chinese by their side, to devastate us in new ways and in a few years when our economy is even worse than it is today and our people still impoverished they will tell us it is our own fault because, after all, they gave us peace and, what's more, they gave us a whole lot of money.'

'And you are the man who claims to have denounced communism.'

'You want to be like France or like America? That is impossible, I tell you, because the achievement of the west, if achievement is the word, has only occurred because of the way the west has abused the periphery—that is us, Your Majesty, we are on the very precipice of the periphery.'

Ranarridh is not stupid, Big Brother. We would be foolish to underestimate him. But I do not think he will stand too tall for his beliefs and I do not think his life of privilege will ever allow him to know the truth about Kampuchea: he will never realise what must be done to fix the economy, and he smiles less sweetly than his father (everyone can see he despises the common people whereas Sihanouk at least fakes love with alacrity). Hun Sen will brush Ranarridh aside.

The speeches began. The aims were laudable enough if you could forget—I could not—that the room was full of those who bled Kampuchea dry in the first place. Build new

roads, someone said (so Thai trucks can import vegetables); rehabilitate the agricultural infrastructure (plant more rice); take note of this malaria-modelling-software (a laboratory in Oxford needs more research funding); contribute to the easing of the global epidemic of anti-personnel ordnances (there are so many landmines in the ground that manufacturers are having to stockpile); improve sanitation infrastructure and engage in educational programmes (Asians shit into holes and wipe their arses with their hands and still wonder why they get sick); improve basic literacy (children should be able to read about the laudable work of the United Nations).

In the stuffy air—no windows, Big Brother, and so much heavy breathing—I quickly became tired. I was tempted to make a political statement by going to sleep but my reputation might have suffered. We do not want rumours about my health to surface or, worse still, rumours about my state of mind and my capacity to follow proceedings.

Still, I might have nodded off if the American hadn't begun to speak. He was a deputy to the Deputy Secretary of State, which I suppose made him the most important person in the room. He was certainly the loudest. He began his speech without too much fuss, making a spurious connection between literacy and nutrition and democratic change (no mention of blanket bombing, no mention of the CIA, no mention of napalm). Then, all of a sudden, he abandoned his prepared speech—at least he pretended to abandon it. His technique was very unimpressive, especially for an American: he paused for effect, sneaked a glance at the delegates to ensure everyone was watching, folded the notes into a square and jammed them into his inside coat pocket.

'The time for airy-fairy chat is over,' he yelled. 'Let us be blunt. We are primarily here today to repair the damage—to infrastructure, of course, but more so to the very fabric, and to the collective psyche, of a Cambodian society that has been wrought by the genocidal policies of the Khmer Rogue during their time of rule in the 1970s, that same group who today do most to obstruct our efforts to bring a lasting and comprehensive peace to this country.'

I am all in favour of exuberant fund-raising, and everybody knows that Americans make the best evangelists, but this was too much. He ignored all the established protocols. I am a member of the Supreme National Council and I had to sit there while he called me a mass murderer: intolerable.

I did my best, Big Brother, to maintain a neutral expression. I think it is possible that I fidgeted and looked unhappy but I believe that I hid my dismay. I do not know what else the American said: I stopped listening for fear of my reaction.

I'm sorry, Big Brother, but worse followed. Sihanouk spoke next. Emboldened by the American, his whole body so aroused that his movements became jerky, he closed the conference with these words: 'I love my beautiful, beautiful children, all eight million of them, and their love for me, and my deep capacity to fulfil their needs, every single one of them, is what keeps me active and keeps me searching for a peaceful and prosperous outcome. But it is impossible for us to meet the various demands of the Khmer Rouge. It is ridiculous to try to accommodate them because they hate peace. Mr Pol Pot, via his mouthpieces, tells all of us from the mighty United Nations of America to tiny insignificant Sihanouk that we must meet his demands: do this, do that, climb a mountain, dig a hole, fly to the moon on an elephant, oh my. We try our hardest, all of us, because we decide that we need the Pol Pot people to achieve peace, tee hee, can you imagine the irony? But that is all we want, peace, or most of us do, so we say to him, "Thank you, Mr Pol Pot, we agree with everything you say." And then Pol Pot laughs at us and thinks up a new set of rules and then he tells us we do not keep our promises. I know this, I assure you all here today of the truth of what I say to you, you must trust Sihanouk, all of you dear friends of Cambodia who offer your money, thank you thank you thank you, but believe me because I know the Khmer Rouge. Oh, but no, Sihanouk barely knows Mr Solath Sar, who you know of as Mr Pol Pot, but he knows how Mr Pol Pot's people behave, very well, oh yes, very well, Sihanouk has seen all this before and he doubts that we will ever be able to fix their bad behaviour because they cannot change and they do not want to change. Their aim, their ultimate aim, is always the taking of power by force.'

I am sorry, Big Brother, but I could not help it. I frowned and I clenched my hands by my sides and it is possible that I groaned. And I must report that the whole room laughed at me.

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Confirmation from Cambodia that a leopard cannot change its spots: the Khmer Rouge are engaged in a concerted campaign to scupper the super-expensive UN peace plan, of which they were a vocal and enthusiastic signatory. First they refused to disarm and, comically,

they barred the head of the UN mission from entering the Pailin region. Then they stepped up their campaign of violence against innocent Cambodians. In one shameful attack on the floating fishing village of Chong Kreas on the Great Lake near the Angkor town of Siem Reap gunmen killed at least 35 men, women and children and injured at least 29. The victims were all ethnic Vietnamese, Cambodian residents for several generations. Now the urbane titular head of the Khmer Rouge, Nhem Kiry, has abandoned Phnom Penh and announced that the Khmer Rouge will boycott the upcoming elections.

Impeccable high-level western sources with links to the Edgar Institute insist that there is no substance to the Khmer Rouge complaints that there remains a large scale Vietnamese military presence in Cambodia. It is clear that the Khmer Rouge are simply using the excuse of Vietnam to continue their draconian and futile campaign of intimidation against the Cambodian people. Over the years the Edgar Institute has advocated tough measures against Vietnam with regards to democratization, the improvement of human rights and the issue of Americans MIAs. And we have continually condemned those Americans who pander to this conniving communist nation simply out of misplaced guilt over the war of 1966 to 1973. However, there is no doubt that Vietnam has removed its troops from Cambodian territory. And there is no doubt that Mr Hun Sen and his Cambodian People's Party are operating relatively independently from Vietnam, and that they are genuine in their desire for peace.

— Cornell E. Jackson's Asia-Pacific Commentary, in GAP (Growth and Persistence), *the monthly report of the Edgar Institute, October 1992.*

~*~

Ul. Gasheka

Tverskaya, Moscow

21 November 1997

Hello Mr Edward Whittlemore kind sir,

I have something to tell you so I will just speak it. I will not play games. I am your son. I am certain. My mother is Sofia Vlahov. She lives in Saint Petersburg now. She is old. She lived in Moscow when you knew her. She cooked for you sometimes when you lived in the apartment near the Moskva River. And sometimes she delivered things to you. She is certain. She is truthful. You are my father. Once, she gave me a book you wrote. I still have your book.

I am more than forty years old. I have a job. I work for Mr Yeltsin. I am high but not that high. Mr Yeltsin is good for Russia. Good for me, anyway. I have a good apartment. I eat well. I do not want your money. Do not be afraid. My mother says you have no money. She says you are nice. So I write to say hello and to tell you I am your son. Hello. My mother says I can write to you in Russian but I want to practise my English.

I am going to work at the United Nations. If you want to write to me, please write in English. I am bit better with English documents. I understand diplomacy okay but I cannot talk so well like a normal person. If you do not want to write to me okay.

Everything is different here now. I can write that. It is okay for some people and it is good for some people. Like me. My mother says hello. She says you were kind to her. She says she was sad every time you went away. She says you always told her you would not stay forever. She says you never pretend to be stable.

Would you like to come to Russia and say hello? Are you too old? My mother says you were older than her. A little older. Can you afford it?

I have my wife and my children are three boys and one girl. They say hello. They cannot wait to go to New York.

Maybe you could visit us in New York if you do not want to come to Russia. If you do not want to okay too.

My mother says, 'No more potatoes please.' She says you will think this is funny. She says all the best to you. She says Yeltsin drinks more than you. We can say that now, I think.

I hope you write but only if you want to.

Yours very truly,

Your son,

Olaf Brogdanov

~*~

Everlasting Tranquillity Hotel

Phnom Penh, Cambodia

19 May 1993

Dear Ted,

I'm trying to like Phnom Penh, if only for your sake. But I've got to tell you, buddy, it's a struggle. The whole city needs painting. And the people are so on edge. And as for the sanitation, well, I'll comment on it as soon as I find some. Whatever attracted you to this place in the sixties is long gone so far as I can see. Any chance you and your princely friends were smoking too much opium back then?

I haven't had a decent meal since I got here. I'm a little scared of the local cuisine (I'm using the word cuisine advisedly). No one washes their hands, or not that I can see. As for the food itself, there's such a thing, in my book, as too much authenticity—they promise it's chicken but who really knows? On the other hand, I had a pizza on the main street the other night. Awful. 'Just because it's yellow doesn't make it cheese,' I told the waitress and do you know what she said? 'You want happy herb? You pay extra?' 'I don't want happy herbs,' I told her. 'I want pepperoni.'

Last night Senator Kemp dragged us across a river to this cavernous restaurant he's taken a shine to. It was as big as an airplane hanger. Off in the distance there was a band on a stage. Ten or so musicians plus five singers (one crooned while the others swayed). The men all dressed as if they were bridegrooms; the women were apparently entrants in the 1993 Miss Cambodia Sleazy Gown Competition. They played the most awful elevator music and, unfortunately, our guide translated the lyrics: 'In this song the girl laments that you only get to be a virgin once.' I wanted to sit outside but there were mosquitoes everywhere. The waiter said, 'No malaria here,' but how the hell would he know?

25 May 1993

Hi buddy. I keep meaning to finish this letter but the election started yesterday and it's all been too exciting. I'm writing to you from the rooftop bar of the Chookraton Hotel in Battambang. Ever stay there? Apparently it means sunflower—or sunflower seed, I'm not sure—which is funny because this place is nothing but mud. Nice view, though.

We arrived a few days ago. I thank the Dear Lord that Senator Kemp arranged a helicopter. I hear that Phnom Penh to Battambang road is as rough as your tongue after a

heavy night—although I don't suppose you get to misbehave any more, do you?

There were rumours everywhere (you would have been in your element). People were saying that the Khmer Rouge were going to blow buildings up, that they would have snipers positioned on the roads leading to polling stations, that whole battalions would march through the towns and cities. But there was nothing of the sort. It was a dream. When I got to the polling station soon after dawn there was already a huge queue. The locals, bless them, were all dressed up in their Sunday best, waiting to vote. They brought forward an ex-soldier. He had no legs (and I've seen matchsticks stronger than his crutches). He voted and—other than when Amy and Katie-Sue were born, of course, and when they were Christened—it's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. I don't mind telling you buddy, I cried and cried. I'm sorry you weren't here to see it.

Take care of yourself,

Cornell

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A small group of young men, our movement's potential policymakers, squatted on the ground under a shelter without walls. I sat on a wooden crate. Having lectured for an hour on the theory, practice and failings of democracy—'They talk about democratic nations while they live in a non-democratic world'—I now led a general discussion.

'We must analyse what has happened in Phnom Penh. We must understand the election,' I said.

Ol sat to one side, separate from the group. I had instructed him to take notes in English: 'Don't forget, the key to accuracy is understanding what you are writing down. Make no attempt to record every word. Try to summarise.'

Behind Ol, Akor Sok leant against one of the shelter's support poles. His task was to evaluate the ideas and the demeanour of the group.

'It is important that we consider the political reality as much as—no, more than—the military reality in Phnom Penh,' I said. We cannot deal with dreams. So, Poeu, please tell me your first impressions of the elections.'

'Two Prime Ministers? It is laughable. It is further confirmation that the shadow of Vietnam still looms large over our long-suffering country,' said Poeu, a brilliant young fellow, at least within his field, who was translating Samuel's *Economics* into Khmer.

'Good, up to a point. Good, as a summary of our official position. We agree, I'm sure, that the UN ignored the truth about the election, and that even before voting began they pretended it was something pristine and wonderful because they had nothing else left to cling to. We agree that Hun Sen, the Vietnamese puppet, came second, which went against UNTAC's expectations and preferences. That is our movement's sober assessment. But that does not alter the facts of the new situation which we must adjust to.'

'Some of the people must have wanted Prince Ranarridh, mustn't they?' said Oudom, whose particular interest was in agricultural policy.

'Yes of course. Many *Cambodians* chose Ranarridh. He received the most number of votes. *In so far as the people had a choice* they exercised that choice. But what does Ranarridh's win really mean?'

'It means the people wanted the Vietnamese out,' said Seiu Thuon, who spoke four languages and was a talented poet. 'Nothing more.'

'Good. But we hardly needed a UN vote to tell us that.'

'It means that the people associated Ranarridh with Sihanouk and that they did not know what else to do.'

'Perhaps, but do not fall into the trap of thinking that the people are ignorant. Yes, they voted for Ranarridh because they associated him with his father. They also identified Ranarridh as the least worst available option. Do not look down on the people. Do not mistake them for children, like Sihanouk would do.'

'It means that the UN did not think the views of the people were relevant,' said Oudom.

'Good, but how do you define the UN?'

'America, China and Russia.'

'Good. Very good.'

'Are you saying that the people chose but also that the people had no choice?'

'Exactly. Vietnam has elections and one party. America has elections and two parties whose leaders cannot be separated except by their hairstyles.'

I glanced at Ol, who was writing furiously, his face contorted with worry that he was missing the point. 'I thought I understood,' he told me later, 'but then I thought, Surely it cannot be that simple.'

'But let us take a step back. You have all talked to me about the government. But I asked about the election itself.'

'The election was a joke.'

'A sham.'

'A pantomime.'

'How do you know? Were you there?' I said. They were all silent. 'That's exactly the point, isn't it? The election did not take place—the UN did not spend all that money—so that Cambodians could choose their own government. The election was so that the UN could say it had succeeded. Now all the people in the west can imagine that life in Cambodia resembles life in their own country. And now they can throw away their guilt.

'Can you imagine the people lined up at a polling station in Phnom Penh, hundreds of them, in their best clothes in the pouring rain? If I close my eyes I can see it. At the front of the queue there is an old woman with a shaved head, dressed in white. She reminds me of my mother. She is helped through the mud by a niece who two months earlier, like a laughing, crying ghost, arrived from the refugee camp she had been living in since 1978.

'The old woman hands her identity card to a one-armed man who nods and indicates that she might enter the room. Behind her, the queue is long but cheerful. The rain now falls in a vast sheet. All around, there are blue-headed men: black Africans, Belgians with stubble, even muscular Japanese. They wear khaki ponchos and carry semi-automatic weapons.

'Two observers, a senior American UN official and a South Korean volunteer, stand together watching the people. "Aren't they happy," the American says. "They are the happiest people you could ever imagine," the South Korean volunteer says. "Peace: they are voting for peace. And democracy. They have earned it, they have craved it, and now the world is giving it to them. This is the real defeat of the Khmer Rouge," the American says. "Look at them: laughing, clapping, dancing, singing. I am so proud," the South Korean says.

'The old woman votes. A UN official, choking back tears, tells her that she is the very first Cambodian in the whole country to exercise her democratic right. The ballot is secret: she marks the page as she chooses, knowing that no one can bully her into voting for one man or another man. In any case, who she votes for doesn't matter. Really, she votes for a promise: the UN has promised peace and so she votes because it seems so important to the nice foreigners.' I paused. 'So, what do we do now? How do we respond?'

'We play along,' Phalasath said.

'Good. Very good, up to a point. We play along. But, also, we keep telling the truth. We reiterate our belief that Kampuchea must now find peace within a *true* democratic framework. We stress the need for reconciliation. We rename ourselves—perhaps we will be the Party of Great National Union or the Khmer Advancement Party or Cambodians For Egalitarianism. Then we ask for a role—a precedent has been set, after all, that election results are not everything—and we carve out a niche for ourselves as a peace-loving, democratic party.'

'All the way with Nhem Kiry,' Ol called out in English.

Slowly, silently, I turned and stared at him. Embarrassed, he studied his notebook. For a moment longer I looked at the top of Ol's head. Then I laughed—and so, in unison, did the group. I said, *'Peace will come because Asians were willing to work for it—and to sacrifice for it—and to die by the thousands for it. But let it never be forgotten: peace will come also because America sent her sons to help secure it. I think every American can take a great deal of pride in the role that we have played in bringing this about in Southeast Asia. We can rightly judge—as responsible Southeast Asians themselves do—that the progress of the past three years would have been far less likely—if not completely impossible—if America's sons and others had not made their stand in Vietnam.'*

Ol, automatically, began to write. Later, I read his version: *It not our fault. We are good.*

'That's excellent: full marks,' I told him, and he beamed.

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10 June 1993

Hope Inlet, Maine

Dear Ted,

Well they've finally sorted the election results out. I guess you saw all that in your papers? Ideally, of course, Ranarridh would have been the sole Prime Minister, since he won. But transitional times call for flexible solutions so the decision to go with Joint Prime Ministers, Ranarridh and Hun Sen, and joint ministers for everything too, is really excellent once you get used to the idea. Apparently it's what the UN had in mind all along. And apparently it's a typically Cambodian solution: once upon a time, way back when, they dealt

with a monarchical crisis by crowning joint kings, so this is a real indigenous solution which is another plus. Besides, anybody would agree—probably even you, since you like Hun Sen anyway, seeing as that he's more or less Vietnamese—that at times like this compromise is best.

Who am I kidding? It's a joke: whoever heard of Prime Minister 1 and Prime Minister 2? But at least it's a peaceful joke, more or less, and peace means development. Besides, it all cost too much money to complain about it now. How embarrassing would that be for the UN? More to the point, the Khmer Rouge are out on a limb. We're gonna get them now, buddy. I'll make you proud of America if it's the last thing I do.

Try to remember to write sometime,

Cornell

~*~

Ieng Sary, a senior Khmer Rouge leader and once Pol Pot's brother-in-law, has led a large number of Khmer Rouge functionaries and soldiers in defecting to the Cambodian government. Co-Prime Ministers Hun Sen and Prince Ranarridh have rewarded the defectors by allowing them to maintain control of the Pailin area, giving them a viable economic base. This is the latest, and by far the most significant, in a series of defections and puts into serious question the Khmer Rouge's ability to continue its military operations. While negotiations are apparently continuing between the government and elements of the rebel group, the Khmer Rouge continue to hold the Anlong Veng area in Cambodia's northwest. Remaining with Pol Pot are Nuon Chea, Ta Mok, Nhem Kiry and Son Sen. Khmer Rouge observers estimate that Pol Pot retains control over somewhere between 3,000 and 10,000 guerrillas.

—Reuters, *17 August 1996*

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'Do you need me?' I asked Ta Mok.

'I have things in hand. If I can think of anything I want you to do I will certainly call for you.'

I stood outside, under a tree, while Mok went inside Pol Pot's hut. They spoke for less than ten minutes. Pol Pot occasionally asked a question in his quiet, calm tone but Mok did almost all of the talking. I could hear his voice but I could not make out what he said. When he emerged his mouth was set grim but, inexplicably, there was a sparkle of amusement in his eyes.

'That shook him up,' Mok said.

'Oh, for goodness sake. The last thing he needs is shaking up,' I said. 'Did you at least break it to him gently?'

'Gently? *Gently*? What is he, a duckling? "Let me stroke you, dear duckling, while I inform you that everything you hold dear and have sacrificed your life for is crashing down around you. A terrible thing, terrible, what with you too lame to fly, but don't let's worry about it, don't be concerned, dear duckling, everything will be okay." No: I told him plainly. He would expect nothing else. Anyway, it doesn't matter.'

'Doesn't matter? How can you say that?'

'I will take a battalion and we will retrieve Pailin. And then we will enjoy ourselves

with Ieng Sary.'

For several hours after Mok delivered the news Pol Pot stayed alone inside his hut. His young wife, Mea, spent the afternoon in the fields, as was her custom. His daughter, Sisopha, old enough to make herself scarce but too happy to be fussed by the tension, wandered around the village chattering to anybody willing to listen. I walked about too, waiting for Pol Pot to call for me, trying to think about something other than the implications of these latest defections.

Eventually Sisopha and I sat down together—I was tired, she was bored—close enough to Pol Pot's hut that we could hear him moving about inside. His movements had always been characterised by a slow evenness but these days they were laborious and punctuated by uncomfortable pauses. The stroke, a year before, had affected his left side, a fact that Mok made constant, gratuitous jokes about: 'He's lost his left side, who would have ever imagined it after all this time? His left side, you understand me, don't you?'

'I understand. It's not funny.'

'He has abandoned the left and collapsed to the right, ha ha ha.'

Mok never behaved so boorishly in earshot of his followers. When circumstances warranted it he was gentle and kindly, an amateurish but passable imitator of Pol Pot.

While we waited, I taught Sisopha to count to ten in French. She especially liked "one". She was running around in a circle with her hands lost inside her flapping shirtsleeves, calling out 'oughh' 'oughh' to great guttural effect, when Pol Pot appeared in the doorway of his hut.

He blinked in the harsh light. 'Hello, my sweet darling,' he said to Sisopha softly. As she ran to him and wrapped her arms around his legs he wedged himself in the opening so that she would not knock him down. A month earlier he had slipped on a rock in the river—it had taken two weeks for his swollen buttocks to return to their normal size. He still had a scab on one elbow, to which Mea administered an antiseptic powder twice daily (but as it came from Ta Mok's supplies, and because Pol Pot's hut was often overrun with giant red ants, I suspected its principal ingredient was castor sugar). 'What are you up to, little bird?'

'Oughh, oughh, oughh.'

'Oh my goodness. Are you a monster? Do you live in a cave?'

'Oughh, Pa, oughh,' she admonished him. 'Oughh, duh, twah, qwat, r, r, row.'

'Very clever, my precious darling. Off you go now so I can talk to Grandfather Kiry.'

'Perhaps, Sisopha, you can go to aunty Sisi and ask her to bring us ginseng tea,' I said.

'Yes. That's what we need. Can you manage that, do you think?'

'Of course, Pa.'

Pol Pot motioned me inside and onto a wooden stool on the plastic mat in the middle of the room. He sat on a straight-backed chair, the only one in the room.

'I have bottled water. Have one while we wait for the tea,' he said. 'My little girl is beautiful but speed is not her great asset. So, for now, you will have water?'

'Thank you, Big Brother. Please let me fetch it.'

'Don't be silly. Sit. Sit I say.'

He carried himself—he did not walk easily but neither was he on the verge of collapse—a few steps to a cardboard box with *Nestlé* stamped on its side that sat beside the wooden wall. He stayed bent over the box for so long, hands connected to a couple of plastic bottles, that I rose to help him.

'I am fine,' he said. True to his word, he straightened and faced me, one eye squeezed shut. 'It's easier to focus, sometimes,' he said as he peered at one bottle, then the other. 'I always check, always. Sometimes the bottles are filled with river water and the caps have been burned to the seals. Such unscrupulous behaviour, all for the sake of profit.'

He sat, grappled momentarily with the seal on his bottle, and then handed it to me to open for him. I did so (though not without difficulty) and we drank, me silently, he with sloshing noises and a tiny gasp as he swallowed too quickly. He righted his head, waited for the gurgling to cease and said, 'I suppose we must denounce Ieng Sary, him and his no-good wife and their cronies.'

'Mok has somebody attending to it, Big Brother. There is no need to trouble yourself with such details.'

'I want to trouble myself. Do not tell me not to do so.'

'I was not telling you, certainly not. I was merely suggesting that the formal response is in hand.'

'What good is friendship—a lifetime of friendship—if it does not last forever? Of what value is the history of the friendship, let alone the history of shared experiences, shared

sacrifices? No use. No use at all. What good is —'

'Pa? Hello, Pa?'

'Hello, my sweet one. I am busy now, what is it?'

'I brought tea. It's in a pot.'

'Thank you, darling. Leave it by the door, that's a good girl.'

He deposited the tea on the mat between us. He took several deep breaths and said, 'Perhaps you wouldn't mind doing the pouring.'

'Of course.'

'But leave it to brew a minute or two longer, won't you. Unless you would prefer it weak.'

'I would prefer it strong.'

'You pour it when the time is right for you, then.' He paused. 'But, tell me, how are you feeling about all this business? Are you angry?'

'I am sad, Big Brother, but not angry.'

'Good. Anger is beside the point, no matter the depths of the betrayal. It serves no useful purpose, once an event has passed. And it clouds the mind. I prefer to try and understand.'

'I agree.'

'Somewhere on our journey, I think Ieng Sary became too attached to a life of comfort.' Pol Pot paused and sighed. 'But that cannot be the whole story, surely? A soft mattress, is that all?'

'I think he prefers a firm mattress. He has such trouble with his neck.'

'Such a debacle for one neck. Why not endure the pain? Anyway, if he wants a firm mattress, he can get that here. My bedding, for instance, is as hard as a rock. An electric refrigerator, is that all he is reduced to craving? A restaurant that serves frog legs, is that all he wants now? After all we've been through, can that be it?'

'No, I do not think so. He's been preaching surrender for two years or more. He stopped believing we could win.'

'I think he simply stopped believing in the struggle. He stopped believing in the point of winning. Should we have given him more to do? Paid him more attention?'

'Perhaps.'

'He missed the attention, don't you think. He missed being pompous, there's not much call for it around here.'

'I suspect he would like to move to New York. He's always loved it there. I think they reward pompous behaviour there.'

'I was complimenting him when I called him pompous. You, also, can be pompous when the circumstances demand it.'

'Thank you for saying so, Big Brother.'

'And to be fair to him he doesn't just want to live in New York; he wants to be somebody important in New York. That's a very different thing. But Pailin is a long way from Manhattan.'

'Pailin is probably safer.'

'Why didn't he go to China? Surely they would have granted him entry? Why not just slip away? Why did he have to take so many with him?'

'I think they were going anyway, I think—'

'You are right. They were lost to us and we can do without them.'

'Big Brother, I want to tell you, Ieng Sary has taken Akor Sok with him.'

'Surely not.'

'I am afraid that he was very angry when I made him give his motorbike back to the community. I tried to teach him well but I failed.'

'You shouldn't blame yourself. You spent hours with him. You taught him well but he failed to learn.'

'He was so keen that day you sent him to me. Was it 1970? Do you remember? We sat in a clearing and he harangued Lon Nol because he thought that's what I expected. I told him to think big. I quoted Liu Shao-Chi: "the average Party comrade is far from possessing the great gifts and profound scientific knowledge of the founders of Marxism-Leninism, and most of our comrades cannot attain their deep and broad erudition in the theory of proletarian revolution. But it is perfectly possible for our comrades to grasp the theory and method of Marxism-Leninism, cultivate the style of Marx and Lenin in work and struggle, constantly heighten their revolutionary quality and become statesmen of the type of Marx and Lenin, if they really have the will, take a really conscious and consistent stand as vanguard fighters of the proletariat, really acquire the communist world outlook and exert

themselves in study, self-tempering and self-cultivation." I told him that I did not believe in fate any more than I believed that this life is pre-determined by the last. I told him that there are key moments in a man's life: whether you grasp these moments or mess them up or carry on oblivious that they have even occurred depends on preparation and hard work and clarity of thought.'

'It seems he learnt that lesson very well. But tell me—you can be honest with me—are you sorry that you did not go too?'

'Of course not, Big Brother. I will not abandon the struggle.'

He smiled. He knew, I hope, that I also meant I would not abandon him, not while he still hoped for some sort of vindication, not while Ta Mok hovered ready to throw him off a cliff given half a chance, not while he was spending as much time asleep as awake.

'Surrender is out of the question,' I said. 'Negotiation is always possible but I want to live in Phnom Penh in a free Cambodia. Ideally, I want a ministry.'

'Do you believe that is still possible?'

'The world is full of rehabilitated politicians. Why not me? And why give up, at my age, when there is still so much to do?'

'What about me? Could I be a future leader of a reconciled Kampuchea?'

'Perhaps not, Big Brother. Not directly, at least.'

'Not even if I change my name?'

'Don't tease me, Big Brother, it makes me sad.'

'We are still a fighting chance, don't you think?'

'No, Big Brother. I believe, truthfully, that we are as exposed as a monkey in a minefield. I am sorry to say it.'

'Don't be sorry. I'm not blind, not completely anyway. I'm not stupid. But, still, Pailin is a pathetic prize. Ieng Sary has won a few economic privileges but we took the best gems years ago. He has gained so little but stolen so much from us.'

'Mok wants to fight for Pailin.'

'Ha. Mok lives in a tiny world. He cannot survive outside of it.'

Pol Pot rose unsteadily.

'Are you all right, Big Brother?'

'Sometimes I feel better if I stand.'

He went to the *Nestlé* box and pulled out a bottle of Mekong Whiskey. 'A gift from Mok. It came with the truck that brought his beer. He's *such* a kind man, isn't he? We will toast Ieng Sary, our old friend, and Akor Sok, your former pupil, and we will wish them as much luck in the future as they deserve.'

'Are you sure that's wise?'

'Well, they deserve no luck at all. That is what we will wish for them.'

'Is it wise to take a drink, I mean?'

'It won't kill me. And what if it does?' He poured the liquor and handed me an ample serve. 'Perhaps you should consider offering yourself to Mok.'

'Never,' I said. 'We have nothing in common. And he knows nothing of the world beyond the brothels in Aranyapathet. He hasn't been to Geneva. I doubt he could even find Washington on a map. I'm pretty sure he thinks Korea and China is one big country. And he has no taste. He has the ugliest house in the whole country.'

Pol Pot smiled and held aloft his glass. 'To absent friends,' he said, 'and to friends we wish were absent.'

~*~

Room 17, Nolan Wing

Concertina Rest Home

8 January 1998

Dear Olaf,

Thank you for your letter. I know you would like to practice your English but I wanted to write to you in Russian just to see if I could still do it.

Of course, I remember your mother with fondness. You can tell her that I always understood that she was a more important person—officially, I mean—than she ever made plain to me. If I was wrong please apologise to her. And if I caused her any difficulties in her life I am truly sorry.

I cannot imagine what Russia must be like now. The best I can figure is that it is something like Vietnam: somehow or other after the war Saigon, despite everything, turned into a cathedral of free enterprise—what terrible use of the word 'free,' don't you think? It was so strange to see it in a country which bled for equality. Is that what it is like in Moscow? Is it even a bad thing or is it just inevitable? I don't know anymore.

I would love to visit Russia but I cannot fly such a long way. My son—my other son—would tell you that I am too frail even to get drunk in a transit lounge. Most of my Russian friends are old or probably even dead. Or in prisons or asylums, I don't doubt, although of course I am not now referring to your mother.

Thank you for inviting me to come to New York but, as I say, I cannot travel. And, frankly, at this late stage in my life, when I am unable to live and work as I would chose, America is the last place I want to make an effort over. Sorry.

I thank you for taking the time and the effort to find me but do not be surprised if I do not write to you again. It seems so late in my life, and yours too, to try and forge some connection. I already have a family that I barely know. I cannot even think about how you and I might become truly better acquainted and, frankly, what purpose such an effort would serve. Sorry.

Yours sincerely

Edward Whittlemore

~*~

In the Anlong Veng region of northwest Cambodia, in an act that signals that the Khmer Rouge movement is imploding, Pol Pot recently ordered the murders of his former defence chief, Son Sen, his wife, Yun Yat, herself a former minister for Education, and a number of their family and supporters. Several independent sources with links to the Edgar Institute insist that the reason for the killings was that Son Sen objected too vocally to a Draconian programme of collectivisation recently implemented. More significantly, it is understood that Son Sen recently established contacts with Hun Sen's Cambodian People's Party whereas other Khmer Rouge leaders, notably Nhem Kiry, have been negotiating with Prince Ranarridh with regards to possible mass defections.

The United States of America must continue to lead international efforts to prosecute the leaders of the Khmer Rouge for crimes against humanity. This must be organised swiftly and must conform to the principles of international law. Therefore, on the one hand we must criticise the Cambodian parties—both Hun Sen's CPP and Ranariddh's Funcinpec—whenever they negotiate with the Maoist guerrillas. On the other hand, we should understand that the fighting needs to stop by whatever means possible. We do not believe that these two separate points—a desire to put on trial the Khmer Rouge leaders and the need to end the fighting—need be in conflict. Whatever implied promises made to Khmer Rouge leaders to bring them in from their outposts have no bearing on the role the United States is now free to play: we must push for a trial, with every ounce of our being, in order that we might, once and for all, wash away the stain of Vietnam that seems to hold us back from fulfilling our potential and from completing our responsibilities. There are many individuals and groups, Americans and others, pushing for a Khmer Rouge trial simply on its own merits. That is even more to our advantage and we must forge links with these honourable people. Indeed, we must take over this initiative because it is the logical endpoint of the peace process that the US was so prominent in achieving. At the very least, should no trial occur, or should any litigation be flawed, we must be able to demonstrate that we wanted justice and that we worked tirelessly to achieve it.

—Cornell E. Jackson's Asia-Pacific Commentary, in GAP (Growth and Persistence) *Monthly Report of the Edgar Institute of International Democracy, July 1997*

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The commotion woke me. I lay in the dark, confused. I heard soldiers entering huts. I heard Son Sen cry out, angry but not scared. I listened to him state his case for his life, his wife's life, for the life of his elderly aunt, his soldier sons, his grandchildren (the youngest barely walking).

The executioners walked them down the path towards the road. They shot Son Sen first, to shut him up I suppose. Then they shot his family. Soon enough it was quiet. I lay still for a long time. Then I went outside and vomited—Son Sen did wrong but he did not need to die like that. After that, I couldn't sleep so I read by torchlight.

Suddenly I was a war criminal. 'String him up,' the Americans said, 'because people are still being murdered.' But I never killed a man in my whole life, not one man. Mass killings? I know nothing about it. I am ignorant and I will accept no responsibility. 'String him up,' the Americans say, 'so we can feel better about ourselves. String him up so we can pretend that the term "United Nations" is not a contradiction.'

Everybody knows that people died. My mother never got to celebrate the liberation of Phnom Penh. My brother died, so far as I know. My aunty died. Cousins died. Friends died. I know that Son Sen died because a commotion woke me in the night.

Do not think me flippant. Do not think that I am playing word games. I grieve for every Kampuchean who has fallen over the course of our long struggle. But if you think I am crass for pointing out the sad truth then you have no business living in this world for you are surely benefiting while other people struggle. Save your own soul before you come hunting for mine. We all die but in the meantime who does the greatest good for the greatest number of people?

Bun Sody was my good friend. My colleague, too, my confidante. He disappeared in the first weeks of our great victory in 1975. I don't know how he died. I don't know for certain that he died at all. Thinking back, I am sad, of course I am, that he went missing. I grieve for him but he was one man.

I will tell you the unpalatable truth about Sody. It will make it sound as though I am happy that he died (if he died) or even that I might have ordered his killing, as if I had such a gross power to wield. Or it will make it sound as if I knew of the decision and I made no attempt to stop it or, at least, that I became aware of the circumstances of his death and I chose not to complain. But are you responsible for the death of every friend you disagree

with? I will not be guilty just because people choose to vilify me.

I don't know how Brother Sody died. Maybe he committed suicide. But I can reveal his essence: he could not bear the thought that people might suffer. That was his favourite word—suffering—because he wanted everybody to know how much he cared. He wanted a perfect revolution without the need for hard work or sacrifice. He did not have the strength to commit to the revolution and yet the revolution meant everything to him. Maybe he realised the truth about himself and he stopped wanting to live.

Maybe he got caught up in a dispute of the heart. He liked women, all sorts of women. They dragged him down. Maybe he was assaulted by an angry husband. It wouldn't have been the first time.

Or maybe he stepped on a landmine.

Or maybe he walked across the path of a stray bullet.

If you want my opinion—but I'm only guessing—I suspect his death was an accident. Most likely, he went to the river, stripped, rubbed himself clean with a cake of soap, floated out to the middle (he liked to pretend he was Mao swimming the Yangtze), dove, became entangled in a sunken tree branch or hit his head on a rock.

Either that or he stole away to Vietnam. He was always very fond of the boulevards in Hanoi. And the food. And the women. And the Politburo.

~*~

Meet Jason (not his real name). He's eleven years old. He speaks with a Texan twang. He wears a cowboy hat and long leather boots. He chews chewing gum while he waits to turn sixteen when he will chew tobacco. His favourite musician is 2-pac Shakur. His favourite food is a hotdog with fries and a vanilla malt shake. He also likes pork spareribs, the sweeter the better. When he grows up he wants to be a rodeo rider. Or a NASA astronaut. Or President of the United States. Or all three. Jason lives in an outer suburb of Melbourne. He has never been to the United States of America. He has never met an American face to face. He has seen two child behavioural specialists. One has pronounced him healthy in mind and spirit. The other has suggested a radical intervention programme, and not just for Jason.

—*in* Hit and Miss: the Australian Culture and Television Monthly, *July 1998, p.11*

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'I've got some news, Grandpa,' Lia said as she sat down with our beers.

'You're pregnant? About time, too. Now all you need is a husband and a house and a swimming pool.'

'Funny.'

'That's it, isn't it? You're getting married? Oh God, not to that child with the sideburns?'

'Who, Fred? Grandpa, Fred hasn't been around for nearly a year.'

'Hasn't been around? You mean you dumped him?'

'You've met Duncan. More than once.'

'Is he the one with no hair?'

'That was Phil. He came before Fred.'

'I've got it: he's the one with the clown nose.'

'He had hay fever that day.'

'Well he had no business being around old people. All that sneezing.'

'You made me bring him. You wanted to meet him.'

'So you're marrying the clown?'

'No, of course I'm not. But I do have something to tell you.'

'Well?'

She paused, dropped her head and stayed silent.

'What is it, Love? You're scaring me. You're not sick, are you? Your dad? Is your dad sick?'

'No, nothing like that. It's good news, actually.' She paused and then she said, 'I'm, um, going to America.'

'Again? Can't you go somewhere else? Try Vietnam: you could see what Americans get up to when *they* travel. Or go to Europe. Go to Russia, people do that now. You like art: you'll never be the same after you've been to Leningrad.'

'It's not a holiday. I've been accepted into an art school.'

I tried but failed to speak. I skulled my beer.

'Careful, Grandpa, you'll hurt yourself.' She put her hand on my arm. 'It's very prestigious. It's in New York. I get a scholarship and an apartment—well, a share apartment. It's wonderful, really, I've got a guaranteed show at a prestigious gallery, it's, it's—'

'How long? How long will you be gone for?'

'A year.'

'A whole year? Just like that?'

'For starters.'

'For starters? *For starters*?'

'Please, Grandpa.'

'You're not coming back, are you?'

'Of course. For holidays.'

'Holidays? Bloody hell, Love.'

'Don't be mad at me. It's a great opportunity.'

'I'm not mad, I'm, I'm, I'm going to get us another beer.'

What happened next wasn't my fault, really it wasn't. I was confused. And I was irritated at myself: I did not want Lia to stand still, for me or for anyone else, but still I felt abandoned. The girl serving behind the bar was vivacious. She smiled and leaned forward, presenting her cleavage. She invited me to look, I am almost certain of it. She winked at me, I swear she did. I felt obliged to comment so as not to be rude.

'I...just...love...your...bahoonies,' I gasped.

Reaching for the beers I panted like a dog—it happens often these days—and then commenced a coughing fit, spluttering all over the bar and the girl's blouse. She took a step

back, repulsed. Her face turned the same creamy colour as her breasts: very fetching.

Still spluttering, I turned my head and saw Lia coming towards me. She grabbed my elbow and dragged me away.

'What about the beer?' I said.

'Leave it.'

'I need to pee.'

'Not here you don't.'

'Bahoonies,' I turned and called as we headed for the door, 'is an old-fashioned word for earrings.'

~*~

A few days after the killing of Son Sen and the others, with Ta Mok's fury showing no signs of abating, Pol Pot and I fled Anlong Veng. We left before dawn, pushing a 4-wheel-drive the first couple of kilometres—several times I had to get out and help—then driving along a track that got bumpier, windier, narrower. There was a bare hint of grey light when we alighted at a place where a narrow track left the road.

When we laid our provisions on the ground it seemed impossible that we could carry them all. Charya, a fine young man, failed to hide his dismay at leaving us. With my blessing he drove away to defect to the government soldiers who patrolled the far end of the road, the 4-wheel-drive a present for his new friends.

We walked in single file around the base of a mountain. Bonarith, Pol Pot's bodyguard, led the way. He wore two backpacks. In one hand he held a long knife for cutting stray foliage. In his other hand he carried my black suitcase, which had been to twenty countries or more but had never known travel this hard. It was full of US dollars.

Pol Pot's wife and daughter came next. Mea carried both their packs. We all tried to draw comfort from the encouraging words she offered the girl.

Pol Pot came next, dragging himself forward with a bamboo pole. He had been panting even before we had begun walking. Now, his shoulders heaved uncontrollably. His whole body shook. He shuffled forward, unable to lift his feet although they banged against rocks and tree roots.

I followed close behind Pol Pot, carrying his pack as well as my own. The packs were not too heavy—Ol withheld my fair share of the load, which was just as well because my shoulders felt as if Sihanouk was standing on them. Soon I snagged my shirt sleeve on a tree branch (I had a spare one in my pack but I wanted to save them for when I was negotiating our passage to the Chinese embassy in Bangkok). Within an hour I split the webbing between two toes. Each time I planted my foot a searing pain shot up my leg.

Ol and Vireak walked behind me. Ol carried two backpacks, one of which contained a portable radio, and a collapsed camp stretcher under his arm. Vireak dragged a second suitcase of money—the case had wheels which he insisted on trying to use over the rough terrain.

Vireak had only come, I was sure, because Ol had asked him to. Not that I considered him disloyal. His love for Pol Pot was unquestionable and he revered Ol. But he had been

dejected from the moment we set off. He clearly did not think that we had any chance of reaching the border. Of course, we all knew he was right, except for Pol Pot who, if he was thinking anything by then, believed only in success.

After an hour, as we pushed up a slope that looked gentle but felt unrelenting, Pol Pot veered off the path and collapsed into a bush. We turned him over. His eyes and his mouth were open wide, trying to draw in oxygen. His skin was as yellow as an overripe banana skin. There were black blotches on his forehead and he smelt overripe.

'Can you hear me, Big Brother?' I said.

He did not reply. We laid him on the stretcher. He closed his eyes and his breathing became steady. We loaded the suitcases on top of him. He groaned feebly.

'I'm sorry, Big Brother, but there is no other way to carry everything,' I said. 'Can you imagine what the newspapers would say if they saw you? Pol Pot in the middle of nowhere with suitcases full of money.'

Pol Pot opened his eyes and whispered in French, 'Last Stand of the Cambodian Godfather.'

I walked beside Pol Pot. Occasionally I used my *krama* to wipe the puddles of perspiration that formed in the depressions either side of his body. He groaned every time one of the suitcases thumped against him.

'All you need is a decent doctor, medicine, an oxygen cylinder. Don't worry, we are making excellent progress. Before you know it we will be in Beijing. You will have a palace to yourself, it is all arranged, a quiet place with woods and a clean pond and ducks and fat orange fish. You will be able to have pork dim sims every night for dinner. Imagine it, an endless supply of roast duck and your very own choice of dipping sauce, and rice wine, beer, as much beer as you want, and do you know the best thing? You can eat and drink to your heart's content while sitting on Vietnam's head. They will hate it: how wonderful.'

Sisopha tailed along beside me. She kept hitting her legs and tripping because she would not take her eyes off her father.

'My feet hurt, Pa,' she said to Pol Pot. 'Can we stop soon?'

'You'll like it in China,' I told her. 'There are a billion little girls to play with. That is such a lot of little girls.'

'Are we nearly there, Pa? *Pa*? Ma, why doesn't Pa answer me?'

'You know that Pa likes to have a rest in the afternoon.'

'It's not good,' Ol whispered to me. 'He's barely conscious.'

'I know. But we must keep going.'

Pol Pot opened his eyes and said, 'Are we nearly there yet?'

'We are so close, Beloved Uncle,' Ol said. 'Can you smell how close we are?'

'I can smell something.'

'Try to stay awake,' I said. 'I've been thinking. I believe I might have found the solution to our problem, right here, right now, while we have been walking. I'm going to tell you about it, Big Brother, although it is unformed in my mind, because I trust your judgement and I hope you will tell me if you think it is a good idea.

'Here it is, Big Brother, my new idea: guided tours of the Dangrek Mountains. Authentic treks with real life guerrillas. What do you say? The Westerners will come from everywhere for this. They'll pay a premium for it, too, so long as we feed them properly. They call it "Adventure Tourism." Our country will fill with Germans. Think of it: *Come and get your feet muddy in pristine wilderness, with authentic mud, and your choice of Soviet, Chinese or American minefields. See the actual site where Son Sen and his family were slaughtered. Climb all over Angkor temples: see headless statues then visit Ta Mok's villa at Anlong Veng to see the heads, where you can meet real live Khmer Rouge soldiers, clean and fire their rifles, work in the fields for a day just like a real Cambodian peasant, hide in a shallow bunker, enduring a simulated attack by President Nixon's B-52s. And as a special bonus for overnight trekkers, be treated to a one-hour lecture in a genuine grass-roofed hut by the famous revolutionary, Mr Pol Pot.* What do you think of my tourism plans, Big Brother?'

Ol half turned his head. 'He's passed out.'

'Oh. Why didn't you tell me?'

'I like listening to you.'

'I was making a joke.'

'Really? Are you sure?'

Although there were several hours of light left we stopped near Kbal Ansom, east of the Chrork Choam pass. Ol and Bonarith carried Pol Pot into a cave. I kicked rocks aside and they set him down. Mea and I propped him upright and helped him drink. His skin shone in

the gloom. Mea wiped his brow with a *krama* and said, 'Everything is going to be okay.'

'Are we there yet?' he asked. 'Have we crossed the border?'

'We are very close.'

Ol and Mea went to look for leaves to boil for a soup. Little Sisopha lay wedged between two rocks, as if a swollen river had dumped her there. I asked her to tell me her favourite story but the effort of thinking made her cry.

'Take the radio up that hill,' I told Bonarith and Vireak. 'Find out if they are chasing us. Find out how close they are.'

I popped my blood blisters. I dressed Mea's feet as best I could. She screamed. I closed my eyes and fell asleep. When Ol woke me up Bonarith and Vireak had fled with the radio and the suitcases of money.

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At dawn, I removed a wad of dollars strapped to my stomach.

'You must keep going,' I told Ol. 'Get to the border and get help. If you can reach Udon Ratchtham ask to speak to Captain Subramanian. Give him all of the money—*all of it*, Ol, do you understand me?—and tell him there is more. You are the last chance.'

'I understand,' Ol said. He stood awkwardly.

'What is it?'

'I want to thank you for teaching me everything,' he said. Before I could reply he ran away.

Ta Mok's soldiers found us an hour later. They announced themselves like visitors standing in a street unable to remember which house they were supposed to enter. I sent Mea and Sisopha to the very rear of the cave.

'I'm sorry, Big Brother, but you need to stand up now,' I said to Pol Pot.

With great effort, and with all his willpower, he held himself upright, one arm resting on the side of the cave.

'I feel much better for the sleep,' he said.

I took two handguns from my backpack. As we stepped from darkness into light Pol Pot stood straight and proud. I pointed one gun at his ear and one at my own chest.

Samnang—a senior officer I knew well and admired—stepped forward.

'This is not sensible,' he said in a kind tone, as if he was explaining to a child that if

you leap from a roof while holding a chicken you will not fly. 'Please surrender.'

'What do you want to do?' I said in English to Pol Pot. 'What do you want me to do?'

'Who are all these people? Am I supposed to address them?' he said.

'No, don't worry. Everything's okay now.'

I dropped the guns at my feet. 'I'm sorry,' I said to Pol Pot. 'I did the best that I could.'

Samnang greeted me warmly. 'You should be proud. Loyalty takes no account of circumstances,' he said. 'Are you hungry?'

But I hung my head in shame. True loyalty does not burn down like a candle; it endures regardless of circumstances. But, still, loyalty cannot be an excuse for failure. I felt a fool, surrendering gratefully like the old coward I suddenly realised I had become.

'Where did you think we were going?' Samnang said. 'Thailand would never have let you pass. And China would have closed its eyes to you.'

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I would never have shot Pol Pot. Even if I'd wanted to—even if he'd ordered me to—it was impossible. One of the guns was empty. I had no bullets with me and, besides, I had no idea how to open and load the chamber. The other gun was Ta Mok's Luger. He brought it out when he was drinking. When he squeezed the trigger a tiny blue flame emerged which he used to light his Marlboros.

~*~

Room 17, Nolan Wing

Concertina Rest Home

19 July 1997

Dear Cornell,

Thanks but no thanks, mate. There's no way I'm writing any sort of report for you. A Prime Minister ousts another Prime Minister: even if I could make sense of that, which I can't, there's nothing I'd rather do less than explain it to you. I'm not even tempted by the thought of getting my hands on some of your fortune, which us underprivileged minions in the colonies surely deserve anyway. Was it a coup? Is Hun Sen's rule now illegitimate? Or did Ranarridh get what he deserved? Was he doing as Sihanouk would have done, getting into bed with the Khmer Rouge when it suited him? Sorry, but I can't be bothered with any of it. And what's that bulldust you're spouting about democracy being in peril? Democracy doesn't work unless it isn't truly democratic: you of all people should understand that.

When you say that Nhem Kiry is somehow involved in the Phnom Penh fighting because Hun Sen thought Ranarridh was getting too close to him I can only respond that the world has truly gone mad. Kiry's old and slow and, surely, too disgraced to be relevant. I prefer to think that he's got no control over his own life, let alone the fortunes of Cambodia. And I've never even heard of half of those people mentioned in that briefing note you sent me, although I see that you've still got your contacts in the State Department: what an icon of independent thought you are! And how pleased your friends would be if they knew that everything you get I get too!

I feel some pressure from you on this matter and I don't appreciate it: I'm not some sort of opinion-piece mercenary. And frankly, I'm disappointed that you've forced me to admit my impotence. I know you mean well but sometimes your good intentions are a pain in the arse. What do you want me to do, write a story that pretends that the world hasn't moved on just because I'm stuck here? 'Here is the 1997 news,' I could say, 'but please bear in mind that the names of those protagonists who came to prominence after 1991 have been omitted.' Trust me, you won't want any association with the manuscript I've been working on. I'm willing to bet you a bucket of money (if you'll lend me the cash) that every word of it will disgust you.

Don't get me wrong. It shames me that I don't feel able to reflect on this coup thing.

But I suppose that's life or, at least, the end of life. And it could be worse. I'd be truly appalled at myself if I suddenly wanted to put Nhem Kiry and the rest of them on trial solely so I could absolve my own government's sordid part in thirty years of unnecessary carnage. But nobody would ever stoop that low...would they?

But—please, please, please—keep the documents and the clippings coming. I'm living in a desert here and I need every single piece of paper you send. The nursing home people have just given me a filing cabinet in the administration wing. Something to do with Occupational Health and Safety. The director—she's not a bad sort although she's far too old for me—came and presented the keys to me herself.

'Terry the cleaner tripped over a pile of papers in your room. Now he wants to sue us. And I've had the union delegate reading me the riot act,' she said.

'In that case, can I have Mrs Davis' room next door as an office?'

'But what about Mrs Davis?'

'She could share with William. He'd love that.'

By the way, there's a new book out by Fogerty, T.D. Fogerty. Any chance you could send me a copy? In the meantime, here's your interim report, mate, and feel free to print it in bold: when all else fails, at the very least be true to yourself.

Best wishes,

Ted

~*~

Michael tried to pace up and down but in my tiny room he had to stand over me, glowering and clenching and unclenching his fists (much like Nixon used to do).

'Lia's really upset,' he said.

'You're standing in my light.'

'She feels dreadful enough as it is. Why did you have to make it worse?'

'I didn't mean to. I just got a shock.'

'I don't know what you said to her and I don't want to know but—'

'All right, I'm sorry. Can we drop it?'

'No. I want to know what you're going to do about it. Well?'

'Oh, don't lecture me, Michael, you're so terrible at it, I can't bear to listen. She's coming to see me tomorrow. I'll sort it out then, all right?'

'It's not good enough, Dad, after everything she's done for you. I want to know exactly what you're going to say to fix this.'

'None of your business.'

'Have you got a pen? A piece of paper?'

'You want me to script what I'm going to say?'

'There's no margin for error here. We're doing it together.' He opened a drawer. 'Can I write on the back of this?'

'Don't read that.'

'Why, what is it? "I have something to tell you so I will just speak it. I will not play games. I am your son. I am certain." Who wrote this?'

'Who do you think?'

He turned his back to me and read the rest of Olaf's letter. When he sat down on the end of my bed he was clearly having trouble keeping a straight face.

'You're not upset then?' I said.

'When did the letter come?'

'A while back. What does it matter?'

'A Russian, eh? Is that even legal?'

'Very funny. If you say, "I've always wanted a brother," I swear I'll never speak to you again.'

'Are there any others?'

'Letters?'

'Offspring.'

'How should I know? I didn't even know about him.'

'Well, you can't be surprised.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'He wants to say hello. Isn't that sweet? Shall we invite him for Christmas lunch? Are Russians allowed to come here these days? And what a coincidence: he's going to live in New York. Just like Lia.'

'Don't remind me, I, oh no, no you don't. I forbid you to tell her about Olaf. He's my son and I say no family reunions.'

'What if I'm curious?'

'You're not.'

'How do you know?'

'Because you're not curious about anything. Except for torts.'

'You don't even know what a tort is.'

'And thank Christ for that.'

'Let's write him a letter. Lia could deliver it in person. How shall we start? *Dearest Olaf.* No. *My darling son, words cannot express the joy I experienced on receipt of your letter.*'

'Stop it now.'

'*All these years I felt a special connection with Russia, even though the KGB never paid me a cent for all that spying I did for them.*'

'Very funny. What should I do to fix things with Lia? Tell her how excited I am about her going? Tell her what a vibrant city New York is?'

'Not nearly good enough.'

'What then?'

'Let's go for a drive.'

'To the pub?'

'To Lia's studio. I happen to know she's there all afternoon.'

'Do we have to? Last time I nearly passed out from the fumes.'

'You're going to look through her paintings and you're going to pick one that you

adore—that will be the word you use—and we're going to bring it back here and hang it above your bed.'

'Oh God. I had no idea things were that bad.'

'Oh, one other thing: I think I'll keep hold of this.' He folded the letter from Olaf and put it in his shirt pocket. 'Evidence.'

~*~

Reports from Phnom Penh and Bangkok state that the former Khmer Rouge leader, Pol Pot, has died of an undisclosed illness in the remote northwest of Cambodia. From 1975 to 1979 Pol Pot presided over one of the most brutal regimes of the twentieth century. He continued to lead the Khmer Rouge during the 1980s and into the 1990s. In 1996 he ordered the killing of his one-time Minister of Defence, Son Sen. Shortly after, the notorious one-legged military commander, Ta Mok, seized control of the Khmer Rouge. Mok arranged a 'People's Trial' at which Pol Pot was convicted of murdering Son Sen and others, the attempted murder of Ta Mok and others as well as betraying the Khmer Rouge movement by attempting to block Son Sen's negotiations with Funcinpec. A source close to the US State Department dismissed the trial as a sham, stating that, 'Should reports of his death prove correct, Pol Pot has evaded justice.' Pol Pot has been reported dead on a number of previous occasions, most recently twelve months ago. While this latest report is being treated with scepticism by some observers, it is widely known in diplomatic circles that he has been gravely ill. A senior Thai official, speaking on the assurance of anonymity, told this correspondent, 'This time there is no doubt.' The same official declined to comment on suggestions Pol Pot did not die of natural causes.

— AAP, 17 April 1998

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Half out of shock, half defending myself from splinters, I sat motionless on an upturned wooden crate. The air in the dark hut, and the saliva in my mouth, tasted acrid. Pol Pot lay on a camp bed. Three hours earlier, before dawn, his erratic breathing had become fast and loud. Abruptly, decisively, as his wife stood over him squeezing drops of water from her *krama* onto his forehead, he had died.

He did not speak the morning he died. Not a word. Nuon Chea insists that Pol Pot told him, 'I am very proud, and I am very proud of you,' but that's wishful thinking: I know, because I too yearned for a last affirmation.

He spoke his last words to me—they were probably the last words he ever spoke—a week earlier. Although he was sitting up he was disoriented. I sat beside him, telling him the latest news from Phnom Penh. He offered an occasional comment but he soon lost focus. I kept talking, kept updating him, but only so that he would know he wasn't alone. After a while, still sitting up, he slept. I stopped talking and started reading an old *Bangkok Post*

that Mok had passed on to me (he was worried that idle minds think too much). After ten minutes of silence, Pol Pot lifted his head and said,

'It depends.'

'What depends, Big Brother?'

'Splendid.'

'What is?'

'Splendid!'

He squinted at me, confused, and I could not tell whether his eyes had failed him or if he had forgotten who I was. He started rocking on his chair. 'Go away,' he said, so I did.

An hour or so later his daughter, poor little thing, found him slumped, barely conscious, on the floor of the hut. We lay him on his bed. Every few hours we shifted his position so that he didn't bruise too much. We forced down water and a little rice and those fat white tablets that Mok had brought back from Thailand (I've no idea what they were meant to cure). He took a week to die. I think, by the end, he'd forgotten even how to do that.

Three of Ta Mok's bodyguards entered the hut. They greeted me with polite, sympathetic murmurs. They were subdued: perhaps they grieved but more likely they were embarrassed that I was present to witness them attending to the body. One bodyguard took hold of his feet. A second man brought his wrists together above his head. They lifted Pol Pot—'He's so light'—while the third bodyguard placed a length of tarpaulin between man and mattress. They dragged several blocks of ice into the hut, wedging them under his arms and between his legs. Then they left.

This was a time for momentous thoughts, or so I counselled myself. As the ice began to melt and drip, I considered Pol Pot's legacy. At heart, and after everything, it was simple: he taught us—he taught me—by example. He lived his life completely in the service of his country. How can that be a bad thing? How can the world take two freedom fighters—Pol Pot and Nelson Mandela or Idi Amin and George Washington—and call one of them a monster and one of them a saint? I know what people say—Pol Pot is as evil as Hitler—but how can that be when he understood Kampuchea so well, although he was humble about it, and when all he wanted to do was make a difference?

Yes, it is true, some people suffered. Errors were made. But it is more true that the innocent man sits at home drinking tea, sunning himself, resting, and waiting for the

opportunity to condemn the man who acts on his convictions. We failed—there's no avoiding facts—but not in the way that people think. In 1979, when the Vietnamese imperialists savaged our revolution, we were one year, two at most, away from consolidation and so proving to the world that even the tiniest and poorest nation, trampled by generations of imperialism, can rise up. We failed because we couldn't protect the people, the country, from Vietnam. We failed because China and the West no longer needed us, and that was because the Soviets forgot how to be Soviets. When America won the Cold War they won the Vietnam War too and they stopped caring what damage Vietnam inflicted on its smaller, weaker neighbour.

Ultimately, we failed even to drag Sihanouk down with us: after everything, he retrieved his reputation and his legitimacy. He is an old king now, and even he does not pretend to have any influence over Hun Sen, but he has learnt nothing: he is as contemptuous of the people and as ignorant of their daily struggles as he ever was.

The weak-willed in our movement surrendered, leaving the strong to rot on the tree. Even after Ieng Sary ran away, taking the best fighters with him, taking Akor Sok with him too, I believed we could end the fighting with honour and with a share of power. I still saw myself as the Minister for Trade, maybe even the Minister for Foreign Affairs, in a future Republic of Kampuchea coalition government. And why not?

Then Brother Mok, with his dim grasp of the art of publicity, made Pol Pot endure that fake trial. I wasn't there: Mok ordered me to stay away and, frankly, I would rather have walked to China than witness it. Each day Mok made Pol Pot sit in front of a group of peasants and endure their frenzied accusations, all scripted—these were the very people that Big Brother had served for his whole life, the very people who, given the opportunity to tell the truth, would have expressed their deep, enduring gratitude to him.

Each afternoon, when Pol Pot returned home from the trial, I consoled him: 'They are getting double rations of chicken to berate you. They are wearing new clothes, you can be sure of it.'

'We will leave, I think; steal away, if we can,' Pol Pot had said. 'We will go to China. They will welcome us, won't they?'

'I'm not sure, Big Brother. Perhaps not.'

'Thailand then.'

'Perhaps, if we are very quiet, they might let us visit. But they will not invite us to stay.'

'Could we possibly—' he paused and hung his head. 'Is there any possibility that we could go to Phnom Penh?'

'There are rumours that the government is negotiating to hand you over to the Americans.'

'Is it true?'

'Probably not. But it is a true reflection of their feelings towards you.'

'You are right. Yugoslavia?'

'Big Brother, there is no such country any more.'

'President Tito will embrace us, surely?'

'President Tito is dead. Do you remember?'

'Oh yes.'

Sick and old, powerless but defiant, he endured the trial. Still, I will not forgive Mok. The day he made the people find Pol Pot guilty I wished a UN trial upon him, presided over by emotional liberal judges—but, then, if he ever takes the stand I suppose the first thing he will do is implicate me.

I shouldn't have sat beside Pol Pot's body for so long. I should have gone and offered my support to Mea, who was inconsolable. I should have found a can of Coca-Cola to give to poor little Sisopha. I should have gone to my home and allowed my wife to comfort me, and my girls to fawn over me. I should have gone to sleep but, somehow, surrendering consciousness seemed the crassest response of all.

Nuon Chea entered the hut, limping badly. His mouth, all too characteristically, was set in a way that suggested a bubbling pot of water about to lose its lid. I stood up and let him have the crate. I wanted to leave—there was nothing more to see and I didn't think that I had the strength to allow my thoughts to follow their intuitive path—but I sensed that Chea wanted me to stay with him.

A group of Thai military officers arrived, chattering like children. Chea stood. They forced us and the wooden crate against the wall, giving them space to file past and peer at Pol Pot, already a curio. The last officer in the queue, a man I personally knew to be of considerable courage, bearing and charm, took a camera from his bag and began taking

photographs of Pol Pot's corpse. Like a tourist at Angkor Wat, his eyes saw nothing but what the viewfinder offered. I bowed my head so as not to betray my disgust.

The Thai officer stood in the middle of the hut and put a new roll of film into his camera. He then crouched down and, as if capturing a bird in flight, took a rapid series of photographs of Pol Pot's inert face. The camera's flash lit up the dim room and cast silhouettes across the concrete walls. I saw that one corner of Chea's mouth was twitching. A diplomatic incident seemed imminent so I took his elbow and led him into the sun. We walked to the river, sat on a rock, and watched the water.

'What now?' Chea said. 'What now but fishing?'

Tears came to my eyes. I turned away from Chea, although he was lost in his own thoughts and oblivious of my distress. At that moment I surrendered. No: at that moment I adjusted my expectations. I no longer sought power, not even the small piece of it I deserved and could have used so effectively in the service of the people. I sought survival, freedom, a life without suspense. It was not that I was abandoning the struggle. I could never have done that, never. Had I wanted to give in merely because all hope was lost I would have done so in 1992 when I knew the UN would break its promises to us; or in 1989 when, watching television in a hotel room in the middle of another peace conference, I saw that idiot student defying a tank in Tiananmen Square and I knew that China would abandon us once and for all; or in 1986 when Gorbachev went to Vladivostok and announced to the Russian people and to Ronald Reagan, 'I am a coward.'

The relative prospects of success and failure never dictated my decisions. Never. But sitting on a rock, watching the river's current until it bent and disappeared around a corner where I could hear women washing clothes, I knew that I had outlasted my struggle. Serving Mok was not an option: under his leadership the movement bore no resemblance to the principles I had devoted my life to. Mok, I think, had come to wish he was Sihanouk. All he craved, really, was a life of leisure and lust in a Royal Palace: Singha beer or Moët, diseased prostitutes or princesses, rice or baguettes, it was all the same to him so long as there was plenty of it. His final defeat was sure to be ignominious. I wanted no part of it.

I have no idea what Chea was thinking. Probably he was trying to decide who to blame, since nothing was ever his fault. We stayed sitting on the rock by the river and, although we had nothing to say, I was pleased to have him there.

Soon after midday, Kunthea came looking for me but before she got close I told her to go back. She ran away, crying; I suppose I spoke too harshly. Soon after, Chea's wife brought us water but we declined food and Chea refused to take his medicine.

In the middle of the afternoon, four soldiers, boys too young to comprehend the moment, carried Pol Pot to a clearing on the top of a nearby hill. They placed him on a pyre made of wood and a few old rubber tyres and the sodden mattress he had died on. They set him alight.

We stayed by the river until the last of the black smoke had cleared. By then, Chea's bad leg had seized up. They carried him along the winding path that led through the jungle. I came along behind.

~*~

Hope Inlet,

Maine

25 October 1998

Dear Ted,

Sad news here. My father passed away two days ago. Everybody keeps saying it's a blessed relief that his suffering has ended. But he was so ill for so long—all those specialists told him he was terminal ten years ago (and then they billed him)—that I realise now that I'd gotten used to it, especially since we all had to pretend that he was so much healthier than he really was. What I mean is, his illness had become so normal that I was shocked when he couldn't fight anymore. But it is a blessed relief that his pain has ended. And he's back with Mum and God now—sorry, buddy, I hope that doesn't offend you but it's what I truly believe.

'Tears of grief and relief,' my sister, Candy says. Is that from a poem? Not much point in asking you, is there?

Father was lucid almost to the end, at least until they upped his morphine. I'm pleased to say we had one final argument or, rather, one last go at the same old argument. I think the crafty old bastard thought he could win this time—what honourable and caring son would challenge his father on his father's deathbed? Well I didn't fall for such base tactics (father taught me well). I won our last argument. But, then, I know his position all too well whereas he's never really understood mine: of course, that's why he was such an effective politician—and he was effective, Ted, he really was, whatever you might think of him personally. He did great good, please trust me on this even if you can't see it.

Do you remember I sent you that speech that I wrote for him? The one he gave to all his friends at the country club when they gave him that human rights award: 'There is only one way to have an influence. And that is to be at the very point of the pyramid. People who pick at power from the periphery fall into two categories: first, those who should be in the centre but who have strayed, and; second, those who should mind their own business.'

***

Senator Alexander Bernard Jackson sat up in bed. Two orderlies, on secondment from a nearby plastic surgery and rehabilitation clinic, propped him up against Ergonomic Insert Pillows. The room temperature, as per the physician's instructions (a golfing partner of George Walker Bush) and in consultation with experts from Artificial Air America, was 77.5

degrees Fahrenheit. Further to the AAA's instructions, the windows in every room of the Calvin Coolidge Wing (as the Jackson family had called this section of the second floor of the family estate ever since the 30th President of the United States had become lost while attempting to find a bathroom) were open two inches.

'Are you certain?' Senator Jackson said. 'Have you considered the implications of turning me down?'

'Good morning, Father, I thought you were asleep. You're looking well. Your cheeks are a very fine shade of pink this morning.'

'That's because I've been sitting on them for weeks. Are you sure?'

'Am I sure about what?'

'You never pay attention, do you boy? You never have.'

'I'm sorry, Father, but I just arrived. Whatever we were talking about earlier I wasn't privy to.'

'Always ready with an excuse, aren't you? Well, it's not good enough. You've got to be a man in this world. You've got to be responsible for your own actions. You can't go through life hearing only what you want to hear.' He put a curved plastic straw to his lips and drank fluid packed with electrolytes and lime flavouring. 'Are you sure you don't want my Senate seat?'

'Are you sure it's yours to give, Father?'

'Don't be cute with me. I haven't the time. Do you want it or not?'

'Did I want it last time you offered it to me?'

'Why do you call me Father? It's so damned impersonal.'

'What's wrong with Father? It's what I've always called you, and you must have had something to do with that. I can change, if you want. Is there another title you would prefer?'

'How about Daddy?'

'Come on, Father, you know I love you but there's no need for such soppiness. We were never that close.'

'No.'

'How about Pater?'

'How about having my Senate seat? Of course, if you agree you'll have to go back to Francine.'

'Is that what this is about?'

'And, of course, you'd have to bolt the cupboard.'

'What cupboard?'

'Pay attention, boy. If you took my senate seat you'd have to bolt the cupboard with the skeletons in it. And you need Francine. You need her to go on television and say that she forgives you.'

'Forgives me for what?'

'Doesn't matter what for. You may need to cry a little, too. For the cameras.'

'But in a manly sort of way?'

'Exactly.'

'How about I call you Dad? It's informal but not as schmaltzy as Daddy. I just can't start calling you Daddy at this late stage.'

'Can't or won't?'

'Both. And I can't take your Senate seat.'

'Can't or won't?'

'Both. Why do you want me to take it so badly?'

'You know why.'

'To keep it in safe hands.'

'Don't be ridiculous, boy. I know at least fifty people who can be trusted.'

'Why, then? Why me?'

'You know why. Don't make me tell spell it out for you. You know I've never been firm enough with you or your sister. I don't have the stomach for it.'

'How about this: I'll commission a poll. Find out what the people think their elected representatives should be called by their children. If the majority think I should call you Daddy then naturally I'll call you Daddy.'

'Actually, I've hardly got a stomach at all anymore.'

'It makes me wonder why you still drink whiskey after dinner.'

'Well, it hardly matters now, does it? I want you to take my senate seat for the good of the country.'

'Well, that's very nice of you to say so, father. I'm flattered, I really am.'

'Don't be ridiculous, boy. You know exactly what I mean: you're damaging the

country, you're damaging yourself and you're undermining the Jackson legacy. I can't think of another way to make you stop.'

'But, father, you agree with almost everything I write. I know you do.'

'Don't play games with me. I haven't the strength to be angry.' He leaned back and coughed. 'Oh, dear Lord.'

'You've always had a politician's timing, father, I'll give you that.'

'As...you...well...know, it's not what you know that's critical, it's not what's true and untrue, it's who else knows. Why—WHY—do you insist on breaching privileges?'

'I believe in democracy.'

'Democracy? You don't care about democracy. You want to have your cake and eat it too. If you ever want to achieve anything for the good of the people you'll have to choose between democracy or honesty.'

'I'm talking about context. I'm talking about the big picture.'

'Exactly. The problem with the big picture is that it ignores all the little pictures. Best case scenarios are always horrible for someone.'

'Sometimes that can't be avoided.'

'We agree, boy, we agree: but why advertise that fact. You're obsessed about Vietnam but—'

'I'm not obsessed about anything.'

'You're obsessed, I tell you, but Vietnam was important because it was peripheral. That's what you're saying, right?'

'Right.'

'Do you want to say that on a nationally televised debate? Do you want to see what my constituents think of you then?'

'But that's exactly why I don't want your senate seat, because I want to say those things. We shouldn't hide away, as if we are criminals. We should be proud of our achievements.'

'You never grew up, did you? I blame myself. It's us and them, my boy, and it's going to stay us and them no matter how many of them you educate.'

~*~

Two former Khmer Rouge leaders, Nhem Kiry and Nuon Chea, have surrendered to the Cambodian government. In a letter to Prime Minister Hun Sen, which Kiry handed to him today at the commencement of a one-hour meeting, Nhem Kiry pledged his support for the Cambodian constitution and for all the institutions of civil society. He added, 'My only wish now is to be a private and normal citizen.' The two men are staying at an exclusive Phnom Penh hotel where tomorrow they will hold a media conference. They will then enjoy a short holiday in the beach resort town of Sihanoukville, after which they will retire to the town of Pailin in western Cambodia. The remnants of the Khmer Rouge remain in the Anlong Veng region in northwest Cambodia under the leadership of the military commander, Ta Mok.

—ABC Radio News, 29 December 1998

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On the morning of the press conference I was nervous then lethargic then nauseous then so deeply irritated that I could not sit still or think clearly. Craving solitude, I sent my daughter, Yat, and my granddaughters downstairs to the breakfast buffet. The three of them probably caused irreparable damage to my reputation for austerity by devouring more croissants and fruit than a peasant family would consume in a month.

Kunthea and little Minea were oblivious of tension. They treated nothing seriously, exactly the attitude I was trying but failing to adopt. The previous night, after the humiliating meeting with Hun Sen, I had encouraged them to drink all the Coke and Sprite in our hotel room's bar fridge. The excess sugar transformed them—Yat as well as the children—to a giggling mess of limbs spread across the double bed. I joined in, downing two cans of Heineken, the first of which I almost enjoyed: 'Cold and bitter,' I saluted my family. 'Just like me.' Then I opened a half-sized bottle of Johnny Walker Black, sniffed it and pronounced it fake. I tipped it down the bathroom sink, an act that deeply shocked Kunthea. I took her hand and whispered, 'When we leave, let's steal the towels.'

Given that I was the centre of attention, and given that nothing would convince her that this day was a necessary but irrelevant evil, I was thankful that my wife had stayed away from Phnom Penh. Not that she would have made a fuss about what she called 'events from once before': she would have denounced me—herself too—with sighs or by gazing at the ground in silence or by picking at her food. I would have pointedly ignored her. So I went to Phnom Penh while she stayed in Pailin to adjust to our new wooden home. After everything

she had been through—yes, yes, after everything I had put her through—I knew that she had hoped for something more palatial: running water, at the very least. 'It's not Beijing,' she told me in a predictably stoic tone, 'but anything is better than another year in Anlong Veng.'

Overnight, my sinuses had reacted badly to the air-conditioner. I blew my nose, one nostril at a time, but the tissue was bone dry. So I ran the shower hot and placed a few drops of eucalyptus oil on a flannel, a neat trick that a diplomat friend had once taught me—I won't name him, I'll save it up in case I'm ever on trial for crimes against humanity. I stood under the shower, closed my eyes and allowed the fumes that rose with the steam to clear my head.

I washed myself with a tiny bar of soap that came wrapped in waxy paper. Once wet, the soap smelt rather like used peanut oil. It washed away without staining my skin but I kept it away from my face. And I used my own shampoo: a few days earlier at a Bangkok salon—on the eighth floor of the 'Sixth Biggest Shopping Mall in Southeast Asia', which is apparently something worth bragging about—a European-trained stylist had dyed my hair chestnut brown. I liked the result—the colour as well as the wave that she had blown through it—but I knew from experience that I needed to treat my hair with great care now or it would shrivel up.

I shaved with a Braun two-headed electric razor. While I preferred a blade—the feel of steel on my cheeks, the smooth finish, its reliability unconstrained by the availability of electricity—I had taken to cutting myself. 'Your skin gets thinner when you get old,' my wife told me. 'Yet another startling revelation,' I replied. But she was right: and today, of all days, facing all those people and all those cameras, I did not want scabs on my throat or blood spots on my collar.

I dried and powdered myself, and dressed in a new camel-coloured safari suit (it contrasted nicely with my new hair colour). I put a single blue ballpoint pen, relieved from the hotel lobby, into my breast pocket, along with a blank piece of paper, folded into quarters.

Haircuts, new suits, talcum powder—I suppose I sound vain. But consider this: I was about to endure an interrogation not because I was so important (there must have been fifty or a hundred men and women in our movement as significant as me) nor even because I was almost the last leader standing, but because I had always been the most accessible. It was a game, no doubt, but if I wanted my peace in Pailin, and my piece of land, I had to play this

game. And once I could not avoid it I resolved to play well.

My minders—government policemen with fake Ray-Bans and obsolete firearms—mingled in the corridor like rats scratching in a wall. I wished they would be quiet but I was also grateful that they were there. They had already dispatched—sent away, not done away with—several pushy journalists.

There was a knock at the door.

'Go away please.'

'Open up, I'm coming in,' Nuon Chea said. 'Come on, hurry up.'

Reluctantly, I unlocked the door. Chea entered and sat down on the end of an unmade bed. A waiter, agog, deposited a pot of tea. Chea waved him out of the room.

I saw that Chea expected me to pour his tea. Instead, I stepped into the bathroom and flicked at my hair with a plastic brush.

'I don't want to do this,' Chea said.

'Drink tea? Why ever not?'

'This, this, all of this: it's a waste of time. It's demeaning. Why do we have to do it?'

'It's mandatory indignation. We just have to play along.' I came out of the bathroom, picked up the telephone and dialled room service: 'I want one black coffee.'

'Mandatory indignation? Listening to you is mandatory indignation,' Chea said.

'Try to stay calm. It's a ritual. It's like President Clinton admitting a relationship with that fat girl.'

Chea snorted. 'Who cares about that?'

'Everybody cares but nobody will care next week. Don't you see, that's the whole point. Don't get angry about the questions they ask you. Stay calm and they will write their stories and soon enough it will all be forgotten. And don't screw your face up like that. They'll love it.'

'Who are you to lecture me?'

'You'll thank me later.'

'I'm not an idiot.'

'Maybe not, but when's the last time you gave an interview?'

'I can't remember.'

'Of course you can. It was 1977 and it was very friendly and well you know it.'

'How to look, how to act: that's all you ever talk about, that's all you know.'

'That's not true. But it is important.'

'Well, it hasn't helped us much, has it?'

'What does that mean?'

'You heard me. Why am I here? Why do I have to put up with this? This is your responsibility. If you can't take care of this on your own what good are you to me?'

'I've done everything I could usefully do for the movement. I've given up my life, the same as you.'

'Ha. You're all talk. You always have been. I will bring legitimacy, you said. I will carry us all the way to the parliament, you said. Imagine Hun Sen's face when I beat him in elections that even the United Nations will have to call free and fair, you said.'

'Come on, let's practice.'

'No.'

'I'll ask you a question and you can answer it: tell me, you awful man, you killer, how can you live with yourself?'

Chea bared his yellowed teeth—one was black, one was chipped—and said, 'I did not have sexual relations with that woman.'

'I'm only trying to help you. I am good at this, you know. It's not as if you're—'

'Enough,' Chea whispered in a menacing tone. I had been scared of this man for thirty years. That was something I definitely wasn't going to miss.

'All right, all right,' I said. 'But all I'm saying is keep your dignity, no matter what they accuse you of. They'll hate that.'

Chea lit a cigarette and took a long drag. 'I don't want to do this.'

'Please don't smoke in here. You know it disturbs my constitution,' I said.

'The world is not a newspaper. It's time somebody told you that,' Chea said, and blew smoke in my face.

***

Nuon Chea entered the press conference first. He planted his walking stick and dragged himself forward, step by step. Government minders held his elbows, separating him from the crush of reporters and photographers.

I considered abandoning Chea. I could have sneaked back to my room (no amount of

sleep seemed enough); or retired to the hotel's bar with the *Phnom Penh Post* and a gin and tonic (I'd heard the piano player was excellent); or donned sunglasses and a baseball cap and strolled around the Central Market.

A government official nudged me in the back. I followed Chea's erratic path—step for step as if we were negotiating a minefield—around microphones, below hot spotlights, over fat electric cords. I tried to create some space for myself. I didn't want anybody writing that I could not stand unaided. But my mouth went dry, my armpits became sticky, my legs turned heavy. I allowed the minders to take my elbows and lead me through the throng.

Chea and I sat behind a table on a slightly elevated stage. I folded my hands on the white linen cloth and attached a pleasant, patient look to my face. The mob started immediately: words piled onto other words, everything out of sequence. I was unable to locate a fully formed question in the tangle of accusations. I glanced at Chea, who was staring at the ceiling, pretending to be somebody else somewhere else. I leant into the microphone and said, 'Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Please, it would be most helpful if you could ask one question at a time.' One hundred or more questions came back at me. I sat back, waited for the voices to dull and then pointed at one man, who said, 'Do you think that the Cambodian people will accept the blanket amnesty that has been bestowed upon you?'

'As you know, Hun Sen, the very honourable Prime Minister of the Royal Government, has warmly welcomed us. We spent an hour with the honourable Prime Minister yesterday and we all agreed that the time for fighting is over. If you expect me to tell you who was wrong and who was right, if you want to carry on accusing particular people of this and that, and if you want me to carry on talking about it, on and on and on, we cannot achieve reconciliation for Cambodians. If we keep talking in this manner the war will never end.'

'I understand your former colleague, Mr Ieng Sary, was also at the meeting with Hun Sen. What did you have to say to him?'

'No comment.'

'You were both very high in the Khmer Rouge hierarchy. Do you accept personal responsibility for the million or more deaths that occurred in the Democratic Kampuchea regime?'

Chea's head dropped, as if he was struggling to stay awake. He stared at the table as

he replied. 'That is a too old story. I ask you, please leave that to history. To keep asking these questions, to dig up the past and turn it upside down, well I cannot see any purpose.' His head rose a moment, then fell again. 'The way this country developed is so complicated, too complicated for us to explain in a few words today. Please don't keep stirring things up about the war.'

'Will you at least tell the Cambodian people that you are sorry for all their suffering?'

Damned BBC, I thought. But, given the sudden silence, there seemed no way to avoid the question. Chea appeared to have suddenly slipped into a coma. I leaned close to the microphone and whispered, 'I'm sorry. I'm very, very sorry.'

'Say it in Khmer.'

'Yeah. Say it in Khmer.'

I was surprised that my hands were shaking slightly. I tried to maintain a mild smile but the effort left me feeling as if I was bleeding from the corners of my mouth. With a supreme effort I controlled myself and said, 'K'nyom somtoah nah.'

'Do you also want to apologise?' someone asked Chea.

'Yes,' Chea muttered. 'Yes yes yes.' He looked straight ahead and his jaw seemed not to move as he spoke. 'In fact, we are sorry for the lives of the Cambodian people but also for the lives of all the animals that suffered because of the war.'

I winced, already envisaging the headlines in the western newspapers: **Cambodian Butcher Apologises to Animals**. I began to add that Chea's remarks were addressed to Buddhists but then I paused: there was nothing I could say to this audience in this mood, especially about freedom of religion, that would do anything other than worsen the situation and lengthen the interrogation.

'What do you have to say to Ta Mok?'

I ignored the question but I imagined Mok standing on the veranda of his garish villa, one arm wrapped around a fake roman pillar like it was a Thai prostitute. 'Brother Kiry and Brother Chea have betrayed us. They are cowards,' he would have been telling his followers. 'But don't worry. I promise that I will protect you all so long as you continue to work hard.'

'What's your estimate of how many Cambodians died in the Pol Pot period?'

'I think it's best not to talk about the past in that way. Some words are right and

some words are wrong and other words are misheard. If we keep talking, the story will never end.'

'Why should you go free when every single family in Cambodia has suffered because of what you did? Have you no remorse?'

'I recently listened to a radio broadcast in which some of my countrymen were talking about the family members they lost,' I said. 'I know that some people talk about these things. I am not deaf. I read. Even my wife tells me stories before she goes to work in the fields. It is normal that those people who have lost some family over the years feel some resentment. But I am sure that most of our fellow Cambodians have many more basic problems to resolve in the present and in the future. Let bygones be bygones is the best way for Cambodians to move forward because we must unite in reconciliation. It is the only way for us to achieve peace and stability at last.'

'And actually,' Chea added, 'please remember that the dangers came as a result of the war. You must all understand that—'

'Why should the Cambodian people put up with your defection?' an American hollered from the back of the room. 'Why should the world?'

'The world? The *world*?' I began but then I paused and checked my agitation. 'It's not for me to say, it is for others. But I will say this—'

'No. Answer the question. Why should the world accept your defection? Why shouldn't you face trial for crimes against humanity?'

'I cannot answer that. I cannot judge myself. History will judge me.'

'Don't you think history has already judged you?'

These people didn't care about history. They cared about getting a front page. They cared about being aired before the first commercial break. Why didn't they ask me if I was feeling sad? Why didn't they ask me if I was grieving for my life's struggle, now abandoned? Why didn't they ask me when was the last time I had a decent night's sleep? Why didn't they ask me if depression is the preserve of rich westerners? Why didn't they ask me what it's like to be paraded before the press like an animal? Of all the worthy questions the American asked me why the world should accept my defection. The world created me. The world owes me. The world should pay me to live in Florida.

'It is too soon, far too soon, for history,' I said. 'I will be gone, and maybe you too,

before history even begins its task.'

Enough. I won't be Nhem Kiry anymore. I set out to damn him and now I'm almost crying with him. I set out to finish him off, to reduce him to a set of circumstances as irritating as mine, but I've gone and made that his victory too. If I damn the world, I agree with him far too often and I absolve him. If I damn him, I absolve the world.

When Nhem Kiry returned to Phnom Penh in 1991 the locals nearly lynched him. At the same time, I retreated to Australia, scared that my body, my mind, would react against a sedentary life and close down. With that—ignominious retreat times two—our stories should have ended. Kiry, I expected, would retire to China and spend his last years reading French novels and playing chess with Pol Pot; or step on a land mine walking to the river to bathe; or die of malaria or dysentery or a broken heart in the Dangrek Mountains. I would settle too easily into quiet, comfortable, clean Adelaide; take pleasure from acquainting myself with my family and from demanding that the local library order in old copies of all my books; submit to the Concertina Rest Home and eke out a final year or two of an existence that still resembled living.

But we were—we are—a couple of stubborn old bastards. Kiry refused to concede until the very end. He lost all optimism but that didn't stop him believing in the cause. He took pride in his persistence, his loyalty, his capacity to expect defeat but to carry on regardless because it was the honourable course—no, the sole course—to take.

Like Kiry, I was disturbed to find the world carrying on without me. Like Kiry, I refused to quit even though I sensed—really I did—that I was travelling one way while the world was travelling another. As new and different stories emerged—as diversions became central issues, as insignificant supporters made themselves prominent figures—I ignored it all, as best I could. I resolved to finish writing my story; I resolved to keep filling in gaps around Kiry until he gave up, until he fell into a muddy hole and could not climb out without stripping back all his layers and revealing a man aware of the atrocities he had involved himself in. Finishing Nhem Kiry off to my satisfaction, exposing his foibles, was all I had left to be defiant about: I intended to record his confessions, but the only way I could do that was to write them for him. And his eventual retreat—call it defection or call it surrender—did leave him living a life just like mine. But for me, forced retirement—the sudden loss of significance, the onset of freedom that comes with being uninvolved—was confounding.

Kiry's defection, if not quite a triumph, somehow became validation of his long struggle. He'd earned the right to put his feet up. He had no need to explain himself further.

When Kiry defected I glimpsed him on the television news. He had aged. His skin had weathered. There were several dark splotches on his forehead, which was bigger than I remember (though that might have been the camera angle). His smile, although unmistakable, pushed against fuller cheeks and was forced. I was not grateful for this glimpse or for the clippings of his last press conference that Cornell sent me. I saw no candour—where's the truth in pre-planned reality?—so what else can I do but note that his freshly dyed hair looked ridiculous, especially as its natural grey colour made him look a dignified elder statesman.

Lia leaves in two weeks. She came to see me yesterday. She kept blinking tears away but I refused to get sentimental. She is going out into the world to make her mark. It may be a strange mark, one I don't understand or really support, but it's her mark. We should all be happy about that. And if we're not happy we should fake it.

She wouldn't take me to the pub—she refused point blank—so we went and sat by Beryl's bed and shared a pot of tea.

The doctor has put Beryl on a drip. She's dying, they say, but she's refusing to slip away easily, like everybody seems to think is best.

'She's not quite ready to go,' Lia said.

'That's bulldust,' I said. 'If people could stay alive by force of will, Zhou En-lai would be alive still.'

'Here we go.'

'I can hear him: "I can't die. There's so much to do still." And Pol Pot would be alive: he's got a reputation to enhance, after all.'

'All right.'

'Beryl's body hasn't stopped working yet. That's all. You shouldn't turn it into some spiritual claptrap. It's rude.'

'It's just an expression, Grandpa. It's meant to make *you* feel a bit better about things. It's what I'm meant to say to you at a time like this.'

'Well, there's no need for it.'

'That's crap, Grandpa.'

'Crap? Already talking like a Yank, I see.'

A nurse poked her head in the door.

'If you people can't keep your voices down I'll have to ask you to leave.'

'When I die—'

'Oh stop it Grandpa. I'm going to New York. I'm going. There's nothing you can say that'll make me change my mind.'

'I'm just saying, when I die—'

'When you die.'

'Stop interrupting. When I die I want you to cremate me.'

'Me, personally? I'd really rather not. I might set the whole nursing home on fire. I couldn't live with the guilt.'

'When I die, have me cremated. Okay?'

'What you should do is write it all down. Or you could arrange to see a funeral director. Lots of old people—'

'Careful.'

'Lots of people in the sunset of their lives are planning their own funerals, did you know that?'

'Excellent. Let's plan it now.'

'No.'

'I want the Internationale.'

'Not that you were ever a communist.'

'I want you to sing it solo. Unaccompanied. And—'

'Do you want me to sing it in Russian?'

'Stop interrupting. I want you to get me cremated. Then I want you to take my ashes for a drive around the city. I want you to find a monstrously expensive sports car—a Ferrari or a Lamborghini—and pour my ashes into its petrol tank.'

'Can't we throw you off the end of the Brighton jetty?'

'I hate the ocean.'

'You never know, you might float to Vietnam.'

'I might get eaten by a jellyfish.'

'Very appropriate, too. Or we could take you up to Belair National Park and plant you

under a nice *grevillia robusta.*'

'I never was fond of nature.'

The nurse put her head inside the door and said, 'Please, Mr Whittlemore, young lady, I won't ask you again. There are sick people in here, you know.'

'I know,' Lia said.

~*~

A day after the press conference, early in the morning, Nhem Kiry and Nuon Chea and their families leave Phnom Penh. Kiry is neither happy nor distraught. Mostly, he is looking forward to a few days of badly needed rest at the Seaside Hotel in Sihanoukville. And Kunthea and little Minea have never seen the ocean.

The morning sun is mild. The road is smooth. Kiry sinks into a bucket seat and is asleep before they pass Kompong Speu. Kunthea wakes him ten kilometres out of Sihanoukville to show him a truck that has rolled off the road and is lying on its side. 'It looks like a buffalo,' Kiry says. Kunthea giggles.

After they arrive Kiry sends his family to paddle in the Gulf of Thailand. 'Don't drown,' he calls after them cheerfully. 'Take your time.' Alone at last, he sits cross-legged on the floor of the room and eats a plate of crabs, freshly delivered from Kep. He twists claws. He cracks shells open with a rock he finds outside. He works methodically, making a pile of meat before he begins to eat. Sipping pineapple juice, he looks for a soccer match on the television but settles for an improbable, mildly amusing Thai soap opera set in a hospital ward.

He sleeps. Ants invade the remains of the crabs, then flies and a couple of miniature geckos. A waiter comes to remove the plate but Kiry sleeps through his polite knocks. Late in the afternoon Kunthea leaps onto the bed: 'I went into the water, Ta, all the way to my belly button.'

He stands under a cold shower with his arms raised and his eyes open. He emerges, still sluggish, and orders coffee. 'Real coffee. Do you understand me?' The hotel manager brings it himself, accompanied by a government official.

'There are a few reporters outside. They would like to talk to you,' the government official says.

'Please tell them not today. I am too tired.'

'I have already been firm with them but they will not go away,' the hotel manager says.

'They promise to be polite. Oh, and your car is here,' the government official says.

'What car?'

'Your car for touring Sihanoukville.'

'I don't want to go.'

'It's all organised. It's on your itinerary. I think it will be better if you go. Please don't worry, the driver is very friendly.'

'Send the reporters away,' Kiry's daughter says.

'They do not wish to leave.'

'No, it's all right. I'll speak to them. I will give them something.' Kiry hands the manager the plate of crab shells. 'I will feed them some leftovers and then they will leave me alone. And, very well, I will tour the town, if I must.'

Kiry drinks his coffee slowly, changes his shirt and steps outside. There are only four journalists. They do not rush forward. They bob their heads respectfully. Kiry shakes hands with a Thai fellow who he knows quite well and says, 'I didn't see you yesterday.'

'I was there. Don't worry about that.'

'Oh, I wasn't worried.'

'You have been inside all day. Are you unwell?' another reporter asks.

'Not at all. I feel quite healthy but I am very tired from the events of the last week. I just need to rest. But I thank you for your concern.'

'What is the future of the Khmer Rouge under Ta Mok's leadership? Are they a spent force?'

'I don't know. I am satisfied to be where I am. I think the time for fighting is over.'

Can the Khmer Rouge still rise up, do you think?'

'Did Ta Mok kill Pol Pot? Did Pol Pot commit suicide?'

'When Pol Pot ran from Ta Mok did you go with him voluntarily or were you his prisoner?'

'What is your understanding of the definition of genocide?'

'I spoke about all those matters yesterday in Phnom Penh, at great length,' Kiry says. 'I honestly have nothing to add. And, as I said, I am very tired.'

'What are your impressions of Sihanoukville?'

'So far I am enjoying myself.' He sees a larger group of journalists making their way towards him. 'Thank you for visiting me.'

Kiry and Chea sit in the back seat of a Toyota sedan. They each stare out of a window at unremarkable streets. From the top of a hill they look down on the port. Kiry fights to keep from falling asleep.

Near the end of the tour they find a private patch of beach half way between two umbrella villages. Chea wades in as far as his ankles. Just like Kunthea, Kiry goes in as far as his belly button. He stares at the flat sea and at the blurred horizon where the light rubs out the water. It seems incredible to him that so many Europeans come simply to go swimming here.

The driver wades out, hands Kiry a banana and then turns away and dives head first into the water. Kiry peels the banana but it is brown and soft. He hurls it at a stick that floats by. He misses.

'Do you want to hear a story?' he asks Chea.

'No.'

'It's about Sihanouk. One d—'

'I don't want to hear it.'

'It's a good story, you'll like it: one day Prince Sihanouk's subjects carried him all the way from the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh to Sihanoukville on a soft leather armchair. Upon reaching Sihanoukville he was ecstatic. "Sihanouk wants to swim in the ocean," Sihanouk said, "and Victory Beach is Sihanouk's favourite beach." Thousands of disciples tumbled along behind as they carried him to Victory Beach, pleading to be allowed to fall to their knees before him and hand-feed him from their meagre stores and fornicate with him.'

Despite himself, Chea snorts with laughter. He splashes water over his shoulders. He waves the driver over so he can lean against him.

'Sihanouk lapped up the attention of the people with his tongue.' Kiry continues. 'Then Sihanouk said, "I announce to you all, my children, that Independence Beach is Sihanouk's personal favourite." So his carriers lifted his chair out of the sand. At Sihanouk's urging, they sprinted, their bare feet hardly touching the ground. Although their soles began to burn and split they did not complain as they ran all the way to Independence Beach. "Sihanouk proclaims that Sokha Beach is the Kingdom of Cambodia's Greatest Beach and a World Top Ten Beach. Keep going, my children, come on, don't stop." On they went. Sihanouk perspired, but a topless beauty wiped his brow. Sihanouk panted, but a beautiful virgin fanned him with a huge feather. They carried on and Sihanouk soon cried out, "Every night, Sihanouk dreams about the beauty and the peacefulness of Ochheuteal Beach and he prays that all Cambodia will resemble that pristine place."

'Sihanouk paused then made his decision: "Sihanouk will swim at Ochheuteal Beach." Proudly, the carriers walked into the water. "Deeper, deeper," Sihanouk commanded. Soon Sihanouk's armchair was floating on the water. Sihanouk delighted in the sunlight dancing on the sea. The carriers drowned. Sihanouk called out, "Swimming is boring," and four new volunteers waded out to collect him.'

'Just as well he didn't want to go to Barbados,' Chea mutters.

Kiry looks back at him, appalled: 'Put that out. You can't smoke in the ocean.'

A crowd of curious onlookers forms on the beach. 'Time to go,' the government official calls. What a pity, Kiry thinks, I was beginning to enjoy the water.

Back in his hotel room Kiry naps fitfully through his family's banter. He wakes at dusk, refreshed. He calls the government minder.

'I'm going out for dinner.'

'What, all of you? It's very difficult. Please reconsider. Too many people want to look at you. And there are still journalists hanging around.'

'I am going. Only me. You can take me if you want but I am going.'

With the official and three bodyguards he goes to a restaurant on the hill above Victory Beach. Ieng Sary has recommended it for the sunset as well as the food but by the time Kiry arrives the view beyond the balcony is black. Still, he chooses an outside table, away from the red-faced tourists who are watching Rambo III, the sound ratcheted high. His minders, gratefully, take a table near the television and order beer.

Kiry sniffs the air, enjoying the mix of salt air and the smoke from the mosquito coil burning in the Pepsi bottle at his feet. He orders a gin and tonic and is delighted when it comes, unbidden, with two triangles of lime—one to drown in the drink, one to squeeze over the ice.

His food comes quickly: the restaurant owner, Kiry surmises, hopes he won't stay too long. He wonders, while he pokes at the soft white flesh of the fish and waits for another gin, if his family are eating cheeseburgers again.

A couple of well-to-do Cambodians, sitting a few tables away, look at him then look again. The woman leans close to the man. As they whisper, their faces turned sour. The woman straightens and they continue to eat, pretending not to rush. Kiry smiles at them and wonders, 'Are you the middle class?'

He pays for his meal with a five-dollar greenback. The owner takes it, holds the note close to the candle on the table, checking if it is counterfeit and checking for stains or creases or rips. This procedure always amuses Kiry. 'It's American money,' he tells the owner. 'It's nothing but imperfections.'

As Kiry stands to leave he accidentally kicks the Pepsi bottle that is at his feet. The last curl of the mosquito coil, the stub still glowing, lodges in a crack. The bottle spins across the decking to a nearby table, where a western couple in their thirties—tourists not expatriates, Kiry can tell by their clothes and their flushed looks—sit perusing the menu.

'Please excuse me,' Kiry says.

'No worries, mate,' the man says in a broad Australian twang, saluting him with a bottle of Tiger beer. 'It was an accident. Think nothing of it.'

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